

BELLY DANCING: PRAXIS AND SELF-IDENTITY

By

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

The Wilkes Honors College

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Arts and Sciences

with a Concentration in Anthropology

Wilkes Honors College of

Florida Atlantic University

Jupiter, Florida

May 2013

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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Dr. Jacqueline Fewkes, and has been approved by the members of her supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of The Honors College and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Arts and Sciences.

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ABSTRACT

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Institution: Wilkes Honors College of Florida Atlantic University
Thesis Advisor: Dr. Jacqueline Fewkes
Degree: Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Arts and Sciences
Concentration: Anthropology
Year: 2013

The history and problematic Orientalist contexts of belly dance within the United States has been discussed previously in academia; my project is a more ethnographic approach than many of these previous works. This particular study focuses on belly dance communities in South Florida to understand how the dancers, students, and instructors appropriate and re-appropriate the praxis of belly dance to fit within their own personal contexts. Through this work we see how contemporary belly dancing both challenges and reinforces Orientalist perspectives. I used Edward Said's notions of Orientalism as an analytical framework to interpret information gathered from participant-observation sessions, interviews with informants, and text analysis. I found that Orientalism influenced the history of contemporary American belly dance and that current practices reflect this history and its Orientalist origins.

To my family, for all their support

Table of Contents

I. Introduction	1
II. Methodology.....	6
III. Literature.....	9
IV. Setting the Scene.....	17
<i>Class at Funkarific Studios</i>	17
<i>A Belly Dance Performance Space</i>	22
V. Data Analysis.....	25
VI. Conclusion	37
Bibliography	41

I. Introduction

My first day at my field site, it had been raining all day. I had accidentally arrived an hour early at the belly dance studio, so the instructor was not yet there. I remember opening the door and being amazed when I stepped inside. The studio was dry and warm, a nice contrast to the cool, damp air outside. The front of the studio was a small store, with a cash register on a desk full of business cards, incense, and small crystals. The other side of the store had clothes racks full of homemade and hand-dyed shirts, skirts, and flowing pants; some of the tops were covered in coins and beads, a quick reminder that this was indeed a belly dance studio. In front of me was a shelf full of handmade metal trinkets and jewelry as well as colorful hip wraps covered in coins similar to the lavender hip wrap I had left at home. The shelf separated the store from the wooden dance floor, creating a small unofficial threshold to the far left of the room. As I stepped through, the room was clear but for tapestries, textiles, a large mirror on a wall, and a young woman dancing to music I could not recognize. She later introduced me to the class instructor, and while I sat preparing for class I listened to them speak. At one point the dance instructor talked about an upcoming performance and said that they did not “want to look like a vomit of color or look like strippers.” This one moment clued me in to the legacy of belly dance history and how my particular belly dance group wished to portray themselves to others. My goal for my project was to understand how the history of belly dance affects the self-identity and communities of belly dancers in South Florida, and if their current practices challenge or reinforce notions of Orientalism as discussed by Edward Said.

Belly dance has become an important icon of the Middle East in the West (Shay & Sellers-Young, 2003). Before we begin discussing belly dance, we must first establish what belly dance is for the purposes of this thesis. According to Shay and Sellers-Young, belly dance can be conceptualized “as a complex of movement practices that originated in a vast region extending from the Atlantic Ocean in North Africa and the Balkans in the west to the eastern areas of China, Central Asia, and the western portions of the Indian subcontinent to the east” (2003, p. 14). In these areas the dance is distinguished by improvised movements of the torso, hands, arms, and head, and that the parts of the body that are the focus of the dance vary both historically and regionally (Shay & Sellers-Young, 2003). While there are regional differences in the emphasis on different parts of the body, it is important to remember that individual dancers have varying styles and these styles also affect which parts of the body are accentuated in a performance (Shay & Sellers-Young, 2003). Current dance practices can be characterized as solo improvised dance and even in groups, unless choreographed together, dancers perform as individuals who sometimes reference each other but do not synchronize their movements (Shay & Sellers-Young, 2003). Finally, Shay and Sellers-Young claim that in the Islamic parts of the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia, solo improvised dance is considered an abstract expression and a form of entertainment but not necessarily an art form (2003). This is the version of belly dance we must keep in mind when we explore and analyze the way the dance is practiced today in the United States.

I also want to situate myself within this project before I begin. My interests and interpretation of the events I experienced while gathering data for this project are my own

and need to be established so that the audience understands some of my influences. By understanding my influences, my subjective bias will be clearer and hopefully will perpetuate this thesis a little less. While I grew up familiar with the idea of belly dance, I did not become interested in it until high school. I thought it was a beautiful form of dance but I knew very little about it. I only knew that belly dance was associated with the Middle East and sometimes performers danced in specialty regional restaurants that served Greek or Turkish food. That began to change during the fall of 2011, when I studied abroad in Morocco for several months. While I lived abroad I learned that there was a dance teacher offering lessons in belly dance, or as it was called in Morocco, *danse orientale*. The studio was close to where I lived and I was curious so I began attending the class. I absolutely loved it. I made friends with some of the women and girls in the class and began to dress as they did for classes, wearing scarves around my hips with coins that made noise as I moved. Unfortunately I eventually had to leave and return to the United States. Because of my experiences in Morocco I decided to continue studying belly dance in the United States, and it eventually became the core of my thesis.

My thesis question consists of two parts. For the first part of my thesis question, I want to understand how the history of belly dance, especially the history of belly dance in the United States, affects the self-identities and communities of belly dancers in contemporary South Florida. To understand why and how belly dancers interact with their own communities and outside their communities, I must first know how belly dance evolved in the United States. I would need to know not just how the names, techniques,

and communities changed over time, but also how public perception has changed and influenced belly dance in the United States.

The second part of my thesis question asks whether or not current practices among belly dancers and belly dance communities in South Florida challenge or reinforce ideas of Orientalism as put forth by scholar Edward Said. This question is also related to the importance of history and how it influences current practices because the history of belly dance in the United States is steeped in Orientalism. I argue that Orientalism continues to affect the practices and sometimes even the histories of contemporary American belly dancers in South Florida.

The methods I used for this particular project included participant-observation in belly dance classes and witnessing belly dance performances; interviews with a variety of belly dance practitioners, including professional paid dancers, students, and instructors; and finally text analysis of various belly dance resources such as photographs, brochures, and websites.

For the beginning of this thesis, I will outline the various methods I used and why I chose them for this study. After describing my methodology I will discuss the existing literature I found on belly dance and belly dance history in the United States and in the West. I will also discuss some of the theoretical bases and beliefs of Edward Said's Orientalism in my literature review. I will then move on to analyzing the data I collected through participant-observation, interviews, and text analysis. In my analysis I will discuss how the belly dance origin myth is perpetuated, the connection between sexuality and Orientalism in belly dance, how transmission of information about belly dance is

laced with Orientalism, and how the belly dancer's own views can contribute to an Orientalist representation of belly dance. This section will lead to my final conclusions of how the history of belly dance in the United States affects contemporary practices and how contemporary practices both reinforce and challenge Said's Orientalism. Because Orientalism influenced the history of these practices, some of them do reinforce Orientalist notions about belly dance. Some practices, however, do challenge or complicate Orientalist notions in contemporary American belly dance.

II. Methodology

I used three main methods to address my thesis questions: participant-observation, interviews, and text analysis. When writing about the information I gathered, all names used for my informants and field sites are pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality.

My participant-observation work included three parts: taking lessons at a particular dance studio, witnessing various belly dance performances, and taking lessons with other teachers to understand how teaching and dance styles may vary. For participant-observation I picked a particular dance studio to use as my main field site. For the purposes of this thesis, I called my field site Funkarific Studios. The studio itself was a small space tucked away in a tiny strip of offices; it consisted of one large room for dance practice in the middle of the building, a bathroom and storage towards the back, and a small shopping area in the front which was separated from the dance area by a shelf of retail goods. Some of the retail goods included dance costumes for belly dance, performance props, jewelry, and shoes. While my dance instructor, Rose, founded the studio, a variety of teachers offered lessons within the space. There were at least two types of belly dance offered, as well as hip hop dance lessons, various types of yoga, hula hoop performance, and fire poi instruction. The studio also hosted workshops in other performance skills such as aerial silks.

I chose to use participant-observation as one of my methods for several reasons. For the first reason, participant-observation at a belly dance studio allowed me to meet and interact with belly dance students and instructors at my field site. I met informants for interviews and interacted with belly dancers on a regular basis. Secondly, becoming a

student myself and observing how students and teachers interact also let me understand how information about belly dance and belly dance communities passed from teachers to students.

For my third reason, part of my participant-observation involved witnessing various belly dance performances. Seeing belly dancers perform as well as teach or learn was important because of the variations in behaviors that arise from the two different contexts. Belly dancers were not just teachers and students, but performers as well. Experiencing performances related back to performance theory and how performances affect public perceptions. It was important to understand the effects of both witnessing and performing a performance art.

My second research method was interviewing. For my interviews I met with my informants wherever they felt comfortable interviewing and talked with them for around an hour unless they agreed to an extended time period. My informants included a range of belly dance students, instructors, and paid professional dancers. Many of these informants identified as more than one of those categories. Some were also retired belly dancers. The interviews I had with belly dancers showed me see how belly dancers self-identify and reconcile their practices with belly dance history they knew.

My final research method for this thesis was text analysis. Text analysis entailed the collection and analysis of various written and image-rich sources, such as brochures, articles, and internet websites. Analyzing the texts I collected about belly dancers helped me understand how belly dancers are portrayed. If the materials were created and published by belly dancers themselves, then it also allowed me to understand how belly

dancers portray themselves. Written sources in particular gave me insight as to how they construct and share their histories.

Using these methods I gathered and analyzed the data found here in this thesis. My research methods allowed me to answer my thesis questions of how the history of belly dance affects contemporary belly dance practices in the United States and also see whether or not contemporary belly dance practices in South Florida challenge or reinforce Said's notions of Orientalism. I found that current practices do often reinforce Said's Orientalism partially because of the history surrounding contemporary American belly dance which also reflects Orientalism. While many current practices do reinforce Orientalism, some practices also challenge or complicate Said's notions of Orientalism.

III. Literature

America's introduction to belly dance began in the late nineteenth century. DonnaLee Dox claims it began with exhibits at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair Midway Plaisance, where a man named Sol Bloom displayed types of Egyptian, Persian, Moroccan, and Tunisian dances (2006). The event "proved to leave a lasting imprint on the popular U.S. understanding of Arab female sexuality" (Jarmakani, 2005, p. 124). At the time, the imported dancers were considered a great contrast from the corseted and rigid bodies of the Victorian time period with fluid movements in their dances (Jarmakani, 2005). According to Jarmakani, they were "at once wildly erotic displays of sensuality dripping with the 'voluptuous passion of the East' and an offensive set of movements, which were 'extremely ungraceful and almost shockingly disgusting'" (2005, p. 128). This strange combination is reflective of Said's Orientalism and its construction of the Other. This dance introduction eventually gave rise to *danse du ventre* performed in vaudeville houses, burlesque shows, and films, and Middle Eastern social and folk dances, as well as veils, became a form of "exotic artistry and self-expression" in the West by the 1920s and were reinforced by dancers like Ruth St. Denis and Maud Allan (Dox, 2006, p. 53).

Maud Allan herself was a "barefoot" dancer who performed throughout England during the early 1900s and was well-known for her scenes as the Oriental princess Salome (Koritz, 1994). Koritz claims that while Allan represented the "essence" of the East to the West, she was not of Eastern origin herself but still made the East transparent for her audience; she also demonstrated a type of threatening female sexuality that was associated with Eastern, Oriental women and confirmed through her dance (1994, p. 68).

Maud Allan's version of Salome was not from any particular country or region, like Egypt or Algeria, but a vague and homogenizing version of "Eastern" (Koritz, 1994). This legacy of homogenizing the conceived East and associating belly dance with female sexuality would continue with the reemergence of belly dance in the United States.

By the 1960s and 1970s, belly dance in the United States became popular again after it became a tool for feminists to "claim and express women's sexuality" (Dox, 2006, p. 53). As belly dance grew in popularity in the United States, a catalogue of named movements, such as "Tunisian hips," "Turkish backwalk," "basic Egyptian," and "belly roll," helped take the Middle Eastern dances and turn them into individual articulations for teachers in studios and helped belly dance be considered a "legitimate dance form" (Dox, 2006, p. 53). This reemergence gave rise to another genre of dance in California during the 1970s that Dox called "American tribal belly dance," which uses heavy drape, pack animal tassels, and nomad turban imagery as well as rise to other subgenres of American belly dance such as "spiritual belly dance," "goddess dancing," "bellygrams," and belly dance workouts (2006). This list is non-exhaustive, but still demonstrates a range of ways contemporary American belly dance is taught, learned, and performed.

To understand how to interpret this historical information and data gathered from contemporary American belly dancers in South Florida, I will be using the framework of Orientalism as established by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism*. While James Clifford (1980) claims that Said does not describe Orientalism directly, Said actually outlines Orientalism and attempts to give the reader a sense of its scope and pervasiveness. Throughout his book, Said emphasizes the interconnections between the

political reality of colonialism and how it influenced and was influenced by scholarly works of those who studied the Orient, or Orientalists, and works of artists, writers, and travelers. As Said claims, Orientalism “is a cultural and a political fact,” so it “does not exist in some archival vacuum” (Said, 1978, p. 13). Orientalism constitutes a political and cultural reality for those living in “the Occident,” certainly enough for them to write and govern their Oriental colonies based on Orientalist knowledge and policies.

Orientalism, therefore, is not just a European fantasy about an Othered Orient which stands against a perceived Occident, but a body of theory and practice with significant material investment that became a system of knowledge through which information about the Orient could disseminate into general culture in the West (Said, 1978). As Orientalism does not exist in an archival vacuum, Said studies the texts that reinforce and are reinforced by Orientalism in his book. In fact, he studies Orientalism “as a dynamic exchange between individual authors and the large political concerns shaped by the three great empires—British, French, American—in whose intellectual and imaginative territory the writing was produced” (Said, 1978, p. 14-15). Orientalism, then, is a framework that allowed for the production of knowledge, texts, and government that also supported that same framework. Not only is it a system that produces such texts and knowledge, but is also a system that references itself by authors citing each other’s work to support their statements (Said, 1978).

In short, Said describes Orientalism as a system of thought that influences three main standpoints. The first standpoint describes Orientalism as an academic endeavor, a field of study created by Western scholars to map and categorize the Orient (Said, 1978). The

second standpoint has Orientalism as a system used by the West to dominate and control the Orient economically, militarily, and politically (Said, 1978). My analysis will mostly use Said's third standpoint, in which he characterizes Orientalism as a collection of myths and fantasies built upon and explored in various artistic and humanities works such as poems and art (Said, 1978). Joan Scott, a feminist scholar, uses a similar idea of the "fantasy echo," where fantasies that surpass history and difference fill in gaps created by echoes of space and time that lack meaning or intelligibility (2001). This framework can be used to analyze self-purported histories created by belly dancers themselves to see how they create their origins and how these origins affect practices and sense of community amongst contemporary American belly dancers.

Said discusses important associations between the Orient and sexuality in Orientalist writings, but unfortunately only briefly and he does not delve into gender or the gendered aspects of Orientalism very much beyond this point as noted by critics such as Reina Lewis and Gyan Prakash (1978, 1999, 1995). In his book Said only briefly mentions the connection between sexuality, sensuality, and the Orient when discussing the writings of Flaubert and his experiences with the dancer and courtesan named Kuchuk Hanem (Said, 1978). Flaubert is both enthralled and repulsed by her sexuality and his own sensual experiences, much like early descriptions of belly dancers in the United States. Said notes that an association between the Orient and sex is found throughout Flaubert's experiences but admits that sex and gender are not his area of expertise and therefore largely leaves it out of his analysis (Said, 1978). He does discuss how Flaubert uses Kuchuk Hanem as a sexual partner and entertainer for his own satisfactions and his own

thoughts (Said, 1978). In a sense Flaubert sees Kuchuk Hanem as a blank slate for his own pleasure, something representing the sensuality and fertility of the Orient that he could inscribe his own thoughts and feelings upon with little understanding of her own life (Said, 1978). This concept of sex and the Orient corresponds well with the history of belly dance in the United States and the West, with Koritz's Maud Allan performing as a so-called "hot-blooded Oriental" and the early performers at the Chicago World's Fair displaying Jarmakani's "voluptuous passions of the East" (1994, p. 68, 2004, p. 128). Sexuality and sensuality are still arguably important aspects of contemporary American belly dance, especially due to its history from the 1960s and 1970s as a way to reclaim women's sexuality during the feminist movement. Author Meyda Yeğenoğlu also develops the connection between female sexuality and Orientalism when she says "the Western subject's desire for its Oriental other is always mediated by a desire to have access to the space of its women, to the body of its women and to the truth of its women" (1998, p. 72-73). Ella Shohat confirms a similar sentiment when discussing the unveiling of women in the context of film, writing, "this process of exposing the female Other, of denuding her literally, comes to allegorize the power of Western man to possess her" (1990, p. 40).

Said also discusses how the West, or the Occident, must explain the Orient to the West through scholarly works and art, saying that "Orientalism is premised upon exteriority, that is, on the fact that the Orientalist, poet or scholar, makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to the West" (1978, p. 20). Even contemporary American belly dancer instructors who try to teach their students the

cultural contexts and origins of the dances they choreograph “play out a desire to know the East by transposing it into Western modes of representation.” (Dox, 2006, p. 54).

Women in the United States can dance in venues such as gala studio shows, dance camps, art festivals, Renaissance fairs, and Middle Eastern, Greek, and Afghani restaurants where Western women masquerading as the Other “lend authenticity to the dining experience” (Dox, 2006, p. 54).

Contemporary American belly dancers standing in as the Other, the Oriental, explain and “render its mysteries plain” for the contemporary American and Western audience.

This relates very well to Jessica Howard, a performance studies scholar, and her notion of how a more powerful, dominant culture relates to minority culture as well as how a “real” world relates to a fantastical “utopia”; she claims that “the former constructs, labels, and interprets the latter, largely for the former’s benefit and enjoyment” (1996, p. 449).

Contemporary American belly dancers become shorthand for the Middle Eastern experience, the Oriental, the Other, created for and consumed by an assumed Western audience. Daryl Chin goes even further in his concept of interculturalism, saying that “the idea of interculturalism as simply a way of joining disparate cultural artifacts together has a hidden agenda of imperialism” (1989, p. 167). This mixing together of Western ideas and Middle Eastern dance can be a way for the West to dominate conceptualizations and the culture of the Orient.

The final issue I wish to discuss is the possibility of what Susan Reed calls auto-exoticization, or “the process by which the colonized come to represent themselves to themselves through the lens of the colonizers” (1998, p. 515). This is especially relevant

with the possibility of belly dancers of Middle Eastern descent practicing contemporary American belly dance. Since belly dance has sexual and sensual connotations and movements, there is a desire to sanitize and make belly dance a respectable dance form (Shays & Sellers-Young, 2003). Native Middle Eastern and Western choreographers try to stage performances that make belly dance acceptable to middle-class elite in both the Middle East and the West: “Thus, in order to use native dance form as art, most choreographers and dancers, native and Western, felt that they needed to be transformed into art and purified—made cultured and respectable like ballet” (Shays & Sellers-Young, 2003, p. 27). While belly dance may have a Middle Eastern origin, it is still being perceived and re-perceived and constructed and re-constructed in a way that audiences in the Middle East come to see contemporary belly dance as Western dancers and choreographers see it—an art form.

The question remained, then, as to why I would use Said’s idea of Orientalism as a way to analyze contemporary American belly dance. The first reason involved the history of belly dance itself in the United States. Since its first appearance in the United States in 1893, belly dance has been steeped in Orientalism and Orientalist ideas about the dance and the performers. Eyewitnesses and even dancers mimicking the belly dancers talked about or expressed its perceived sensuality and sexuality. As contemporary American belly dance began to evolve into the form as we know it, it still retained elements of sexuality and sensuality in the dance moves and in the presentation of the dance. Acknowledging the Orientalism that pervades the history of American belly dance allowed me to pinpoint certain possible aspects of Orientalism in

contemporary American belly dancing. The second reason involved Said's ideas of Orientalism. American belly dance is, in a sense, a global phenomenon. It was imported from across the Atlantic Ocean to the United States and as time has gone on contemporary belly dance has gained popularity across the globe. Said's book was published in the 1970s, and I wanted to see how well his position held up in this current time of near instantaneous communications and new ways of sharing, accessing, and producing knowledge, including knowledge of belly dance. Can Said's notion of Orientalism still apply, or does it need to be revisited and revised?

The history and theory I discussed here influenced the directions of my project. These works provided a theoretical framework through which to analyze my data. My framework for analysis mostly revolved around Said's idea of Orientalism while supplementing it by exploring the relationships between Orientalism, gender, and exoticization as put forth by other authors. These ideas guided my participant-observation work in belly dancing communities, helping me to decide what types of details and activities to observe while out in the field attending classes or performances. The main details and activities I observed include belly dance teaching styles in classes, performers' behavior during performances, the clothing and appearance of belly dancers in various contexts, and the types of histories and opinions the dancers express in writing and in interviews. By analyzing these aspects of belly dance culture and community in contemporary South Florida, I wished to explore possible remaining relationships between contemporary American belly dance and Said's Orientalism.

IV. Setting the Scene

Before I begin analyzing my gathered data, I must first outline my main field site, my typical class experience and an alternative class experience with a different teacher, and a description of a belly dance performance I witnessed in a restaurant. By describing my field sites in more detail, I hope to give the reader a better image of the spaces within which belly dance students and instructors interact. Describing my typical class experience is also important for later examination and demonstrates how a class experience can vary depending on the teacher and their teaching methods. Witnessing and describing a performance, particularly in a venue commonly used by belly dancers, shows a belly dancer in their performance capacity and highlights the differences in certain aspects, such as behavior or costuming, between a belly dance performance and a belly dance lesson.

Class at Funkarific Studios

The dance studio where I spent most of my time, Funkarific Studios, was a small square space. The studio itself occasionally changed in appearance depending on the owner, Rose, and the events that the studio sometimes hosted. Like many dance studios, the floor of Funkarific Studios was made of wood. After walking through the door there was a large counter with a register on it in the left corner. The counter aligned diagonally which allowed the person behind it to see both the door and the large open space where the lessons take place. In case no one manned the cash register or a class was in session, there was a bell above the door to alert all in the studio that someone was either arriving or leaving. To the right of the door was most of the merchandising section. There were

clothing racks selling belly dance costumes and shelves full of jewelry and other small miscellaneous products. Sometimes there were shelves extending from the right side that



seem to separate the studio entrance from the actual dance studio, while other times most of the shelves were removed and the studio felt more open and spacious. Along the right wall in the dance area of the studio was a full-length mirror that dancers used to follow the instructor as well as observe and correct their own movements. The left wall was mostly blank

except for some white shelves near the entrance that held student and instructor personal belongings and shoes. The back wall was covered in tapestries and also lead to a small hallway where the bathroom and storage room are located. The back left corner held the sound system and also the area where the pink yoga mats were stored. Sometimes the back wall was covered in colorful cloth that hid the hallway entrance for an event or performance at the studio. There were also various performance tools that hang from the

ceiling, such as hoops and aerial silks. These were used by other instructors who work at the studio, as the studio taught more than just belly dance.

My belly dance classes at Funkarific Studios typically began around 7:00 pm. The studio was always warmer than the outside air, but never oppressive. I would leave my shoes and purse under the white shelves towards the front of the building. Rose was usually already there, and sometimes other students were there early as well. The students usually chatted quietly and caught up with each other before class began and Rose turned on the music. We would all pull out pink yoga mats and arrange ourselves behind Rose and her mat, which were usually closest to the mirror wall. Rose would lead us through our stretches and conditioning while music played in the background. The music had impressive, complicated drum solos and background beats, sprinkled with Middle Eastern instruments, mysterious and echoing vocals clearly speaking a non-English language, and some electronic background sounds.

Rose and the other students generally wore comfortable exercise clothes such as sports bras, tank tops, long loose pants, or yoga pants of various lengths. Some women wore hip wraps or pixie skirts—mini or microskirts with elongated swaths of cloth at the left and right sides of the hips—to accentuate the movements of their hips. The colors of these clothes tended to be dark, neutral, or subdued. Our opening stretches included bending forward to stretch the backs of our legs, straddles to open our hips, and various yoga poses. The second half of our stretches included body conditioning. We did squats, lunges, and abdominal exercises to build our core strength and leg strength. One of our most important conditioning exercises had Rose and the students sit on the floor with

their legs spread to the side and their hips rolled forward. While sitting in this position, we had to pull the muscles of our right and left glutes up in various orders and at various speeds. Rose explained that she liked the teaching methods of the famous belly dancer Suhaila Salimpour. Suhaila had created a teaching system that focused on working specific parts of the body, and Rose, while not certified in Suhaila's school of teaching at the time, decided to include it in her own teaching routine. The muscles were important for accentuating hip movements.

After stretching and conditioning, we all rolled up our yoga mats and put them away in the corner of the room. Once again, Rose faced the mirror wall and we the students all gathered around her. We worked on particular belly dance techniques for the rest of the class. Since this was a beginner level class, Rose focused on basic movement

vocabulary
such as piston
hips, which
was one of the
first moves
taught in a
class. To do
piston hips,
you pulled up



one side of your hips using your oblique muscles. As that side goes down to a neutral pose the other hip got pulled up by oblique muscles. Similar basic dance vocabulary

included slides, where the hips moved out from side to side as the top of the body stayed erect and still, and mayas, where the hips moved in sync to draw a vertical figure eight in the air. Rose often used terms like “ooziness” or “juiciness” to describe the hip movements. We also worked on arm movements and posture. Occasionally Rose walked around as we practiced and adjusted our bodies or showed us which muscles we should use for different movements. At the very end of the class we stretched one more time for a “cool down,” to make sure we did not injure ourselves. Some of the students hugged each other and left the studio, like me. Other students, and Rose, stayed behind to wait for a yoga class to begin afterwards or mingle and talk about dancing before leaving.

Because Rose could not make a class one evening, I also had the privilege of studying with another teacher from the same studio. She called herself Esma and explained that she usually taught the more advanced belly dance classes but had agreed to substitute for Rose. Esma’s teaching style was very, very different. While in Rose’s class there was a focus on both conditioning and dance vocabulary, Esma focused more on the dance and the performance aspect as well as the historical and cultural context of the style she taught. Instead of beginning with stretching, Esma had me and the one other student who showed up immediately start dancing and mimicking her movements in front of the mirror wall. She explained to us the history of the Classical Egyptian style of belly dance, such as its association with black and white Egyptian films and its fusion of Middle Eastern dance and ballet. Esma taught different dances as they related to the different rhythms found in Classical Egyptian. The first dance and rhythm she taught us

was called *chiftitelli* and she explained how the slower speed was meant to relax the dancer. Esma then helped us fix our posture, the movement of our hips, the way we moved our feet, and showed us how to use our hands to frame our hips and body as we moved, all while using the terms “slow and sexy” as well as “juicy” to describe this type of dance. The next rhythm and dance we learned was called *maqsum* and was created by a drummer for a dancer. The final rhythm and dance we learned that session was called *saidi* and it was supposedly the closest out of all the rhythms we had learned to Middle Eastern folkloric dance. Esma’s class did not finish with a cool down but we stood around and she told us a little more about belly dance history and cultural context before we all left for home.

A Belly Dance Performance

Space

The next participant-observation experience I had was as an audience member for a belly dance performance at a Greek restaurant. I had been invited by a fellow student at my belly dance class and entered the restaurant with my friends with the intention of supporting a fellow belly dancer and having dinner. The



restaurant was relatively small with no particularly part of the floor free from wooden tables and chairs. The walls were covered with whitish plaster and pictures of Greece and the lighting was soft and warm. Soft melodic Greek music played through a sound system. When the belly dance show started, however, the mood changed. The music became louder with more emphasis on the beats and drums and Arabic singers crooning over the tune. Two belly dancers came out from a side door that led to a kitchen, holding their veils as they moved across the floor to the middle of the restaurant. One dancer, Fiona, wore a blue and purple skirt with shiny silvery beads and tassels. Although she wore a black bra with more shiny silver beads and tassels, she covered her stomach with a sheer black material and covered her shoulders and upper arms with a jacket-like wrap she tied underneath her bra. Her feet were barefoot and her veil was full of tie-dyed rainbow colors. A silver headband kept her free hair out of her face. The second dancer, Lizzie, wore a turquoise skirt covered in silver sequins and bead tassels around the hips. Her bra was covered in silver sequins and bead tassels as well, and a turquoise cloth headband covered in silver coins held her hair back too. She danced in silver sandals and held up a light blue veil. After holding their veils up for a while as they danced, they would fold them up and leave them on empty chairs. Their hips, arms, and legs moved with the music and changed as the rhythms in the music changed. Sometimes they stood next to each other and danced, reflecting each other's movements but never quite coordinating, and other times they moved around the floor frequently and danced at opposite ends of the restaurant. Occasionally they danced right up to tables and would even have people stand up and teach them to dance. Both dancers used *zils*, or finger

cymbals, at least once and used their veils at least once after leaving them on a chair.

Lizzie had cash tucked into the waistband of her skirt during part of the night. Once the Arabic music died down and the show was over, the dancers would pick up their veils and quickly retreat to the kitchen as the restaurant clients clapped.

V. Data Analysis

While an academic understanding of the history of American belly dance is necessary, we must also start with how belly dancers construct their own histories of belly dance. This includes the history of belly dance within the United States and the history of belly dance outside the United States. For example, in a website for a belly dance troupe called Dancers of the Nile, there is a page that describes what belly dance is, including the history of belly dance both inside and outside the United States. Akasha, the author, claims that “experts say belly dancing is the oldest form of dance, having roots in all ancient cultures from the orient to India to the mid-East” (Akasha, 2007). She also claims that belly dance was not intended to entertain men but to celebrate fertility rites or marriage parties (Akasha, 2007). It is interesting to note that she cites her information as coming from an organization known as the International Academy of Middle Eastern Dance which was founded by a belly dancer in the 1990s. My instructor, Rose, also agreed with Akasha with a similar explanation when she said

It was, um, originally a dance for women by women. Well I can't say originally, because there's some skepticism on what the origins of belly dance are, because it's such an old dance form. But from some things I've read it was originally from women for women to help fertility, so. It was more of a feminine dance and then became other things, and became looked at like other things.

Other informants either reiterated a similar sentiment or admitted to having little or no knowledge of how belly dance began outside the United States. As Joan Scott mentioned earlier with her concept of the fantasy echo, due to a lack of consensus as to the origin of belly dance, the belly dancers fill in the knowledge gaps with ideas that

circulate between students and instructors as well as through media such as the internet. This origin myth for belly dance seems to reinforce the association between sexuality and the Orient, but belly dance in this myth is not for the sensual and sexual enjoyment of men. While still connected to sexuality, it is about the sexuality of women and their own issues. The origin myth reinforces aspects of Orientalism, such as its reliance on circulated myths that rely on an imagined ancient Orient, but also challenges Oriental sexuality by centering it on female sexuality instead of male sexual desire.

There is more consistency and information about the history of belly dance within the United States, probably because of its more recent introduction. Donnalee Dox and most other academics agree that belly dance was first performed in the United States in the early 1890s at the Chicago World's Fair (2006). Several of my informants reiterated that statement, but they all also added more information about the history of American belly dance. Many mentioned the names of famous American belly dancers such as the Salimpour family and credited them with helping to popularize and formalize belly dancing in the United States from the 1960s and 1970s onwards. My instructor Rose included Hollywood as an influence on the contemporary American belly dance aesthetic. Akasha also mentioned the importance of movie-making Hollywood because "costumes and dancing styles were given a distinctive Hollywood flare and, in turn influenced dancers in the Middle East, thus evolving the art form to a new level. For example, belly dancing with flowing veils hadn't been documented before the 1900s but is now quite popular throughout the world" (2007). Again, as per Joan Scott's model of the fantasy echo, belly dancers fill in American belly dance history with knowledge shared between

dancers and that knowledge is often dependent on their backgrounds as belly dance students. As an example, when I asked my informant Fiona about the history of belly dance in the United States, she told me “Most of what I know is hearsay or from my teachers.” Again, like the origin myths of belly dance outside the United States, American belly dancers use information shared between students and teachers to create a sense of collective history. Some of the history I learned about contemporary American belly dance, such as the role of dancers Jamila Salimpour and her daughter Suhaila Salimpour, was not included in the academic research I found. Unlike the origin myths, though, the shared American belly dance histories challenge Said’s Orientalism. The history of contemporary American belly dance is not based upon fantastical myths of the Orient that cannot be verified; rather it is based off more concrete events and trends that become a mix of academia and information from other dancers. Suhaila Salimpour, for example, is currently still alive and still teaches belly dance, preserving the history of her own contributions as well as her mother’s. Because contemporary American belly dance history is not based off a collection of myths but rather recorded events and patterns verifiable by living belly dancers, it challenge’s Said’s mythic aspect of Orientalism.

Sexuality and sensuality are still important parts of belly dance and dancers recognize this when they talk about themselves. It is also an important aspect of how they advertise themselves and their costuming. When I interviewed my belly dance informants, every single informant acknowledged the sexuality and sensuality pervasive in what they practice and how it influences belly dancers’ behavior and how their audience sometimes perceives them. As previously noted sexuality and sensuality are

part of Said's Orientalism. When I asked my informant Fiona why she believed people in the United States saw belly dance as a sexual activity, she responded by saying "Definitely costuming. It's sensual. Sometimes people tip dancers." Another informant of mine of Lebanese descent, Silvia, talked about some of her belly dance experience and reconciling with the sexuality associated with belly dance.

More people are realizing it's an art form but there's still a stigma attached to it because it's a taboo in proper society, which is a real shame...I didn't always tell people I belly danced on the side because I worked in a conservative area. One time I danced at a party and a guy tried to stick money down my costume and people made comments...Since I moved to South Florida, I don't like the private jobs because I don't get the respect I had previously. I'm proud of my heritage, so it bothers me.

Silvia associates belly dance with her Lebanese heritage and does not like to take on private dance jobs for parties in South Florida because of her treatment and lack of respect she receives during those jobs. This is partially related to the sexual and sensual connotations belly dance has in the upper class, mainstream public or "proper society." Silvia's experience is related to Said's Orientalism because of the way members of the audience treated her. Like Flaubert's *Kuchuk Hanem*, Silvia was perceived as a passive sexual object that the audience could inscribe their own desires upon without regard for the dancer's subjectivity. While one informant called belly dancing empowering, my other interview informants expressed a more ambivalent view on the sexual side of belly dance performance. To Noura, it was not as much a sexual performance as a chance to pretend to be someone else, saying "it was like playing house when you were a kid." She went on to say further that "you're performing for other people and you're the

entertainer, when you come out the stage is yours to do with as you will.” The dancers have control over how they express themselves, although not necessarily control over how the audience may interpret their expressions. Rose also accepted the sexual part of belly dance, but said “[the costume] is revealing, but it’s the costume for the art form.” Sexuality within the performance is accepted as a part of performing belly dance, but most of my informants did not consider it a central part of how they internally experienced belly dancing in front of others. They personally associated belly dance with self-expression. This correlates with the origin myth of belly dance, because it also challenges Orientalism by positing belly dance as an activity that centers on female expression and not sexual entertainment for men. Sexuality did affect their performance experiences when it came to their audiences’ reactions. Sexual objectification of Oriental women under the male gaze, particularly the Western male gaze, is part of Said’s Orientalism. Silvia’s experience, therefore, reflects the Orientalism in belly dance because of how the audience perceives belly dancers in a sexual manner as sexual entertainment objects. The idea that belly dance is some sort of sexual activity or taboo, while waning according to some informants, is still a big enough issue that it affects the way belly dancers are treated. I have witnessed a belly dancer named Lizzie moving across the Greek restaurant she performed at with dollar bills partially tucked into the top of her skirt. It reminded me of the tipping my informants had mentioned, although I could not be sure if she or a client had put the money in her skirt.

Not only are belly dancers seen in a similar light to sex workers and strippers by some, but belly dancers also recognize their own threatening sexuality when performing.

The belly dancer Noura realized her sexuality was threatening and tried to lessen the threat.

But I went out of my way, I did mixed parties and events, but I went out of my way to make sure that the women there could relax and enjoy themselves. And once they stopped seeing me as a threat, then people start to really relax and enjoy... Older audiences, actually, senior audiences even way back tended to be much more appreciative than the younger generation. They saw it as an art, they appreciated it more as an art, where somebody that was in their twenties, thirties, or forties, they've got the thing of "Well, it's a stripper" and it's all about the sexuality part of it.

Again, we see that there is an association between belly dancers and strippers and a concern for displayed sexuality. The association between sexuality and belly dance has some Orientalist undertones because of how belly dancers are perceived as sexual entertainers, particularly for men. This contradicts the origin myth stating that the dance was created for women and not for the entertainment of men. There is also an Orientalist fear of the dancer's displayed and perceived sexuality. As a stand-in for an Oriental woman, Noura's sexuality suddenly becomes threatening, particularly to the female members of the audience. Lustful Oriental sexuality, even when represented by a non-Oriental woman, still becomes a fearful force influenced by Said's Orientalism. The fear of an Oriental woman's sexuality can be traced all the way back to descriptions of the first belly dance performances at the Chicago World's Fair in the 1890s, where it is described as both offensive and sensual, a construction of the Other, terrifying in its difference and control.

Costumes and belly dance movements are also a very sexual and sensual part of belly dance. The two instructors I worked with, Rose and Esma, both emphasized the sexual aspects of belly dance movement vocabulary as well as used very specific words to connote sensuality. Esma, in her class, emphasized the use of hands to draw attention to the swaying movement of the hips. Hip movements are an important and heavily practiced part of contemporary American belly dance. Rose, in some of her classes where we drilled hip movements such as piston hips and mayas, told us to keep our hands near our hips and use them to frame the movement of the hips. Rose also used the words “juiciness” and “ooziness” to describe some of our dance movements in a few classes. The words were used to help us students understand that the particular dance movement we practiced must be done in a particular, slow, sensual, exaggerated manner. Esma also used the terms “juicy” and “slow and sexy” to connote a similar feeling when dancing during a song at a class. The sensuality and sexuality associated from the beginning of belly dance in the United States—again, it was a dance “dripping with the ‘voluptuous passion of the East’”—have become an integral part of belly dance vocabulary, both physical and oral (Jarmakani, 2005, p. 128). The Orientalist history of belly dance is reflected in contemporary American belly dance because of the sexual and sensual connotations found even among belly dancers themselves.

Belly dance costumes are more variable depending on the context of contemporary American belly dance. When the women of the belly dance classes are practicing, they wear very casual clothes that stress comfort and freedom of movement. The clothes, like tank tops, sports bras and yoga pants, generally come in subdued colors

or patterns. Occasionally women wear scarves or pixie skirts to accentuate their hip movements, but the clothes overall are not very flashy or sensual. The sexual and sensual aspects of contemporary American belly dance costume are subdued in a practice space or class space. The costumes are less revealing, less exotic, and in that sense challenge the sexuality and showy exoticism associated with Said's Orientalism and his construction of the mythic Other. When in a performance space, however, the belly dancers transform in appearance. Some, like Rose, wear elaborate, colorful make up for performances. Most belly dancers wear revealing, flashy costumes that are often bright colors or have dangling, shiny decorations and flowy cloth to emphasize the movement of the dancers. The dancer Lizzie, for example, wore a turquoise top and skirt covered in sequins and beads that revealed her stomach, shoulders, back, and arms when she danced in the Greek restaurant. Even Fiona, her dancing companion who covered her stomach and arms, still wore a brightly colored top and skirt decorated with beads and tassels. Even when covering up, the costumes created an exaggerated, imagined, exoticized look. Arguably, costuming is one of the most recognizable parts of belly dance. It is a very sensual look, and it is not lost upon belly dancers such as Rose.

Originally belly dancers didn't look the way they do now, like the sparkly, shiny stuff. So that's why people perceive belly dancers in that light, as well as they—I mean—why people see them as more promiscuous is probably because we don't really wear a lot of clothes a lot of times.

Rose acknowledges the sensuality and sexual connotations that the costumes bring, but believes that they come from the evolution of the costumes. The performance costumes, unlike the practice costumes, help reinforce Said's Orientalism. Belly dance performance

costumes help construct the belly dancer as the Other through their flashy, exotic appearance that clearly denotes the dancer as different. The costumes also tend to be revealing, which again suggests a sexuality we have previously seen also associated with Orientalism. In this context, performance costumes for contemporary American belly dance reinforce Said's Orientalism because of how they construct the dancer as a stand-in for the Oriental Other through their exotic and sexy appearance.

Sexuality and sensuality associated with the appearance of belly dance also come in pamphlets about belly dance. One pamphlet for the Rakstar belly dance convention in Miami has some sensual images of belly dancers that reflect the connection between Orientalism and sexuality. For example, on the third page, there is an advertisement for a Mediterranean restaurant. A large part of the advertisement is taken up by the name of the belly dancer who frequently entertains at the restaurant, as well as a picture of a dark-skinned woman in a purple belly dance costume. Her costume reveals the skin of one of her bare legs, her stomach, and her shoulders and arms. She is posed in a way that shows off the curve of her hips and her body. It is arguably a provocative pose when combined with her costume. It is reflective of the Orientalist fantasy of the sexualized Oriental woman because of how revealing her costume is and the way she is posed as well as her function as a stand-in for the mythical, sexy Oriental woman. The bright purple coloring and intricate golden patterning at the corners of the page also add to the exotic, mythic Oriental fantasy feel of the advertisement.

Another advertisement on the sixth page of the pamphlet exemplifies fantasies associated with the Orient. The page advertises a particular belly dance instructor and

her belly dance classes. There is a picture of her face in the upper left corner of the page. Her face is uncovered, but her hair is covered in an orange veil with coin jewelry adorning her forehead. Her head veil and forehead jewelry immediately identify her with a fantastical, Oriental Middle East. Her name itself is written in a font that mimics Arabic writing, adding to the exoticism. Her appearance and the font create a sense of exoticization because of how they emphasize her Otherness. The phrases she uses to attract the attention of the reader are “Be A Queen. Move Like A Goddess. Dance Like a Diva.” Each phrase implies a mythical fantasy from the Oriental Middle East and that the student, too, can re-enact these fantasies by learning belly dance. Like the origin myth, the writing draws from the mythical aspect of Said’s Orientalism and reinforces the Orientalism found in contemporary American belly dance. This particular advertisement reinforces the sensual and exotic Orientalist associations that are a part of belly dance and its history.

Orientalism is not just present in belly dance performances but also in how knowledge about belly dance is transferred between dancers and in how belly dance is perceived by the dancers themselves. Knowledge about belly dance is generally transferred from instructor to student during classes. Teaching styles can vary between instructors and this affect what type of information is transferred and how. My main instructor Rose, for example, could give relatively detailed information about how to perform particular movements and the physicality of belly dance, but admitted to knowing little about its original historical and cultural context. The next instructor I briefly studied under, Esma, had a highly detailed knowledge of the cultural and

historical context that her style of belly dance came from and she shared it readily with the class as she taught us dance movements. This helped remove some of the Orientalist mythic aspects and associations usually seen in contemporary American belly dance. At first glance it appears that Esma actually challenges Said's Orientalism by giving the Classical Egyptian style of contemporary American belly dance a cultural and historical context. While it is important to demystify the Orient and break down the Occidental mythologies the West associates with the Orient, Esma is still a non-Oriental woman explaining the Orient. An important aspect of Orientalism is the Occident trying to explain the Orient without the Orient or Orientals being able to express themselves. It is problematically Orientalist but may be alleviated by the fact that Esma's mentor who gave her the information was an Egyptian dancer. According to Said, however, it is still possible for people from the Orient to espouse Orientalist views (Said, 1978).

The Western views of belly dance are still present in how performers view belly dance. For example while in academic text belly dance was considered a form of entertainment but not necessarily a form of artistic expression in the Middle East, among the Floridian belly dancers I met it was considered a type of art. Every single one of my informants referred to belly dance as an art form at some point in their interviews, and a few also did so during participant-observation. Even Silvia, my informant with Lebanese heritage, called it an art form more than once. I can also recall a story that Rose told the class once about a belly dancer who was also a therapist who worked with military veterans. One of the dancer's clients, a veteran who toured part of the Middle East, saw her perform and requested that she stop belly dancing because it made him

uncomfortable. When a student asked why, Rose vaguely said it was because the dancer was performing a Middle Eastern style dance form and this reminded the soldier of his time in the Middle East. Rose sighed and finished the story by saying “It’s too bad some people can’t see it for what it is—an art form.” The soldier interpreted the belly dance performance as a genuine icon of Middle Eastern culture and a symbol of his time in the Middle East. But the belly dancers saw it as something other than a cultural experience that reflected the Orient. They saw it as a form of artistic self-expression. By trying to have belly dance be seen as an art form, belly dancers are conforming to another aspect of Orientalism: they are taking an Eastern experience and transposing it into a Western mode of representation. When done by someone from the Orient or of Oriental descent it can be seen as a case of self-exoticization because the Oriental dancer is now viewing their own practice from the point of view of the hegemonic, Western culture. They may try to make it respectable through promoting it as an art form to the general public in the United States.

VI. Conclusion

There were two questions I wanted to tackle in my thesis. For the first half of my thesis, I wanted to see how the history of belly dance in the United States affects contemporary American belly dance practices. The second half of my thesis problem was to see if contemporary American belly dance in South Florida challenges or reinforces notions of Said's Orientalism.

I found that the origin myths of belly dance reinforced Orientalism because it built upon fantasies associated with the Orient and Orientalism. It tied together with the sexuality and sensuality associated with Orientalism and belly dance. The origin myth stories challenged notions of Orientalism because they presented belly dance as focusing more on female expression and ritual, but not as a tool for male sexual entertainment. Even the history and origin of belly dance within the United States as understood by the belly dancers was steeped in Said's Orientalism. Many informants talked about the association between belly dance and sexuality and how that affects the experience of the dancers and the perceptions of their audience. Their performance experiences challenged Orientalism by focusing on their own enjoyment and performance style while the audience's reactions reflected Orientalist perspectives by treating the dancers as sexual objects for entertainment. Though the clothes worn by belly dancers in a practice or class space challenged Orientalism because of their subdued, less exotic colors and less revealing cuts, the costumes belly dancers wore in performance spaces reinforced ideas of Orientalism. Both dancers at the restaurant performance, for example, wore bright, colorful, at least somewhat revealing costumes and one dancer allowed money to be

tucked into her skirt, which reinforces the exoticism and sexual connotations associated with belly dance and Orientalism because, again, of the treatment of the dancers as sexual objects and the Otherness emphasized by their costumes. The looks and costumes of belly dancers in the Rakstar pamphlet also suggested a connection between belly dancers, Orientalism, and sensuality because of their revealing nature, their exotic appearance, and mythic references. The transfer of information and the characterization of belly dance also contained elements of Orientalism. While Rose and Esma both sometimes emphasized the physical and sensual aspects of belly dance, only Esma challenged the mythical parts of Orientalism by trying to educate her students about the history and culture from which modern belly dance evolved using information from her Egyptian mentor. At the same time, she also reinforced Orientalism by trying to explain customs of the Orient to Westerners while not necessarily having an Oriental background herself. We must also take her mentor's information into account; simply because her teacher was Egyptian does not mean her teacher was free from internalizing Orientalist messages, history, and information about belly dance. Every informant also referred to belly dance as an art form. Trying to make belly dance fit into an acceptable consumable form in the West is an aspect of Orientalism, where the West tries to explain the Orient to the Orient and create an acceptable Western form of an Oriental practice.

The belly dance community is far more nuanced than some may first think. While belly dancing in the United States may have been predicated upon Orientalist fantasies constructed by and for a Western audience, the belly dancers themselves do not always directly conform to those fantasies. I believe that more of the Orientalist fantasies

associated with belly dancing may be dismantled as more dancers become educated in the history and cultural origins of belly dance. As belly dance becomes more mainstream and acceptable, there will probably be fewer stigmas attached to it. If it becomes mainstream then perhaps the sexual connotations associated with belly dance will be lessened as more and more people believe it to be another type of performance art. At the same time, belly dance is also steeped in Orientalism from the time of its inception in the United States. It is still a pervasive part of belly dance but sometimes occupies areas where boundaries can dissolve and be reformed. Sometimes it is reinforced, sometimes it is challenged or does not wholly fit Said's Orientalism, and sometimes it can be both. There is a subtle polemic plurality within the symbols and actions of the belly dance community in South Florida and I believe it could encourage a future search for plurality in other similar studies concerning Orientalism. It is difficult to fully extricate Orientalism from the webs of knowledge in belly dance and in the end it is something that the belly dance performer must come to accept and develop awareness for. Hopefully this project will contribute to the study of how types of knowledge are created, distributed, and reinforced within various communities.

For further study in belly dance and Orientalism I would recommend looking into more unexplored areas of belly dance. For example, while researching I found evidence of male belly dancers but unfortunately could not find any to meet during my study. How do their performances and histories interact with Said's Orientalism? Another part of belly dance to explore in the United States in particular is a specific academic historical catalogue of belly dance from the 1960s onwards and the influence of particular

historical belly dance figures such as the Salimpour family. A final connection to research would be the perception of contemporary American belly dance community as an alternative subculture, focusing on Orientalism, subcultures, and their associations like Renaissance fairs. While belly dance has sexual connotations and an Orientalist history that does not make it unworthy of serious study, practice, or pursuit; by unpacking belly dance's history and Orientalism we not only deconstruct our problematic notions of the Orient but also our own equally problematic Occident.

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In this video, belly dancer Irina Akulenko teaches you how to do hip lifts and a basic shimmy. You'll be shaking it like Shakira in no time. So, now, we are going to go over the basic hip lift. Let's assume our basic belly dance posture position. So, the legs are right under the hip bones. Knees are bent. Lower abs are tucked, chest lifted, arms out. And now you are going to bend the knees even more than before and focus on lifting one hip at a time by straightening one knee at a time. So, as you straighten the right knee, the right hip will come up and it is going to shoot straight. After all, belly dancing is a discipline that requires attention and practice. We can assume that white practitioners on the whole take belly dancing seriously, and do it not for the sake of mockery but for enjoyment. It is also doubtful that Jarrar means to say that belly dancing is something sacred within Arab culture, or that there is a cultural prohibition against the participation of non-Arabs in the practice, in the same way that there is a general prohibition against images of Mohammed. Belly dancing is not considered in the Arab world to be a sacred practice; it is not a practice explicitly. Belly dancing provides a good cardiovascular workout, focusing on the torso. It can effectively help to increase the blood circulation in the pelvis while building the muscles of the lower abdomen. All the issues are supplied with plenty of oxygen as you do your dance. Many see a belly dance or a dance performed by a woman with curving movements of the hips and abdomen as an exquisite treat that should be set apart for special occasions only. However, the assertion would look preposterous to those who have already learned how to "return the key" with their hip movements and control "the wave" with their arms, those who can shake their bellies playfully to the music's rhythm and project their emotions through dance.