

“MAKE YOUR BELLY DANCE”: AN EXPLORATION OF  
FEMINISM, ORIENTALISM, AND EMBODIMENT IN  
THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF BELLY DANCE

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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES  
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

GRADUATE PROGRAM IN SOCIOLOGY  
YORK UNIVERSITY  
TORONTO, ONTARIO

February, 2018

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## ABSTRACT

Belly dance is a popular form of exotic dance in the West. Dancers, who are primarily White women, partake in weekly classes and perform at recitals and festivals. However, 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminism argues that due to its use of revealing costumes and movements that are read as highly sensualized, belly dancing objectifies female dancers and is oppressive. Scholars of Orientalism argue that belly dance has been disassociated from its roots in North Africa and the Middle East and is rife with Orientalist stereotypes. What can account for the discrepancy between the social scientific literature's denouncement of belly dance and its popularity among women today?

Absent from these critical analyses is any account of the embodied experience of dance practice. The body, which ought to be central to any research on dance, is curiously absent from much dance literature. My dissertation asks: What is the relationship between the body, experience, and social structure? What can studying the embodied experience of dance offer that is not captured in critical literature?

Informed by Merleau-Ponty's (1962) phenomenology, I employ an ethnographic methodology, including field work at two popular belly dance studios in Toronto and semi-structured interviews, to explore women's first-hand, lived, subjective experiences of belly dance.

My research suggests that lived experience and social structure are intimately intertwined, and the body is a mediating factor that reinforces the connection between the two. Dancers have internalized the heterosexual male gaze, but suggest the gaze can offer a source of pleasure. They speak of agentically using the male gaze to escape and subvert

the objectification it imposes. Although dancers exoticize the dance in ways that could perpetuate Othering, they also think critically and work to resist reinforcing the tropes of Orientalism. Finally, dancers discuss how their felt-senses inform their experiences. The somatic profoundly contributes to their lived experiences.

My research contributes to the development of an understanding of lived experience that takes into account representation, discourse, and corporeality. It moves beyond the work of critical scholars, for it allows both felt sensation and the external life world to remain vital to lived experience. I argue for the inclusion of the body in studies of lived experience, in order to provide more “fleshed out” accounts of such phenomena.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee for their intellectual guidance, enthusiasm in the project, and faith in my abilities. To Dr. Kathy Bischooping – I am thankful for the hours we spent at La Barista, the dance shows, the mini body experiments in the gym at which we were both members, the lessons in grammar, and most of all, for your suggestion that I pursue embodiment and dance as a dissertation topic. To Dr. Deborah Davidson – I am thankful for pool parties, periodic tearful chats, and dinners in your home. To Dr. Mary Fogarty – I am convinced that if we had met under different circumstances, we might have been friends and dance collaborators. I am thankful for your embodied way of being and the example you have set for me and your other students.

To Yasmina Ramzy and Audra Simmons – I will remain forever indebted to you for allowing me to conduct fieldwork in your thriving studios. You each provided me with extended interviews (upwards of 3 hours!) where we delved into topics that pertain to this research, as well as many that lie far beyond its scope. I am grateful also to the 30 dancers and friends who took the time to share their stories with me. Without all of you, none of this would have been possible.

To Dr. Jan Hux and Dr. Seema Nagpal – thank you for your support over the last three years of this process. I always appreciated your (sympathies!) willingness to support my (completion!) professional development by adjusting my work schedule when necessary and allowing me to take a leave of absence to get through the final sprint of this marathon.

My academic friends who have gone/are currently going through the PhD process provided me with strength and inspiration along the way. To my crew from York – Kritee Ahmed, Aliya Amarshi, Christopher Bailey, Selom Chapman-Nyaho, Elena Chou, and Jason Webb – our group was hugely important to me. Our regular get togethers and constant chat-group banter provided a sense of community through what can otherwise feel like a fairly isolated endeavor. I look forward to attending each of your graduation parties in the not-too-distant future. To Dann Hoxsey – our late budding friendship has augmented my existence both intellectually and emotionally. I enjoy filtering our life experiences through various theoretical lenses. Moreover, you are living my dream life: a partner who is a professor (and critical scholar no less!) and two adopted children. I want to be just like you when I grow up. To Dr. Siphwe Dube, who regaled me with tales of his own academic and intellectual journey. Your life story, worldview, and profound understanding of so many fields inspired me always to think both more broadly and deeply. To the newly anointed Dr. Agata Piekosz – it has been amazing to share the graduate student experience with you. Who would've thought when we were 23 years old, living together in a basement apartment in little Italy, that we would each be where we are today? I'm honoured to have watched your life unfold as it has. To Dr. Loretta Ho, who listened to and celebrated every minute step along the path to completion. Thank you for helping break this long process down into more digestible pieces through texts, phone calls, and fancy dinners. I look forward to the final celebration after my defense!

To my most supportive friends, Michelle Asgarali, Louise Hanly, Ingrid Kittlaus, Jenna Shervill, Kip Southam, and Nicki Zivku – thank you all for allowing me to ramble on ad nauseam about my research. From coffees to get me out of the house, to yoga, to

vacations to re-energize, you've each played a special role in this process and I'm grateful to have had you each walking alongside me.

To my loving family – where to begin? Thank you mom for always encouraging me to continue, and Annie Beej for always giving me permission to quit. Thank you Uncle Hank for helping me schedule mandatory breaks to be your personal fashion consultant, and thank you Uncle Richard for your endless curiosity regarding my progress. Thank you Middle Darryl for indulging me when I talked about dissertation drama over our brunches and lunches in big bad London Ontario. Thank you Little Kyle for coining the term “Classic Krista Crisis” to describe the overwhelmed, panicky, fretful states that take me over periodically – and thank you all for helping me through each and every one of them! Finally, thanks to my dad – writing this dissertation felt like an extension of our last conversation, and I enjoyed the way in which it maintained our connection.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

If you were to ask my mother what I was like as a child, she would tell you that I was always interested in arts and culture. She tells stories of watching me learn to figure skate, driving me to classes such as gymnastics and jazz, and listening to what sounded like a dying cat as I went through the early stages of practicing violin. She will also recount the ways in which she saw me as being “innately drawn” to cultures to which our family had very little connection. I was raised in London Ontario, and most of my neighbours were White, as were the children with whom I attended school. However, on Saturday mornings, when most other kids my age were watching cartoons, my mom would look downstairs and see me stationed in front of the television, watching an American Hindu station, transfixed by the singers’ voices and admiring their ornate style of dress. And my flare for “world music” did not end there – as a teenager, when she would walk by my room and hear the mix of salsa, dancehall, and RnB blasting from my speakers, my mother would stop and ask, “My lovely daughter, you do know you are White, right?”

It came as no surprise to her when, at 26 years of age, I called her to tell her that after taking one belly dance class, I had fallen in love! I regaled her with tales of the fascinating instruments used in the music, of the rhythms that, although new to me, resonated on a deep level, and of my love of the vocal melodies. I also discussed with her the beauty of the movements. Watching the teachers’ demonstrations, I was captivated by their strong hip articulations during drum solos, and the soft, fluid movements of their arms and torsos when they danced to slow, melodious instrumentals. After only one class, I knew belly dance was going to receive a large part of my time and attention. After five

years of practice, I began teaching at the best-known school for Middle Eastern dance in Canada, and was apprenticing with their dance company. When I began my dance journey, however, I would never have thought I would eventually submit a dissertation on the topic. As it turns out, I ended up more interested in the dance than I could have ever anticipated.

I have participated in belly dance for approximately nine years, my academic interest in the topic deriving from my personal experiences. Like many young women in the West, I was not immune to societal conceptions of beauty. Unrealistic media images of women who are thinner than average pervade the social landscape (Berry, 2007; Bordo, 1993; Goodman, Morris & Sutherland, 2008; Harrison, 2003; Kilbourne, 2000), and these ubiquitous images are paired with messages that associate body shape and weight with popularity, success, health and happiness (Goodman, 2002; Hesse-Biber, Leavy, Quinn & Zoino, 2006). I was so critical of my figure, which I felt fell short of the ideal, that my sense of self-worth was diminished.

Through belly dance, as I developed a new respect for what my body could do, the importance of how it looked decreased. In fact, I grew to appreciate aspects of my body that I had previously despised. My extra flesh was transformed from a hindrance to a virtue for, in belly dance, jiggling is a sign that movements are being executed correctly. I came to associate belly dance with enhanced feelings of wellbeing, and with my feminist values: I experience it as emancipatory, empowering, and female-centric.

Further, I have always been a strong proponent of multiculturalism, in both policy and practice. I have lived in Toronto for 13 years, a city where a full 51.5 per cent of the

population identifies as members of a visible minority community (Statistics Canada, 2016). As a result of over half a century of mass immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe, and, more recently, an influx of immigrants from the Caribbean, Eastern and South Asia, Toronto rightfully proclaims to be “one of the most multicultural cities in the world,” has branded itself as an immigrant city, and has an official motto that claims “Diversity our Strength” (toronto.com, 2018). The city’s civic culture valorizes identities of difference as manifested in host of policies and programs that aim to preserve Canada’s bicultural framework while providing opportunities for other communities to practice and preserve their cultural values and heritage. A number of researchers have identified Toronto as a leader in municipal government responsiveness to diversity (Boudrea, Keil, & Young, 2009; Good, 2005). However, a vast critical literature explores how this form of “warm and fuzzy” multiculturalism leaves intact structural inequities and reinforces historical social hierarchies, all the while disguising both in discourses that celebrate cultural diversity (Bannerji, 2000; Bell & Hartmann, 2007; Bhabha, 1992; Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Lipset, 1996; O’Brien, 2001; Razack, 1998). As Sherene Razack (1994) notes, in countries like Canada “minorities are invited to keep their culture but enjoy no greater access to power and resources” (p. 916). These tensions, and how they inform participants’ experiences of belly dance, are explored in Chapter Four.

For me, learning a dance associated with a group unfamiliar to many North Americans, seemed to me to serve as an embodied form of multiculturalism. I understood myself to be privy to information and cultural know-how not readily available in mainstream

culture.<sup>1</sup> What's more, I was well aware that I was practicing a dance associated with feared and stigmatized peoples. United States-championed angst surrounding terrorism, especially since 2001, has contributed to paranoia about activities and practices deemed Middle Eastern. I felt that by participating in belly dance, I was demonstrating both my worldliness and my rejection of prejudice.

Yet, as I began to explore belly dance intellectually, I found that much of the 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminist literature to which I was first exposed reflected neither my five years of experience of the dance, nor the experiences of other women with whom I spoke. This literature argues that due to its use of revealing costumes and movements that are read as highly sensualized, belly dancing objectifies female dancers and is oppressive (Koritz, 1997; Lorus, 1996; Savigliano, 1995; Shay, 2008). Scholars of Orientalism (Dox, 2006; Fruhauf, 2009; Koritz, 1997; Said, 1978; Savigliano, 1995; Shay, 2008) pose even more forceful critiques. These researchers argue that belly dance, as it is practiced today, has been disassociated from its roots in North Africa and the Middle East and is rife with the Orientalist stereotypes that Edward Said (1978) took up. Having been exported to the United States through the World Fairs of the late 1800s, modified by Western interpretive dancers to suit the tastes of Western audiences, then exported back to Egypt through Hollywood films, belly dance changed substantially and this new form was taken-up by local dancers in a form of auto-exoticization – a process through which those who have

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<sup>1</sup> Although scholars have largely taken-for-granted the term mainstream, Baker, Bennett & Taylor's (2013) edited book problematizes the definition of mainstream and the processes interactions that construct mainstream culture and music. For the purpose of this paper, I am using mainstream to refer to a historically situated category that refers to dominant behaviours, discourses, values, and identities (Huber, 2013, p. 11).

been colonized come to represent themselves nationalistically through the lens of their colonizers (Savigliano, 1995).

Second wave feminist and Orientalism literature, as well as the historical accounts of belly dance and its evolution, caused me great distress and altered my personal relationship to the dance. I felt as though I had been misled into believing that an inherently oppressive dance that verged upon racist could be virtuous. I was horrified to think that I had involved myself in an activity that countered many of my deeply held convictions. I felt disoriented and doubtful of any value I had hitherto ascribed to belly dance as it is practiced in the West.

Today, as this dissertation nears completion, my conflict has become – if not resolved – somewhat more clearly delineated. I still enjoy belly dancing, however, the enjoyment now exists alongside a deep feeling of discomfort that surfaces when I encounter its problematic elements, such as its appropriation of culture and potential to be read as hyper-sexualized. I find myself split, simultaneously experiencing empowerment and objectification, multiculturalism and Orientalism, and something more – something that the extant literature does not predict or capture. The embodied, corporeal, kinesthetic, and felt-sensorial components of dance also contribute to my experience of belly dance. This dissertation demonstrates that the possibility of these complex and simultaneous relations to the dance is not unique to me.

In Canada, the United States, and many other parts of the world, belly dancing is a popular form of what Robert Stebbins (2001) calls serious leisure, an activity involving prolonged, intense and dedicated involvement with the goal of developing a skill set.

Dancers, who are primarily White women, partake in weekly classes and specialty workshops, and perform at various recitals, festivals and galas. This leisure activity is costly: each class costs between \$18 and \$20, and workshops can cost from \$35 to \$100 a day, depending on the skill and prestige of the teacher. The ability to partake in belly dance, therefore, is quite privileged, and the women in my study willingly and enthusiastically devote their disposable income to this pursuit. What can account for the discrepancy between the social scientific literature's denouncement of belly dance and its popularity among women today? Are women embracing gender oppression and Orientalist stereotypes, or do they find a form of pleasure in engaging these gazes that the current literature and theoretical arguments leaves unaccounted for? Are women even engaging the gazes at all? Of particular note is that absent from these critical analyses is any account of the embodied experience of dance practice. Indeed, the body, which ought to be central to any research on dance, is curiously absent from much dance literature. Even writing "the" body objectifies it in the ways my research seeks to critique. The difficulties of discussing and writing about "the" body are taken up in Chapter Five and Six. In those chapters, I endeavor to re-embodiment the body.

Moreover, critical researchers' visually focused analysis leaves unacknowledged the other elements of bodily sensory experience (Classen, 1997; Howes, 1991), as well as what phenomenologists (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Sheets-Johnstone, 1999) would call the daily life worlds of the women who belly dance. Thus, belly dance's critics may be negating women's agency, their reasons for partaking in the dance, and its potential affirming benefits. More broadly, the 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminist and Orientalist theories may fail to accurately capture lived experience. It is these gaps that this dissertation addresses. It

asks: What is the relationship between the body, experience, and social structure? What can studying the embodied experience of dance offer that is not captured in critical literature?

This chapter is designed to provide the background information necessary to understand both the current state of the academic literature on belly dance and the rationale for my project. First, I briefly describe the theoretical orientations that inform my work – male gaze theory, research on Orientalism, and phenomenology. Each will be addressed in more depth in subsequent chapters. Second, I offer a history of belly dance that informs Orientalism scholars’ analysis, illuminating some of the factors influencing their harsh critique of the practice. Third, I look at the ways in which the body has been addressed in sociological analysis, making a case for the use of the concept of the “lived body” in my own work. Fourth, I explore the discrepancy between 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> wave feminists’ vastly different interpretations of belly dance, addressing the theoretical underpinnings of their positions and the limitations of their methods and findings. Here, I pay particular attention to the neglect of the body in their analyses. The last section will orient readers to the dissertation by providing brief descriptions of the remaining Chapters, organized around the themes of the male gaze, Orientalism and embodiment.

### **Theoretical Orientations**

**The male gaze.** In her now famous essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Laura Mulvey (1975) details how the structure of cinema influences the audience’s pleasure in viewing. She argues that, by virtue of the fact that it was developed within a patriarchal framework, the film industry involves a sexual politics of the gaze that leads

to a sexualized way of looking that empowers men and objectifies women. Subjected to the male gaze, women are visually positioned as objects of heterosexual male desire, and neither their feelings, thoughts, nor her own sexual drives matter to the degree that her being 'framed' by male desire does. In this way, Mulvey endeavors to find a connection between the process of film production and social control: she argues that through the act of viewing, spectators become subjects of, and subjected to, patriarchal ideologies.

Mulvey (1975) employs the psychoanalytic concept of scopophilia – a deep-seated drive that denotes the sexual pleasure in looking – to support her work. She argues that most popular movies are filmed in ways that satisfy heterosexual masculine scopophilia.

Visual media, she contends, responds to masculine voyeurism and sexualizes women for the male viewer. Because the camera tends to take on the perspective of the male protagonist, viewers come to identify with the male perspective, thus internalizing and perpetuating the patriarchal system.

Although my work is not informed by psychoanalytic theory,<sup>2</sup> I engage with Mulvey's theory through the work of the dance scholars (Adair, 1992; Albright, 1990; Daly, 1991) and the 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminist thinkers (Bartky, 1988; Bordo, 1993; Morgan, 1991) she influenced. Although dance performances differ from film, dance scholars argue that dance involves a "politics of imagery" (Albright, 1990, p. 34) that positions women as subjects. Moreover, 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminist scholars extend Mulvey's theory by examining the ways in which the male gaze functions within systems of representation. They argue that

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<sup>2</sup> Due to its focus on unconscious processes, psychoanalytic theory has been critiqued for reinforcing gender binaries, essentializing gender (Evans & Gamman, 1995; Thomas, 1996), and for privileging psychological processing over the cultural contexts and historical situations that influence it (Gamman & Makinen, 1994).



due to exposure to hegemonic beauty ideals prevalent in media images, women monitor and judge their appearance based on the tenets of the male gaze. They posit that the male gaze supports a patriarchal status quo that perpetuates women's real-life sexual objectification.

On its surface, belly dance appears to be created specifically to please the male gaze. The movements are highly sensual, and the sexualized costumes with sequined 'push-up' bras and naked midsections are designed to be visually pleasing. In Chapter Three, I explore women's experiences of and engagement with the male gaze through belly dance.

Outside of film, few scholars have focused on the processes through which women exercise agency by gazing and presenting themselves as objects of the looks of others.

How do dancers experience and engage with the male gaze?

**Orientalism.** Edward Said's (1978) groundbreaking *Orientalism* criticizes writers of the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in England and France for having produced one-dimensional accounts of the East, which he purports to be "an imaginative geography...Europe's collective daydream of the East" (p. 3). In their writings, scholars and other writers of the time defined the Orient as passive, unchanging, mystic, spiritual, sexually abundant, placing it in a direct binary with the West, which was deemed civilized, sexually conservative, rational, and progressive. The East, then, was metaphorically equated with a woman "to be ravished and won by the Orientalist hero" (pp. 188, 207, 311). The constructed distinction between the East and West justified the colonial ambitions of England and France, paving the way for them to colonize the

Middle East. Said argues that Orientalism was “in short, a Western style of dominating, restricting, and having authority over the Orient” (p. 3).

The Orientalist tendencies of the West produced a Eurocentric framework against which other countries and their peoples are judged. This framework was imposed upon and came to shape the experiences of colonial subjects themselves, resulting in a world system that values the political, economic and cultural norms of the West and devalues those of countries at the periphery. Moreover, the West came to define itself in opposition to the East. The East is characterized as passive, watched, and studied. It is depicted as timeless and unchanging, lacking the Western capacity to develop (Said 1978: 96). The East is also represented as “irrational, depraved, childlike and ‘different’; thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, ‘normal’” (p. 41). While Said did not entitle it as such, he had laid out the foundation for the development of the concept of the colonial gaze.

In Chapter Four, I explore the ways in which Said’s theory functions at a micro level. Postcolonial scholars (Kaplan & Pease, 1993; Maira, 2008; Williams, 1980) argue that the colonial gaze and the tropes of Orientalism (and of empire more broadly), have come to permeate and influence lived experience, such that “empire [has become] a way of life” that has affected the “habits of heart and mind” (Williams, 1980, p. 11). These “imperial feelings” (Maira, 2008) infuse individual’s motivations and their constructions of meaning, leading structures of difference and domination to be reflected in and perpetuated through individuals’ everyday lives. In Chapter Four, I expand upon the works cited above and explore the degree to which “imperial feelings” play a part in

women's understanding of belly dance. I posit that their experiences are not so easily reduced to engagement with this broad discourse.

**Phenomenology.** Phenomenology is a vast philosophical field with a complex history and many different traditions. According to Herbert Spiegelberg, eminent phenomenological philosopher and historian, the number of phenomenological styles practiced is equivalent to the number of practicing phenomenologists (1982, p. 2). In this section, I make no attempt to provide an exhaustive account of the development of the field. Instead, I focus on the history and tenets of French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (1962) phenomenology, upon which this work draws.

Merleau-Ponty (1962) emphasizes the centrality of the body to our understanding of how humans engage with their environments. For him, it is perceptual experience with and through the body that meaning is found. His philosophy demonstrates a rejection of the phenomenology of philosopher Edmund Husserl (1982), who argued that knowledge and meaning are the product of the essential structures perception, of which human consciousness is comprised, that coexists with the body but are essentially independent of it. For Husserl, knowledge and meaning, then, are also independent of the body. Merleau-Ponty's recognition of the role of one's body in the constitution of meaning is conducive to a novel approach that details the situatedness of perception – perception that is rooted in the perceiving subject's body.

Merleau-Ponty's analytic framework of perception is also a response to Cartesian dualism, the idea that there exists an active mind and an inert body, the former residing in the latter (Schmidt, 1985). Merleau-Ponty holds that humans are more than purely minds,

subjects, or bodies: the nature of being is instead best understood through the term body-subjects. For Merleau-Ponty, referring to individuals as body-subjects means not that we possess bodies, but that subjectivity and corporeality are wholly intertwined and indistinguishable (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Therefore, one cannot speak of the mind and body as separate entities; one can only refer to them in conjunction, as indicated by the hyphenated body-subject term (Hughson & Inglis, 2000, p. 124).

Phenomenologists argue that we must consider two distinct aspects of corporeality. First, the body is a biological organism. Its materiality is pivotal as any experience of dance is predicated on the body's physical abilities and limits (Grosz, 1994, p. 190; Young, 2005, p. 16). Second, beyond its organic nature, phenomenologists contend that the body is a phenomenon we experience subjectively (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 156).

Phenomenologists interrogate the experience of the body from a first-person perspective, something largely missing in sociological literature on movement, the body, and belly dance. Because embodied experience plays a role in the construction of meaning, corporeality must be considered in order to fully grasp the lived experience of this embodied practice.

However, social researchers (Howson & Inglis, 2001; Shilling 2007) have raised concerns about a phenomenology that conceives of the body as an active agent outside of the context of the society and culture that produce it. They argue that a phenomenological approach to a sociology of the body must account for the concept of social structure.

Bodies are active in, and restrained by, socially structured contexts (see Shilling, 2007), so failing to address social structure reduces the validity of the phenomenological

approach. Therefore, Alexandra Howson and David Inglis (2001) suggest that sociologists acknowledge and incorporate within their research the fact that the body acts on, and is acted on, by society (p. 299). Therefore, I subscribe to a corporeal form of phenomenology that takes into account embodied, lived experience, as well as the social world in which both the body and one's experiences are produced and situated.

### **Orientalism and the History of Belly Dance**

In order to understand Orientalism scholars' (Dox, 2006; Koritz, 1997; Savigliano, 1995; Shay, 2008) denouncement of belly dance, as presented briefly above and explored in more depth in Chapter Four, it is important to have an understanding of the histories of the dance and how it has evolved over time and space.

Dance scholar Donalee Dox (2006, p. 53) describes belly dance as a:

combin[ation of] footwork, movements, costumes, and performance conventions from a wide range of Middle Eastern and North African social, folk, and ritual dances with those of professional Egyptian nightclub dancing (often referred to as "cabaret" dancing). Today, the common names "belly dance," "Oriental dance," "la danse Orientale," and "Middle Eastern dance" are all used to refer to this syncretic genre, with traditional Egyptian raks sharki as the most prominent stylistic component.

A complete history of belly dance would be difficult to provide due to the sparse and incomplete records of its origin. In Egypt, paintings in the tombs of noblemen dating approximately 1400BC portray bejeweled women dancing in scenes of pleasure and celebration (Deagon, n.d.). Within the cultural life of the Middle East, Turkey and Egypt in particular, this dance had been popular among both men and women, and used in tribal rituals as a means of fostering community, pleasing gods or goddesses, and producing an abundant harvest (Buonoventura, 1998; Deagon, 1998). Belly dance also played a role in

holiday celebrations and rituals, marriage ceremonies, sexual education, pregnancy and birthing support. Before the 1700s, belly dance in Egypt was practiced in the privacy of one's home or communal gatherings (Sellers-Young, 2016, p. 110), and was rarely performed for a public audience (Dox, 2006). In the early 1700s, however, European travellers to Egypt begin references two groups of professional dancers in their writing: the Awalim and Ghawazi. The Awalim were primarily singers who memorized a large repertoire of poetry and songs and who performed in the private quarters of women, or behind screens<sup>3</sup> should men be present. Remaining out of sight of men preserved their reputations, leading them to be considered a higher class of entertainment than the Ghawazi, who were primarily street entertainers who danced unveiled in front of female and male audiences, and who were often considered prostitutes (Shay, 2008, p. 133; Shay & Sellers-Young, 2005, p. 5). Both of these groups were affected by changes in Cairo's entertainment landscape in the late 1800s. In particular, the influence of Western tastes and preferences provided Egyptian performers with new choreographic and costuming ideas, and by the start of World War I, almost no traditional Awalim or Ghawazi remained (Danielson, 1991, p. 245).

The evolution of belly dance from its early roots to the sensualized performances we see today involves a complex social, economic and political history that dance scholars (Dox, 2006; Savigliano, 1995; Shay, 2008; Shay & Sellers-Young, 2003) have understood as intertwining what are called the male and the colonial gazes. For this reason, throughout this dissertation, I refer to these scholars collectively as critical gaze scholars. In

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<sup>3</sup> Mashrabiya screens – wooden screens with carved latticework – were used so that male audience members could not see the performers but could still hear their singing (Thompson, 2010, p. 65).

Orientalist writings and art of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, women were depicted as large-breasted, scantily clad, overtly sexualized performers, existing to entertain and seduce men in harem settings (Moe, 2012, p. 204; Said, 1978, p. 207). Said argues that the Orient represented “sexual promise (and threat), untiring sensuality, unlimited desire, [and] deep generative energies” (p. 188). Therefore, the Orientalized woman stood as an ideal representation of colonial relations by seeming available for the pleasure of colonizers and ready to submit to their wishes. However, these representations were fabrications with little grounding in reality, as writers and artists of the time would have had little to no access to harems or the other settings depicted in their works (Moe, 2012, p. 204; Sellers-Young, 2016, p. 111).

Many Orientalist painters employed European models and staged scenes in their home studios based on their assumptions of Oriental dress and activity (Moe, 2012, p. 204). These images are historically inaccurate. Women in the Orient were expected to be quite chaste, refraining from sex prior to marriage and keeping their thoughts, speech, and actions free of any sexual undertones, as they lived in a society that imposed upon them stringent moral, political, economic and legal obligations surrounding sex (Said, 1978, p. 190). The idea of the overtly sexual, mystic harem princesses adorned with veils and jewels, was a Eurocentric creation put forth by colonizers and travelers to satisfy their own needs and desires – they were both the producers and consumers of these representations. Through the colonial gaze, the East became an object to be studied, fashioned and created in the image of the West’s desires.

Although it is broadly acknowledged that the seats of empires extract material goods and labour from their colonies, Marta Savigliano (1995) demonstrates that a political

economy of emotions, passion in particular, also developed, leading to the exoticization of countries at the periphery, whose emotional and expressive practices could also be subjected to domination. She describes how imperial powers accumulate, recode, and consume emotional capital from a culture that they deem exotic, mysterious, wild, primitive, and above all, passionate (p. 2). As Savigliano notes,

Exoticism is a way of establishing order in an unknown world through fantasy; a daydream guided by pleasurable self-reassurance and expansionism...It is also a will to power over the unknown, an act of indiscriminately combining fragments, crumbs of knowledge and fantasy, in disrespectful, sweeping gestures justified by harmless banality... Western exoticism accompanied by worldwide imperialism has had the power to establish Eurocentric exoticism as a universally applicable paradigm. (1995, p. 169)

In her work, Savigliano demonstrates that passion and emotion came to be commoditized through the circulation of exotic dance genres. Dance, with its promise of the sexual, mysterious, and forbidden, became a byproduct of the unequal exchange between the colonial powers of the West and its more primitive Other. The idea of the passionate woman is a product of this process – of the colonial desire to dominate.

Belly dancers first performed in the West in a series of exhibitions and fairs meant to parade the conquests of Western imperialism. The fairs were held in the world's major cosmopolitan centres between 1850 and 1912: London in 1851, Philadelphia in 1876, Paris in 1889, Chicago in 1893, San Francisco in 1894, Nanking in 1910, and Manila in 1912 (Shay & Sellers-Young, 2005, p. 7). Indigenous peoples from colonized lands were brought and put on display for locals: the 'Other' became a spectacle used to demonstrate the lifestyles of the natives the West had come to dominate. Although fascinated with belly dancers' abilities, their audience at these fairs found their dance vulgar and offensive. The sharp hip accents and body gyrations were read by Western audiences to



communicate an overt and potentially threatening sexuality (Shay, 2008, p. 128). Moreover, their garb of pantaloons and vests were interpreted by audiences as unattractive. Because audiences found these dancers and their costuming distasteful, Shay argues that the West's widespread fascination with belly dance did not have its inception at the world exhibitions. It was only after the dance underwent a process of Orientalization that it became aesthetically pleasing to Western audiences. The version popular today represents such a conceptual break from its historical roots as to make contemporary belly dance "essentially a new dance genre" (Shay, 2008, p. 131).

The process of Orientalization and exoticization of belly dance began in the West in the early 1900s when Maud Allan, Ruth St. Denis and Loie Fuller, offered westernized interpretations of belly dancing (Shay & Sellers-Young, 2005, p. 7). Such dancers, inspired by photos of exoticized Eastern women, wore jeweled bra tops, pantaloons, and headpieces. These interpretive dancers moved in a manner that modeled the bodily posturing of Eastern dance but that incorporated more arm movement and wrist twists, and avoided accentuating the hips (p. 7). These dancers were taken to represent the "spirit of the East", an essentialized "truth" about the East abstracted from the dance as it is practiced in its various countries of origin (Koritz, 1997, p. 141). Western interpretations of belly dance appealed to elite tastes and the dance grew in popularity.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Orientalism was common in Western dance forms. Impressionistic images of the Orient appeared in modern, tango, and many other forms of dance in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Marius Petipa's *La Bayadere* and his interpretation of the *Nutcracker*, which includes the Arabic coffee dance, are famously Orientalist. Diaghilev's Ballet Russes greatly contributed to the process of Orientalization in dance when it presented six "oriental ballets" between the years of 1909-1912: *Cleopatre*, *Le dieu bleu*, *Les Orientales*, *Scheherazade*, *Thamar*, and the *Polovestian Dances*. Russian composers, choreographers, theatrical designers and designers combined their efforts to portray dazzling images of

While the aesthetic changes in dress and movement contributed to its acceptance in the West, Anthony Shay (2008) and Amy Koritz (1997) argue the cultural context was important to the growth and popularity of belly dance as well. Addressing the dancing at the world fairs, Shay (2008, p. 128) notes that during the late 1800s and early 1900s, the prevalence of racist attitudes towards Arabs made it unlikely that any form of art associated with Middle Eastern countries would be met with reverence. According to Daly (1997), dance embodies “ideologies of difference”, noting:

Dance, as a discourse of the body, may in fact be especially vulnerable to interpretations in terms of essentialized identities associated with biological difference. These identities include race and gender and the sexualized associations attached to bodies marked in those terms, as well as national or ethnic identities when these are associated with racial notions [...] In the United States, the dominant structuring trope of racialized difference remains white/non-white... In cases where a cultural form migrates from a subordinate to a dominant group, the meanings attached to that adoption (and remodeling) are generated within the parameters of the current and historical relations between the two groups, and their constitution of each as “other” and as different in particular ways. (p. 36-37)

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Middle Eastern people were grouped into the category of “non-White Other” which contributed to White audiences dismissing the dance. Prior to the civil rights movement of the 1960s-1970s, these audiences were unable to appreciate the art of the “Other” (Shay, 2008, p. 126-131).

White women performing belly dance, such as Maud Allen and Ruth St. Denis, bypassed these racial concerns (Koritz, 1997). In addition, these American-born performers’

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the exotic east, presenting female ballerinas as licentious and carnal. Russian critics also accused Diaghilev of misrepresenting Russia, its people and its culture through ballets that portrayed Russia as a “semi-Orientalist nation of barbarians” (Lozynsky, 2007, p. 94). Indeed, their critiques point to Diaghilev’s auto-exoticization (Savigliano, 1995) of the Ballet Russes; a deliberate transformation of his company due to his reliance on Western patrons for financial support. Diaghilev employed commonly held stereotypes of Russia to provide Western audiences with ballets that they appreciated, i.e., those that affirmed of the West and the backwardness of the East (Jarvinen, 2008, p. 27).

interpretations of belly dance reflected and eased the prevalent anxieties over female sexuality at that time. While avoiding focused pelvic movements, they introduced subtle forms of sexuality to boost ticket sales<sup>5</sup>. The result was a sensuality lacking any element of aggression. Thus, appealing to the male gaze was structurally incorporated into the art form (Koritz, 1997). Due to their sexual allusions, modern renditions invoked fear of untamed and threatening Eastern female sexuality. However, because the performers were White, they transferred the threat of sexuality onto an enacted Other, avoiding accusations of overt sexuality themselves. While they embodied the mysterious sexuality of the Orient, their Western status calmed anxieties regarding its limitlessness, demonstrating once again Western control and mastery of the East (Koritz, 1997, p. 147). Therefore, the popularity of dancers' interpretations of belly dance was largely due to their reliance on racial and gender stereotyping.

In the 1940s, the Western interpretations of belly dance and its costuming were taken up by Hollywood and used in many films exported to Europe, South America, and Singapore. These countries, having had limited exposure to belly dance as it is practiced in the East, adopted the Westernized version – today commonly referred to as “cabaret style” – in their own countries. The films were also exported to Egypt, resulting in the auto-exoticization of Egyptian belly dance. Savigliano (1995, p. 2) defines auto-exoticization as a process of identity formation that takes place when a dance's originators make use of Orientalist elements introduced in Western countries to construct

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<sup>5</sup> For example, by gazing down at their bodies, dancers turn otherwise innocuous movements, such as small hip or chest movements, into sultry demonstrations of female sexuality. Because they directed the audience's attention to the relevant area with gazes that might themselves be modest, the dancers no longer needed to employ the kinds of powerful movements that had overwhelmed and offended (Adra, 2005, p. 31).

the dance's modern identity. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many restaurants and theatres opened in Cairo catering to tourists and upper class residents whose tastes were largely dictated by Europe and America. Responding to their Western and Westernized clientele, the theatres and restaurants too incorporated more cabaret style dancing: the two-piece costumes used in movies became the norm and solo improvisations were reduced in favour of staged choreographies with movement vocabularies from the West. Egyptian dancers used Orientalist symbols to market themselves and draw larger audiences. Consequently, cabaret style was appropriated by Egyptians and became what today is known as Egyptian-style belly dance<sup>6</sup> (Shay & Sellers-Young, 2008, p. 23).

Therefore, Shay (2008, p. 128) maintains that belly dance today aesthetically has little connection to its Egyptian origins and constitutes an almost entirely new dance genre. The movements involved reference historical practices, but having undergone a process of Orientalization, only a small portion of past dance performances have been retained.

Shay explains:

What is clear from these observations is that the aesthetic elements of the dance were foreign and alien in an unattractive way to most American audiences, while they found the interpretive orientalist performances of St. Denis and Allan exotic in an exciting and attractive way. Westernized performances of 'oriental' dance by St. Denis and Allan, and the later performances of Egyptian dancers like Masabni, Gamal, and Carioca, were much more influential in the development of the highly popular form of belly dance that was introduced on a grand scale in the 1970s than the authentic nineteenth-century form of belly dancing that was seen at the Chicago World's Columbian Exhibition in 1893. (2008, p. 138)

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<sup>6</sup> The transformation of belly dance to incorporate Orientalist stereotypes further supports Fine (2003) and Grazian's (2005) arguments. These authors argue that authenticity is staged and performed by groups who seek to capitalize from the value placed on "authentic experiences". This process largely mirrored that of Chicago blues bands who sought to manufacture "authentic" images by employing only black musicians, using stereotypical language and banter on stage, and performing in "seedy" bars and pubs, in order to satisfy clientele in search of an "authentic experience" (Grazian, 2005).

By stylizing their costumes in accordance with Orientalist images, and by focusing on hand and arm movements instead of torso articulation, American interpretive dancers negotiated between spectacle and aesthetic, producing performances that balanced the West's interest in the exotic with its conservative attitude towards sexuality. It is their interpretations that have inspired today's dancers in Egypt and the West alike.

Modern belly dance is commonly marketed as a vehicle through which women can access an “ancient” and “timeless” culture<sup>7</sup>. However, as the history of the dance suggests, belly dance, as practiced in the West, is neither. Yet, it is important to note that I purposefully avoid using the term “authentic” to refer to early Middle Eastern forms of belly dance. Cultural sociologists (see Fine, 2003a; Grazian, 2005; Urquia, 2004) see authenticity as socially constructed, noting how it alludes to essentialized, unchanging, tradition-bound practices. David Grazian argues that ideas of authenticity are seeped in stereotypical images of reality as opposed to being reflections of everyday lived experiences. Therefore, applying the term “authentic” to belly dance would leave me committing the same error as Orientalist thinkers of the past: assuming that belly dance in the Middle East is (or, without Western intervention, would have been) basic, frozen in time, and incapable of evolving.

### **Empirical Literature on the Body and Dance**

In this section, I present the role of the body in the current state of empirical belly dance literature, situating my project among its gaps. First, I discuss the traditional absence of

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, *Hannan's Belly Dance Studio's* website (Hannan Belly Dance Inc, 2010) which professes “Belly Dance is the world's oldest dance form”, or Texas's *Cultural Performances* website (National Park Services, 2013) which entitles its article: “Belly Dance: An Ancient Art.”

research on embodiment broadly in the field of sociology. Second, I describe the three broadly defined categories of theories of the body that have been used in contemporary sociological research: the symbolic body, the discursive body, and the lived body. I argue for the use of the lived body in research that explores embodied experience, addressing how this concept will be used in this project. Third, I present the tensions between the role of the body as it is conceived by 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> wave feminist scholars, outlining the limitations of each perspective. These tensions will be expounded upon in Chapter Three. Finally, I argue that, to date, the research on belly dance has resulted in the development of two opposing discourses, each with their own merit, but that have nonetheless neglected to consider the role of embodiment, taken up in Chapter Five, in women's understanding of their lived experiences. How might a project that focuses on embodied experience contribute to our understanding of the practice of belly dance?

**Sociology and the body.** Up until the 1960s, the body was given little attention in sociological theory. Ours is a discipline that privileges the social world over the natural world and thus, when engaging with the nature vs. culture debate, due to the process of development of the discipline, we have historically fallen on the side of focusing on culture. The body, generally seen as a natural, biological organism, was not prioritized in sociological research.

The “founding fathers” of sociology (Marx, Weber, Durkheim) were concerned with the similarities and differences between industrial capitalist societies and traditional societies. Their work focused on the industrial, political and ideological revolutions in Europe, and they were concerned with aspects of the changing economic and political landscape, such as the growth of wage labour, mechanization, urbanization, democracy, and

secularization (Turner, 1991, p. 7).<sup>8</sup> Moreover, when seeking to create their own space within the intellectual field, early sociologists distinguished themselves from psychologists and natural scientists by privileging the social perspective. Although this strategy demonstrated sociology's value as a discipline in its own right, one consequence was that the body was ignored. As a living organism, it was seen to fit more appropriately within the domain of the natural sciences (Shilling, 1993, p. 25; Turner, 1991, p. 7).

The absence of women scholars in sociology's early days may also have played a role in the neglect of the body in social theorizing. The female experiences of industrialization, including the risks of pregnancy, mortality during childbirth, and high infant mortality rates, might have created space for a focus on the body within sociology. It has been suggested that the "founding fathers" emphasis on the intersection between their personal biographies and the social concerns pervading society at that time might have shifted the focus onto embodied experience had they had first-hand experience with the corporeal dangers associated with being a woman at that historic moment (Frank, 1991, p. 41; Shilling, 1993, p. 27).

However, in the 1980s, the body emerges in sociological analysis as an important component of the social world and lived experience. Chris Shilling (1993, p. 31-38) and Bryan Turner (1991, p. 18-24) outline four key reasons for the growing academic concern with the body at that time. First, 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminism in the 1960s prioritized women's control of fertility and abortion rights, placing these embodied concerns at the forefront

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<sup>8</sup> In Marx's analysis of how capitalist technology makes the bodies of working-class people into appendages of machines, and in Weber's discussion of the rationalization of the body within bureaucracy, we do see that these thinkers were aware of the issues of embodiment. However, their conceptualization is limited to the perspective of the body as a physical component of social control (Shilling, 1993, p. 24).

of their political agenda. Second, the ageing of Western societies' populations has had broad economic implications, in terms of social policy, pensions, and care services for the elderly. Third, a cultural shift in Western societies away from hard work and ascetic values to increased leisure and consumption promoted the idea of the body as something to be worked on, cared for, and restructured through exercise, diet, health, and fashion. Finally, the rationalization of the body, wherein the body came to be seen by institutions and governments as a machine to be controlled, improved, or manipulated via scientific advancements, contributed to research on the body in the areas of diet, sport, health, and production.

Although the body had previously been viewed as an “uninteresting prerequisite of human action” (Shilling, 1993, p. 19), it became a central concern for social theorists. In response to these changes, scholars worked to move the discipline away from conceptualizing the body as a biological given that is stable across time and space, and toward redefining the body as a sociocultural and historical phenomenon (e.g. Bourdieu, 1984; Butler, 1990; Csordas, 1994; Douglas, 1970; Featherstone, 1991; Foucault, 1995, 1998; Frank, 1991; Grosz, 1994; Shilling, 1993; Turner, 1984; Young, 2005). I classify the broad literature theorizing the body into three main groupings: the symbolic body, the discursive body, and the lived body.

***Symbolic body.*** The symbolic body perspective emphasizes the representational nature of the body. It conceives of the body as a vehicle that conveys meaning, ignoring corporeality almost completely. Prominent writers in this field (Bourdieu, 1984; Douglas, 1970) address the physicality of the body, however, they lend to it no special significance beyond symbolizing the society in which it is situated.



Mary Douglas (1970) was one of the first to write about the symbolic significance of the body. Douglas argues that “there is a strong tendency to replicate the social situation in symbolic form by drawing richly on bodily symbols in every possible dimension” (p. vii). For Douglas, the body is viewed as a text that can be read, signifying the social world of which it is a part. Douglas’s work laid the groundwork for the representational perspective of the body.

Pierre Bourdieu (1984) picks up on this thread and argues that the body is one among a number of other objects that carries symbolic value, providing embodied indicators of one’s social class, mapping individuals onto a social hierarchy, and enabling individuals to navigate within different fields<sup>9</sup>. What Bourdieu calls habitus – all learned habits, style preferences, tastes, taken-for-granted knowledges, and bodily skills – imbues different social groups with different “system[s] of dispositions” (p. 71) that are commodified as a form of physical capital. Some individuals, by virtue of their social origin, gain more embodied capital and are able to navigate the world in ways that lead to higher rewards. The body, then, plays an important role in reproducing social categories through its comportment and tastes that individuals perceive as innate.

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<sup>9</sup> Bourdieu defines the field as an arena of objective social relations, and human agency is both shaped and enacted therein. There are many fields, such as economics, politics, education, and culture, and many subfields within them. While fields can overlap, they are relatively autonomous. Each has its own rules and structure, determined by the relations between the individuals occupying positions within the field, the relations between the fields themselves, and the relationship of the field to the overarching power structure. Thus, a field is ‘a space of possibilities’ which provides an objective realm of opportunities for actors to acquire certain rewards (economic or symbolic, for example). Actors, expressing their own agency within the positions they occupy, confront this range of possibilities and are free to seek these rewards to the best of their abilities (1984: 64).

*Discursive body.* Michel Foucault (1995, 1998) and Judith Butler (1990) are most widely associated with viewing the body as discursive. For Foucault, the discursive body is seen as the result of “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault, 1972, p. 49). The body does not exist as an object in and of itself; it is formed through cognitive mappings, which outline the possibilities and limitations available for understanding bodies and bodily experiences (Frank, 1991, p. 48). Therefore, the physicality of the body is elusory, for discourses of the body outline the normative parameters through which one can come to understand it. There is no material body, except the one that is discursively constituted.

According to Foucault (1995, 1998), the discursively-constituted body is a site of moral and political struggles that leave it passive, docile, and therefore well-positioned to serve social functions imposed by power/knowledge relationships. Both the inner body and outer body are regulated, through concerns of diet and reproduction, and appearance and commodification, respectively, which illustrates concerns of bodily governance, and concerns over the control of desires of people whose selves are shaped in the process (Featherstone, 1991; Frank, 1991; Turner, 1984). Consequently, then, discourses of the body play a pivotal role in the social control of society.

Judith Butler (1990) takes the sexing of bodies as her main example of discursive constitution. She insists that sexed bodies have very little to do with the differences imputed to them, but rather that sex is a product of discursive regimes onto which gender is ascribed. She contests the differentiation between sex (biology) and gender (social construction), insisting that our understanding of bodies is produced by social conditioning, through institutions, such as medicine, that seek to reinforce

heteronormativity. Sexed bodies, in her view, do not differ biologically but discursively and have “no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute [their] reality” (1990, 173). In other words, Butler sees sexed bodies as socially constructed as though they provide a material base for gender, as opposed to being the material entities upon which a socially constructed gender is imposed.

Symbolic and discursive theorizations present the body as socially constructed, neglecting both the material body and one’s experience of it, reinforcing the mind/body dualism so prevalent in Western thinking (Shilling, 1993; Turner, 1991; Thomas, 2013). Although the body does serve as a powerful symbolic medium, it is also agentic; it has the capacity to participate in the creation of social meaning. Addressing the body’s symbolic potential or discursive construction provides only a partial theoretical account of its significance in social theory. I understand the body to be something more than a construction or discourse; it is also lived, animated, and experienced.

Contemporary scholars have sought to transcend the dichotomy of mind/body by drawing attention to the often overlooked role of the body in social action (e.g., Csordas, 1994; Frank, 1991; Wacquant, 1995). Within this framework, a self that acts on the world necessarily does so through the medium of the body, a notion often referred to as “embodiment” (Csordas, 1994). According to corporeal feminists (Grosz, 1994) and phenomenologists (Csordas, 1994), any work that seeks to move beyond conceptualizing the body as passive needs to engage with these additional facets of embodied existence. I argue that exploring the lived, experiential body will help counterpoise the heavy attention paid to the symbolic and discursive facets of the body and provide a more thorough understanding of the phenomena social researchers endeavor to elucidate.

**Lived body.** The concept of the lived body draws our attention to the body as an active agent on the grounds that our bodies mediate our relationship to the world around us. This perspective draws on Merleau-Ponty's (1962) phenomenological insight, described earlier in this chapter, that "the body is our general medium for having a world" (p. 146). The concept of the lived body acknowledges that we have "bodily organs [that] have certain feelings and capacities and function in determinate ways; her size, age, health and training make her capable of strength and movement in relation to her environment in specific ways" (Young, 2005, p. 16). The relations between an individual's bodily existence and his or her environment, both physical and social, constitute a facticity: an objective state of being that is both lived and experienced.

Attending to the facticity of lived bodies can help us to address the critiques mentioned previously of symbolic and discursive understandings of the body. As Elizabeth Grosz (1994, 190) discusses, the body is "constrained by its biological limits", in that its material specificity is not infinitely pliable. There are real differences between bodies that cannot be reduced to inscription, discourse or representation. The concept of the lived body accounts for the differing of physical bodies, while not reducing bodies to biology: broader swatches of history and culture retain primacy.

**The body and dance.** Second wave feminist and orientalism scholars (Fruhauf, 2009; Koritz, 1997; Lorus, 1996; Savigliano, 1995; Shay, 2008; Shay & Sellers-Young, 2003) have relied mainly on the postmodern perspective of "dance as text," and analyzed movements, costuming, and choreography for meaning (Wainwright, Williams & Turner, 2006, p. 536). In the literature of these critical gaze theorists, dance is most often discussed as symbolic, representing and producing societal power relations (Wright &

Dreyfus, 1998, p. 95). The emphasis on “reading dance” overlooks its experiential aspect; just as we do not passively consume texts, dancers do not passively interpret, experience, relate to and use the dance in their daily lives, but, rather, bring their life histories and social positions to these processes (Frith, 1996). Furthermore, as sensory anthropologists (Classen, 1997; Howes, 1991; Pink, 2009; Vannini, Waskul & Gottschalk, 2012) might suggest, reading dance as a text negates the bodily-kinesthetic knowledge of dancers in favour of visual representation and interpretation of audiences. The input of other modalities of sensing may temper, change, or altogether negate conclusions based on visual cues.

Third wave feminists have conducted the few empirical studies of belly dance that are not based in gaze theory and have focused on the benefits of belly dance (Downey, Reel, SooHoo & Zerbib, 2010; Kraus, 2009, 2010; Moe, 2012, 2014; Tiggerman, Coutts & Clark, 2014). These studies all rely on small, localized samples of almost exclusively White women from Western countries (primarily the United States), and employ semi-structured interviews for data collection and thematic analysis. They find that belly dance is associated with positive body image, healing, community building, stress reduction, confidence, fitness, spirituality. Concentrating on the benefits of belly dance, Angela Moe (2012) argues that belly dance is a form of resistance to social and cultural norms about women and their bodies. She found that reasons for belly dancing fall under four umbrellas: healing from both physical and psychological ailments; sisterhood, through a source of community with like-minded women; empowerment, through feeling happier, healthier and stronger; and spirituality. Moe (2014) found that these benefits extend to

ageing recreational belly dancers, who, in addition, note that belly dance helps them regain mobility and find a sense of sensuality in their later years.

Rachel Kraus (2009, 2010), a scholar of religion, asserts belly dance is not simply a secular form of leisure. Many participants describe a spiritual significance to their dancing that contributes to its value in their lives. The self-reported sense of spirituality comes from the feeling of letting go and involving oneself completely in the dance. Her participants report being in an almost meditative which they attribute to tapping into a higher power. Goddess imagery, so heavily associated with the practice of belly dance, bolsters this experience, as it hints towards an otherworldly element of the dance. Finally, because they use the dance as a form of self-expression, the dance's capacity to help them connect more deeply with what they perceive as their true, inner, authentic self, is interpreted as spiritually significant. Cumulatively, these components foster a sense of spirituality in belly dance for otherwise non-religious participants.

Many forms of dance, such as classical ballet or modern dance, as well as aesthetic sports, such as gymnastics or figure skating, are associated with unhealthy body images (Reel & Beals, 2009; Ryan, 1995). However, survey research has found that belly dance, which puts less pressure on body shape and weight conformity, is associated with high levels of body image satisfaction (Downey, Reel, SooHoo & Zerbib, 2009; Tiggerman, Coutts & Clark, 2014). The acceptance of bodies of different shapes and sizes, and teachers' encouragement to make any extra flesh shake, contribute to bodily acceptance that is not found in ballet or aesthetic sports.

Although these empirical studies address lived experience, they do so in a way that treats the conceptual category of “experience” as raw and direct, as though it is unmediated by structural influences. The authors present their participants’ interpretations as pure and refrain from questioning the ways in which the women’s responses bear markers of the society in which they were socialized.

Cultural theorist Angela McRobbie (2009) cautions against relying on celebratory discourses of power, control and agency for, as she posits, these mask themselves in a mask of feminism that, in fact, only serves as a substitute for it (p. 1). She argues that emphasizing individualism and autonomy contributes to the perception that women are no longer impacted by structural constraints, making the feminist movement redundant (p. 11). Such notions, then, discourage collective organizing and leave intact structures that create power divisions in society.

In addition, the few extant 3rd wave feminist empirical studies of the dance neglect matters of Orientalism all together. They do not address any aspects of their participants’ experiences that could be interpreted as culturally appropriative. They also fail to take into account practitioners of colour. Focusing only on the experiences of White women who belly dance leaves unacknowledged how differences experienced by groups who are themselves considered “Others” within a Western framework might lead them to interpret the dance, and their involvement in it, differently.

Finally, the phenomenological experience of the dance does not factor into their analysis. The embodied, felt sensations that contribute to our evaluations of experience are not considered in their explanations of belly dance. More work is needed to capture fully the

discursive field in which dancers are situated and the embodied nature of belly dance. How is belly dancing understood by the dancers themselves? Do women experience or sidestep the dichotomous discourses outlined in the literature (i.e. belly dance as emancipatory vs. oppressive, multicultural vs. Orientalist, personal expression vs. embodying the other and dancing for self vs. dancing for an audience)? If so, how are these polarizing discourses negotiated? What alternate discourses may exist that the current literature does not capture? How are these discourses embodied and expressed?

The research of 2<sup>nd</sup> wave and 3<sup>rd</sup> wave feminists serve this dissertation as a starting point. However, they account for only two, largely polarizing, discourses of belly dance – one that interprets the dance as thoroughly objectifying, and the other as unabashedly celebratory. My work seeks to close this gap by illuminating the relationship between structure and lived experience through an exploration of belly dance, to work towards tying together these polarized literatures. As Wright and Dreyfus (1998, p. 95) contend, the body must be taken as more than a site of “inscription and oppression.” The body is a site of both oppression and pleasure simultaneously, and the interaction between these women’s subjectivities and cultural discourses require careful analysis that recognizes the tensions and contradictions inherent in this activity.

My project is inspired by a small number of studies that address the relationship between actors’ phenomenological accounts and societal structures. These studies span a vast array of activities, including dance and ageing (Thomas, 2013; Wainwright & Turner, 2006), dance and injury (Tarr & Thomas, 2011), boxing (Wacquant, 2004), aerobics (Grimshaw, 1999), and women reading romance novels (Radway, 1983). These researchers are writing in response to critical scholars who interpret these activities



negatively due to having textually analyzed the phenomenon at hand. Through participant observation and/or semi-structured interviews, these researchers describe the lived experience of their chosen activity, not in an effort to situate participants as authorities over experience, but to outline the connections between expressions of experience and institutions (Fogarty, 2015, p. 250).

For example, although the body is not her focus, Janice Radway found that women who read romances do so not because they reinforce traditional gender roles, as critical literary scholars had argued, but because novels serve as a “declaration of independence” (p. 60). Her method allowed her to detail women’s use of these books for their own creative purposes, namely, receiving pleasure through reading as well as “escaping” mundane familial obligations, while simultaneously highlighting the ways in which readers’ subjectivities have been influenced by the systemic force of patriarchy. Similarly, Jean Grimshaw (1999) argues that Foucauldian-informed critiques of fitness programs strip women of agency and leave the benefits of participating undertheorized (p. 100). By drawing on the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty (1962) and Young (2005), she argues that participation in sport and exercise provides women with the opportunity to develop different forms of bodily comportment and develop a sense of competence that involves “feeling that one can cope with any task or project at all” (1999: 112). In her writing, she acknowledges the possible negative or collusive aspects of women’s participation, but challenges researchers to also theorize the positive.

Steven Wainwright and Bryan Turner (2006), as well as Loic Wacquant (2004), draw on Bourdieu’s (1984) concept of habitus to help describe participants’ experiences and connect them to their cultural worlds. Interviewing participants, Wainwright and Turner

seek to describe professional ballet dancers' experiences with of injury and ageing. Wacquant adds intense participatory embodied practice, what he calls "direct embodiment" (p. 60) to his ethnographic work in a boxing gym in Chicago, arguing that this phenomenological component that includes his lived-experience of being initiated into the bodily craft of boxing. He asserts that this form of carnal sociology is imperative to the understanding of lived experience for, if we accept that Bourdieu's (1984) contention that the "social order inscribes itself in bodies through its permanent confrontation," then "it is imperative that the sociologist submit himself to the fire of action *in situ*" (p. viii).

Jen Tarr and Helen Thomas's (2011) analysis of pain and injury in ballet dancers was informed by cultural phenomenology, which examines both embodied experience and the cultural factors that shape and mediate it. They also added a visual component to their methodology. In addition to questionnaires and interviews, they asked participants to map their bodily pain using three-dimensional body-scanning technology. They found this visual element enhanced the findings garnered through interviews by focusing participants attention on the body, providing "somatic reminder[s]" of their experiences of pain, and enabling them to "scan through their bodies" and bring awareness to symptoms of pain or injury they would otherwise ignore because they are interpreted as simply part of the life of a dancer (p. 153).

As previously mentioned, the empirical work on belly dance has only accomplished one part of this equation: it has focused largely on women's experience of the dance with little emphasis on social structure (for an exception, see Bock & Borland, 2011; Dox, 2006; Wright and Dreyfus, 1998). As is discussed in more detail in Chapter Two, in this

dissertation, I use an ethnographic approach, relying on both participant observation and semi-structured interviews, to understand women's stories of the belly dance experience and investigate the relationship between embodiment, experience, and structure (Grimshaw, 1999; Radway, 1983; Tarr & Thomas, 2011; Thomas, 2013; Wacquant, 2004; Wainwright & Turner, 2006). Like Wacquant (2004), I allow my intense participatory embodied practice of belly dance to enhance my understanding of the practice, and I draw upon it when necessary to clarify concepts and ideas for readers. However, as this is not an autoethnography, my experiences are not privileged in the analysis. Moreover, although I do not deem a visual component to be appropriate for my research, like Tarr and Thomas (2011), the felt body is central to my analysis. Instead of using bodily mapping, I ask my participants to perform their favourite belly dance move to increase their levels of bodily awareness and feeling. Taken together, these methods allow me to test existing theories of experience, amending them when necessary, and present new ways of conceiving of the relationship between embodiment, experience and structure as called for by the data.

### **Dissertation Chapter Descriptions**

This dissertation is organized around the pertinent themes being investigated. Chapter One has served as an introduction to the topic. I have outlined the goals of the project, and the major research questions. I have contextualized the topic by providing background information on belly dance and its evolution, and outline the major theoretical debates with which I will engage. Chapter Two focuses on methods and presents an in depth account of the research design. My research involved participant observation at two belly dance studios in downtown Toronto, each practicing a different

style of belly dance. I also conducted in-depth interviews with 32 women of various levels, from beginners to professionals. The chapter also explores the methodological implications of researcher positionality, elaborating on how I navigated the field as an “intimate insider” (Taylor, 2011), and on how my shifting identity shaped the research process and findings. Chapters Three, Four, and Five are data analysis chapters, each focusing on a theme being explored in this project: the male gaze, Orientalism, and embodiment. Throughout these chapters, comparisons are made between the experiences of women at the different studios, as well as comparing troupe members to those dancing primarily as a leisure activity. In these chapters, which focus on drawing links between applicable theories and women’s accounts of belly dance participation, I argue that embodied experience is key to women’s understanding of their dance experiences and their life worlds in general. In Chapter Six, I discuss the difficulties of speaking about and writing the body, relating these challenges to those experienced by scholars working with translation. I suggest that due to the lack of language with which to describe their experiences, participants rely heavily on metaphors to translate their embodied experiences. In light of these challenges, I propose a new method for translating movement into text that seeks to overcome these challenges. Finally, in the conclusion, I discuss the importance of including embodiment in any research that seeks to understand lived experience.

In the next chapter, I present methodology and methods used for this research. Founded on a phenomenological framework that investigates lived experience, I employ an ethnographic methodology, using participant observation at two studios in downtown Toronto, and semi-structured interviews with belly dancers of all levels. This chapter also

explores how my “intimate insider” (Taylor, 2011) status influenced the research process, including how it impacted me personally.

## Chapter 2: Methodology and Methods

In 2014, at the time of my fieldwork, I had been belly dancing for six years and was in studio for 12 hours a week on average. I was regularly taking classes and specialty workshops at four different studios in the city, performing at recitals and festivals, and paid to entertain at bridal showers, bachelorette parties, and other female-focused celebrations. Also, I was an apprentice in Arabesque Dance Company and employed part-time as an instructor for beginners at Arabesque Dance Studio<sup>10</sup>, one of the studios at which I conducted my fieldwork.

Many of the women I would be interviewing were women I thought of as friends. My relationship to other dancers extended beyond the dance floor. We routinely went out for drinks after classes and performances. We scheduled events of interest to group members, such as attending documentary films that highlighted the dance experience, inviting everyone regardless of how deeply embedded they were in the community. Moreover, over the years, I had developed a network of friends with these women. Most of my close friends at the time were people I knew through belly dance. We were friends on Facebook, regularly texted and talked on the phone, went for coffee and dinner dates, and relied on each other for personal support.

When I first conceived of this project, I imagined it being a counterweight to the largely critical feminist body of literature on belly dancing. As discussed in the introduction, this literature argues that belly dancing is oppressive because it objectifies women (Koritz,

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<sup>10</sup> To alleviate any conflicts of interest and to ensure compliance with ethical standards of free and informed consent, I did not interview my own students or individuals who I thought could potentially become my students.

1997; Savigliano, 1995; Shay & Sellers-Young, 2005). These interpretations did not reflect my phenomenological experience of the dance, or the experiences of the other women I had spoken with informally before conceiving of this project. My embodied experience led me to conclude that belly dance promotes feminist values: it is empowering, it is female-centric, and it is body positive. By interviewing women about their lived experiences, I hoped to shed light on alternate (more positive) discourses that critical theorists missed.

In this chapter, I first describe ethnography as an interpretivist methodological approach. Second, I depict the difficulties I experienced juggling what felt like divided loyalties to the dance and scholarly community even prior to undertaking my fieldwork, particularly due to my insider status. Third, I describe my data and the methods used to collect it<sup>11</sup>, with a focus on the ways in which my intimate insider status helped or hindered the process. Fourth, I discuss the techniques I devised to overcome the more challenging aspects of insider research, in particular, the ways in which I made the familiar strange (Atkinson, Coffey, & Delamont, 2003, p. 47; Erikson, 1986, p. 121; Garfinkel, 1984; Sikes, 2006, p. 538).

### **Ethnographic Methodology**

Methodology refers to the link between technique, data and theory (Kothari, 2004, p. 8).

It ties together and justifies one's epistemological framework, the data to be collected and analyzed, as well as the theories that inform research. For my research, I rely on

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<sup>11</sup> All recruitment, data collection, and data management procedures described in this chapter follow the guidelines outlined by the Tri-Council Policy Statement (PRE 2014) and York University (2013).

ethnography, a qualitative methodology that organizational theorist John Van Maanen (1988) describes as “a written representation of a culture (or selected parts of it)” (p. 1). I turn to ethnography as it allows me to explore the experience of belly dance through the theoretical lens of phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). According to Max Van Manen (1990), “phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences” (p. 9). It is not my intention to claim to uncover the essence of the experience as truth, but rather, I intend to investigate the meanings associated with belly dance from my participants’ perspectives. My goal is to explore the embodied experience of belly dance, and ethnography will support this endeavor.

**Ethnography.** The purpose of ethnography is to provide in-depth, rich, holistic insights into the beliefs of members of the group or culture being studied, as well as to describe the location they inhabit, through observations in the field as well as interviews. As Martyn Hammersley puts it, “the task [of ethnographers] is to document the culture, the perspectives and practices, of the people in these settings. The aim is to ‘get inside’ the way each group of people sees the world” (1992, p. 4).

Ethnography is considered an end product, such as a manuscript or article, that uses literary or rhetorical features to represent a group or culture (Thomas, 2013, p. 83). Moreover, ethnography is also something a researcher does: it involves entering the field, immersing oneself in the group of interest for a prolonged period of time, collecting observational data by way of field notes (records of what people say and do, the daily goings on in their field, interactions between individuals, and the researcher’s reflections on and emotional responses to them) and conducting interviews (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p. 1).



Until the 1990s, “the field” in which ethnographers conducted their research was commonly understood to be geographically bound (Naess, 2016). In order to come to understand the culture and experiences of the community under study, ethnographers would spend a significant amount of time, about twelve to eighteen months for anthropologists, often less for sociologists, doing participant observation within a territorial unit (Eriksen, 2003, p. 6; Thomas, 2013, p. 83). However, in the 1970s, factors associated with globalization, including telecommunications, media, and economic interdependence, led to questions regarding the boundaries of “the field” (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997, p. 37; Wittel, 2000, p. 2). States, institutions, and individuals’ lives have become increasingly interconnected, and phenomena have spread across time and space. Therefore, to understand a group’s point of view and experiences, ethnographers adapted to include the context of globalization in ways that challenged the traditional understanding of “the field” (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997; Naess, 2016). In accordance with Hans Naess’s conceptualization, I understand “the field” to be composed of the many sites, processes, and relations, in which a phenomenon can be said to exist (2016, p. 2). Instead of entering spaces that are geographically bound, researchers working under this understanding must choose (or, during the ethnographic process, be directed to) different sites for research that are interconnected. The sites in which I conduct my fieldwork, as described in full detail below, include two prominent belly dance studios in downtown Toronto. Popular belly dance websites are drawn upon in Chapters Three, Four, and Five.

The use of ethnography as we understand it today can be traced back to anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. His work came as a critical response to “armchair anthropologists” who he accused of producing speculative theoretical accounts

of social groups based on second hand accounts (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 16-17).

Malinowski studied and wrote about his time researching the Trobriand islanders, and his study is one of the most heavily cited works in anthropology (Bernard, 1998). Although much about his standpoint, uncovered in his writings posthumously (Malinowski, 1989) has been rightly criticized for being, at best, ethnocentric, and at worst, rife with racism (Fuchs & Berg, 1993; Geertz, 1988; Hsu, 1979), he practiced an experiential approach to ethnographic research and encouraged others to enter the field and “figure out what the native says and does” (Geertz, 1974, p. 30).

Anthropologists have largely studied small, remote cultures other than their own, whereas sociologists have mostly studied phenomena present in urban society (Van Maanen, 1988). The development of the use of ethnography in sociology began in earnest in the 1920s and 1930s when members of the Chicago school, including Robert Park, W. I. Thomas, and Ernest Burgess, took up the study of urban life, particularly of subcultures considered deviant, such as dancehalls and street corner gangs (Atkinson, 1990). These thinkers used first-hand accounts collected through participant observation to study groups within the society in which they lived, albeit not groups of which they were members.

Today, we see researchers studying not just communities within their society, but also groups of which they are a part (see Adler & Adler, 1987; Ergun & Erdemir, 2010; Irwin, 2006; Narayan, 1993; Taylor, 2011). This has led scholars to question the advantages and disadvantages of insider or outsider researcher status, and put into question the boundaries of insider and outsider status altogether. This will be explored in more depth later in this chapter.

### **Methods: Observing and Questioning Embodied Experience**

My project uses qualitative research methods to investigate the embodied experience of female recreational belly dancers in the Toronto area, Canada's hub of belly dance activity. Qualitative methods allow for thick descriptions of social life, detailed explanations of social processes, and the generation of theory on both micro and macro levels (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2004). As I will discuss, I employed a combination of participant observation and in-depth interviews to investigate this topic.

**Participant observation.** Participant observation is a process that enables researchers to learn about the activities of groups in natural settings (Kawulich, 2005, p. 2). It is defined as “the process of learning through exposure to or involvement in the day-to-day or routine activities of the participants in the research setting” (Schensul, Schensul & LeCompte, 1999, p. 91). Researchers work to secure inclusion and to be involved in group activities, in order to understand how the group operates (Fine, 2003b). Researchers must work to establish rapport within their community of study and act in ways that will allow them to blend in so as not to disrupt the regular goings on (Bernard, 1994).

Because it allows researchers to observe what individuals actually do, witness group interaction, and get a sense of the kinds of activities the group undertakes (Schmuck, 1997), some researchers deem participant observation to be both more useful and more enlightening than interviews which rely on self-reporting (Dingwall, 1997, p. 61; Gans, 1991, p. 540). It can also be useful in terms of data triangulation, in that researchers can ask follow-up questions in interviews based on what was observed, seek clarification of

terms, and observe situations informants describe in interviews so as to verify the accuracy of their claims (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002; Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

However, a number of researchers have drawn attention to the limits of participant observation as a method for data collection (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002; Schensul, Schensul & LeCompte, 1999). These thinkers question the degree to which a researcher's social location, including gender, ethnicity, age, and class, influence her or his capacity to be accepted into a group, the information group members are willing to share, and the researcher's interpretation of data. Moreover, questions arise as to how the presence of a researcher may affect the group or situations (Merriam, 1998). By virtue of simply being there, researchers alter the environment and may impact how individuals interact, calling into question the degree to which findings can ever accurately represent a community.

Kathleen and Billie DeWalt (2002) recommend using a reflexive approach to help mediate the effects of the researcher's social location, recognizing that meaning is made, not found, and for the researcher to reflect on his or her role in this process. Although this limitation cannot be completely resolved, DeWalt and DeWalt (p. 23) suggest the following:

The key point is that researchers should be aware of the compromises in access, objectivity, and community expectation that are being made at any particular place along the continuum. Further, in the writing of ethnography the particular place of the researcher on this continuum should be made clear.

Researchers must be cognizant of their potential impacts on the setting and group and of their own biases, and ensure that they account for their possible effects on the environment when explaining the data and reporting their findings (Merriam, 1998).

As a participant observer, my aim was to describe the culture and practices at each studio and increase my own understanding of what takes place within studio walls. What did the women wear? How did they use the mirrors? What types of messages about the body are presented by teachers and students alike? How are the history of belly dance and the cultures to which it is connected constructed? I felt that attending to such matters would allow me to examine the normalized discourses at each studio, providing me with a greater understanding of how meaning is constructed within the group. Moreover, it would familiarize me with the messages participants are exposed to on an everyday basis, and help me to determine the degree to which those discourses are invoked during their interviews. I felt that fieldwork was essential to garner a greater understanding of participants' experiences as well as the culture and studio practices that relate to my research questions.

Participant observation was conducted in, and interviewees were recruited from, Arabesque (artistic director – Yasmina Ramzy), and The Dark Side studio (artistic director – Audra Simmons),<sup>12</sup> two popular belly dance studios in downtown Toronto. These studios were selected purposively to facilitate collection of data on the issues pertinent to my topic: the gaze, Orientalism, feminism, and embodiment. Each studio is owned and operated by a White Canadian female artistic director, and both studentships are almost exclusively female and from diverse racialized backgrounds, with the majority being White. The Dark Side is almost exclusively White. The two studios expound

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<sup>12</sup> These are the actual studio names. Upon beginning the research, I gave the artistic directors the option to have a pseudonym created for their studio or use their studio's name. Both preferred to have their studio's identity and their own identities made public and provided me with written permission to do so on their informed consent forms. All other names are pseudonyms in order to protect participants' confidentiality.

different philosophies, adhere to different aesthetics, and practice different dance styles. Because the structures of these schools and their teachings differ immensely, including both in this study allowed me to capture the social and material circumstances of the women attending each, as well as the differences in women's experiences based on the style of dance taught and the habitus of the dance school they attend. Of the five belly dance studios in the city, Arabesque and The Dark Side were selected because only they have professional companies; this allowed me to compare dancers from beginners to professional.

Arabesque was founded in 1987 and defines its style of belly dance on its promotional material as a "shameless display of femininity." Arabesque (2013) prides itself on being an ambassador of Middle Eastern dance, music and history in Canada. Its focus is on teaching traditional styles of dance from Egypt and Syria, along with folklore styles such as Saudi Arabian Khaleeji, in which long jeweled dresses are used as props, and Raks Asaya, a Middle Eastern cane dance that both men and women perform. By contrast, The Dark Side studio, founded in 2004, defines itself as "modern belly dance for modern women" (2013). The Dark Side studio emphasizes non-traditional forms of belly dance, using modern and techno dance music. The school's philosophy does not prioritize teaching the history of belly dance and its traditional roots. It focuses on tribal belly dance, a style that combines foundational belly dance movements with tribal dances and costuming from North African and Eastern Mediterranean groups. Often, dancers use masks and other props to enhance the theatrical element of their performances. The Dark Side studio also teaches tribal fusion, referring to styles that combine tribal belly dance

with hip-hop, reggae, Latin, burlesque and break dancing. Tribal fusion has no base movement vocabulary; each performer will have her own version of it (June, 2010).

The schools each have students of varying levels, from complete beginners to professionals. While beginner and intermediate students may perform in recitals for friends and families, they dance largely in private spaces and classes. Troupe members perform regularly in elaborate stage productions, at community events, and for many other types of engagements, and are therefore exposed to the attitudes and expectations of the audience. Including dancers of all levels allowed me to interrogate how dancing in private vs. dancing for an audience changes the way dancers relate to the dance and to their bodies. Moreover, studying dancers of all levels permitted me to consider the degree to which experience dancing over time influences one's sense of embodiment.

I participated in eight one-hour classes at each studio, ensuring I took classes with a variety of teachers. To disrupt the studio environment as little as possible, I took the role of a complete participant, taking notes as soon as possible after each observational session rather than in the field. The themes on which I took notes were informed by my literature reviews – they were decided upon based on my own interests and my understanding of the important debates in the field. My field notes addressed themes I was interested in before fieldwork began include both empirical observations and my preliminary interpretations or analyses of them. In my notes, I describe and compare the culture and practices of each studio, focusing on the following: décor; class structure; and appearance of teacher's clothing and body decorations. I took note of “body messages”, asking: What is defined as a “good body”? How are messages about the body conveyed? What evidence is there in the studio that belly dance is (or is not) empowering? How

does instructor input contribute to or detract from experiences of empowerment? I also attended to the relevance of the gaze in my participants' environment by observing the function of the mirror: How ocular-centric is the dance class? To what degree are students encouraged to "watch" and evaluate their movements in the mirror vs. "feel" their movements kinesthetically? I attended to messages regarding looking at the teacher and/or other students: How are students instructed to use their own gaze on other dancers within the dance setting? I also watched and listened for messages regarding performance: Are audiences invoked in class and if so, how? What messages are dancers given about audience desires? Finally, to explore the Orientalism critique, I attended to discussion of the Middle East, its history, and its relation to the dance throughout the classes.

**Interviews.** Observations from the field were used to inform the second phase of the research: semi-structured interviews with dancers to explore their relationship to the pertinent themes of the gaze, feminism, and Orientalism and interrogate their embodied experience of the dance. Observations shed light on the collective culture of a group (Hammersley, 1992; Van Maanen, 1988). However, individuals rarely respond uniformly to any environment; their life histories influence the way they interpret their surroundings, involvement, and the way they construct meaning (Radway, 1983). Without interviews, I would be left with only the publicly sanctioned discourses with which belly dancers engage, as, in studio, those are all that are on display. My data would not capture how women use or relate to these discourses in their daily lives, nor would it capture the degree to which women have bought into and/or grapple with these discourses. Moreover, I knew I had topics I wanted to discuss that were rarely, if ever,



brought up in studio, such as the Orientalist elements of the dance, and without the opportunity to speak with dancers one-on-one, I would not be able to fully explore these topics of concern. Including interviews allowed me to elaborate on topics I felt were important, provided participants with space to offer insights that run counter to the prevailing discourses, and allowed participants to raise issues that I may not have considered but are nonetheless significant to their experiences.

Semi-structured qualitative interviews are especially well suited to the research questions under investigation. The flexibility in interviewing process provides the capacity to go off-script, allowing interviewers an opportunity to probe participants' answers on a case-by-case basis (Berg, 1995). Semi-structured interviews give participants space to express their views in their terms, which may lead researchers to identify new ways of seeing and understanding that the use of structured interviews might not bring to light.

Like James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium (2011), I understand interviews to be meaning-making endeavors that are an "inherent[ly] interpretive activity" (p. 155). As they note, qualitative interviews are not intended to be "search and discovery" activities (p. 153) that seek to uncover objective truths that participants hold. Instead, meaning is constructed between interviewer and interviewee (Frisch, 1990; Mishler, 1991).

Participants are not sources of information; they are constructors of meaning and understanding. Rejecting objectivity in order to focus on meaning and interpretation has become the proud cornerstone of qualitative research methods, distinguishing it from positivist forms of research.

In total, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 32 dancers who self-selected to participate: 12 dancers from Arabesque, 11 from The Dark Side, and seven who regularly take classes at both. Almost all participants were White, with the exception of two. One limit of my interview guide is that I did not ask dancers how they self-identify ethnographically. However, due to my intimate insider status, as explained below, I am aware that these participants identify as Trinidadian Canadian and Ghanaian Canadian. More difficult for me to discern is the background of my White participants. In accordance with what theories of the invisibility of White ethnicity detailed later in this chapter (Dyer, 1988; McIntosh, 1988; Shome, 2000) would predict, these participants and I have not questioned each other's heritage.

The sample included five members of Arabesque Dance Company and five members of Lavish, the professional troupe at The Dark Side, while the remaining participants were students ranging in level from beginners to advanced dancers. I also conducted interviews with the artistic directors of Arabesque and The Dark Side (for brief biographies of the dancers quoted in this paper, see appendix A).

I used occupation and education as markers of participants' social class. Although income is commonly also used in the measurement of social class (Nam & Boyd, 2004), I chose not to ask participants about their financial situation for two reasons. First, I was not attempting to objectively measure class and categorize my participants accordingly. I was seeking instead to gain an understanding of participants' social position to inform my analysis of their narratives and experiences. Second, my intimate insider status made asking explicit details about their income feel inappropriate. I did not wish to make participants uncomfortable disclosing this information to someone with whom they have

frequent interaction and with whom their relationship would extend beyond the period of data collection and interviewing.

Participants come from a range of educational backgrounds and hold diverse occupations, with the majority holding at minimum bachelor's degree and working professional positions. Only one participant held a high school degree only. She is currently not working and collecting employment insurance. Four hold jobs in retail or as waitresses at local restaurants. Most participants, however, are teachers, public servants, or otherwise professionally employed. Three participants are not in the labour force. They consider themselves homemakers and have partners who are gainfully employed and capable of funding their belly dance practices with ease.

The interviewing protocol was comprised of open-ended questions related to themes of feminism, objectification, Orientalism, multiculturalism, and embodiment, with related prompts and probes included (see appendix B). I designed the guide to interrogate both the creative ways in which women use belly dance and the social elements that structure women's participation in and experience of belly dance. Interviews took place between January and September of 2014. Because my questions included asking participants to show me their favourite dance moves, interviews took place in private, either in my home or the home of my participants. Interviews lasted on average 90 minutes, with the shortest being 34 minutes and the longest just over three hours. They were digitally recorded and transcribed by a graduate student at York University for whom I received funding from the Faculty of Graduate Studies to hire.

The process of recruiting participants differed by studio. My intimate insider status at Arabesque made participant recruitment easy. Most of my fellow dancers were aware that I was researching belly dance and many had pre-emptively volunteered to participate. Before I had even received ethics clearance, far more women than my sample design included had expressed eagerness to participate. Soliciting interviewees at The Dark Side proved much more difficult. Initially, I placed a recruitment poster with my contact information on the fridge in the common area where students wait before class. This attracted only three participants. I recruited the other eight participants through announcements at the beginning of classes, by leaving information sheets in the common area, and through conversations at class breaks.

Analysis focused on the ways women subjectively attribute meaning to belly dance's role in their lives, and evidence of their engagement with and resistance to the male gaze, Orientalism, and their embodied experiences. Field notes and interview passages that were relevant to each theme were isolated, taking special note of examples that would be polished for description in the dissertation, whether to demonstrate a typical experience or to be used for their theoretical relevance. I employed a largely theory-driven approach (Weber, 1990), alert for evidence that supported, refuted, or altered the key theories with which I was concerned. However, I maintained a flexible position to allow unanticipated themes to emerge from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

### **Intimate Insider**

When doing ethnography, researchers most commonly claim insider status or label themselves “native” researchers when they study the geographically bound communities into which they were born, or communities with whom they share some form of identity

(such as race, ethnicity, queer, etc.) (Narayan, 1993, p. 677). Although the essentialism of insider/outsider categories has been much problematized (see Ergun & Erdemir 2010; Oriola & Haggerty, 2012; Narayan, 1993), the key feature of native ethnography that I wish to recuperate despite these disputes is that some researchers can nonetheless share certain key interests and experiences with the communities they study. My affiliation with Arabesque and my professional dance career positions me as such an “insider” or “native” researcher.

Qualitative research that explores the implications of being an insider (Adler & Adler, 1987; Ergun & Erdemir, 2010; Irwin, 2006) cites benefits such as gaining access to otherwise restricted locations, more easily recruiting participants, more quickly establishing rapport, and having insights into shared knowledge not understood by those on the outside. Ongoing contact with participants provides access to unexpected opportunities for informal data gathering in settings and situations to which others might not be welcome.

I considered myself what Jodie Taylor (2011, p. 8) defines as an “intimate insider,” one whose friendly pre-research relationships will segue into researcher-participant informant relationships. Taylor differentiates “intimate insider research” from “insider research” in that

[T]he researcher is working, at the deepest level, within their own “backyard”; that is, a contemporary cultural space with which the researcher has regular and ongoing contact; where the researcher’s personal relationships are deeply embedded in the field; where one’s quotidian interactions and performances of identity are made visible; where the researcher has been and remains a key social actor within the field and thus becomes engaged in a process of self-interpretation to some degree; and where the researcher is privy to undocumented historical knowledge of the people and cultural phenomenon being studied. (2011: 9)

“Intimate insider” status carries additional benefits not enjoyed by insider researchers. For example, knowing participants well helps researchers to discern when participants are misrepresenting the truth, to understand participants’ nuanced body language, and to capture the degree of congruency between presentations of self in various situations (Taylor, 2011). Taking all this into account, I felt my intimate insider status would help to facilitate my ethnographic research and lead to the collection of rich data.

However, this feeling was short-lived, as I quickly began to recognize there are disadvantages to intimate insider status. Reading for this project, I was exposed to interpretations and analysis of belly dance that stand in stark contrast to the collective beliefs I experienced to be held in my dance community about the meaning and value of belly dance. Both in and outside of class, dancers discuss the virtues of belly dance for augmenting body image, developing a sense of community, and reclaiming female sexuality, but many of my readings on Orientalism (Dox, 2006; Said, 1978; Savigliano, 1995) were critical of belly dance, arguing it is appropriative and encourages Orientalist stereotypes. I felt myself to be developing a sense of consciousness that largely conflicted with the collective consciousness of the belly dance community.

The literature examining insider research considers dilemmas that arise once research is underway, such as using the “illusion of intimacy” to create a comfortable fieldwork space (El-Or, 1997, p. 188), becoming romantically involved with participants (Irwin, 2006), or balancing the pillars of friendship (such as mutual trust, cooperative behaviour, honesty, loyalty, respect, empathy, etc.) without compromising the integrity of one’s research (Taylor, 2011). However, even having yet to begin fieldwork, I was already experiencing a sense of distress.

**Insider Awakening.** As the time to begin my ethnographic research neared, I experienced nervousness and angst. I had taken up the project optimistically, feeling that I was well positioned to defend belly dancing against the negative evaluations of 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminists. As I switched back and forth between my “dancer identity” and “researcher identity” in dance studios, my dismay was not allayed. However, I saw evidence of the Orientalist components the literature speaks to in belly dancers’ daily practices. For example, many studios are decorated with pillows, feather fans, and exotic fabrics, an interior design that may look attractive, but that, as discussed in the Introduction, perpetuates the “harem fantasy” largely created by European travelers and artists of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Furthermore, I started noticing contradictions in belly dancers’ feminist proclamations. For example, practitioners argue that the dance promotes self-love and body acceptance. Although it is commonplace to hear students encouraging each other and telling each other that they are beautiful, regardless of body size and shape, behind the scenes of the studio, students use many unhealthy behaviours to discipline their bodies and maintain a publicly attractive figure. Some dancers, for example, carry with them a calorie counter by which to ensure they do not go over their allotted daily intake of calories. Such efforts to police the body seem to go unnoticed, hidden behind overt messages of body love.

These revelations changed my relationship to the dance. I endured an “end of innocence” in terms of how I perceived belly dance, its role in my life, and its place within the larger societal structure. While dancers argue that participation in belly dancing is progressive, other feminist discourses would argue that despite one’s experience of the dance, due to its problematic history and its reception in society, it cannot be said to advance a feminist

agenda. For me, these realizations disrupted what was before a naïvely pleasurable experience, and although I continued to dance, I did so with conflicting emotions and contradictory beliefs.

The internal conflict I experienced conducting my fieldwork can be likened to the estrangement experienced by Alfred Schütz's (1945) "Homecomer", an essay inspired by returning soldiers. Schütz argues that "it is inevitably the case that ... the home to which [the homecomer] returns is by no means the home he left or the home which he recalled and longed for during his absence ... the homecomer is not the same man who left" (p. 375). Having matured, and encountered experiences not shared by the community, the homecomer stands irrevocably apart from them, interpreting home activities through a different lens. Schütz coined the term "pure we-relation" (p. 371) to illustrate the familiarity of ways of relating, common-sense ideas, and routine ways of using community space in primary groups that makes life at home predictable and easily navigated. Individuals returning home find these "pure we-relations" are disrupted. They are unknown to the community, and the community is unknown to them. Ethnographers who leave home for schooling and return some years later to study their communities typically report feelings of estrangement. Tempitope Oriola and Kevin Haggerty (2012, p. 541) contend this process leads researchers to become "academic homecomers," who struggle to re-enter their communities. Their experiences of homecoming are often rife with identity confusion, conflicting priorities (for example, those of their community and those of academic research) and a sense of "differentness" that they had not experienced prior to their time away (Fournellier, 2009; Grahame & Grahame, 2009).



The more deeply I delved into this project, the more I felt I had become a perpetual homecomer. In my case, the feeling of estrangement that Schütz (1945) so vividly depicted was unyielding. However, I experienced all of this without having ever left “home.” I was experiencing dramatic shifts in my thinking, and unlike Schütz’s soldier, my community was unaware that I had departed. Instead, my discomfort arose due to my identification with the competing interests of the groups to which I belonged; in Malin Åkerström’s (1991) terms, my identification with multiple “We’s.” According to Åkerström, a scholar interrogating the experience of betrayal, a We is a “distinctive form of relation” that can be as small as a romantic partnership or family, or as large as a religious sect or nation. A We is based on the creation and sharing of valued information among that group: “only they (as opposed to the world around them) know the nuances, meanings, and possibilities of interpretations of that information” (Åkerström, 1991, p. 4). At any given time, individuals are members of multiple We’s, often with competing or conflicting interests.

Combining Åkerström’s (1991) concept of multiple We’s with Schütz’s (1945) homecomer, we see that estrangement from a community can take place not only after an extended period of absence, but also when the collective values of multiple We’s conflict. As Åkerström would deduce, it was exposure to outsider knowledge, garnered through my identification with the “We” of academia that interfered with my “pure we-relations” in the belly dance community. Although my involvement in dance remained consistent, the way I perceived and interpreted what belly dancers did changed dramatically due to my work in the scholarly field. My allegiances to these two disparate We’s left me in a precarious position. Knowing I planned to study my friends and fellow dancers and

publish material that critiques some of our practices played on my conscience, and I experienced a sense of guilt.

For example, I chose not to divulge my changing perspective to fellow dancers for both personal and professional reasons. First, I did not wish to impinge upon the positive experiences of others. I wanted the dance studio to remain a positive space, untainted by a critical perspective, for the many women who seem to receive unadulterated pleasure from partaking in belly dance. Second, I did not want to alienate myself from my friends or the group as a whole. I received a great deal of support and emotional fulfillment through my involvement with belly dancers and the friendships I had formed. It would have been quite a loss to find myself unwelcome in the group. Third, I did not wish to jeopardize my advancement in the dance company. I shared similar concerns to those who “study up” (researching elites or government officials): should dance project leaders or artistic directors uncover my intentions, I feared that my opportunities for performances would decrease, impeding my artistic progress. Finally, I was concerned that disclosing my ambivalence would disrupt the rapport I had with dancers and discourage them from participating in my project.

Choosing not to share my perspective led me to take on the identity of a betrayer: I was not honoring the We. Åkerström (1991) notes that such sentiments are common to social researchers who “gain access to the sacred by identifying with and being accepted by the in-group and then must simultaneously reveal information due to their job or task” (p. 7). The demands of loyalty from each group make betrayal almost inevitable, and in this case, my feelings of betrayal were exacerbated by the fact that I had never left “home.”

The act of “telling” (p. 5-9) group secrets or private experiences is defined as a form of betrayal, an act I anticipated I would eventually commit.

**The in/visibility of *my* whiteness.** Through the process of engaging with the critical literature review, I also awoke to another form of “insider” status to which I had been inattentive: my status as a White woman. Although I had understood that, in demographers’ terms, I was a White woman, what I had not considered were the ways in which that identity impacted the ways I interpret the phenomena I encounter. As a frame of reference, my whiteness had hitherto been invisible.

The invisibility or taken-for-grantedness of whiteness was first addressed through W.E.B. Du Bois’s (2003) concept of “double consciousness.” Originally published in 1903, Du Bois described how Black people (arguably extended to people of colour more generally) who live in predominantly White societies, such as the U.S. and Canada, understand themselves from two perspectives: one being from their own sense of self, the other from a sense of how members of the dominant group views them. According to Du Bois, only Black people (and arguably extended to people of colour more generally) experience this “double consciousness.” Therefore, the salience of White racial identity and privilege to everyday experience is left unacknowledged. Whiteness as a social location is effectively invisible, whereas people of colour are constantly aware of their otherness, and the subordinate position in which it places them.

Du Bois’s (2003) work foreshadowed the development of critical whiteness studies, a branch of scholarship on race that examines and theorizes the nature of whiteness as a racial category and a lived experience (Dyer, 1988; Frankenberg, 1993; Lipsitz, 1995;

McIntosh, 1988; Rodriguez, 1998). This field emerged out of the realization that, historically, scholarship on race tended to study the “other” (non-Whites) while it left the norm (whiteness) intact and free of critique (Dyer, 1988; McIntosh, 1988; Shome, 2000). In consequence, anyone who is not White becomes defined as other, judged against a rubric of normative whiteness, and treated as deviant (Lipsitz, 1995; McIntosh, 1988).

Critical race scholars (Omi & Winant, 1986; Hall, 1989; Rodriguez, 1998) demonstrate the ways in which race is not a static, fixed, essentialized identity, so much as a process that produces a fluid and contested identity, established through everyday interaction and through relations to the larger culture. The central concern of this scholarship is with the invisibility of whiteness and how it occupies a neutral position: its power as a category of dominance, therefore, remains unseen and unquestioned (Rodriguez, 1998). The goal, then, is to do away with the invisible social norms, values, and structures that reproduce whiteness as a privileged cultural construction, by raising awareness of them, challenging them, and altering policies and institutions that support them (Shome, 2000, p. 367).

Being well-versed in issues of social justice, I was aware of the role of White privilege in the structure of society and the perpetuation of inequality. This made me an outlier in terms of White racial awareness, for as Peggy McIntosh (2003) points out, most Whites who recognize the disadvantages of racism do not as readily understand the implications of White privilege. However, my exposure to critical literature on belly dance raised my awareness of how my lived experiences as a White woman led me to interpret belly dance in a manner specific to my social location.

The critical literature's (Koritz, 1997; Fruhauf, 2009; Lorus, 1996; Savigliano, 1995) denouncement of the history of belly dance and its culturally appropriative elements, drew my attention to the ways in which the ignorance of my privileged subjectivity was leading me to perpetuate the opposite of my anti-racist intentions. My unadulterated perspective, discussed in Chapter One, that belly dance was empowering and in keeping with my progressive, feminist, multicultural ideals was only possible because I was unaware of ideas of representation and the history of appropriation that led to the development of the dance I loved so much. When performing, I had been blissfully unaware of the ways in which my dancing could be further entrenching harmful stereotypes. After reading the critical literature, I felt ashamed of having participated in that process. Moreover, I realized that I was able to dance in a celebratory fashion because, unlike those from the cultures from which the dance is commonly thought to have originated, I could do so without suffering the social and political consequences having a Middle Eastern identity. As a White Canadian woman, I could travel domestically and internationally without being interrogated at airports, rarely would my religious views be questioned, and I was unlikely to be associated with terrorism. Would my joy in belly dance be the same if my whiteness did not protect me from such experiences outside of the studio?

As discussed in the introduction, part of the reason I felt proud to belly dance was that I felt it served to align me with Middle Eastern culture which, due to government interventions in anti-terrorism, was devalued and discriminated against. The critical belly dance literature rendered such ideas naïve, and I felt foolish dancing. I found myself more sympathetic to the views of Whiteness scholars, such as Robert Jensen (2005), who

argues that if white people with privilege “decided that all they were obligated to do in this world was to be nice to people around them and celebrate diversity, it is difficult to imagine progressive social change ever taking place” (p. 79). The more I came to understand the centrality of White identity and its impacts on lived experiences, the more responsible and guilty I felt for the transgressions of Western society.

### **Insider Effects**

My intimate insider status helped me to garner permission from artistic directors to conduct ethnographic research in their studios. Artistic director Yasmina Ramzy from Arabesque allowed me to attend classes for free, provided I was attending for research purposes and not my own training. Audra Simmons, artistic director at The Dark Side, with whom I was less familiar, invited me to her home to discuss the project over lemonade and berries. She gave me full access to her studio for observation, but did ask that I pay for the classes I attended.

My degree of familiarity with each studio influenced my note taking. My early field notes from The Dark Side were far more detailed and rich than those from Arabesque. For example, my The Dark Side notes were full of descriptions of the way Audra Simmons moved about the studio, her appearance and body comportment, and how she spoke about bodies. For example:

Audra’s outfits fascinate me. Today, she wears black harem pants with a very low hanging crotch. It sags so much in the middle it looks almost as though she is wearing a diaper. She has on a cropped black short-sleeve shirt that shows her belly and the large Celtic cross tattoo on her abdomen. Before class, she sits on a wooden chair at the front of the room near the audio system, casually talking to students as they enter and stretch before class. She sits upright with her feet planted firmly on the ground, legs wide spread, and her hands cupping the front seat of the chair between her legs. She and the students swear. A lot. The F word is coming out over and over again as they talk about how hot it is outside. (Field notes, August 27<sup>th</sup> 2014)

I had, however, very few descriptive notes on the teachers at Arabesque, or other aspects of the studio – there, I only remarked on extraordinary events. I wondered, if I was meant to be attending to similar factors at each studio, what could explain the difference in the quality of my notes? And, more importantly, what could I do to address this discrepancy?

I quickly realized that this was an instance where my intimate insider status at Arabesque was a hindrance. Scholars have grappled with the ways in which researching familiar settings leaves one unaware of many of its characteristics (Gurevitch, 1998; Mannay, 2010; Vrasidas, 2001), and this was certainly the case for me. I was so habituated to the environment that I took for granted much of the setting because they seemed “normal,” and thus, unremarkable. The Dark Side, on the other hand, was a lesser known environment. I remember feeling wonder as I watched the activities unfolding around me during the time of my fieldwork. My intrigue, brought on by the newness of The Dark Side, led me to record far more than I had at Arabesque, contributing to the richness of the data I had collected.

What’s more, the inspired fascination at The Dark Side was not due simply to the fact that it was new – it arose out of the fact that it was *different from* Arabesque, a site with which I was intimately familiar. At The Dark Side, I was confronted time and time again by conversations, class activities, music and aesthetics that bared no resemblance to the dance culture with which I had grown so accustomed, and my acculturation at Arabesque increased my sensitivity to surroundings that I found to be *different*, leading me to produce better quality field notes at The Dark Side.

I was experiencing a common struggle amongst insiders: the need to make the familiar strange (Atkinson, Coffey, & Delamont, 2003, p. 47; Erikson, 1986, p. 121; Sikes, 2006, p. 538). To fight familiarity in my usual cultural milieu and make Arabesque more perceptible, I interrogated the field notes from The Dark Side. They held the key to uncovering the elements of Arabesque that I was taking for granted: aware that the events of which I took note at The Dark Side struck me as noteworthy because of their difference, I worked backward to shed light on what I had come to perceive as “normal” at Arabesque. What I discovered was that I was largely taking for granted the self-presentation of dancers and teachers at Arabesque, their language, as well as the body comportment of dancers both in dance and at rest – findings that figure heavily into the analysis in Chapter Five.

In the interviews, I felt as though most participants considered me to be an insider – even those from The Dark Side and to whom I was a complete stranger. Of my first four interviews, two were The Dark Side dancers, and two were with Arabesque. Although The Dark Side dancers did not know me personally, they spoke to me with a sense of intimacy and shared understanding that I had not anticipated. For example, they frequently used phrases like “I know you know what that is like,” when describing issues such as learning new moves, struggling with costuming, and juggling dance with other life commitments. Given that they knew little about my dance experience – which had not hitherto included the tribal style belly dance practiced by two of these four participants – or personal life, I surmised that these participants felt that I was an insider because I played a prominent role in the Toronto belly dance community. They knew I was a dance teacher, had seen me performing with Arabesque Dance Company,



Arabesque's professional troupe, and as a soloist at venues across the city, and had seen me at other dance events. We may not have had contact, and I may not have been familiar with their studio, but my status as a professional belly dancer at the time gave me insider status in their eyes.

Researchers have discussed the appeal of shared identity and experience in interviews, noting it may elicit greater understanding since cultural differences do not have to be negotiated, making it easier for participants to share aspects of their experiences they might otherwise obscure (Atkinson, Coffey, & Delamont, 2003). In addition, shared understanding can mediate the traditional distance and imbalance of power between interviewer and interviewee (Rogan & de Kock, 2005). There are also, however, negative aspects to being an insider: these early participants from both Arabesque and The Dark Side assumed considerable knowledge on my behalf. They consistently glossed over important events, opted not to define key terms or concepts, and assumed that I shared their interpretations of the politics and practices within the community. For example, when discussing what it feels like to perform, Riley,<sup>13</sup> a student from The Dark Side, said, "It's fun. It's good. I mean, you're on stage! You know what that's like." She then sat back and awaited further questioning. It appeared she felt that she had said all that was necessary to convey her message to me – a fellow dancer.

In a similar vein, Elena, a devout student of The Dark Side who performs with their student troupe, provided the following story of her husband's family's response to the fact that she belly dances, "I don't invite his family to shows. Ivan's parents are old-school Serbian, and rightly or wrongly, they have their own ideas about the kinds of

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<sup>13</sup> See Appendix B for brief biographies of participants cited in this dissertation.

people who do belly dance.” At the term “rightly or wrongly,” she deepened her voice, dropped her chin and turned her head slightly to the side while looking straight in my eyes, which I interpreted as her way of saying “you understand the sensitivities of this debate.” As Riley and Elena were among my first participants, I did not think to probe these statements. I simply smiled in agreement, and moved on to the next question.

My early participants and I were experiencing what Dawn Mannay (2010, p. 94) calls a “two-way taken-for-granted cultural competence,” a phenomenon that occurs when researchers have preconceived knowledge, and participants communicate with the assumption that the researcher already understands his or her experience. Participants did not feel a need to detail their perspectives to someone whom they saw as part of the group, and I allowed my own interpretations to fill-in-the-blanks when their responses were short.

Certainly, I did have my own understanding of terms and concepts, and my own interpretations of community processes and events, but when my supervisor read the transcripts and ask me further questions about my participants’ responses, I lacked sufficient understanding of participants’ perspectives to answer. I realized then that I needed to move beyond my preconceived understandings in order to tap into a fuller spectrum of meanings. I decided I would “play dumb” and ask seemingly naïve questions to prompt participants to answer more fully (Hockey, 1993; Platt, 1981). To avoid seeming to be testing participants about what they would see as our shared cultural knowledge, I included the following in the introductory statement of the interview:

You will likely notice that I ask you to provide details that you might feel are unnecessary, details on your feelings, interpretations, events, or our belly dance practices

that feel like common knowledge. I will be asking you about these things because I want to ensure that my interpretation does not stand-in for yours. I do have my own views and beliefs, and they may be similar, but I don't want to assume that they are. I want to know what these things mean to you. So, although it may seem silly, I will be asking you to elaborate on a number of points you might not were this a regular conversation.

This preamble made clear my motivations and made me feel at ease when questioning aspects of the experience thought to be shared. It also neutralized any potential skepticism, confusion, or sense of silliness about talking in such detail about things “we all know.”

For the most part, participants were quite willing to elaborate when asked, but my data shows how difficult it is to move beyond assumed notions of shared knowledge. When asking follow-up questions, I was frequently met with a series of partial responses.

Participants would simply re-word their previous responses and continuously assume I “got it.” In such moments, I would remind my participants of the importance of fully explaining their views, and they would do so with patience, as in the following example with Kara, a beginner student at Arabesque:

Well, when that woman from Kitchener got on stage and started dancing with a live snake, I wanted to boo her off! [Why?] Well, you know what that does for the reputation of belly dancers. [Please explain that to me, how dancing with a live snake impacts the reputation of belly dancers.] Well, you know, all the stuff about being the same as prostitutes, or just there to be sexy. [So, again, remember, I know it feels strange, but I need you to spell it out for me. I have my own ideas about this but they might be different from yours. What exactly is the concern about a woman claiming to be a belly dancer dancing with a snake?] We already have such a hard time separating ourselves from the idea that we are all strippers or prostitutes. We work so hard to be poised and distinguished to try to move away from that. If you get up on stage and start dancing with some snake that has absolutely nothing to do with traditional belly dance, then, it's like setting us back. It reinforces the thing we are trying to get away from.

Kara found it difficult to push past her sense of assumed understanding, and this was not uncommon in the interviews. One participant confessed that she felt “silly” providing so much information on something she was sure I already knew. When such situations

arose, I took care to detail what in their response was new or useful to me, and this seemed to nullify the sense of silliness.

Kara's example above reflects a situation in which our understandings were aligned. How to address the belly dancer/stripper/prostitute conflation is consistently and openly discussed among dancers, and even factors into the policies of the studios.<sup>14</sup> However, on a number of other occasions, using this method gave me new insight into my participants' worlds and the varieties of meaning in circulation. For example, six participants mentioned that they no longer involve themselves with on-line belly dance communities. Common wisdom among dancers holds that when a dancer leaves social media, she does so to remain anonymous to her family members, clients, superiors at work, or others, or for safety reasons. To do so otherwise would be seen as almost foolish as most professional dancers use on-line platforms to promote themselves. When Jenna mentioned her withdrawal from Facebook, my instinct was to assume it was for one of the aforementioned reasons and move on. In my effort to make the familiar strange, I questioned her further, and she discussed leaving because she was frustrated by what she perceived to be a "massive circle jerk" of dancers posting photos of themselves in costume and receiving "likes" and comments about their beauty. When I questioned one of the lead dancers in Arabesque Dance Company, Monique, about her reasons for leaving Facebook, she said:

Well, I just see us all parading around in beautiful costumes, accepting love, and I don't see a lot of questioning about what we're doing. I just see a bunch of White girls having

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<sup>14</sup> For example, Arabesque Agency dancers are not allowed to take money stuffed into their costumes from audience members. They are allowed to accept tips after the show, but not during. These rules are intentionally designed to project an image of belly dancers as artists as opposed to exotic dancers.

fun playing and no one is talking about what we are doing. [What we are doing?] Yeah, that we are dressing up like people from another culture. I mean, we are responsible for that. We are responsible for the way we carry ourselves because we are representing another group. This isn't just fun and games, but no one is talking about that.

Jenna and Monique's responses offer insights into perspectives that influence their behavior and choices that were not on my intellectual radar. Moreover, as I will show in Chapter Four, responses such as Jenna's and Monique's showed me that I was not alone in my questioning. Perhaps I was not the betrayer I had originally thought myself to be.

### **Conclusion**

When I originally conceived of this project, I felt that it would be pro-dance and celebratory of women's experiences. I had not expected to have the stakes changed as I learned more about Orientalism. My research demonstrates that, unlike in Schütz's (1945) conception, the idea of homecoming is not geographically bound. Insider researchers who make use of this concept (Fournellier, 2009; Grahame & Grahame, 2009; Oriola and Haggerty, 2012) refer to themselves as "academic homecomers," describing the difficulties and they encounter upon making their pilgrimages home after time spent in another town, country, or continent, for schooling or other professional pursuits. My experience shows that feelings of estrangement from one's community can arise when one is still firmly situated within it. My immersion in critical literature exposed me to perspectives that were not part of the parlance of the belly dance world, creating a cleavage between my community and I. However, that discomfort eventually led to new understandings of myself, and to a more sophisticated and nuanced project.

Debates about the advantages and disadvantages of insider and outsider status acknowledge the fluidity of the role: no researcher is ever fully on one side or the other.

Instead, scholars occupy the status of insider or outsider at different points in the research process, sometimes feeling they are both insider and outsider in the same moment. While my intimate insider status was certainly not absolute, I vigilantly placed my attention on the ways in which my proximity to participants influenced my emotions and the research process.

Most writing on insider status discusses dilemmas researchers encounter once the research is underway. However, even before commencing my research project, I was in a conflicted place. The background research needed to think through a project, to conceptualize it theoretically, write a proposal and seek ethics approval, leads researchers to engaging with literature, and therefore, new ideas and concepts, when projects are in their nascent stages. I argue that for insider researchers, and particularly for intimate insiders, the line between community membership and community as object is blurred long before fieldwork begins. My experience demonstrates the need to reconceptualize the role of researcher reflexivity, taking into account field relations prior to undertaking fieldwork.

The personal dilemmas I experienced before beginning this project provide support for sociologists Natasha Mauthner and Andrea Doucet's (2003) contention that there are limits to researcher reflexivity. Narrating their experiences with their own dissertation work, they find that different stages of research bring different degrees of reflexivity, and they discuss how it was not until their projects were complete and they stepped away that they were able to properly assess their relationship to the field and its implications for their findings. They suggest hindsight as a useful tool to provide the space necessary to

reflect on one's experiences and gain a better understanding of the inside and outside influences on one's thought processes and subsequent research decisions.

I argue that for intimate insiders, because we are personally invested in our communities, we fall on the lower end of the continuum of reflexivity from the outset. We come into the research process with strong relationships to our field and to the people there within intact, and therefore, every aspect of the project has high stakes, for us personally and for our relationships with our communities. Belly dance for me was more than just a leisure pursuit – it was pivotal to my sense of well-being, and fellow dancers were my closest friends and social supports. Coming to question this activity and the community led not only to a shift in intellectual thinking but almost to a crisis of consciousness: it disrupted my primary form of self-care and changed the nature of my relationship to my most intimate friends. As I previously described, this disorienting experience took an emotional toll.

Therefore, I advocate for intimate insiders to build time and space into our projects, especially in the early stages when we are exploring new literature, to reflect on and process the emotions we experience. At the initial stages, my intimate insider status made it difficult for me to be reflexive because I was so emotionally enmeshed with my community. Since researchers do not have the benefit of hindsight, I argue that we must extend Mauthner and Doucet's (2003) thinking on reflexivity and create opportunities for emotional processing, not only at the point of project completion, but also throughout the research process. Furthermore, we must incorporate time for emotion work as our responses have implications not only for the progress of the project, but also for our everyday lives.

Fortunately, the angst I experienced regarding the Orientalist critique of belly dance was productive: it changed not only how I thought of the dance and the community, but also how I related to myself. I no longer viewed myself as ‘just a woman’, for I went through a process of awakening to the whiteness of my womanhood. Exploring the ways in which the social identity of researchers (including their race, class, and gender) shape research is a basic standpoint epistemology. This work is focused on the effects of research social location on research practice – how our socially constructed ways of thinking and being influence our decisions when we enter the field and how we analyze data. Underlying these explorations is the assumption that a researcher’s biography is formed before the research process begins. However, my racialized identity emerged from the research process itself. Through my readings, I transitioned from a researcher who had not considered the role of whiteness in her construction of meaning to one keenly aware of the politics of intersectionality. This project made clear the ways in which I had been blind to my own privilege, and for someone who considers herself to be progressive, left-leaning, and intent on the pursuit of social justice, this was indeed a difficult pill to swallow.

My new perspective led me to fear I would betray my participants in a double sense: first, because my newly adopted critical perspective differed from common studio discourse, and second, because I planned to use this critical perspective throughout my analysis and writing. The fears of betrayal that this awakening induced, however, were only partially lived out in the research process. The techniques I devised during participant observation and interviewing helped mediate the normalizing effects of knowledge, which function by taking one’s own group’s experiences and assuming these experiences to be



paradigmatic for all. Comparing field notes from my two research settings, as well as being hyper-attentive to and questioning the seemingly “common sense” explanations the participants provided, made the familiar strange *and* more interesting. These techniques created a gateway to understandings that moved beyond my preconceived notions, helping to unravel the diversity of belly dance experience. In particular, I quickly realized that I was not alone in my critique.

Almost immediately upon starting interviews, my sense of being a betrayer began to dissipate. One-on-one conversations with my participants alleviated the shame I had experienced for being a member of a group that, to my mind, had bought into offensive stereotypes and worked to embody them. As exemplified by Monique’s quotation above, and as is discussed in detail in Chapter Four, my interviews illuminated a rich world of internal questioning and a collective sense of discomfort among belly dancers about the Orientalist elements of belly dance. Only four of my 32 participants did not speak of critically questioning their involvement. The practice of questioning, while experienced as individual, is in actuality a common experience. This also helped to alleviate the sense of anxiousness I had about betraying participants through my writing. My fears of exposing the harmful objectifying and Orientalist discourses I had expected to be littered through their responses did not come to fruition. Because of my participants’ critical questioning, during the interviews, I quickly came to realize that my analysis would not be as damning as I had once conceived. Overall, my data led me to argue *against* conceptualizing dancers as dupes who have bought into the fantasies outlined by male and Orientalist gaze scholars – a happy surprise for me given the findings I had expected. My data redeems dancers to whom neither I, nor critical scholars, had given enough

credit, weakening my sense of betrayal and resulting in what I perceive to be more amenable implications for my social relationships.

In the next chapter, I explore belly dancers' experiences of the male gaze. I outline Mulvey's (1975) work addressing the male gaze in film, and look at the ways in which her theory has been taken up by 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminist theorists and dance theorists. I then explore the meaning of the gaze and the ways in which belly dancers engage with it. My findings suggest that the experience of the gaze is not as straightforward as 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminists might lead us to believe. Dancers receive pleasure from and actively resist the gaze. Moreover, counterintuitively, dancers find respite from the tenets of the gaze while performing – the very situation in which one might assume dancers feel the most pressure to adhere to the gaze's demands.

### Chapter 3: More than Meets the Eye - Belly Dance and the Male Gaze<sup>15</sup>

At 9:30 pm every evening for the last several years, I would dim the lights in my apartment, put on some Arabic music, and take position in front of the mirror hung on the wall of my living room in order to practice dance. Wearing a sports bra and old pajama pants that struck the perfect balance between hugging tightly enough so as not to fall down but not so tightly as to give me a “muffin top,” for about half an hour I would drill movements and choreographies I found difficult, and then spend upwards of an hour dancing freely to whatever music iTunes played on shuffle.

I do not have what would be considered an ideal body in the West – I am not slender. I have been described by others as having an “extreme hour glass” shape – so great is the ratio of my hips to my waist that artistic director of Arabesque Yasmina struggled over whether or not to invite me to join Arabesque Dance Company. She feared my curves, and particularly my large behind, would stand out in the corps of other dancers, most of whom were quite thin at the time, and detract from the intricate formations and sense of “oneness” she worked to create for troupe performances. I have always been aware of the contentiousness of my body within the dance world, and in society at large, and the ways in which I do not “measure up” so much as, thanks to my large hips, I “measure out”. But in the privacy of my apartment, when the sun had gone down and the music was playing, none of that mattered. I felt free.

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<sup>15</sup> Sections of this chapter are a substantially revised, rethought, and expanded version of a preliminary analysis published as Banasiak, K. (2014). Dancing the East in the West: Orientalism, feminism, and belly dance. *Critical Race and Whiteness Studies*, 10(1), 1-14.

In this chapter, I first provide a background on male gaze theory as it has been taken up by feminist film and dance scholars. I then argue that my participants' stories cause us to rethink the role of power and agency in relation to the gaze: their narratives highlight the pleasurable functions of the gaze which they experience when controlling, engaging with, and or subverting it. Finally, I suggest that Foucault's theorization of power and "technologies of self" are more aligned with participants' experiences than theories of the male gaze.

Of all the environments in which I have danced, my home brought me the most pleasure. Having engaged with second-wave feminist scholarship (Bartky, 1988; Bordo, 1993; Mulvey, 1975), I realize now that the reason my living room dance series was so important for me was that it allowed me to escape the male gaze. A feminist concept, the male gaze is a lens through which we view cultural objects. In particular, the theory looks at what the female body represents, arguing that films and advertisements are created to please heterosexual male desire, which, in turn, shapes how women are expected to look and act in everyday life. Dancing alone, I felt liberated from the ideals of feminine beauty of which I knew I fell short.

Approaching this research, I assumed that my participants too experienced the gaze as the aforementioned 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminists describe it. I anticipated that if asked to choose the setting in which they danced most comfortably, they would surely say the privacy of their homes where, like me, they would feel free of the demands of the gaze. However, only four of my 32 participants share my love of dancing alone at home, while 18 are most happy when performing: they report taking pleasure in the gaze. I wondered, if I find the gaze so oppressive, what is it about participants' experience that enables them to find

pleasure in the gaze? Are women embracing gender oppression, or do they find some form of pleasure in engaging the gaze that the current literature and theoretical arguments leaves unaccounted for? Are women even engaging the gaze at all?

Absent from critical gaze scholarship are accounts of the embodied dance practice. How do dancers experience the gaze? In this chapter, I argue that women are not passive victims of a male gaze that oppresses them. Instead, they are embodied individuals who bring with them an abundance of lived experience that alters the way they understand and relate to the gaze.

### **The Male Gaze**

The term “the male gaze” was devised by film theorist Laura Mulvey (1975). Her polemic article, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975), in which she coined the term, concentrates on the objectification of women within the stylistic codes of Hollywood filmmaking. Mulvey’s focus is on spectatorship and the ways in which subject positions are constructed through the camera apparatus and the structure of film. Applying the psychoanalytic construct, scopophilia, which refers to the pleasure involved in looking, Mulvey suggests that the characteristics of cinema viewing, such as the darkened theatre in which viewers are seen neither by those on screen nor by other audience members, facilitate voyeuristic processes that objectify female characters on screen and lead viewers to identify with the camera’s viewpoint, accepting the male protagonist’s perspective (see also Messaris, 1997, p. 44).

Mulvey states,

as the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look onto that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence. (1975, 28)

Traditional Hollywood films rely on stories that feature men as the active, controlling subjects, treating women instead as passive objects of desire, subjecting women, then, to “the controlling male gaze” (p. 33). Women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote “*to-be-looked-at-ness*” (Mulvey, 1975, p. 11). Therefore, women are presented as image, and men are “bearer[s] of the look” (p. 27). In patriarchal society, then, the “pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female” (p. 27; see also Berger, 1972, p. 45; Fowles, 1996, p. 204).

Mulvey’s (1975) work has become one of the mainstays of film and cultural analysis, for it injected feminism into film studies, which previously viewed the camera apparatus and structure of film as apolitical. Yet, her work has not been without its detractors. Her theory is criticized for proposing that all gaze is heterosexual and male (Gamman & Makinen, 1994; Mirzoeff, 1999), and that men are not subject to the same objectification through the look as are women (Gamman & Marshment, 1988). Moreover, Mulvey’s foundation of psychoanalytic theory leaves her open to the critiques of reinforcing gender binaries, essentialism (Evans & Gamman, 1995; Thomas, 1996), and neglecting to consider the influences of cultural contexts and or historical change on how the gaze functions (Gamman & Makinen, 1994). She has addressed these criticisms in later writing, noting that it is the “‘masculinization’ of the spectator position” (Mulvey, 1989, p. 29) that is of concern to her, not that men and women were fixed in the position of active spectator and passive object, respectively. She also explored the possibility of

watching films through alternate spectator positions, but reinforces that such positions are just that: alternatives to a way of viewing that has been structured into film as the norm. Alternatives, then, involve “self-conscious spectatorship” (Mulvey, as cited in Sassatelli, 2011, p. 128).

Without adopting the psychoanalytic component of her theory, I wish to recoup Mulvey’s theoretical framework for understanding the connection between the objectification of women through their bodies and their lack of cultural power (Gamman & Marshment, 1994), as this framework has been integral to the work of 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminists (Bartky, 1988; Bordo, 1993). Bombarded by media images that present hegemonic ideals of beauty, 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminists argue that women seek to appease the gaze by creating themselves in the image of heterosexual male desire. They modify their body shapes through diet and exercise; and they style their clothing, hair and make-up to please male onlookers, even in their absence. According to this framework, the gaze is a relentlessly oppressive force that pacifies subjects, often making them complicit in their own subjugation. Sandra Lee Bartky (1988) describes this process as a phenomenon of contemporary patriarchal culture and argues that women have developed a “panoptical male connoisseur” (p. 67) – a male gaze situated within their own consciousness which results in women seeing themselves as a man might (see also Messaris, 1997, p. 41). According to Bartky, “woman lives her body as seen by another, by an anonymous patriarchal Other” (1988, p. 72)<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> Mulvey’s work does not take into account the position of the actress. It had not been her intention to study the experience of being gazed upon, so much as to demonstrate the ways in which the structure of the film industry, as well as the camera apparatus, constructed women as objects to be looked at. Second wave feminists, however,

Drawing on Mulvey's work (1975) and the work of 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminists, dance scholars have taken up theories of the male gaze in their discussions of dance performance. At first, this may seem counter-intuitive: how can we apply theories of film to theories of performance art, when they involve different modes of production and presentation? The cinematic product, for example, is an object that, unlike a dancer in performance, cannot look back. Critical dance scholars (Adair, 1992; Albright, 1990; Daly, 1991) utilize the male gaze in their work on dance and representation. Ann Cooper Albright (1990, p. 34) and Christy Adair (1992, p. 72) argue that dance and film spectatorship have quite a bit in common: they contend that the aesthetic importance of women's bodies in western theatrical dance points to the relevance of "to be looked-at-ness" (Mulvey, 1975, p. 11) of film to dance. Albright (1990, p. 34) draws our attention to the fact that dance performances are not "imaging machines in quite the same way that cameras are" but they do still involve "a certain politics of imagery" by positioning women as objects (p. 34). Adair, more critically, writes, "the audience is in the role of the voyeur in relationship to the dancer. The voyeur has power over the looked at, so that the dancer is traditionally displayed to gratify the audience's desire" (1990, p. 72). Adair suggests that the impact of the gaze in dance has the potential to be more problematic; the presence of a real, lived body makes female dancers more available and vulnerable to the immediacies of the gaze than are actresses in films.

However, these scholars note that there is space for resistance within both film and dance.

In a manner similar to Mulvey (as cited in Sassatelli, 2011) who speaks of the transgressive capacity of avant-garde films, Adair points to the potential of certain dance

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articulate how the gaze has become embedded in our systems of representation, reinforcing patriarchal power in all aspects of life.



styles to disorder the gaze. Ann Daly (1991) goes one step further and looks at all aspects of representation, including “the spectator and his/her process of interpretation” (p. 2). In doing so, Ann Daly argues that dance turns the “psychic symbolic subject” in film into a “social subject” who is able to interact with the gaze. Through this argument, Daly problematizes the transference of some concepts from film theory to that of dance, contending that dance moves beyond imagery. Specifically, dancers’ presences disrupt the fantastical component of film viewing, diminishing the utter autonomy of spectators.

Yet, these theorizations of resistance cannot speak to belly dance as it still exemplifies Mulvey’s assertion that “a traditional exhibitionist role” is imposed on women with “their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact” (1975, p. 11). By virtue of its costuming and sensualized movements, belly dance appears on the surface to be designed for the male gaze. How do belly dancers come to understand themselves to be controlling, subverting, or escaping the gaze while their dance simultaneously pleases it?

Dance scholars Sherril Dodds (2014), Samantha Holland (2010), and Kathy Griffiths (2016) have researched the ways in which neo-burlesque<sup>17</sup> (Dodds, 2014) and pole dancing (Griffiths, 2016; Holland, 2010) negotiate the tensions between practitioners’ lived experiences and social discourses. Dodds, Holland, and Griffiths argue that these dances cannot solely be understood through gaze-based analysis. Informed by data collected through both participant observation and semi-structured interviews, they posit that when one includes embodied experience in research on neo-burlesque dance or pole

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<sup>17</sup> Neo-burlesque dance marks the re-introduction of stripteases into burlesque dance in the 1990s. Striptease had been removed from burlesque performances in the 1960s in response to 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminist critiques that stripping objectified female dancers (Shteir, 2004).

dancing, positive characteristics of these activities come to light that critical scholars have left unacknowledged. Dodds argues that neo-burlesque is “transformative” for performers. Neo-burlesque involves female performers slowly and playfully removing articles of clothing while dancing or singing, and using a variety of props to cover and reveal themselves as desired. Performers discuss the personal benefits they gain by performing, such as pleasure, confidence, and a sense of esteem. Similarly, in their discussions of female recreational pole dancing, Holland (2010) and Griffiths (2016) find that including embodied experience in analysis draws attention to aspects unacknowledged when pole dancing is read as a text. In particular, Holland references the pleasure women derive from the kinesthetic and sensual experience of pole dancing. Although all three researchers question the degree to which women’s personally empowering and transformative experiences can contribute to larger political change, they argue that including embodied experience in analysis alters the meanings associated with these forms of dance, resulting in a more fine-grained account of these practices. My research parallels their model of researching popular sensual dances by examining the representation, structure, and lived experience of belly dance.

### **“I’m Sexy and I Know It”**

Examining training habits, it is possible to see the ways in which the dominance of the gaze functions. Dancers are trained to invite the audience to assess their appearance, including their bodies, costumes, hair, jewelry, and make-up, when they first appear on stage. At Arabesque, dancers are taught to enter the stage veiled and, upon taking center stage, to remove the veil and remain still to allow the audience a chance to take them in. After “the grand reveal,” Yasmina advises dancers to perform very simple movements,

such as walking gracefully around the stage or venue, to allow the audience to further absorb the dancers' appearance. When teaching classes, teachers at Arabesque and The Dark Side often offer advice on how to position oneself to hide "flaws," such as double chins and upper arm fat. Moreover, both studios offer workshops that teach how to do hair and make-up, and how to pose in photos in ways that "flatter the body."

However, participants speak to their enjoyment and the sense of pleasure they receive in their abilities to control and please the gaze. Elizabeth, an intermediate student at The Dark Side studio, expresses feelings of pleasure that come from being watched by an audience:

I love being up there in costume, in make-up, with my hair done, and moving in ways I know people think are sexy. I'm not stupid – I know I have the kind of body that lots of guys find attractive, and that many women would like to have. [What is it exactly about your body that makes you feel that way?] Well, I've got big boobs and a flat stomach, I'm not tiny but I don't have much fat. I fit the standard, you know? And since I know that, it is easy for me to dance on stage because I'm confident that other people enjoy watching someone like me. They enjoy letting go, letting me seduce them. Makes it easier for me to get into it because I'm so thoroughly convinced that they are, and that feels great.

Elizabeth appears most to have internalized the gaze as Bartky (1988) expounds it. She makes explicit reference to the joy and confidence she receives from meeting the standards of and pleasing the gaze: she knows her body is uncontestable and feeds off what she projects as the approval of the audience.

Lorraine, an advanced dancer at Arabesque, adds complexity to the meaning of the gaze by introducing a sense of agency. She discusses the feelings she receives when performing:

It's empowering. Because, like, for example, doing a solo show even at a small party, whether, you know, it's a small audience or intimate setting, it's so empowering when

you realize the control you have. And it's just taking that control back. You know, it's not about thinking you're all that and being out there, you know. It's just that everybody is looking at me; I'm being cheered for; there's smiles on their faces. Like, that resonates back and I just suck it up like a sponge because I feel good. It's like yes! [...] Your adrenaline is pumping and you're all hyper, and you're all excited and I think that is the empowering part. It's, you did it; you owned it; you commanded it; and you left them wanting more, you know. So, it's just being, you know, knowing that you're, you're a woman and women are powerful. And to learn that and to be able to grasp that is, is pretty important.

Exposing herself to an audience does not lead Lorraine to experience a sense of oppression. Instead, she actively uses the gaze for her own enjoyment, obtaining a sense of power and pride in her self as a woman. She controls and draws encouragement from the gaze as opposed to feeling subjected to it.

Through belly dance, my participants both contest and reify hegemonic culture. Lorraine and Elizabeth are conventionally attractive – they are White, tall and slender with appealing facial features, such as large, vibrant eyes, high cheekbones and full lips. They are both curvaceous. Lorraine is quite open in the community about having undergone breast augmentation in order to “grow my buds into breasts.” The reasons they give for enjoying the gaze reflect both agency and the internalization of cultural beauty standards and ideals of female attitudes and behaviour. Elizabeth, in particular, recognizes she is subjected to the disciplining gaze of the audience, but she does not experience this as oppressive. Because their appearances adhere to contemporary beauty norms, the “panoptic male connoisseur” (Bartky, 1988, p. 67) in their minds are not menacing forces but liberating ones, leaving them feeling more confident – more powerful. Their perspectives are aligned with more recent critiques of the gaze within feminist literature that suggest the gaze is not always experienced as oppressive or controlling. Individuals

who see themselves positioned as desired can engender a sense of empowerment and/or pleasure from that position (Gill, 2007; Nash, 1996).

Furthermore, Elizabeth's declaration that "[t]hey enjoy letting go, letting me seduce them" troubles the male-ness of the traditional male gaze. Elizabeth introduces a challenge to some gaze theorists' contention that audiences voyeuristically watch women in order to make them into objects. Elizabeth attributes to her audience the desire to be under her spell. She imagines the audience taking pleasure in submission as opposed to by gaining mastery of her visually. This is aligned with Mulvey's second form of viewing, the fetishistic gaze, which media and cultural scholars Norman Denzin (1995), Diana Saco (1992) and Gaylyn Studlar (1988) have argued entails a masochistic desire to passively submit to the person or thing that is fetishized. Since the gaze is understood to be male, Elizabeth's statement feminizes the gaze in its first sense by removing its active component and associating it with the passivity traditionally considered a feminine trait. Because audience reception was not part of this research, we cannot tell whether Elizabeth's interpretation holds weight. However, for the purposes of her understanding of the belly dance experience, all that matters is her perspective: for Elizabeth, even the male gaze is not entirely male.

### **I'm Watching You Watch Me Watch You**

Participants' stories trouble the "classic split between the audience and the performer" (Albright, 1990, p. 34). In theories of the male gaze, the traditional audience/performer relationships is theorized as a binary, with the audience and performer described as mutually exclusive. My participants speak of the ways in which they disrupt the one-way flow of the gaze, as articulated by gaze theorists (Mulvey, 1975; Schroeder, 1990;

Sturken & Cartwright, 2001). As opposed to feeling like passive objects exposed and vulnerable to the gaze, they speak of the pleasure they receive through interacting with their audience. They express great joy in what they experience as a mutual exchange of energy between themselves and their viewers. Michelle, a lead dancer in Arabesque Earth Shakers,<sup>18</sup> describes what she likes about performing:

And performance! It's like getting a (pause) well I've always been a performer. So it's like you get this sense of (pause) it's a dialogue between you and the audience. And when you really put yourself out there for the audience and they actually pick it up, and enjoy it and appreciate it and show you that they do ... just like when you dance at Al Khaima [a performance event the studio holds quarterly], you're not on stage, there are no lights on you, you can see everyone, and you knew that when you were dancing the musicians were feeling your vibe and you were feeling their vibe and you felt that dialogue with them, that's what I get from audiences.

In this quotation and in other passages of her interview, Michelle sets up a distinction between stage performances that take place in large theatres, with lighting that illuminates performers for the audience while blinding them to those who watch, and performances in which a mutual gaze is possible. In the studio's "Al Khaima" show, walls are draped with red and gold curtains and floor cushions are provided for audience members, mimicking the trappings of a tent. Dancers perform solo improvisations to live music played by the company's orchestra. In this show, as in outdoor festivals or in restaurant performances where dancers interact with diners, women voluntarily place themselves in view, can see their watchers, and are explicitly trained through specialty workshops and performance classes to engage with the audience. In the following passage, Donna, an instructor and lead dancer in Arabesque Dance Company, more

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<sup>18</sup> Arabesque Earth Shakers is a troupe for full-bodied advanced dancers who aim to challenge normative conceptions of beauty.

explicitly juxtaposes two dance styles in order to articulate what she sees as belly dance's unique capacity to develop a mutually-engaged gaze:

In belly dance, you're trying to, there's less distance between yourself and the audience, I think. You're really trying to pull them in and have them as part of your experience, right? You know, samba has that playfulness too but again it's more distant and belly dance has that beauty to it too, right? Where you accentuate what's naturally quote-unquote beautiful about a woman, their breasts, their hips and stuff. But it doesn't have that distance like, "I'm the hot one and you guys are watching me." I don't find that in belly dance at all.

Donna's effort to "pull them in" and have audience members be part of *her* experience demonstrates that she understands herself to be using her agency to communicate with and position the audience in a way that will be mutually beneficial. Even though she is on display, she sees herself as owner of the dance and desires audience interaction to enhance something that is already hers. By incorporating the audience into their performances, Donna and Michelle erase the line between dancer and viewer. They are not just displaying themselves for consumption; there is an interaction that makes audience and dancer one.

Perhaps the most startling instance of how the gaze becomes complicated appears in Lorraine's discussion of dancing for her partner. In belly dance classes, it is not unusual to hear teachers speak of dancing for their romantic partners. As teachers' partners are well known in the studios, dropping in to talk about daycare arrangements and the like, students hearing such stories often giggle salaciously at stories they characterize as "hot."

Lorraine articulates the appeal of dancing for her husband:

It's just a fantasy to play out I think. He enjoys it, I enjoy it. It's not lap-dancing but it's definitely more sexual. There's more enticing when I dance for him versus an audience. It takes on a whole different – it's foreplay essentially! I put that costume on for the same reason I'd put on a little lacy number with fluff, you know? I think you really get in touch with the sensual part, the part that you can't

share with everybody. A dancer dances for herself, and she can dance for different people and entertainment, but there's a different dance when you're with your lover and it's a romantic scenario or situation. It becomes more of a really, powerful tool because you can amp up the enticing, sensual, sexual part that you don't touch on that with your audience. It's private. It's a personal thing. I'm looking for the feedback. And I really don't want to hear him talk.

Gaze scholars could not read this without some despair, as Lorraine, and arguably in her earlier quotation, is decidedly recruiting Orientalism to titillate and seduce her husband. She equates her costume with lingerie and interprets her dance as foreplay. Yet, instead of experiencing the dance as purely for the pleasure of her husband, a male onlooker, Lorraine also finds pleasure in it. It is not something she is doing “for him” but for them both. Likewise, she does not define the female body as the mute object of the gaze.

She goes on to discuss how her husband has an image of her tattooed upon his back:

I know for a fact that my husband is very proud of me and very proud of what I do. He shows my dance pictures to everybody. He's got me tattooed on his back in a dance costume. He went out and had me professionally photographed so he could pick the pose in the photograph, and from that, his friend started the tattoo on his back.

On a first reading, Lorraine's experience appears aligned with gaze theory: her statement that “he had me photographed” makes her the passive object positioned according the tastes of a heterosexual male onlooker. But, she continues: “and I'm not a little corner. I'm a good chunk. He's really proud of me. He's like ‘Look at my wife!’ That comes from having a great relationship”. Lorraine is drawing on the concept of occupying space, and taking up “a good chunk” of her husband's back as opposed to “a little corner” gives her a sense of pride. Moreover, this example draws attention to the reciprocal nature of the gaze. In this situation, it is not only Lorraine who is being gazed at: as the tattoo is on her husband's back, he cannot see it. *He* becomes gazed at because of the tattoo and most likely, the gazer is *her*. Further, he has endured the pain of body modification to give her



a view of herself that they have arguably co-created. Thus, the power and pleasure in the gaze flows between them both.

### **Escaping and Subverting the Gaze**

Extolling the benefits of belly dance, anthropologist and belly dance practitioner Angela Moe (2012) argues that it is a form of resistance to social and cultural norms about women and their bodies. Such sentiments are aligned with 3<sup>rd</sup> wave feminism that seeks to redefine female subjectivity. This post-feminist perspective permeates the very few empirical studies that have investigated the lived experience of belly dance (Kraus, 2009; Moe, 2012; Wright & Dreyfus, 1998), which – unlike forms of dance such as ballet – has no prescribed body that determines one’s eligibility to participate. Many participants described difficult childhood experiences in ballet class or gymnastics, where they were felt less than adequate – as if there was no space for them. Belly dance, for them, is a welcome alternative, for they feel that in that dance community and space they are accepted and able to thrive.

One often-cited benefit participants experience due to their involvement in belly dance is to moved beyond the “body shaming” many women experience and develop a more positive relationship with their bodies. For example, neither Elena nor Michelle considers themselves to fit the ideal of societal beauty. Elena expresses concerns about the shape of her stomach, which has a noticeable fold at the belly button. She says:

I do appreciate that even if I don't necessarily like the way I look overall, it is possible to make my body look good, look nice, look appealing. It's nice because I mean, I grew up with the same body shame that most women grow up with where if you're not completely flat from the hips up, then, screw you basically. So yeah, in that respect, even if I still would like to lose that last 10-15 pounds that I've got

hanging on me, I'm not going to cry over it anymore because I know I look good when I move.

Michelle is conscious of having gained what she considers to be a substantial amount of weight after carrying her three children. In her daily life, this causes her distress and she often feels badly about her body, but when belly dancing, she is able to escape those negative feelings.

When you belly dance, you have the right to feel sexy. [In what other aspects of your life do you get that feeling?] Not many – I get it, I mean, with my husband, of course, when we're alone. No, I mean really, legitimately being a forty-two year old mother of three, married for twenty-some odd years, overweight – the whole, the whole thing – you don't get to feel very sexy very often. So, it's good to find the places where you can do that.

The dance offers these participants an antidote to the pressures imposed by the gaze. This new way of interpreting body shape and size is actively constructed in class by teachers who promote and congratulate students when their bellies jiggle, and who applaud and encourage body confidence among all students. In turn, students support and encourage each other, and comments such as, “You look beautiful,” “Let me see you shake,” and “Make your belly dance” are common. This reframes the conception of the ideal female form, even if only within this dance community, to celebrate flesh, which is generally interpreted through the lens of the male gaze as repugnant.

Despite the body positivity in classes, Elena, is unable to “shut down” her inner critic when in studio. It is in performance, completely exposed to the gaze of the audience, that she finds reprieve:

In the studio when we're practicing, I'm just constantly critiquing myself like, "Get that elbow up there, get energy in the fingers, what the fuck does energy in the fingers mean? I don't know but make the fingers look better." It's just constant issues like, "Make your posture look better. Oh God, my stomach." Everything is

just terrible. But when I'm performing it's like, "Well this is it! You either make it work, or don't."

In Elena's experience in the studio we see evidence of what Bartky (1988) describes as the internalization of the gaze. Elena turns the gaze on herself, thus challenging the possibility of the popular mantra encouraging individuals to "dance like no one's watching." In an opinion that would seem paradoxical to gaze researchers, it is with an audience that Elena finds respite; knowing she has to "make [her performance] work" allows her to stop criticizing her body and instead connect to with it pleurably. It is almost as if these dancers have developed access to a new liberatory form of the gaze that helps shape their behavior.

Dancers from The Dark Side offer a unique reason for their increase in body confidence, and confidence overall. They mobilize a definition of femininity that 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminism and Orientalism scholars would find surprising. In marketing and media, belly dance is associated with hyper-feminized traits: dancers are usually depicted as having long hair, wearing considerable make-up, wearing bright, sparkling costumes that highlight their breasts, hips and stomachs, and dancing in a sensual, yet unassuming, way, a stylization that Yasmina at Arabesque calls showing "Arab subtlety." Yet, tribal belly dance promotes a femininity that is more assertive, edging into aggressive. Elena details how tribal style significantly influences the way she relates to the world:

And it does teach you a certain "fuck you" attitude a little bit, because there will be a point where someone will say, "It's time to do the recital and you have to show your belly." So, I remember the first time I did that, I was like, "Oh my God this is horrible. What am I going to do?" And especially since there were only two other girls in the class, both of whom were personal trainers. I was as big as both of them combined. Well, of course, they were also tall and statuesque just to really shit on me a little more, you know. Eventually you do it and you're like, no one died. No one burst into flames. It's fine! A lot of people even told me I looked good. Some of them might not even have been lying. So it's, you know, you know I CAN wear whatever I want and if someone

else has a problem it's their problem not mine. You do learn to cultivate that, when you need it, "I'm Queen Bitch" dance posture and then you can pull off anything in that sense.

An attitude similar to Elena's "Queen Bitch" was demonstrated by seven of the eleven The Dark Side dancers during interviews. When asked why they prefer tribal style to cabaret, they answered with an almost identical embodied example: adopting an intentionally soft, high pitched voice that I perceived as mimicking a virginal young woman, they said "Cabaret style is like this," placing their arms in an exaggerated form of Arabesque's basic position<sup>19</sup> with a pronounced bend at the elbows which creates a "chicken arm" look. They all produced small, innocent-looking, closed lip smiles and tilted their chins down in a coy, almost submissive way. In their high-pitched voices, they said, "It's soft. It's pretty. It's sweet." Then, enunciating with more precision and using a noticeably deeper, louder and firmer tone, they would say "Tribal is LIKE THIS!" Breathing deeply, they would lift their chest and head and raise their arms to tribal fusion's second position<sup>20</sup>. "It's strong, it's powerful, it says, 'Here I am and I've got this.'" For them, the feeling of the dance and what it portrays can be summed up in its strong body posture, which they embody and project with unapologetic vigor.

The number of participants using this example was not a coincidence. Audra, the artistic director at The Dark Side, gently pokes fun at dancers whose cabaret style training becomes evident in their body postures. Having trained extensively in cabaret style, I

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<sup>19</sup> In basic position, a dancer rolls her shoulders softly back and down, extending her arms approximately 45 degrees from her body with a slight bend at the elbows. Her arms sit about four inches below shoulder height with her wrists flexed slightly downward. She keeps a gentle energy in her hands, fingers stretched to almost straight but without force.

<sup>20</sup> In The Dark Side's second position, a dancer extends her arms at shoulder height. She extends her upper arms extend from the body at approximately a 45 degree angle, bending them at the elbows. Were she viewed from above, it would appear as though she is creating a U with her arms.

easily fall victim to her critiques. When dancing, my default upper-body posture is Arabesque's "basic position." Watching me throughout drills, Audra mimics my arms, exaggerating the bend in her elbows and collapsing her shoulders forward so that she has "chicken arms." In a tone that I interpret as mocking, she says "That is so Arabesque!" She then fiercely lifts her arms into second position, elongates her neck, raises her chin and exclaims "Be more proud!" Examples such as this demonstrate how the discourse of soft versus strength with which my participants engage is actively produced and reinforced at The Dark Side.

Nonetheless, as I hear participants from both Arabesque and The Dark Side profess their body confidence, I am struck by the detailedness of their body criticisms – are they perhaps more concerned about their body image, on the whole, than other women? They seem to oscillate between feeling confident and doubting their appearance, with the intervals between these contradictory sentiments sometimes being indescribably short. See, for example, the way Nicki, a member of Arabesque Earth Shakers and instructor at Arabesque, discusses how belly dance has changed her relationship to her body:

Belly dance has really changed how I see myself. I like myself so much more now. I mean, I don't necessarily like how my thighs slap together when I do the hip-kick, that I could do without, but now I like my body. It helps that all those things you don't like about yourself, other women tell you is sexy. So, like me, I'm always worried about my underboob [which she describes in an earlier part of the interview as "these two pockets of extra fat folds right under my boobs. It's like my boobs have a double chin"]. You know, when you dance, you spend a lot of time looking at yourself in the mirror. I'm painfully aware of all my flaws. But I like myself.

Nicki jets back and forth between proclamations of self-love and self-critique. Distilling her comments, her statement reads: "I like myself a lot more. I don't like my thighs slapping together. I like my body. What I don't like other women say nice things about. I don't like my underboob. Mirrors make me aware of my flaws. I like myself." She

vacillates anew with almost each sentence. Her mention of mirrors leads me to think she looks at herself through the lens of the male gaze, and this heightens her awareness of the ways in which she falls short of its standards. Belly dance, it appears, has not helped her in that regard.

### **Theoretical Implications**

In their assertions, critical scholars (Fruhauf, 2009; Koritz, 1997; Lorus, 1996; Savigliano, 1995; Shay, 2008; Shay & Sellers-Young, 2003) privilege representation such that the extent to which women are agents and beneficiaries of the male gaze receives little attention. While my research did find evidence that supports the tenets of the gaze, it suggests that fully subscribing to male gaze as theorized by 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminists Bordo (1993) and Bartky (1988) is problematic. Bodies cannot simply be read as cultural texts that passively reflect the values of their societies. If we reorient ourselves towards the perspective of the experiencing dancer, we find that what is represented on the surface does not always correspond to embodied experience. The interaction between women's subjectivities and cultural discourses require careful analysis that recognizes the tensions and contradictions inherent in this activity.

Although an examination of spectator positions is beyond the scope of this chapter, what *is* pertinent is the kind of spectator dancers believe they are interacting with. My participants' narratives challenge the existence of a monolithic male gaze. For dancers, the gaze of their audience is never just masculine. Instead, for them, the male gaze is one of a variety of subject positions that they feel their audience adopts, which provides support for cultural scholars (Denzin, 1995; Nash, 1996; Saco, 1992; Steinman, 1992) contention that the gaze is multifaceted. They understand their audience to be varied,

complex, multi-dimensional, and experiencing fluid transitions among different gazes, which helps to explain their assertions of feeling both disciplined and empowered. This is likely also part of what leads to their acknowledgment of the way dance subjects them to the gaze and, at the same time, allows them to escape it. When we acknowledge the multiplicity of gazes with which dancers are preoccupied, we can avoid the danger of painting all dancers, and their experiences, with the same brush.

While their narratives do suggest some instances of feeling subjected to the male gaze, participants experience belly dance as more than a site where they are simply passive objects. They have found pleasure in pleasing, controlling, subverting, and escaping the gaze. Because belly dance has the potential to both affirm and challenge dancers' self-image, this leaves me wondering, is the "awesomeness talk" perhaps also performative? The enthusiasm with which most participants discuss their newfound self-love leads me to think this is perhaps an almost obligatory performance required of dancers to be accepted as one of the group. Their open appeals to the dictates of 3<sup>rd</sup> wave feminism stand in stark contrast to their detailed evaluations of their bodies, a tension not so easily reconciled.

If pleasing the male gaze leads to feelings of control and empowerment, this poses a problem for feminist theorists: how then are we to theorize female agency? The role of agency among recipients of the male gaze is understood differently by 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> wave feminists. Second wave feminists undertheorize the role of agency, holding that women are socially coerced into striving to achieve the standards imposed by the gaze (see Bartky, 1988; Bordo, 1993; Morgan 1991; Wolf, 1991), so that a woman who welcomes the gaze is seen as its dupe. Third wave feminists contend that women wittingly choose to

adhere to hegemonic norms of beauty (Davis, 1995; Genz, 2006; Rampton, 2015). This binary presents an overly simplified account of women's subjectivities. While the 2<sup>nd</sup> wave perspective leaves women as nothing but passive objects, much of 3<sup>rd</sup> wave writing reads like an apolitical exploration of expressive individualism, lacking discussions of the cultural context in which women's subjectivities are shaped (Snyder, 2008; Waters, 2007).

Second and 3<sup>rd</sup> wave feminist interpretations appear to be on opposite ends of a continuum, however, they share two themes. First, both conceive of the relationship between the mind and body in a Cartesian manner: the body is a passive object, either inscribed by hegemonic norms or used in identity construction. The second commonality is that both conceive of power as a zero-sum phenomenon. The 2<sup>nd</sup> wave perspective asserts that men hold and exercise power over women, whereas, according to 3<sup>rd</sup> wave feminists, women have the power to express their agency – a power that lies outside existing gendered power relations. Neither consider the sites at which power is exercised, which Michel Foucault (1995) argues leads to an incomplete theorization of the concept of power. These perspectives ignore the constitutive role the body plays in forming thoughts, feelings, and actions, and the intricate connection between mind and body in the experience of the self and the formation of meaning (Grosz, 1994; Weiss, 1999).

My participants' experiences require a synthesized theoretical perspective that accounts simultaneously for women's agency, objectification, and embodiment in the practice of belly dance. By expressing a sense of agency and simultaneously a submission to norms of beauty, dancers are aligned more with Foucault's (1995) way of conceiving power relationally. Foucault, I argue, does better than both 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> wave feminists at



providing a conceptual space in which the dancers' otherwise seemingly contradictory perspectives can be reconciled.

For Foucault, according to Gaventa (2003), people cannot be neatly divided into those who have power, and those who do not. As he argues, this masks the ways in which power is spread throughout social networks, how it operates, and the consequences of those operations. As political sociologist Jonathan Gaventa tells us,

[Foucault's] work marks a radical departure from previous ideas, as power is diffuse rather than concentrated, embodied and enacted rather than possessed, discursive rather than purely coercive, and constitutes agents rather than being deployed by them. (2003, p. 1)

Foucault suggests that power is not wielded by people, groups or states, but is dispersed and pervasive: "power is everywhere ... it comes from everywhere" (Foucault, 1998, p. 63), and is embodied in discourse and knowledge. Moreover, he views power not solely as a constraining force, but as productive: it can produce pleasure, knowledge, and an image of the self. With this concept, Foucault (1982) draws our attention to the productive and pleasurable sides of power. Technologies of the self, such as exercising or going to the doctor, are intertwined with technologies of domination, allowing individuals, through use of their own agency, to present and police their selves through regulation of their bodies, thoughts, and conduct. Technologies of the self also guide how we wish to be perceived by others and how we perceive ourselves, producing self-esteem and self-confidence that are experienced through bodily sensations, such as pleasure, arousal, and excitement. It is at this intersection of both constraining and guiding agents into "proper" use of their bodies that my belly dancers' stories achieve coherence.

Foucault's (1982) concept of power holds that it is a mode of action: "a set of actions on possible actions: it incites, it induces, it seduces" (p. 789). With this distinction, it becomes possible to see the ways in which possibilities of resistance are built into relations of power:

At the very heart of the power relationship, and constantly provoking it, are the recalcitrance of the will and the intransigence of freedom. Rather than speaking of an essential antagonism [between Power and Resistance], it would be better to speak of an "agonism" – of a relationship that is at the same time mutual incitement and struggle; less of a face-to-face confrontation that paralyses both sides than a permanent provocation. (Foucault, 1982, p. 792)

Power is constantly moving through relations, and since subjects are the effect of power, the practice of resistance is built into the act of negotiating the dynamics of power. Some participants confront what they see as oppressive forces of mainstream society and create ways of resisting those forces through the practice of belly dance. Dance has changed the way they construct, reconstruct and move through their lives, and they work within the power of the gaze, even as they experience themselves as escaping it, to resist it.

Understanding power through this lens allows us to extend ideas of the gaze such that men are not the sole agents and beneficiaries of the gaze.

In the next chapter, I look at the ways in which Orientalism is recruited in dancers lived experience of belly dance. Although I had anticipated that dancers' stories would be fraught with Orientalist stereotypes and fantasies, my findings suggest that the meanings associated with belly dance go beyond expressions of "imperial feelings" (Maira, 2008). Instead of embodying an exoticized other, dancers reject the use of Arab stage names and offer alternate reasons for their enjoyment of props such as the veil and hip scarf. Dancers

feel belly dance helps them to gain a greater sense of self – they are not simply prancing around in “Arab Drag” (Jarrar, 2014).

#### Chapter 4: Re-Orienting Ourselves - Negotiating Orientalism and Appropriation<sup>21</sup>

The dance class starts like any other. I take my regular spot in the back left corner and begin to practice some movements that I find particularly difficult while the other women trickle in. Two arrive with new, silky black hip-scarves, printed with red roses that are intricately outlined with red sequins. Others in the class admire these scarves for fusing “Middle Eastern culture with a Spanish flare.” In my earlier years of dancing experience, I would have said the same – I would have been equally enamored by the scarves and likely would even have bought one for myself. However, having been exposed to literature on Orientalism (Koritz, 1997; Savigliano, 1995; Shay, 2008), I was horrified. As the Introduction lays out, these scholars argue that a history of appropriation, and exoticization informs contemporary belly dance practices. My understanding is further informed by an email exchange with an Egyptian costume designer who explained to me that it was American teachers who introduced hip-scarves to belly dance. These 1970s hip-scarves were lined with thin gold and silver coins that jingled with movement, and the teachers felt that this would help students match their movements to the music. Seeing the American trend, Egyptian costume designers began to produce and sell the scarves en masse (Hamidzadeh, A., personal communication, 2012). Hip-scarves, therefore, have no connection to any group’s long-standing history of practicing belly dance, yet today, they are staples of almost any belly dance class. I stopped wearing a hip scarf because I understood it to be a marketing gimmick that promotes indulging in fantasies of an exoticized Other.

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<sup>21</sup> Sections of this chapter are a substantially revised, rethought, and expanded version of a preliminary analysis published as Banasiak, K. (2014). Dancing the East in the West: Orientalism, feminism, and belly dance. *Critical Race and Whiteness Studies*, 10(1), 1-14.

In this chapter, I suggest that a reliance on symbolic interpretations of belly dance leads Orientalism scholars to project incomplete meanings of the practice onto participants' experiences. When we make the dancer the subject of experience rather than an object of the gaze, we find that many seemingly Orientalist practices have different meanings for participants. In particular, I challenge and complicate Orientalism scholars' somewhat totalizing understanding of the use of costumes, props and stage names, by illuminating the ways in which they are understood by dancers.

For Orientalism scholars, the practice of belly dance might be considered to contribute to what South Asian American studies expert Sunaina Maira (2008, p. 319) calls "imperial feelings": a complex structure of feeling that results from being socialized into a system of difference and domination. "Imperial feelings" are a micro form of imperialism built into individuals' psyches. According to Holly Edwards (2000, p. 28), Orientalist discourses and imagery have permeated Western culture to such an extent that individuals draw upon them for the process of self-construction in both appearance and demeanor. Orientalism scholars suggest that belly dancers are performing a "racial masquerade" (Maira, 2008, p. 334) and that their common practice of taking Arab-sounding performance names may be the result of, at the same time as it reproduces, "imperial feelings." They argue that dancers of the dominant West are engaged in a form of self-exoticization, reveling in the feelings of "empowerment" that embodying the Middle Eastern "Other" arouses (Shay, 2008, p. 146; Studlar, 1997, p. 125; Shay & Sellers-Young, 2003, p. 27).

As individuals have engaged more and more with the culture, practices and art forms of groups to which they do not belong, questions arise regarding the social consequences of representing the Other. Edward Said's critique of Orientalism (1978) so shifted our understanding of what such representations mean that it is now difficult to conceive of circumstances in which depicting groups as essentially "different" would not contribute to their domination. In his discussion of what he labels "the postcolonial dilemma", Graham Huggan (2001, p. 31-32) asks:

Is it possible to account for cultural difference without at the same time mystifying it? To locate and praise the other without also privileging the self? To promote the cultural margins without ministering to the needs of the mainstream? To construct an object of study that resists and possibly forestalls its own commodification?

Such critiques are not confined to academic literature but have entered the sphere of popular discussion. For example, Salon.com published an article entitled *Why I Hate White Women Belly Dancing*. Palestinian-American writer Randa Jarrar accuses White belly dancers of dressing in "Arab drag", taking on Middle Eastern sounding names, and uncritically involving themselves in cultural appropriation. She states:

This dance form is originally ours and does not exist so that white women can have a better sense of community; can gain a deeper sense of sisterhood with each other; can reclaim their bodies; can celebrate their sexualities; can perform for the female gaze. Just because a white woman doesn't profit from her performance doesn't mean she's not appropriating a culture. And, ultimately, the question is this: Why does a white woman's sisterhood, her self-reclamation, her celebration, have to happen on Arab women's backs? (2014, n.p.)

A scathing critique indeed. Jarrar's article seized my attention immediately as it reflected, in a popularized manner, the arguments of many scholars. After being exposed to this critical academic and popular literature, I quickly adopted its perspective, experiencing an end of innocence in terms of how I perceived belly dance, its role in my life, and what

it represented in the larger social structure. These realizations disrupted what had previously been a thoroughly pleasurable experience.

As discussed in the methods chapter, although I continued to dance, I did so with conflicting emotions and contradictory beliefs. I questioned the social impact of my fellow dancers and I, who are predominantly White Western women, representing the Middle Eastern Other in public spaces. Hearing no voice to the contrary, I assumed that other dancers were deeply immersed in fantasies of the Orient. This assumption left me unable to participate in our activities, conversations, and dance practices as I had before. I came to feel that I had become an outsider. I felt that I was continuing to play the part of an agreeable dancer, participating in belly dance culture, as I knew it, in an effort to avoid alienating myself from the group. What's more, as I detailed in Chapter Two, the knowledge that I planned to study my friends and fellow dancers and to publish material critical of this culture, began to play on my conscience. I experienced intense feelings of guilt and took on the identity of a betrayer, one who was not and would not be honouring the "We" (Åkerström, 1991). Through my interviews I realized that I was not an "outsider" after all.

### **The Accouterments of Belly Dance**

To be at Arabesque's dance studio is to be in a world that would make Orientalism scholars uneasy. Framed black and white posters of influential belly dancers in full costume adorn the walls. The studio is splashed with ruby, gold, emerald and turquoise coloured cushions, used to sit on the floor and watch performances, and hip scarves and veils are stored in open bins on the windowsills. Women admire one another's hip scarves, enthusiastically don colourful veils, and dance without any outward sign of

questioning issues of race, representation, or appropriation. In many ways, the studio looks to be a 21<sup>st</sup> century imaginary of a harem and the dancers its willing inhabitants.

My observations in this environment led me to believe that my participants would discuss desires and experiences that suggest they are happily living out Orientalist stereotypes. In general, though, it was unexpectedly difficult to bring out such stories from the participants. I had designed questions explicitly intending to address experiences aligned with Orientalist tropes, but almost none of participants gave me the results I had anticipated. For example, I asked “if money was no object and you had infinite resources, where would you most like to dance?” I had expected to be met with answers that detail Orientalist settings – plush cushions, perhaps a Sultan’s palace, descriptions of bejeweled costumes and dreams of being bathed in the attention of an audience ready to be seduced. Instead, I received responses like Jenna’s, an intermediate dancer at The Dark Side:

I would take some private classes, definitely, because, I would take group classes and private classes and do any workshop that I wanted to and just dance as much as I wanted to. I saw on Facebook that Rachel Brice is in Belize, I think, doing workshops, doing like a yoga-belly dance workshop so I would SO be doing that right now, I wouldn’t be here in February, pregnant with a fucking kidney stone, no! I’m rich! I’m in Belize with Rachel Brice.

Jenna’s response does not suggest escapist or fantastical desires but instead, point to the ways in which she understands the dance as a skill she works diligently to develop. An emphasis on skill and technique pervades other participants’ engagement with belly dance too. My participants relate to belly dance in ways that speak to Robert A. Stebbins (2012) concept of serious leisure, which he defines as “the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist or career volunteer activity sufficiently substantial, interesting, and fulfilling for the participant to find a career there acquiring and expressing a combination



of its special skills, knowledge, and experience” (p. 69). Individuals engaged in serious leisure pursuits find their activity highly rewarding and fulfilling, and as is evidenced by the amount of time and resources spent and the emotional investment involved, the activity occupies an important place in their life.

Participants’ responses provide more support for the serious leisure perspective than they do the contentions of Orientalism scholars. When presented with an opportunity to articulate their dream dance scenario, they describe neither fantasies of dancing in a Sultan’s tent nor a scene of seduction. They choose instead to spend the fictitious unlimited resources on bettering their skill set. As Stebbins (1992) states, having adequate financial resources greatly influences serious leisure participation, and dancers see the unlimited resources as affording them greater opportunity to participate in activity that they love.

Moreover, if given a choice, Jenna would eschew traditional female role of mothering and travel to take extra classes from well-known teachers. That is her fantasy, not an Orientalist one. Michelle’s response also points to the reward she feels from venturing outside the caretaker role:

For me, the most rewarding thing about performing is the applause, the appreciation, the cheering, it feeds a part of my soul that I don’t get anywhere else. You don’t get appreciation when you make breakfast for hungry, tired teenagers – you know what I mean. They don’t really appreciate you for getting up and doing that.

Jenna and Michelle’s responses draw our attention to the gendered nature of serious leisure. For women more so than men, serious leisure offers a chance to escape their daily routines and roles as caretakers, giving them a space to have fun, develop a skill and

sense of accomplishment, and foster new relationships (Dilley & Scraton, 2010; Kraus 2014; Stalp & Conti, 2011).

An Orientalism scholar might still, however, question the degree to which the emphasis of “skill” is used to sanitize belly dance, desexualizing it and disconnecting it from the exoticized other, in order to legitimize dancers’ involvement and alleviate some of their unacknowledged guilt or concern. Their discussions discursively locate the choice to take up recreational belly dancing as empowering through the advancement and refinement of a “skill.” There is simultaneously a great deal of talk about how to avoid being or appearing “too sexy.” For example, in classes, teachers consistently make references to how belly dance movements differ from other dances they perceive as more explicitly sexual or provocative. When teaching the African shimmy<sup>22</sup>, it is common to hear teachers say, “This is NOT twerking!” In this shimmy, movements in the core of the body and pelvis result in one’s rear end bouncing up and down in a way that, from behind, resembles Jamaican twerking, a move made famous by a dance between Miley Cyrus and Robin Thicke at the Video Music Awards in 2013. Belly dancers discuss twerking as a less purposeful, less precise movement with “the bum just bouncing as far and as fast as it can go. African shimmies are more controlled and defined.” Referring to the African shimmy as “not twerking” positions this shimmy above the twerk in a

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<sup>22</sup> To perform the African shimmy, the dancer stretches her arms above her head straight up with both of her palms facing forward and the palm of her left hand on the back of her right. She envisions a separation between the upper half and lower half of her body at approximately the belly button and brings her rib cage and shoulders down towards that line while she tilts her pelvis up towards it. This creates a concave look with the belly sucked backwards and the body rounded. She then releases that tension, allowing her belly to pop forward and then back again repeatedly. Once a dancer has initiated this large movement, it is very little work for her to continue to execute it; the body’s own momentum keeps the movement going. The effect is that the entire mid-section of the body appears to be convulsing.

hierarchy of sexualized movements, thus giving belly dancers permission to dance without experiencing a sense of moral depreciation.

Drawing out the experiences of the two women of colour in my sample, we see a the comparisons made to other dance styles being used differently than by the White participants mentioned above. Joanne, who self-identifies as Trinidadian Canadian, and Monique, who self-identifies as Ghanaian Canadian, discuss how they like belly dance because it makes them feel so “womanly” and “feminine”:

Joanne: When I belly dance, I get to be feminine. I get to feel like a woman. I feel like it's not okay for me to feel like a woman anyways. Because I'm Black, and there's this scary thing about Black sexuality, I'm really self-conscious of. Black men have it worse for sure, but black women are often seen as having this overt sexuality. You know. More than White women. So I'm always trying to watch out for that. But I don't have to in belly dance because it's just so gently feminine. It's that Arab subtlety, right?

Monique: When I dance other dances, like calypso or salsa, and don't get me wrong, I love those dances, I'm always aware of that animalistic Black woman thing. Those dances are more aggressive and showy. It sounds kind of silly to say this because belly dancing is pretty sexual too, but it's a different sexuality. It's not quite so in your face. I love the in your face stuff. Calypso in particular, even dancehall, I love doing those. But I do those a bit more privately just because, unless I'm only with other Black people or people of colour, I can't shake the fear of being seen as really raw. Belly dance I will do in public, no problem. I can feel feminine without being as concerned when I belly dance. I just get to revel in it.

Joanne and Monique put forth a narrative that aligns with Caribbean feminist thinkers' (Thomas, 2004; Ulysse 1999) critiques of the way that black women have historically been excluded from understandings of womanhood. These scholars argue that colonial discourses set up a distinction between “lady” or “woman” and racialized bodies, where White women are desexualized and considered “ladies,” while people of colour, and black bodies in particular, are hypersexualized. For Ulysse (p. 148), this has resulted in a “racially coded white Madonna/black whore polarity.”

In their quotes above, I understand Joanne and Monique to be influenced by colonial ideologies that render black women enjoying their bodies unrespectable (Thomas, 2004; White, 2001). Caribbean feminist scholarship (Hobson, 2003; Noble, 2000; Ulysse, 1999) argues that, in the face of exclusion from womanhood, women of colour have worked to redefine traditional definitions of femininity and created new subjectivities that directly challenge “respectability.” However, at least in this instance, we see Monique and Joanne using elements of “Arab culture” to enable them to feel included in womanhood as it is understood within the confines of colonial legacies. It is the movement vocabulary of belly dance, with its “Arab subtlety,” that allows them to embody a sense of womanhood they feel unable to capture in other dances, and in their daily lives more generally. The “gently feminine” mannerisms help them to neutralize the threat of hypersexuality they are concerned others may project in the presence of their black, dancing bodies.

Beyond comparisons with other dance styles, teachers also caution against standing or positioning the body in ways that leave the legs open to the audience, stating that “we are belly dancers! No crotch shots!” In fact, I have many times advised my students against certain body postures because “we don’t want the show to become X-rated.” The discourse of skill is invoked to thwart potential criticism by positioning those who would critique belly dancing as overly sexualized or as sexualizing Arab women as misinformed. Such discursive work elevates belly dance above “the pornographic of the mainstream” (McNair, 2002, p. 61), a term used to describe the introduction of previously hypersexualized activities, such as pole-dancing, into the mainstream in a way that is seen as “porno-chic” as opposed to degrading. Participants construct their

involvement in belly dance an empowering, skillful activity, distancing themselves from the realm of the super sexual.

**Hip scarves.** Hip scarves are a largely unstudied prop. There is a dearth of academic material addressing their history, and what is found on-line points to their invention in the 1970s by teachers in the U.S. (anankedance.com). As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, a critical reading of hip scarves might suggest that hip scarves were exported to Egypt through popular American films and were then taken up as an essential element of belly dance costuming in an act of auto-exoticization. This was done to appease tourists and upper-class Egyptian audience members whose tastes were largely fashioned according to those of the West (Savigliano, 1995). Orientalism scholars would argue that in the West, teachers capitalize on hip scarves in an attempt to enhance participants' identification with the exotic. Whether scarves jingle with coins or are decorated with intricate patterns, it could be argued that they draw attention to the hips, an area typically associated with female sensuality, and thus enhance belly dance students' pleasurable and fantastical feelings.

Lorraine, one of the women whose new hip scarf was discussed in this chapter's opening, had self-selected to be part of my research. Recalling the incident, I asked her about her open affinity for hip scarves. She offers an explanation that challenges a critical reading of their use:

I just feel like it's a big arrow saying "look here! (points to her hips) This is what it's about." And I find that that's the empowering part because that's the powerful part of me, you know. Even when I'm dancing and I'm looking in the mirror: I think that's why I lose my arms so much because I'm always looking at my hips. For me that's my centre. These [hips] are powerful weapons. These things carry life inside them; these things have done a lot. And I just find it's my most, it's a very womanly feature; and I find I feel very

powerful being able to use them in a womanly way. You know what I mean? It's just, you know, it's enthralling; this is life-giving here.

As Lorraine speaks, she places her hands on her hips with her index fingers pointing out: the effect is to imply that this area of her body is endowed with invisible “magic wands,” a term she herself is about to use. Moving her hips to make the “wands” sway, she says:

It is, because this is, you know, only women have this ability. And also too, I think, having a child and growing it and the birth part of it really makes you feel your ultimate womanness. It's like you're like, “Wow, I'm a factory, man.” Look what I'm capable of. And it is, there's a connection to it and I think that's kind of where it's like waving your magic wand.

Thus, the meaning of the hip scarf to dancers can differ from the interpretations that critical theorists would assume. For Lorraine, the hip scarf is a favourite not because it allows her to identify with a fantastical Orientalist “Other” but because of the embodied connection it forges with her hips, a part of her body she has felt a strong affinity with since giving birth. The power she feels is grounded in her life experience: she does not discuss her hips as sexy or powerful in an essentialized way. Instead, it was the experience of giving birth that gave Lorraine a sense that her hips are significant to her. Hip scarves remind her of her body's capabilities.

**The veil.** Orientalism scholars would be even more suspicious of the common use of the veil in belly dance than of hip-scarves. As Meyda Yeğenoğlu (1998, p. 39) notes, the “veil is one of those tropes through which Western fantasies of penetration into the mysteries of the Orient and access to the interiority of the other are fantasmatically achieved.” The veil is not simply an item of clothing derived from particular cultural practices, but in the West it symbolizes “otherness” (Ahmed, 2002, p. 60; Yeğenoğlu, 1998, p. 41). Images of veiled women often epitomize the Orientalist notion that the veil conveys mystique and cloaks sensuality (Yeğenoğlu, 1998), and Western feminist notions

that the Middle East is rife with oppressive and backward practices (Eltahawy, 2010, as cited in Franklin, 2013). But Elena's account of why she "loves" the veil offers another interpretation:

I think I've always liked big swishy capes to play with so now I had a big swishy veil to play with. When veil is done well, it's spectacularly beautiful, it really is. The dancer managing to keep this big partner really, this exploding piece of fabric up in the air, it can look so beautiful and so ethereal.

Elena's finds the veil beautiful for its movement and for the show of skill involved as using it as a prop. She considers it to be a dance "partner," implying that both she and the veil are active agents partaking in the dance together.

In this, Elena's perspective is more closely tied to the arguments put forth by post-feminist scholars who posit that the veil has a cultural significance more complicated than is appreciated by feminists critical of veiling. Post-feminist scholars suggest that the veil is used by women in their everyday lives for their own purposes, such as preserving family honour (McDonough, 1995, p. 131) or in acts of resistance to repressive laws in both the West (such as the "Burqa-Bans" debated throughout the European Union and enacted in France and Belgium) and Middle East (Ahmed, 2011; Göle, 2002; Sreberny and Khiabany, 2010), and that veil use should be seen as complex and fluid, occupying the spaces between conformity, repression, and agency (Franklin, 2013).

Although these theorists are discussing the use of the veil in women's everyday lives, their arguments parallel debates regarding costuming in belly dance. It would be easy to criticize veil use for objectifying the female body, preying on Orientalist tropes of "mystery and reveal" to please the colonial and male gazes, yet the meaning of Elena's use of this object, like that of Lorraine's use of her hip scarf, reflects a post-feminist

subjectivity. Neither Elena nor Lorraine, nor my other participants report using the hip scarf or the veil to engage in the colonial or sexist fantasies that 2<sup>nd</sup> feminist or Orientalist gaze scholars might predict. Instead, in a way similar to their engagement with the gaze, my participants use these objects in ways that challenge us to reconsider their agency.

However, when discussing their use of veils and hip scarves, it is remarkable how much the participants are able to say that has nothing to do with race. They love using the veil and believe it is a great prop, but they are notably silent about Orientalism. For example, participants who mentioned the veil did not once speak of the common practice of making stage entrances with the veil wrapped around the face and body, revealing only the eyes, mimicking the practice of wearing a niqab. In the interviews, dancers discuss neither their involvement in impersonating cultural practices, nor the implications of doing so.

Because many of these women are highly educated and politically savvy, I find it difficult to believe they have not heard the stories of veiled women subjected to ridicule and being denied opportunities, such as being refused Canadian citizenship unless the niqab is removed during the ceremony (a decision that was overruled and deemed unlawful in September 2015) (cbc.ca, 2015). Yet, no such examples factor into their answers. They appear to be doing some work to be as colour blind as they are.

A deeper examination of participants' attraction to veils supports Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's (2014) contention that in contemporary democracies, racism exists without racists. For Bonilla-Silva, this new form of racism is not explicit – it is not the type of cross-burning, Klu Klux Klan overt racism that existed in the past. Instead, one way in which it



manifests is through White privilege, a form of racism that bestows advantages upon the dominant group (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; McIntosh, 1988). It is a form of racism that both underlies and is distinct from institutional and overt forms of racism. White privilege is preserved not through intentional or hostile acts, but by consenting to everyday policies and practices that work to the benefit of White people at the expense of minority populations. Therefore, it is harder for many to see White privilege as “racism” because the advantages experienced are passed off as examples of the proper functioning of meritocracy in neoliberal democracies (Mascarenhas, 2016).

In dancers’ narratives, we see an absence of critical discussions of race and racism, and the invisible privileges associated with whiteness in multicultural societies. They interpret themselves as participating in multiculturalism in a way that silences race and power differences. They appear to be practicing a colour blind (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Lipset, 1996) multiculturalism. Colour blindness implies not recognizing difference, and critical multicultural scholars argue that failing to take into account difference is an act of misrecognition which is unjust and inegalitarian (Sen, 1992; Taylor, 1994). This perspective, as adopted by my participants, is perhaps unsurprising when we consider that these dancers are almost all White and are thus living with privilege not afforded people of colour.

As K. Anthony Appiah (1996) details, fairness, not colour blindness, is a fundamental principle of justice, and to work towards fairness, we must recognize difference.

Participants narratives do not contribute to progress towards fairness, equality, unity, or understanding of the lived experience of an “Other.” Although they celebrate the idea of engaging with another culture and promote the virtues of diversity in the abstract, a

phenomenon referred to by critical multiculturalism scholars as “happy talk” (Bell and Hartmann, 2007), their discussions avoid notions of racism, power and privilege. Arabesque Dance Studio even pitches its performances and classes in such a manner. For example, the promotional video used to advertise their 2014 production *Sawah* constructed the show as a multicultural experience. The video is a composite of 30-second clips of individual dancers and musicians of different nationalities, discussing in numerous languages what the show means to them. To me, Arabesque’s video epitomizes the celebratory, “warm and fuzzy” side of multiculturalism in a “come one, come all” fashion, almost as if the Company expects to be rewarded as paragons of globalization and cultural acceptance. It is a concrete example of Homi Bhabha’s assertion that in contemporary democracies, “multiculturalism must be seen to be done, as noisily and publicly as possible” (1992, p. 232). This promotional video promotes the “fiction of equality” associated with multiculturalism (Razack, 1998, p. 60). If being multicultural requires White people to do no more than sing the songs, learn the dances, and eat the food of other cultures, then little will be done to challenge the status quo from which most of my participants are privileged enough to benefit.

Given that the denial of racism is one of the defining aspects of Canadian multiculturalism, participants’ perspectives are not surprising. In their work on race and culture in Canada, Sherene Razack (1998) and Himani Bannerji (2000) argue that the discourse of culture most commonly used is one that stipulates values, beliefs, knowledge, and customs exist in a static fashion outside systems of patriarchy, racism, imperialism, and colonialism. Looking at the criminal justice and education systems, Razack (1998) demonstrates that discourses of “cultural difference” have come to replace

overt racism such that inequality is now justified by referring instead to differing cultural values and practices. Similarly, offering a feminist, anti-racist, and Marxist critique of multiculturalism, Bannerji (2000) argues that the elite in Canada use constructions such as “culture” and “community” to oppress others while hiding under seemingly equitable connotations of multiculturalism. Taken together, their research provides concrete examples of Bonilla-Silva’s (2014) “racism without racists” in the Canadian context. By appearing to recognize difference, yet failing to appreciate systemic inequality, participants’ multicultural discourses make it difficult to construct a genuinely progressive anti-racist politics.

Discourses of multiculturalism relieve dancers from confronting the realities of racism, especially their own. As Bhabha (1992) contends, the “declaration of faith in a plural, diverse society...[effectively defends] against the real, subversive demands that articulation of cultural difference – and the empowering of minorities – makes up on democratic pluralism” (p. 235). Considering this analysis, Orientalism scholars are not outright wrong – in some ways, the dancers are uncritical and unaware of their own privilege and the issues of representation with which they engage through their involvement in belly dance. However, given their responses, the meanings that critical gaze scholars produce must be altered to account for other interpretations that are more diverse than originally projected.

### **Stage Names and Theorizations of the Self**

Another frequently criticized practice of Western belly dancers is the adoption of Arabic-sounding names for public performances. This practice is so common that popular belly dance websites post articles on the use of “belly dance stage names” and offer a selection

of names along with their translations to help dancers choose. For example, *Living Belly Dance* (2013) promotes self-naming because “[w]hen you take on the identity of a Middle Eastern Dancer, it happens from within...some feel this identity must be given a name of its own,” while *Shimmy* (2015) encourages taking on an Arab sounding name because, “[w]hether you are a professional dancer or just a beginner, choosing a stage name can help you free yourself from the constraints of daily life and spur your creativity.”

Interestingly, these websites use the term “Middle Eastern” as opposed to Arab. This was also common in my interviews, in which only three participants used the term “Arab” in conjunction with the distinguishing features of belly dance. The other 27 use the phrase “Middle Eastern dance.” This term may seem more accurate because the “Middle East” includes non-Arab countries, such as Turkey and Iran, to which various styles of dance have been traced. However, avoiding the word “Arab” may also be due to the ambivalence in the West, particularly in the United States, about Arab identity, which is constructed as threatening (Maira, 2008, p. 326). This term “Middle Eastern” glosses over regional differences, producing a generic “Orient,” one entity lacking national cultural nuances. Saskia Witteborn (2004) suggests women of the “Middle East” attempt to counter this language use by using national identity labels, such as Lebanese or Palestinian, to emphasize the distinct “political, geographical, and historical characteristics of their respective countries” (p. 94). Moreover, the suggestion that taking on a new name will enhance a dancer’s new identity suggests explicitly engaging in the act of othering. The “Middle Eastern dancer” within must be distinguished from one’s self-identity, embodying and emphasizing the differences between “East” and “West.”

Yet, only four participants in my sample use stage names. At Arabesque, most professional dancers have rejected such names because they are “inconvenient.”

Georgina, an apprentice dancer in Arabesque Dance Company and solo dance artist, shares her experiences with using a stage name and the reasons she quickly reverted back to using her own:

I started off with a stage name. (And what was that?) Ameena; it just got weird for me. I like it in theory. (Why?) I like having a fake name and being that person and having the name. Ultimately it came down to, I’m never gonna be famous enough so it doesn’t really matter and it got confusing. When do I introduce myself as a stage name? When do I use my name when I’m corresponding with people? And then, if somebody would call me the name, did I remember to respond? It seemed just easier to go as “Georgina”. The stage name was more trouble than it was worth.

Such sentiments were echoed by other Arabesque dancers. The inconvenience of using a stage name outweighed the anticipated pleasure.

Where Georgina is typical of Arabesque dancers in having liked “being that person,” dancers at The Dark Side see their dance as more an act of personal expression and choose to perform under their own names to enhance what they see as the vulnerability and intimacy in their performances. Dancing under another name, for them, would feel contrived. As Samantha, a member of The Dark Side’s student troupe, says:

I personally wouldn’t do that [use a stage name] because it would feel a little bit, it would feel like a bit of a disconnect for me. I’m trying to express myself, putting a different name on it would take me further from what I’m trying to do.

Laura, an advanced dancer with The Dark Side and solo artist, expresses a similar experience of feeling a heightened sense of self when performing:

When I dance, I’m definitely expressing myself. Yeah, which is one of the reasons I don’t have a stage name, and one of the reasons I think that it’s near impossible for me to separate my dancer self from my personal self, ‘cause to me it’s all just one person.

These dancers construct belly dance as a form of personal expression requiring artistic talent, persistence, and confidence, and resulting in a skill just like any other kind of dancing.

However, one common trend among dancers of both schools is to perform under an abbreviated version of their legal name, most commonly, using only their first name. This is done strategically for purposes of privacy and safety, as Lorraine eloquently summarizes in the following sentences: “I think people do it because they are afraid of fallout. They are afraid of what other people will think. Or maybe they are just trying to stay away from the perverts.” Some dancers have concerns about suffering professional consequences should their colleagues or superiors learn of their dancing. For example, Monique, a Grade 8 teacher, sometimes takes time off work in order to attend important all-day dress rehearsals and does not want her principal to know she is using her sick days to dance. Others dropped their last names when performing after hearing of incidents that they found disturbing. In particular, dancers told me stories of audience members who sought them out after shows, harassing them over email and on social networking sites.

Although one might be tempted to praise these women for rejecting the Arab name-taking that is so common in the belly dance world, when we examine the words left unsaid, we arrive at a less optimistic picture. Just as in the discussions about hip scarves and the veil, mentions of the racist undertones of adopting an Arab stage name are palpably absent. In fact, almost all of the dancers appear to be actively trying to produce a narrative in which belly dance is colour-blind. Arabesque and The Dark Side dancers

reject Arab stage names not because using one would be racist or appropriative, but because the use of alternate names is inconvenient or not reflective of their “true selves.”

Of the four participants who do use stage names, Elena was the only one to reference race. Musing about how she thinks about the consequences of appropriation, which she terms “shitting on cultures”, Elena explains:

If I'm going to fuse two cultures, if I'm already shitting on one via my privileged position as a White person by the fact that I'm taking what is a Middle Eastern dance, at the very least I'm going to fuse it with a culture I have some connection to. I'll fuse it with my ballet training. You can't get away from the locking and popping in tribal fusion which was taken from break-dancing, a Black form of dance, which is not great but I do limit that to a certain extent and I fuse it with more acting or sketch comedy which would be more American or British. So it's kind of like, "let me only be horrible to one other culture at a time basically." I make very sure I'm not pulling things from Indian costuming [...] I pulled a [stage] name from a German fairytale.

This quote demonstrates that Elena is not lacking critical engagement with elements of belly dance, particularly its costuming and its history. She does not simply lap up the exoticized elements, but has come to question some of them and to experience conflicts between her values and her love of the dance. Elena has developed her own ways to participate in the dance while finding ways to reduce some of the elements she finds most troublesome, mainly, the appropriation of culture. Therefore, for her, appropriation is not an either-or. Instead, she sees it as having degrees.

However, even Elena discusses race in a way that is not fully coherent. The claims of empowered embodiment Elena was shown to be making can be understood to be aligned with feminism insofar as they are implicitly coded as feminism for White women in a colour-blind society. As historian Andrea Deagon (1999) argues, the discourse of popular practitioners situates belly dance as a form of personal expression grounded in liberal humanist feminism that conceives women’s experience as universal, an example of

thinking problematized by intersectional feminist writers, most notably Audre Lorde (1984) and bell hooks (1981, p. 2000). These scholars critique 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminists for conceptualizing “women” as a unified whole and focusing their theories and progressive agendas on the experiences of middle-class White women while leaving unacknowledged the ways in which different identities impact the experiences and henceforth needs of women of different classes, races, and sexual orientations.

A pattern in Elena’s thinking is clearly racialized. She feels she is “shitting on” Middle Eastern culture by appropriating its dance, compounding the problem by incorporating African, Indian or (in another passage of her interview) Japanese styles of dance or aesthetics. Mixing these cultures with belly dance produces feelings of discomfort of “shitting on two cultures at once.” However, she feels comfortable mixing belly dance with Celtic, German, American or British cultures, with ballet, which is of French origin, and with Gothic elements, which reinterpret a 19<sup>th</sup> century European style of literature, architecture and art. While it is left unsaid, I would argue that Elena feels entitled to fuse belly dance with European elements which she regards as neutral, as Lorde (1984) and hooks (1981, p. 2000) might argue, whereas she regards incorporating Indian, African or Japanese elements as appropriation because it would mean mixing two “colours.”

The other three of my participants who use stage names do so to highlight particular aspects of their personalities they wish to enhance during performances. Polly, an advanced dancer at The Dark Side who also leads her own tribal dance troupe, describes the importance of her dance name, Warda<sup>23</sup>, to her:

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<sup>23</sup> Warda is a pseudonym for Polly’s stage name.



I kind of liked this idea of having this other name to kind of pair it up with this aspect of my personality. So Warda is Persian for rose<sup>24</sup>, which is my favorite flower. Feels kinda neat to have a different name for that part of me. (And can you describe that part of you for me?) I believe in being generous and supporting each other, and Warda embodies that. “Let’s all just have a good time and let’s do something that’s meaningful to us. There’s room for us all to dance.” I’m really open and accepting and encouraging in general. When I dance, I feel this incredible positive energy that is open and loving, I want other people to feel it too, and Warda is the name I associate with that energy, that piece of me.

For Joanne, an apprentice with Arabesque Earth Shakers, using another name helps her bring out a “more glamorous” part of herself:

For me, it’s almost like a different person dancing. I call her Yolanda<sup>25</sup>. Well, no, not different person, just a part of me that I don’t get to use on a daily basis. I’m kind of shy, and I work in the corporate world so I’m kind of conventional like. So I use this name because it helps me come out of my shell and helps me feel comfortable expressing a part of me that in any other context would make people be like, “Come on Joanne. This isn’t you.” But it is me. Using Yolanda just makes it easier to bring that part of me out because I can kind of hide behind the name.

A key finding is that all four of these dancers feel they are being themselves on stage, not characters as Orientalism scholars (Shay, 2008, p. 146; Studlar, 1997, p. 125) would anticipate. Their stories show no evidence of persona adoption or “imperial feelings” (Maira, 2008). For Polly and Joanne, using a stage name appears to demarcate boundaries between the whole self and the parts of the self they actively choose to project when dancing.

In this, dancers are not unlike the members of online communities studied by communication scholars (Baptista, 2003; Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013). Interviews with bloggers and role-playing gamers suggest that individuals do not create new

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<sup>24</sup> Her favourite flower was replaced with “rose” in order to protect her anonymity and align with the pseudonym given for her stage name.

<sup>25</sup> Yolanda is a pseudonym for Joanne’s stage name.

identities online but instead exaggerate aspects of themselves that they deem desirable, or expect their audience/fellow gamers to respond well to. The role-playing gamers design their avatars with similar physical features to their real-life selves while bloggers tell truthful (although often exaggerated) stories of their offline lives. Liam Bullingham and Ana Vasconcelos (2013, p. 107) conclude:

Although participants generally reproduced their offline selves online, they would not always replicate their whole offline identity, but rather, just highlight aspects of their personality. What is meant by this is that the offline self is divided up into aspects of self, and only some of these aspects are presented online.

These authors argue that their participants' experiences provide support for Erving Goffman's concept of the mask. In his pioneering work on identity construction, Goffman (1990) theorizes identity work, using the metaphor of a mask to conceptualize the ways in which we present "the self we would like to be" (p. 19). For him, "a mask of manner can be held in place from within," allowing one to call forth particular aspects of one's identity during an interaction while minimizing others (p. 57). Providing examples of soldiers and from communities in Shetland, Goffman illustrates that wearing a mask does not cause an individual to become somebody else; the masks worn and the person behind them are all facets of the same individual.

Certainly, my participants' stories suggest some form of identity work – the mutually constitutive processes by which people strive to shape coherent and distinct notions of their selves (Watson, 2008, p. 129) – is taking place. Stage names help participants to divide the self, highlighting certain aspects of their identities, which they deem useful for performing and that, for Joanne in particular, are suppressed in other contexts such as at work. However, my participants' responses also suggest that they feel attached to each

part of their identity: there is a sense of coherence and continuity of self from which these various aspects emerge.

Dancers do not experience themselves as taking on a succession of roles lacking a firm, integrating identity. I argue that there is a phenomenological felt sense of self, a concept to be explored more fully in Chapter Five, that ties together the identities that they display socially, allowing participants to feel that they are representing their “true selves” as they enhance or minimize various traits in various social settings. My participants are trying to show the audience who they *are*, not simply who they want to *appear* to be. This challenges not only theories of Orientalist persona adoption, but also Goffman’s conception of the self. Goffman (1990) cannot account for the experience of coherence between the selves presented as he does not provide us with an description of the subject. He theorizes “a person as a set of role-slices” (p. 142) where the self is derived not from the individual but by the social scene in which the individual is located. For Goffman, the person is sum of the social masks he or she wears, the set of social roles he or she plays (MacIntyre, 1981). The “liquid self,” a term coined by Bauman (as cited in Hazaz-Berger & Yair, 2011) is a more recent invocation of such ideas. Drawing on Bauman’s concept, Hagar Hazaz-Berger & Gad Yair elucidate the ways in which Israeli flight attendants juggle the multiple identities they experience at home and on layovers between flights in various countries. Some report experiencing vast changes in their presentation, personality, and even their sexual orientation, in different contexts (p. 999). Such research into the multifaceted self is challenged by thinkers such as Marc Miller (1986, p. 186) who asks, “[W]ho wears these many masks?” By discussing “that piece/part of me” and not “that role that I’m playing,” participants allude to their self-knowledge and self-

understanding. When the experiencing subject is included as part of the analysis, the self cannot be reduced, as Goffman might argue, to a set of role performances with no person-as-agent behind them (Hollis, 1977).

How is it that we recognize that the self changes in response to lived experiences and yet is simultaneously experienced as continuous and coherent? My participants' responses provide support for the argument that the self is ongoingly constituted through acts of narration (Ezzy, 1998; Linde, 1993; Mead, 1934). A difference exists between individuals' many identities and the narratively constituted self at its core. Moreover, it seems they feel their selves and who they are come increasingly into focus, through being enacted in the dance, as opposed to the multi-faceted or liquid identities presented by Goffman (1990) and Hazaz-Berger and Yair (2011), respectively. As sociologists Kathy Bischooping and Amber Gazso (2016, p. 25) explain, narratives help us to make sense of the cleavages in our personalities and life pursuits, such that it is possible for us to find continuity in change.

My participants' seek to align the different aspects of their personalities they engage when dancing, referencing their own self-consciousness about discrepancies others might observe in them from one setting to the next, particularly differences in their "work selves" and their "dancer selves." They employ discourses of agency, discussing how they choose to call forth certain personality traits or characteristics when they dance which they feel will be beneficial and received well in that context, whereas they choose to minimize those traits in other contexts, such as at the office. Despite the differences in presentation, a continuous self underlies each of their expressions and experiences, and the act of the dance is part of how they constitute themselves.

## **Conclusion**

From the point of view of critical scholars (Koritz, 1997; Savigliano, 1995; Shay, 2008), belly dance is interpreted as rife with oppressive tropes of Orientalism. However, my research demonstrates that belly dance is open to interpretation and to systems of meaning that this school of thought would not expect. Far from a simple excursion into Orientalism, belly dancers understand themselves to be exploring a sense of femininity, empowerment, and agency through their dance. The visual focus of critical theorists has contributed to the neglect of embodiment in these accounts; the body, which ought to be central to any research on dance, has been curiously absent in critical literature.

The critical approach fails to account for the “complex interplay of culture, societal norms of femininity, individual expression, and women’s emic experiences within this type of leisure” (Moe, 2012, p. 207), for the body as a site wherein many contradictory and opposing discourses exist (Shilling, 1993). Participants understand their bodies as more than objects of “inscription and oppression” (Wright & Dreyfus, 1998, p. 95). The interactions they describe between their bodies, subjectivities and cultural discourses require an analysis alert to tensions and nuances.

While I have argued that the embodied experience of dance is key to analyzing its meaning for participants, I also have wondered what to make of the racism and Orientalism implicit in a dance practice that does, after all, reinforce stereotypes of “Arab princesses” for its onlookers. This is not an unusual dilemma for researchers to be in (see Arat, 2003). My response is that we must bear in mind that the experience of the body is always socially mediated by constructed discourses that produce the body and its meanings (Bordo, 1993, p. 30). I wish to balance acknowledgement of the lived and

embodied experiences of my participants, with acknowledgement that researchers are equipped with tools and theoretical dispositions that help them to analyze experience in relation to broader social processes of which participants may be unaware. For example, while Elena sees the veil as a “partner” in dance, she also positions it as “ethereal” and “other-worldly,” thus presenting a fairly clear Orientalising discourse. Therefore, I do not intend for this chapter to be an argument veiled in apologetics for racism; it is the role of the researcher to move beyond members’ practically-oriented interpretations to more abstract and informed analysis (Schutz, as cited in Anderson, 2006, p. 381).

Finally, a criticism that has been leveled against gaze theory, upon which critical theorists generally rely, is that it disarms would-be acts of resistance: in its framework, the female body has no potential to effect political change because the pre-existing meanings associated with it – e.g., as sex object or projection of the male gaze – nullify the progressive intentions of subversive acts (Manning, 1997; Wolff, 1997). My participants express certain discomforts around Orientalism and appropriation, whether by dance instructors who emphasize sexuality in place of skills, or in demonstrating a critical engagement with the history of the dance form. Gaze theorists may not agree with Elena’s perspectives on “shitting on” cultures or her efforts to resist what she considers wrong about belly dancing by taking a German fairy tale-based stage name rather than wearing a bindi, but to her, these are ways to effect change. Therefore, while their actions seem to be consistent with the practice of empowerment through the appropriation of the imagined cultural other, what makes matters more complex is that the participants are not

acting altogether unthinkingly. When it comes to belly dance, the question of appropriation is not so simply resolved.

In the next chapter, I explore in more depth the embodied experience of dance. Relying heavily on the insights of phenomenology, I present how belly dance has influenced women's experiences *with* their bodies, and how belly dance has transformed women's experiences *through* their bodies. I describe shifts that take place over time in the dance experience, where women rely less on visual reinforcement from the mirror and more on their felt sense of self in order to execute movements, and I describe the teaching techniques that foster that bodily awareness. Moreover, I argue that movement informs cognitive processing and plays a pivotal role in how dancers come to know the world and themselves.

## **Chapter 5: I Dance, Therefore I Am - Movement, Embodiment, and the Self**

It is May 2008 and in the city of Toronto, the first signs of spring are upon us. In the warm, sunny weather, people fill the seats at popular downtown patios, and shops and the streets are full of pedestrians. Taking advantage of the weather, I attend an outdoor festival that takes place monthly in Kensington Market – a vibrant neighbourhood downtown with a variety of shops, including vintage clothing stores, a marijuana dispensary, and craft bazaars, as well as restaurants serving food from around the world. While meandering about, I stumble upon a performance group comprised of three male drummers and a female dancer. Originally, the intricate rhythms of the drums attract my attention, but it is the dancer who draws me in completely. She is wearing a long brown skirt, Birkenstocks, and an unadorned purple cropped top, and has left her long frazzled hair down and unkempt. She looks so earthy and grounded. Wishing to cultivate what I perceive as her groundedness, I begin taking classes with her the following week.

A minority of four of my participants report similar experiences of becoming motivated to begin dancing when watching a performance by which they are “captivated” or “mesmerized” by a dancer in a “stunning costume” that is “so beautiful, sexy and confident.” Each of the four has a feeling that belly dance is accessible to them in a way other dance forms are not; while watching, they think to themselves “I could do that.” They have an inkling that belly dance will be more than it is stereotyped to be.

For the most part, however, participants come to this dance with few to no expectations. For example, three attend their first class to support friends interested in trying. Five participants desire to “trying something new” and select belly dance haphazardly as they



flip through books of university and community program offerings. Two are ballet dancers who, having injured themselves dancing professionally, turn to belly dance because they believe it to be less physically demanding. While different factors motivate these beginnings, what the participants have in common is that none has prior belly dance experience.

Not long after starting, however, dancers begin to form opinions of belly dance that largely contradict what they perceive the public's impression of the dance to be: an overtly sexual dance performed by hyper-sexualized women. Sensitive to this perception, many participants profess their unwillingness to disclose their belly dancing to others. Some prefer to keep their dancing from close friends and family for fear of being judged as "too old" or "too fat" to belly dance. Others, myself included, avoid mentioning that they belly dance when meeting or seeking potential partners for fear of being overly sexualized or objectified. In the same spirit, Courtney, an instructor and apprentice in Arabesque Dance Company, states:

I don't ever tell the men I date because telling a guy you date that you're a belly dancer is like a man telling a woman he's a firefighter. Women go crazy for the idea of the sexy fireman. It's the same for a belly dancer. I want to know he likes me for me, not because he's into some fantasy or wants bragging rights with his friends.

Dancers imagine the public, and others close to them such as friends, family, and colleagues, to hold expectations of belly dancers that are not unlike those put forth by 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminist and Orientalism scholars. Dancers fear that others may interpret belly dance the same way critical scholars do: as objectifying and overtly sexualized. However, as we have seen, belly dancers rarely experience their dance in this fashion. As Samantha notes,

There's this sexualization thing that we always have to work to counter. It's just like, 'Oh, come on; this is not a sexual thing. It could potentially be a sensual-erotic thing depending upon how you wanna perform it. But don't put that on me and tell me what my dance is supposed to mean.'

This chapter asks, how is it that Samantha and other belly dancers stubbornly come to a different decoding of what they are doing, different from both critical scholars and a public usually thought of as uncritical? In this chapter, I argue that the experience of belly dancing is precisely what leads dancers to interpret this activity differently. First, through an examination of reception theory, I argue that critical scholars' focus on the visual component of belly dance is shortsighted. Embodiment, which they negate, is a key factor in dancers' construction of meaning, leaving the critics to produce incomplete interpretations. Second, I suggest that Merleau-Ponty's (1962) phenomenology provides a more complete account of the lived experience of dance. Third, I suggest my participants' movements throughout the interviews speak to the prevalence of non-apperceptive consciousness.

### **Reception Theory and its Limits**

Second wave feminist and Orientalism scholars approach dance as a symbolic art form, conceptualizing the body as representative of larger social structures. As Steven Wainwright, Clare Williams and Bryan Turner (2006, p. 536) remark, they study belly dance as a text, analyzing movements, costuming, and choreography for meaning. Jan Wright and Shoshana Dreyfus (1998, p. 95) argue that in their reading, belly dance is most often a symbolic product that represents and (re)produces societal power relations. This position on how the dance is experienced assumes first, that the meanings associated with the symbolic elements of belly dance are read and experienced in a stable and

consistent fashion by all; and second, that belly dancers, in particular, understand, value and desire the meanings that critics discern.

As we have seen, belly dancers' interpretations of their involvement in the dance are numerous and varied. Critical scholars capture only a fragment of the meanings participants expressed during their interviews. Stuart Hall's (1980) reception theory provides insight into the processes of interpretation that contribute to such discrepancies in the construction of meaning. For Hall, meaning is created through a process of encoding and decoding, wherein a sender encodes a message based on his or her social location and life experience, and a receiver draws on his or her social location and life experience to decode it. Meaning, therefore, does not inhere in any cultural text and is instead created via the relationship between the text and the reader: there is no guarantee that an intended message will be actualized by its reader (Hall, 1980, p. 91).

Most reception analysis research focuses on how individuals consume and make sense of texts that are produced by others, such as television shows, film, advertisements, or novels (see Fiske 1986; Espiritu 2011; Friedman 2006; Halley 1986; Radway 1983 for examples). In these cases, the texts are autonomous: they are objects that have a concrete existence, becoming independent of those who created them. Only the audience, then, is involved in the act of decoding.

In her discussion of performance reception, classics theorist Edith Hall (2004) points out that "performance reception excludes individuals reading a visual text to themselves" (p. 51). Examining Greek theatre, she outlines the way that performance is most commonly understood as an act in which person A performs character B for audience member C.

Person A is therefore involved in an act of interpreting and portraying a text created by another.

Hall's (2004) finding can be generalized to dancers of all styles, who are interpreters of choreography that is set on them and to dancers of any style involving improvisation or choreography set on oneself. I argue that the practices of choreographing and improvising make belly dance a unique form of text to analyze. Belly dancers create their own dances: they do not simply perform a choreography set on them by person B (a teacher or artistic director) and perform for person C. Most dancers are encouraged early on to begin creating their own combinations and choreographies, and they are challenged to attend workshops to work on improvisation. In belly dance, often a separate person A does not exist. Belly dancers, and dancers of many other styles, are uniquely positioned in the communication process as they are ongoingly and evolvingly both producers and consumers of meaning – they encode *and* decode. Their text cannot exist in absence of its creator.

Stuart Hall (1980, p. 136) proposes that readings take three forms: a dominant reading that encompasses hegemonic ideals; a negotiated reading, in which a reader partially accepts the intended meaning, but incorporates some of his or her own life perspective; and an oppositional reading, in which the reader rejects the originally intended meaning, understanding the text “within some alternative framework of reference” (p. 138). The concepts of negotiated and oppositional readings help us to understand why scholars critical of belly dance and dancers articulate discrepant meanings: the dance is decoded differently by these two groups as they are members of different “interpretive communities” – social groups that share particular sets of knowledge and/or assumptions

that predispose them to interpret a text a certain way (Radway, 1983, p. 55). Scholars are equipped with theoretical and political knowledge that predisposes them to oppositional and critical readings of the art of belly dance, while – as I will argue – dancers decode negotiated alternative meanings.

Moreover, not only are there differences between the interpretations of dancers and scholars, but differences among dancers as well. When examined closely, individual dancers often offer seemingly contradictory views towards the dance and its meanings. Curiously, Laura speaks of tribal belly dancing as both “very lovely” and “creepy.” Samantha describes it as “sparkly” and “dark.” Elena characterizes belly dance as “pretty” and says it helped her to develop an “I’m queen bitch” attitude. Belly dance, as understood by my participants, is polysemic (Fiske, 1986), in that several meanings are encoded and decoded. Dancers may intend to portray sensuality, strength, empowerment, sexuality, resistance, cultural history, personal stories, or myriad other messages simultaneously, initiating a process of meaning-making that is neither linear nor cyclical, but open and multi-layered. For example, by understanding belly dance polysemically, the contrasts mentioned above are possible for dancers to inscribe and value. Ultimately, to belly dance is to produce a text that is ripe with “semiotic excess” (Fiske, 1986).

Reception theory offers a starting point from which to understand the emergence of the many meanings of belly dance as articulated by participants and outlined in previous chapters. However, reception theorists undertheorize the embodied dimension of dance, which helps explain the differences between participants and their critics. My data suggest that bodily lived experience is key to understanding alternate ways of knowing the world and has been left unaccounted for by gaze theorists’ focus on “reading” of

texts. The contribution of other modalities of sensing may temper, change, or altogether negate conclusions based on visual cues alone.

### **Phenomenology as a Corrective**

How does thinking about the senses improve our understanding of the dance experience?

Merleau-Ponty's (1962) phenomenology details the constitutive role that the body plays in how we understand and engage with the world. He argues that thought is framed by perceptual activity that we understand in bodily terms. For him, we are embodied perceivers who do not *have* or *own* bodies but who are *being* bodies (pp. 90-94).

Merleau-Ponty describes perception as a pre-reflective intertwinement of the body-subject with the world; through perception, the body allows us to engage with and understand our surroundings. The body is simultaneously influenced and molded by the environment (pp. 60–1, 93, 430). Merleau-Ponty hints towards cultural influences on our senses when he suggests that an aesthetic or sensuous “excitation is not perceived when it strikes a sensory organ which is not ‘attuned’ to it” (1962, p. 75). By this statement he articulates that in spite of being built on a material and biological foundation, our perceptual faculties are patterned according to our experiences. We live in a world that we share with others and in repeatedly focusing on what others perceive and do, we learn to perceive in accordance to them.

Using the work of Merleau-Ponty (1962) as their starting point, sensory anthropologists emphasize the influence of culture on perception, drawing attention to the skill of tuning into the body (Classen, 1997; Howes, 1991; Pink, 2009; Vannini, Waskul & Gottschalk, 2012). Alva Noë writes: “The world makes itself available to the perceiver through physical movement and interaction .... What we perceive is determined by what we do (or

what we know how to do)” (2004, p. 1). She argues that perceptual experience is a temporally extended activity of skillful probing so that perceptual consciousness is, in fact, a type of thoughtful or knowledgeable activity (Noë, 2004, p. 3). We need to move, act and focus our attention in order to allow the perceptual information of the things we want to perceive to fill us. Noë’s discussion of perceptual consciousness is similar to Philip Vannini, Dennis Waskul and Simon Gottschalk’s (2012, p. 15) “somatic work” through which we develop skills that allow us to make sense of somatic experiences, enabling them to navigate the world more successfully. As I expand upon later in this chapter, I understand emotions and embodiment to be intricately bound. Feelings, both sensory and affective, are embodied and intertwined to such a degree that to speak of one in absence of the other is only useful for conceptual clarity. As they are lived, and as they are implicated in the construction of meaning, they are indistinguishable.

Just as perception is shaped by both culture and experience, so too is emotion. In the West, emotion is popularly understood as a function of a psychobiological make-up that signifies one’s internal state (Williams, 2000, p. 565). However, Catherine Lutz (1988, p. 2), an anthropologist of the emotions, argues that this overly naturalized concept of emotion reinforces cultural discourses that hold strongly to binaries including mind/body, essence/appearance, rational/irrational and public/private. She suggests that each culture provides conceptual categories by which to express and interpret emotions. For her, emotions are institutions in that cultural norms and rules of behavior have structured their meanings as well as how we understand and express our emotions. Emotions, then, are the culturally sanctioned expressions of feelings. They are a “form of discourse” (1988, p. 7) people use to interact. She argues that emotions are named feelings, the ones that have

entered into public discourse, whereas other feelings may evade meaning. More than that, however, she sees emotions as “ideologies of practice,” they are active means of being-in-the-world. Her cross-cultural comparison helps her to destabilize our conception of emotions as natural; how they are named and what they mean are culturally informed.

Lutz argues that understanding of “emotional concepts” serves “complex communicative, moral, and cultural purposes” (p. 5), such as contributing to the continued oppression of women who are commonly held as the “more emotional” of the two sexes (p. 73). Lutz points to the ways in which emotions are positively valued, such as their link to ideas of essentialism and non-estrangement, however, when compared to privileging of thought, emotion is devalued as is linked with irrationality, the private, and, most notably for us, the body.

Her theorization of emotion includes connecting the cognitive understanding of and emotional feelings, arguing that the experience of emotion is situated in the middle of one’s body, or as we might say, in the gut. Another anthropologist of the emotions, Michelle Rosaldo (1984), introduces the body into the theory of emotion. She argues that emotions are embodied thoughts; thoughts that are literally felt in the body through sensations such as raised pulses and rising body temperatures. For her, these sensations indicate the body is engaged in the world and in the process of thought: they are “cognitions implicating the immediate, carnal ‘me’ – as thoughts embodied” (p. 138). Therefore, for Lutz, emotions are what we perform outwardly, whereas for Rosaldo, emotions are the felt sensations of thought.



Both Lutz (1988) and Rosaldo's (1984) approaches draw our attention to the influence of culture on emotion. However, they both also reify the mind/body dichotomy. I argue that the mind and body, thought and emotive sensation, are intimately entangled. The body is imbued with information that often eludes conceptualization as we do not have the language to describe it. It is nonetheless integral to our construction of meaning and contributes to our phenomenological felt sense of self.

### **Being In One's Body**

As Merleau-Ponty (1962) discusses, in most of our tasks, our body and its experiences are positioned vaguely in the background. The body is seen as no more than the vehicle through which we are aware of and capable of functioning in the world. During much of our waking time, we operate through a bodily intentionality that does not necessarily involve the use of our personal or reflective faculties (p. xviii). For example, when I walk down the street, I am more focused on my surroundings or my intended destination than on the muscles in my legs that engage to propel me forward. When I smile, I am more aware of the positive affect that motivated doing so than I am of the tiny muscles in my face that simultaneously work to produce it. Samantha and Marianne too describe experiences of what contemporary embodiment scholars describe as the "disappearance from awareness" (Csordas, 1994, p. 8) or the "absent body" (Leder, 1990), and how they feel belly dance enables them develop a greater awareness of and connection to their bodies:

Samantha: It's so easy when you're out and about, you're living your day, you're doing all this other stuff or you're sitting at a computer and you're typing away and you're not really physically engaged to lose that really quickly and to not actually pay attention to what you're doing and how your body feels and how it's moving. So yeah, there is a

difference between the day to day and when I dance, but I would like to see myself bring that too in my daily activities a little bit more.

Marianne: With belly dance, I feel connected to my body. I feel in touch with it. I like being aware and in touch of my body 'cause I guess if you break down who are we, mind and body and spirit, I was really good at the academics which is all in your mind, the dance more about the body, and I need that. My parents were academics, my mother lived in her head, you know and you kind of learn that. That kind of filtered down to me.

Samantha, currently completing a masters degree, and Marianne, who works in policy research, have occupations that require a significant degree of intellect and reason. In their understanding, with the faculties of their minds privileged, their bodies are relegated to a secondary status. Their remarks suggest that the absence of a bodily consciousness is a consequence of a Western society structured to promote a disembodied style of life. Samantha and Marianne belly dance in part as an antidote to what they perceive to be their otherwise disembodied existences. Dancing provides them with an opportunity to reconnect with their corporeality, something they value greatly.

By discussing their work as purely cognitive, Samantha and Marianne reify the mind body split. However, their work obviously *does* involve the body: they sit in chairs, they type on computers, and they engage with others in an embodied way. It is not that their bodies are absent when they work but are taken for granted as absent. If either woman lived with a physical disability, they would be unable to work in such a decorporealized way as they would be confronted at many turns by the embodied nature of work.

Samantha's acknowledgement that she would "like to see myself bring [attention to how my body feels] in my daily activities a little bit more" points to the possibility of engaging the body in such contexts, even if she is not actively aware of the contradiction in her statements.

The capacity to be more in touch with and connected to their bodies is something many dancers actively cultivate. Being more “in the body” is a project some take on alongside the development of dance technique; it is one of the primary reasons they continue attending dance classes. As Samantha states:

I’m absolutely more present in my body when I’m dancing. But, that being said, that’s a quality of attention and mindfulness that I’m trying to bring to my other daily activities as well. So, I think that as I go deeper into my dance practice I’m actually bringing that, or attempting to bring that, to other parts of my life and not just move that way when I dance. Because I think it has a lot of positive impact on me. Part of that is just because I really like that awareness, that clarity, of being really, just feeling really inside your own body.

In more detail, Aileen, an intermediate dancer from The Dark Side who also teaches classes to women in her office building, outlines how belly dance classes helped her to develop greater body awareness, along with a new attitude toward her body – and toward learning in general:

I think that belly dance has cultivated a bit more of a positive relationship with my body and a new attitude towards learning new things...It’s less of a failure-oriented model...I felt more intrinsically motivated, and more supported to fail safely...I feel like I can be nice to my body; I could be generous with myself. I can accept that failure is part of the learning process; And that’s been a really, really positive thing for me and I think one of the biggest reasons why I keep dancing. Because that’s the lesson that I can take into other parts of my life. And that has given me a more positive relationship with my body because, I think, it has helped me to kinda make friends with my body a little bit. It may be a funny thing to say, but instead of feeling like I’m struggling against it, I’m fighting against the things that I can’t do, it’s more like I’m coaching it and I’m helping it to learn.

Samantha and Aileen’s attempts to “coach” their bodies and embodied thoughts implies a concerted effort to modify their relationships with and attitudes toward their bodies and the world more generally. Through their bodywork, they endeavor to construct themselves in alignment with this particular set of values that they deem desirable. They discuss “attempting/trying to bring,” “coaching,” and “cultivat[ing],” body acceptance, body connectivity, and new attitudes towards learning, all of which align with

contemporary upper-middle class values about seeking self-actualization, as well as with the so-called New Age or self-help movements. Moreover, these may act as a form of resistance to the repressive ideals of female body size, weight and shape imposed by the male gaze.

What's more, my participants are positioning themselves as individually responsible for coping with the problems associated with the male gaze. They see the difficulties they have with body acceptance as a personal problem that they must work on their own to overcome. Their discourse is similar to those of women who employ rape-prevention strategies, such as self-defense classes, not walking alone at night, and ensuring their drinks are not drugged (Hollander, 2009; Senn, 2011). Women have internalized the "blame the victim" mentality and see themselves as responsible for ensuring they prevent such an incident from occurring. Neither dancers' strategies nor those of women engaged in sexual-assault prevention address the cultural conditions that underscore their experiences.

Dancers, then, can be said to be engaging with the gaze by way of what sociologist Nikolas Rose (2000) terms "responsibilization": they have interpreted this public issue as a private problem (Mills, 1959, p. 8) and see it as necessary to take it upon themselves to take responsibility for altering the emotional impacts of their experiences. Individualism is the cornerstone of this process (Pollack, 2005, p. 73), which ignores the influence of social factors on people's choices, behaviours, and their interpretations of their experiences. In accordance with Rose's theory, dancers may be understood as individually using belly dance to confront the gaze and help them cope with the elements they find problematic. As a result, the body-image issues that my participants face are

framed as individual experience and are confronted individually as well. They consciously use belly dance to negotiate the disciplinary component of the gaze in order to achieve a sense of comfort and contentment.

### **How Dancers Make Sense of the Sensory**

Beyond developing an awareness of the body, my ethnographic research and interviews with dancers of all levels demonstrate that the embodied experience of dance changes their sensory landscapes. Those who are beginners are still very much focused on visual cues – they do not yet understand how movements feel, or how to adjust their bodies accordingly so as to improve their technique. Teachers, therefore, spend more time describing the visual components of movements in beginner classes alongside how the movements feel. For example, beginner students are often instructed to imagine they are drawing certain shapes with their hips on the mirror or the floor and advised that a movement called the maya, should “look like a figure 8 being created by the hips.”

Beginner students are more likely to report being interested in moves for how they look, not for how they feel. Thus, in response to my question about their favourite move, they gave answers such as:

Kara: I like the internal hip circle because it's like it's inside your body. You watch it and you see all this stuff happening but it is contained, not loose and messy. It just looks good and impressive.

Stacey: I like the  $\frac{3}{4}$  shimmy because it looks like your hips are moving independently. It's like, 'how's she doing that?'

In these participants' choices of pronouns, imagined audiences' perceptions come to the fore: they speak of “you” in a way that places me, the interviewer, in their position and implies that I too would think or experience these same thoughts or sensations if in

similar circumstances (Timor & Landau, 1998, p. 367). My participants imagine the audience being amazed and perplexed by hips that appear to be moving magically, and they interpret this type of audience response as desirable. The visual perspective of audience members features heavily in beginning dancers' evaluations and attraction to particular movements.

As dancers progress, instructors introduce exercises that limit the sense of sight, such as dancing facing the wall instead of the mirror, dancing blindfolded, or dancing in the dark. Such exercises are intended to heighten dancers' embodied sensations and their connection to the music. Also, in more advanced classes, less time is spent describing how a move looks and more alluding to what its movement quality should feel like, for example, "it should feel as though your behind is a bag of wet cement so when you drop it, it falls low and heavy." At times, teachers advise students not to consider what the movement looks like and to think only about what they feel in their muscles. When teaching an undulating fish<sup>26</sup> at Arabesque, Audrey instructs:

I don't even want you to look at yourself doing it because it will look so different on every body. What I want you to do is *feeeeel* it. I want you to *feeeeel* every muscle in your stomach stretching and contracting as much as it possibly can. I want you to *feeeeel* the goeyness of this move. There is no 'right way' for it to look.

She demonstrates the move through her explanation, exaggerating and slowing the movement down when she says "feel," "stretching," and "contracting," to outwardly demonstrate the experience of her muscles' stretching and contracting. More advanced

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<sup>26</sup> An undulating fish is a layered move where an undulation (a wave from the chest through the torso into the lower abdominal muscles) is coupled with a fish (where the hips move in the shape of a vertical figure 8). The visual produced is one of the mid-section fluidly expanding and contracting in multiple directions. It is often described as "goeey" since there are no articulated moments with the hips or belly.

dancers who have spent time developing body awareness are capable of understanding and using such metaphors and instruction in ways beginners cannot.

The “somatic work” (Vannini, Waskul & Gottschalk, 2012, p. 15) carried out in belly dance classes shifts the way women discuss their dance experiences. Many mention how, as time passes, mirrors become less important because they develop the ability to assess how well they are executing movements through their embodied sensations. Courtney, an advanced dancer at Arabesque who is apprenticing in Arabesque Dance Company, describes the relative importance of her bodily input versus the mirror in the following excerpt:

I can watch a teacher do a move now and figure out what she is doing. When I do it myself, I can tell whether or not my hips are straight, if they are dropping enough, if the movement is smooth, without having to see it. I can feel it now because that is all in my body. I can tell when I’m holding back because I feel restrained, like I’m not letting go. I don’t need a mirror to tell me that I’m muting my movements. (What does that restraint feel like?) I’m not following through. Like I’m stopping moves before I’ve finished or not using my full range of motion. It happens when I’m thinking too much. The best is when you aren’t thinking and you just feel.

Courtney’s somatic work, carried out over her eight years taking belly dance classes, has enabled her to use feeling to recognize whether she is achieving her desired movement quality. Her bodily sensations, not a mirror, inform her dancing.

Courtney also brings our attention to what she sees as the problematic elements of “thinking too much” which leave her feeling “restrained” and like she is “not letting go.” She is not alone in her belief that thinking hinders one’s capacity to dance at one’s best. Other participants mention how they “try not to think,” that they attempt to get into a “dance zen” where they “zone out,” or how it took them a long time to “learn to let go of

my brain and just be in my body.” Audrey describes one particular experience of entering a “dance vortex” with Bassam, the director of Arabesque’s orchestra:

I remember one time getting into a taqsim<sup>27</sup>, Bassam was doing something on the oud<sup>28</sup>, he got into a mawwal<sup>29</sup> and I literally forgot about the audience. And in fact I [pause] we were in a moment, me and Bassam had a real moment and I forgot that there was an audience there and then I realized there was an audience there and I realized I didn't really know what had happened for the last minute and a half. Like, I wasn't sure exactly what I had done. I just knew that me and Bassam went into a, like a vortex. And that it was quiet, the whole room was like dead quiet. And then my brain started up again and we finished the taqsim, probably cause he realized that I lost it.

The ability to “turn off” thinking is highly valued and teachers both train and reinforce this skill in classes. One particular example that stands out is that of an improvisational exercise in an advanced class at Arabesque. Yasmina asks students, one by one, to improvise to approximately one and a half minutes of music. Upon hearing her music begin, a student named Daniella stands stiffly, hands clasped, looking down at the floor and nodding her head to the music as if trying to recognize the song or decipher its rhythm or style before beginning to dance. The teacher abruptly stops the music and jokingly shouts, “STOP THINKING! I can see you trying to figure this out. In this exercise, your mind is your worst enemy. Just let yourself feel the music. Your body knows.” The teacher restarts the music but again Daniella struggles. The teacher stops the music again, exclaiming “I know what to do!” She switches CDs to a piece of contemporary music that has none of the familiar Middle Eastern instruments or common drum rhythms, leaving Daniella incapable of drawing on her theoretical knowledge of

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<sup>27</sup> A music style with a solo instrument and no percussion.

<sup>28</sup> A traditional Middle Eastern string instrument.

<sup>29</sup> A traditional style of vocal Arabic music typified with singing with minimal instrumental accompaniment.



how Middle Eastern music relates to dancing. In essence, the teacher stopped the student from “thinking” and Daniella began to dance.

However, my participants do not consider “the body know[ing]” to be thinking, introducing a contradiction to the concept of perceptual consciousness as defined previously. The directive to “stop thinking” speaks to the desire of the teacher to have the student refrain from conceptually thinking through the music and to let her body lead the way. Yet, I argue that these bodily movements are, in themselves, a form of thinking. The body is “working through” the music, yet, they do not consider this to be thinking. Moreover, students and teachers talk often about how much they rely on “muscle memory” and technique and choreographies being “in your body,” yet, they do not consider these embodied ways of knowing to be knowledge. The depth of the roots of Cartesian dualism are once again made evident through these example: cultural consciousness does not consider the body to be part of thinking, knowledge or knowing, and therefore, neither do these dancers despite their experiences to the contrary.

Finally, as opposed to favouring moves for the visuals that they create, my advanced and professional participants enjoy movements for how they feel. Participants described liking movements because they feel, for example, “like sinking,” “juicy,” or “gooey”. In the following two quotations, Samantha and Michelle respectively describe their favourite move, an undulation, for how it feels.

[a workshop leader] had us lie on our back and then try to move our bodies up and down, and side to side without using our limbs. And then she’s like, “Congratulations, you are undulating!” And we noticed that’s exactly what we were doing. And she’s like, “this is a primal movement; this is like when the first creatures developed lungs and pulled themselves out of the ocean and squirmed on to the land, this is what they did – they

undulated.” And I was like, “Ahh, that’s why it just feels so right to do that” – to me anyways – it just feels really primal... It just kind of makes sense, it feels really natural.

Well, to feel your stomach relaxing and then contracting and relaxing and contracting, it’s very much like being intimate with somebody. Or it is for me, how I’m intimate with my husband; we’re very in tune – the breath is together, the movements are together. So it almost feels like a dance version of making love or being intimate. It’s not like eh-eh-eh [she says syllabically, gyrating her hips mechanically], it’s like that gooey, you know you have your best physical releases when you relax enough to let your stomach go out and let your muscles chill out and pull in, and chill out and pull in. You get the best reaction from your body if you allow yourself those spaces to be relaxed and then be tense, be relaxed and be tense and that’s what you do in an undulation.

More advanced dancers, then, are an exception to the dominant sensory order in which vision is privileged. David Howes and Constance Classen (1991) note that different groups within a society often produce sensory orders that diverge from the dominant one. They provide examples of North American children who generally have a greater interest in odor and tastes than adults, and how in almost every society, males and females are understood to perceive the world differently, with the male sensory order considered the norm and the female sensory order being positioned somewhere between complimentary and deviant. Belly dancers, a particular group within the larger society, have come to train themselves in ways that increase their bodily awareness. They enjoy the sensual experience of the dance and their perceptual consciousness, attributing less value to visual cues and rational thought which, as Courtney comments, detracts from their capacity to be in the moment with the movement.

### **Dancing the Interviews**

Bodily feeling meaningfully influences subjective interpretations of experience and must be incorporated into any analyses of lived experience. Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (1999), a prominent philosopher of dance, has grappled with the relationship between the body, emotion, and subjectivity, and argues the following “we experience the world and

ourselves in wordless ways before we come to language experience, whether for our own benefit or communicatively for others” (p. 364). Sheets-Johnstone argues that embodied experiences are difficult to articulate, and yet they are of vital importance to individuals’ evaluation of activities and their life worlds more generally. Therefore, accounts of lived experience that fail to incorporate the ways in which embodiment informs subjectivity almost always fall short.

While most participants adamantly profess their enjoyment of the experience of dance, it is difficult for them to elucidate what they feel and why they find those feelings rewarding. For example, Lorraine mentions that during her first belly dance class, she knew “this is for me!” When I follow up, asking what led her to appraise her experience so positively, she says:

I don’t, I can’t really understand or explain it, I just liked it. It felt great. It fit. It felt right. I smiled the whole time, you know? It was, I just had a great time. Even though I was new and fumbling, you know? So yeah, I just knew. I just knew it was a good fit. I was smiling, it felt good, I wanted to go back.

Lorraine’s enthusiasm for belly dance shines through, but she is unable to describe the goodness she was feeling and why. Lorraine appears to be exhibiting what sociologist Marjorie DeVault (1990) describes as “linguistic incongruence.” DeVault argues that language cannot always capture experience, certain kinds of it especially. Met with inadequate language, Lorraine struggles to narrate and give meaning to their experiences. As she says, “if words often do not quite fit, then women who want to talk of their experiences must translate, either saying things that are not quite right, or working at using language in non-standard ways” (p. 97).

Stacey, a beginner student at The Dark Side who enjoys performing solos in student events, employs a different strategy to address the linguistic incongruence she experiences when describing the feeling belly dancing evokes in her. She uses an analogy to help me understand:

(When you say you feel good what are you feeling?) Light, sort of buzzy. What's the most spectacular thing you've ever seen? (Oh my gosh!) Northern Lights, the mountains, the waterfalls? You know the feeling when you look at that? (Shooting star kind of thing.) That; that is what you get! And then you go, "aaaaaaahhh." [closes her eyes and flops back into the couch, letting her entire body go limp and relaxed]

This analogy helps Stacey translate an otherwise ineffable experience by attempting to produce in me the kinds of feelings she experiences when she dances. Using this technique, I too can know through my body, helping me to "listen around and beyond words" (DeVault, 1990, p. 101). What she describes is an affection for the dance brought about not through intellectual or conceptual reasoning but by the embodied sensations belly dance produces and which are deemed by my participants to be pleasurable. The lived sensations are felt and defy straightforward representation, and participants resort to metaphors, analogies, and symbols, as Stacey does above, to explain to others and even to capture for themselves the defining qualities of the experience. As a result, their accounts are always, at best, partial. Nonetheless, embodied sensation is equally important, if not more so, to the constitution of the participants' subjectivity as is conceptual and reflective thought. Sensory and perceptual experiences are foundational components of knowledge and understanding (Ignatow 2007; Merleau-Ponty 1962; Sheets-Johnstone 1999) and these should not be ignored in investigations of lived experience.

Since describing their embodied sensations through language proves difficult, my participants incorporate movement into their responses. Poring over my interviewing

guides, I find notes in the margins describing how participants move, dance, make hand gestures commonly used in the dance, or adopt belly dance postures or poses. Such notes are most numerous found near in the section of the guide that asks participants to perform and describe their favourite movement. Riley, whose favourite move is an undulation, stands and demonstrates a rather exaggerated version of the move. As I question her about why this move is her favourite, she continues to undulate with just her belly while answering, changing the quality of the undulation in accordance with her description. When she discusses how it can feel “goeey”, she allows her stomach to stick out quite a bit so that her flesh folds and ripples through the move, but when she says it is “snake like”, she sits up straight and keeps the movement flowing through her muscles so that the “S” shape becomes apparent. Even when discussing how she just simply “enjoys” the movement, she continues to undulate, without making any verbal attempt to draw my attention to it. Although I had not required it, almost all of my participants continue minimally performing their favourite move while describing how it makes them feel.

Often, participants move to demonstrate a feeling, such as Georgina who states belly dance “makes me feel so [pause] sweet.” In her pause, she raises her arms into basic position<sup>30</sup>, tilts her head shyly and produces a delicate, closed mouth smile, a pose that is fairly common when performing cabaret style. During her pause, she looks me in the eye and bats her eyelashes. Her gesture helps convey the “sweetness” she feels, as well as from the movements and qualities of the dance from which it originates. Many

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<sup>30</sup> In basic position for cabaret style belly dance, the arms are placed out to the side just slightly in front of the body with a faint bend at the elbows. Fingers are kept gently straight, with the thumb and middle fingers pulling together slightly.

participants, when asked what pleasure they receive from belly dancing, gently perform a movement, such as shoulder rolls or chest circles throughout their explanations.

At other times, participants find themselves at such a loss for words that gesturing is the only means through which they can express themselves. Frequently, participants begin a sentence, struggle to find words, and then proceed to demonstrate a movement over and over with exaggerated facial expressions, in an attempt to convey meaning. For example, when Riley describes her preference for slow, fluid movements over the sharp, accented movements, she says, “because it just makes me feel sooo...” She trails off and begins circling her chest forward and back in a slow, fluid movement, recruiting her shoulders in a more exaggerated way than one generally would in the studio or on stage. She simultaneously looks into my eyes, pouting in a way that I read as sexy and seductive.

Participants use these gestures as a form of inter-subjective meaning making, helping me to understand their perspectives. Because the movements clarify and intensify meaning, they are a form of language, a body language or “shorthand,” that they likely expect me, as a fellow dancer, to understand. However, even were I not a dancer, I suspect that my participants would have moved and gestured in a similar fashion, as it seems to be through these gestures that they habitually communicate their feelings, be they emotional or sensory.

Moreover, I would argue that embodiment is so strongly tied to the participants’ conceptual awareness of their lived experience of dance that performing such movements throughout the interview contributed to their ability to think through the body and articulate their perspectives. My research further supports a series of studies (Glenberg &

Kaschak 2002; Rauscher, Krauss, & Chen 1996; Schubert 2004; Spivley, Tyler, Richardson & Young 2000) that demonstrate the importance of the bodily dimension of knowledge and understanding of lived experience. For example, social psychologist Thomas Schubert (2004) showed that making a fist, which generally indicates the potential to use bodily force, impacts men and women's automatic processing of words related to the concept of power. The author concludes that embodiment and cognition are linked and bodily behaviour influences cognitive processing. In another study, Frances Rauscher, Robert Krauss, and Yihsiu Chen (1996) asked participants to watch an animated action cartoon and then describe the cartoon to an interviewer. When participants were asked to respond without gesturing, it was more challenging for them to describe the spatial elements of the cartoon. The authors argue that blocking embodiment impairs access to conceptual elements of representation.

The aforementioned studies in cognitive science and psychology have significant implications for cultural and identity research and can help fill important gaps in sociological theory which has tended to neglect the body (see Dimaggio, 2002; Zerubavel, 1991). The body is involved in knowledge production and cognitive processing (Ignatow, 2007, p. 115). I argue that my participants' heavy use of gestures is likely not only for demonstrative purposes, but instead, enables them to think and speak more clearly about their lived experiences, and to engage in a process of subjective meaning-making informed by embodied ways of knowing. My research thus makes a contribution to the "bodily turn" which conceives of knowledge not as information that is disembodied and emotion-free, but instead as thoroughly embodied (see Csordas, 1994; Frank, 1990; Leder, 1990; Shilling, 2001).

Finally, participants' use of the term "feeling" requires further interrogation. Dancers use feeling to describe physical sensations in their bodies, such as the feeling of their torsos stretching, and at other times, they use "feeling" to describe their experience of an emotion. Through their stories, time and time again their discussions of emotion, cognition, and sensation are knotted together around the word feeling; they use term without specifying the feeling aspect to which they refer, relying on context to illuminate the intended meaning.

Within the literature exploring the sociology and anthropology of emotion, a similar debate is taking place over the definitions of "feeling," "emotion," "affect" and "sensation." For example, for Lutz (1988) and Besnier (1990), emotions are the culturally constituted forms of expression on display for others. Lutz does not distinguish between emotion and feeling, while Besnier sees feeling as alluding to one's internal state. Rosaldo (1984), like Lutz, interchanges the terms feeling and emotion, but she draws our attention to the embodied experience of emotions and how they are felt. Dance philosopher Sheets-Johnstone (1999) distinguishes between kinesthetic sensation and affect, where the former describes perceived bodily sensations, and affect is used as a catch-all phrase for emotional experiences.

While it may be a useful academic exercise to theoretically define these concepts separately, my data illuminates the ways in which they cannot be so neatly unpacked. The word "feeling" is not simply used interchangeably with emotion, thought, or sensation, it is the umbrella term that highlights their unity. While my participants do carve out space for the kinesthetic feeling of the body moving, their emotional feeling is so heavily tied to their somatic feeling that the two cannot be distinguished. This points to a conjoined



relationship between emotion and sensation, such that the two are experienced indistinguishably. However, beyond what the aforementioned theorists discuss, the word “feel” is also often used for thought: participants consistently expressed their thoughts with sentences that begin with “I feel like...” such as “I feel like this costume looks better on me,” or “I feel like belly dance has made me gain a better sense of confidence.” Using “I feel like” as opposed to “I think” suggests support for Rosaldo’s (1984) theorizing of embodied thoughts and goes further to demonstrate the ways in which felt sensations *are* knowledge. Bodily sensations contribute to participants’ construction of meaning and their evaluation of the phenomena they encounter. For my participants, the inner experiences of thought, emotion, and sensation are uncodifiable: they are each felt as embodied and contribute to an intuitive primary way of knowing.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter presents a tension between representation and experience. I have argued that, in relying almost fully on visual interpretation, without interrogating the experience of the dance, scholars who have studied belly dance as representation, using theories about reception, produce only partial accounts of the phenomenon of dance. Moreover, as my research suggests, even efforts to capture the embodied experience of dance fall short as the language used to represent embodiment is inadequate. We arrive, therefore, at an analytic knot that ties around the relationship between the body, thought, and emotion, all of which involve processes of feeling. Phenomenological accounts of dance produce more exact descriptions of meaning and what is experienced. As Sheets-Johnstone (1980) says, to watch dance is to observe an “indivisible wholeness” that makes it difficult to

distinguish the dancer from the dance. Theories of reception can always, at most, tell only part of the story.

At first glance, one might be tempted to argue that dancers adhere to a Cartesian dualism, seeing the mind and body as separate; certainly the dancers sometimes sound that way. Given the nature of dance training, in which bodies are sometimes treated as objects to be controlled and trained to meet standards projected by the mind (Aalten, 2007, p. 111), this would not be far-fetched. Alternatively, having trained their bodies to develop certain postures and techniques through drills and repetition, one could argue that dancers develop the capacity to execute certain movements and choreographies unconsciously for these become part of their basic “techniques of the body” (Mauss, 1973). However, these interpretations fail to account for the ways in which dancers discuss the body as “knowing” and “understanding,” ascribing to it a degree of agency.

I argue that participants do not seem to have a language for their experience of thinking through their bodies. As mentioned above, they discuss cultivating the capacity to “be in the body,” suggesting the integration of mind and body as articulated through theories of perceptual consciousness. Through their lived experience of dance, they have developed an awareness of a knowing and perceiving body; they recognize that their bodily senses inform their dancing, but they do not conceive of this thinking in movement through the theoretical concept of perceptual consciousness. This is not surprising given the “cognitive habits of dualism” engrained in Western cultural discourse (Leder, 1990, p. 5). Through the lens of Cartesian philosophy, thought, broadly conceived of as the sum of cognitive processes and intentionality, is understood to be the incorporeal function of an immaterial mind. We lack a discourse through which to express bodily knowledge and

thus, it is not surprising that my participants do not associate “thinking” with embodied knowing. While the instructions given in classes and discussions in my interviews all detail experiences with perceptual consciousness, the idea of a thinking body is not part of participants’ conceptual vocabulary. In fact, the difficulties we have articulating the full range of embodied ideas, relative to what critical scholars perceive through the sense of sight, is part of why the ideas of critical scholars carry so much weight in the first place.

Furthermore, use of the term “thinking” itself harkens back to Cartesianism, which defines the subject as in existence due to its capacity to think. Merleau-Ponty (1962) writes counter to Cartesian theories of apperceptive consciousness, in which where the experiencing subject is defined as conscious of self, distinct from any object. Merleau-Ponty argues that the body is infused with consciousness, thus, to fully account for subjectivity, we must consider non-apperceptive consciousness which is neither conscious of self nor of objects. For him, perception involves a significance and intentionality that is distinct from the significance and intentionality of thought and judgment, and this is left unaccounted for in theories of apperceptive consciousness. Our understanding of the world is predicated on our presence in and capacity to move and act upon the world. Therefore, human experience is irreducible to conceptual thought: “The world is not what I think, but what I live through” (p. xvii).

While I did not set out to engage with the question of subjectivity as part of this research, the question emerged from the data and begged my attention: what is the dancing subject? Does the dancing body think or does it know? While it cannot be fully explored here, my data strongly suggests the existence of a non-apperceptive consciousness in the

dancing body. When dancing, my participants, with their knowing bodies and sensory knowledge, exist on a sensory stratum of consciousness and intentionality that is governed by its own kind of normativity. When dancing, what some call “not thinking”, being “in the zone,” or entering a “dance zen,” perception and action are necessarily unified, enabling a fuller appreciation of the intentionality of somatic consciousness that is non-conceptual and yet, discursive. Dancers are taught in classes to “stop thinking.” They have bought into this discursive practice, as well as the subject positions and subjectivity it outlines. The dancing subject knows, feels and acts through its senses, in a “knowing” that comes before “thinking,” providing support for philosopher Sheets-Johnstone’s (1999) argument that movement is an integral part of subjectivity. For her, individuals enter the world moving and come to understand the world through movement, arguing that “I move” precedes both “I think” and “I can.” We cannot think about the world without first moving through it. Sheets-Johnstone contends that “moving forms the I that moves before the I that moves forms movement,” (p. 266). My fieldwork and the statements of my participants support her thesis, demonstrating ways in which movement constitutes the self as an effective agent.

In the next chapter, I look at the absence of the lived body in studies of lived experience. I explore in more detail at the difficulty dancers have in speaking of “the body”, highlighting their reliance on metaphors to express otherwise ineffable bodily experiences. Moreover, I describe the challenges involved in translating embodied experience into text, exploring issues with inter-lingual translation and how those relate to difficulties in making the somatic semiotic. Finally, I propose a new method for writing the body that involves a two-pronged approach, incorporating a visual element from the

perspective of the audience, and the phenomenological experience from the perspective of the dancer.

## Chapter 6: On Translating Movement into Text

There is something just really pleasurable and joyful about just movement generally. I think that's one of the things that keeps me dancing, just the physical enjoyment; the endorphin rush of physical movement, that's a component of it for sure. There's a brute, visceral physical pleasure of moving your body.

Aileen, quoted above, notes that the pleasure involved in feeling and connecting to her body is a key factor that motivates her continued participation in belly dance. My participants expressed such sentiments regarding the experience of dance frequently. Yet, 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminist and Orientalism literature on belly dance all but ignores the bodily component and focuses instead on one of two elements. The first sees belly dance in a negative light due to its analysis of representation (Koritz, 1997; Manning, 1997; Savigliano, 1995; Shay, 2008; Shay and Sellers-Young, 2005). Alternatively, 3<sup>rd</sup> wave feminists look at the lived experience of the dance, examining the practice from a micro perspective (Downey, Reel, SooHoo & Zerbib, 2009; Kraus, 2009; Moe, 2012). Interviewing dancers, they argue that the dance is both emancipatory and empowering and can be seen as a form of resistance to social and cultural norms about women and their bodies. They find that involvement in belly dance is therapeutic, spiritually significant, that it improves body image, and provides a sense of community and sisterhood for participants.

My ethnography finds both perspectives to be lacking. The body, which I argue ought to be central to any research on dance, is curiously absent in these literatures. Second wave and Orientalism scholars' emphasis on "reading dance," treating movement abstractly and symbolically, overlooks personal accounts of the experience of movement and the body. Although 3<sup>rd</sup> wave feminists partially address this gap, they omit the kinesthetic

component that is of utmost importance to the experience of dance. Embodiment is a fundamental mode of communication and knowledge that shapes meaning as well as cultural and personal identities and must be considered in order to fully grasp body, movement, and mind (Foster, 2008; Ness, 1992; Sklar, 2000). Thus, dance research must interrogate the embodied dimension of the dance experience as it is a central component to any inquiry that seeks to grasp its cultural and subjective significance.

In this chapter, I use the example of the embodied experience of belly dance to address ways of representing embodiment in text. First, I situate the absence of writing about this in the belly dance literature within a larger literature that is inimical to talking about the body in movement. Second, I examine the use of metaphors for representing felt sensation. Third, I present the ways in which ethnographers have attempted to embody their texts, paying particular attention to the way these relate to theories of translation. Fourth, I explain my approach to writing movement with two elements produced in a rich, evocative writing style: an analysis of how the movement looks, and a phenomenological account of the lived experience of the movement. Finally, I discuss the advantages and limitations of this method for translating embodied experience into text.

### **Body Neglect/ed**

The body is absent in research on the experience of dance for a number of reasons. Western cultural thought privileges mind over body (Thomas, 1996, p. 6). Drawing on the legacy of Cartesian dualism, rational thinking takes precedence and leads to binary oppositions of mind/body, culture/nature, rationality/emotions, and objectivity/subjectivity. From this perspective, it is the body, often defined as pre-linguistic and material, that is considered natural, primitive, and uncivilized, and

therefore less worthy of study than the mind. While essentialized notions of the body as “natural” have been heavily criticized (see, for example, Adair, 1991; Foster, 1986; Grosz, 1994; Novack, 1995), the privileging of mind as a topic of analysis has led sociological inquiry to neglect pursuits of the body, including dance. This disregard of the body is intensified when we consider the Western scheme in which five senses – visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory and tactile – are commonly acknowledged references only sensory input from outside of our bodies. Sensory anthropologists (see Classen, 1997; Howes, 1991; Pink, 2009; Vannini, Waskul & Gottschalk, 2012) argue that the privileging of those senses is both arbitrary and not universal and leaves unacknowledged interoceptive senses, meaning those sensations located within one’s body, such as pain or hunger.

When the body in movement *has* been the focus of study, it has largely been through disciplines aligned with pursuits of the mind, such as physics, biology and psychology (Markula & Denison, 2000, p. 409). According to Rintala (1991), this resulted in the development of “science disciplines of movement” that intellectualize movement: exercise physiology, biomechanics, and sport medicine and psychology. These sciences consider the body to be a purely mechanical system and thus easier to study, control and quantify. This form of studying movement privileges mind over body and is a consequence of at the same time as it reinforces Cartesian dualism.

Meanwhile, in the social sciences, feminist researchers have been hesitant to study the female body in movement for fear of reinforcing the link of femininity to nature and the body, an ideology that has historically been used to justify women’s oppression. To



counter this perspective, the focus of feminist social and dance theorists has been on the ways in which the dancing body is socially constructed to represent certain kinds of femininity (Markula & Denison, 2000, p. 423), leaving the body and the material aspects of experience out of scope (for exceptions, see Foster, 1986; Young, 2005).

Finally, and key to the purpose of this chapter, social scientists choose not to include the body, movement and sensation in analyses because it is so difficult to capture in writing (Ness, 1992; Sklar, 2000). I argue that the neglected body is a methodological choice made on behalf of investigators who self-select out of studying the body due to the challenge of representing it linguistically. In academia, where written language is privileged, our ability to share knowledge about our bodies and movement is limited (Markula & Denison, 2000, p. 408).

### **Challenging Movements**

Writing the dance experience poses a unique set of challenges. Because many movements and sensations take place simultaneously in dance, they are difficult to depict within the linear structure of text (Markula & Denison, 2000, p. 411). Writers must dissect and describe each component separately; the body is converted into a fragmented representation and is thus disembodied. The reader too must work to decipher the sequence of events and movements, combining them to form a mental image of the writer's intended message. For instance, my supervisor was attempting to decipher a foot-pattern I had described in writing. Instead of reading my description and making a mental construct from it, she used a method that she had seen ballet dancers employ: using two of her fingers to represent the left and right foot, she tried to recreate the pattern on the

table. When she was unable to figure it out herself, I adjusted her finger feet and ensured that they were executing the right pattern. Even for readers, then, it is difficult to understand embodied text without somehow incorporating one's body to augment comprehension.

Another major limitation of studying and writing embodied experience is that we lack the language with which to access it. Describing embodied experiences proves a difficult task due to the absence of a clearly developed vocabulary that addresses it. The difficulty with language poses two problems for the study of movement: it is difficult for participants to articulate their experiences, and difficult for us as researchers to translate those experiences into text. As my field notes demonstrate, even dancers, considered a proficient group and authorities on bodies and movement, have trouble linguistically expressing their embodied experiences and intentions. Teachers struggle to explain choreographies to students and often abandon verbal efforts in favour of modeling. Statements such as "it's harder to say it than it is to do it" are common in dance studios. Teachers also frequently use sound effects to reference movements as opposed to verbal descriptions: "the hips do a little [click of the tongue used to reference the right hip dropping slightly and sharply]." The movement is not quite a drop, it is a [tongue click].

Describing movement and embodied experience proved more difficult still throughout the interviewing process when I asked participants to describe how their favourite dance moves *feels*. While many, particularly the professional dancers, are quite capable of describing what a move looks like, and are proficient in communicating the technical components of the moves, participants often stared at me looking bewildered about how to articulate their sensory experiences. Statements such as, "Oh, it's hard, Krista!"

commonly followed their failed attempts to describe the feelings in their bodies. In the following examples, Daniella, Joanne, and Lorraine attempt to describe their favourite moves:

Daniella: How to describe an undulation. Ummmmm, it's like a wave, but crunchy because I can feel that it isn't quite smooth. Does a crunchy wave make sense?

Joanne: A shimmy? It feels like shaking. Like, everything is moving. It's just [pause] it's just shaking. [And how do you feel when you are shaking?] I feel like everything is moving. [And what appeals to you about everything moving?] I like to feel my body shake. [And how does...] Krista, what do you want from me? It's just, it just feels like I'm shaking!

Lorraine: [If you had to describe the backwards figure eight, how would you do it?] Uuuuuuummmmm, how would I describe the figure eight? (Laughing) In words? [I know, that's the trouble.] Hmm, I've never thought about that before. Well, I've never been one who's really great with words. I mean, I don't think there's like one word that could definitely describe it, that's for sure. (long pause) But, there's a sensuality to them and to it, you know. But it's controlled; it's within my power to amp it up, amp it down kind of thing, you know. So, I mean, oh it's a hard thing to describe in words. It's more of a feeling. [So, can you describe the feeling? I know you've used the word power a lot, that it feels very powerful.] It does. I feel very powerful. I feel very in control. Like when, it's like, it's like...gosh darn Krista, I don't know.

As previously mentioned, the difficulty describing kinesthetic and sensory experiences lies in the facts that we have neither been socialized to attend to them, nor developed a rich vocabulary with which they can be elucidated.

Moreover, Lorraine's comment that she has "never thought about [describing embodied feeling] before" demonstrates that her felt sensations were preconscious until I asked her to make them the object of her attention. This should not come as a surprise for, as Merleau-Ponty (1962) theorizes, phenomenology is the study of how the world is perceived, rather than the study of the essence of things as objects of our consciousness. As was explored in Chapter Five, consciousness is grounded in one's body, and for Merleau-Ponty, it is the acting, perceiving, and sensing – our active "being in the world"

– that is consciousness. Therefore, felt sensations, although integral to consciousness, are preconceptual, making them all the more difficult to translate linguistically.

### **Metaphorically Speaking**

In an effort to convey the ineffable, many participants turned to the use of metaphors.

According to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (2003), pioneers of the exploration of the use of metaphors in everyday life, metaphors are conceptual maps that transpose meaning from a concrete semantic source domain onto a more complex target source domain.

They are conceptual tools that exemplify abstract concepts that are difficult to express and/or understand. Lakoff and Johnson (p.1) explain that metaphors are used largely unconsciously to help us categorize the world, which, in accordance with their cognitive linguistic<sup>31</sup> framework, is part of an essential process that connects language and thought. In other words, we use metaphors to help us apprehend and express complex concepts in what is called a metaphor's "target domain" through the use of more concrete and readily understood referents in the "source domain".

Beyond communication, metaphors play an important role in the way we frame, come to understand, and interpret phenomena (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Lakoff and Johnson argue that, unlike the popular view that holds metaphors are either poetic or rhetorical flourishes, our everyday lives, and language itself, are shaped by metaphors. They use the example of "argument is war." The authors demonstrate how this metaphor influences the language used to describe arguments, turning perspectives into viewpoints that need defending. Through the use of this metaphor, arguments are understood and

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<sup>31</sup> Cognitive linguists study the use of language as it relates to the construction of meaning.

spoken of as something to be won. This demonstrates that metaphors not only pervade language, but also influence thought and action.

And yet, our bodies are not abstract; they are substantive and material and we live in, with and through them. They are our primary mode of our existence. How is it that we must rely on metaphors to describe our bodies, which are intimate part of our existence?

Lakoff and Johnson (2003) support Damasio's view and present three foundational principles of consciousness. First, like Merleau-Ponty (1962), they argue that the mind is embodied. Second, thought is mostly unconscious. Third, abstract concepts are largely understood metaphorically. Lakoff and Johnson, then, extend my arguments in the previous chapter by acknowledging that meaning, understanding and knowing are created in and through the body, through non-apperceptive consciousness. For them, this knowing is experienced in a non-linguaged manner, but is nonetheless understood through the use of metaphors.

Empirical studies that have looked at the use of metaphors have found that participants use them to explain unfamiliar ideas, to convey affect, to discuss traumatic experiences, and to simplify difficult concepts (e.g. Catalano & Creswell, 2013; Erjavec & Volcic, 2010; Martin, 2010). My research makes a strong empirical contribution to the use of metaphors to how embodiment is understood: my participants use metaphors to understand, represent and express somatic experience. In the face of a lack of a broad vocabulary for somatic experiences, metaphors enable participants to translate their embodied experiences of movement into language. Metaphors also evoke in me, the researcher interrogating their experiences, a visceral sense I imagine to be akin to their experience.

In their efforts to describe how their favourite dance moves feel, 26 of my 32 respondents used at least one metaphor to describe the target domain of an embodied experience. The predominant source domains, along with their examples, are as follows:

**Dessert.** Using the metaphors gooey, oozing, juicy, and gelatin, participants characterizes themselves almost as luscious desserts. They are capturing a decadent, overflowing nature of the movements that cannot be contained. These metaphors bring to mind thick liquid that is moving or escaping in a continuous and indulgent manner. Moreover, they hold within them a sense of resistance; participants do not describe themselves as “gushing”, which would imply a fast-moving flow, but rather, they discuss “oozing” and feeling “gooey”, evoking a thick and slow flow.

“Gooey” was often accompanying with participants making a closed fist, a gesture embodying a sense of resistance and mirroring the movement being created in the body. For example, Georgina discusses how slow chest circles, to her, feel gooey. While doing so, she moves her chest in a circle with her left fist hand mimicking that movement. My participants, therefore, embody some of their metaphors. While teaching an undulating fish at Arabesque, Nicki instructs her students:

Don't think about it too much or you will get confused. Just let it ooooooze. Let the movement ooze through you and out of you. (Watching students in the mirror, she sees one who is trying to break the movement down and practice it in sections.) Anita! Anita, that's not oozing. That's chopping. Just ooooooooze. Feel oozy.

For Nicki, the movement itself oozes in the same way as she wishes her students to feel oozy. It is associated with a feeling of flow more than with a particular technique.

Gelatin is used to describe the pleasurable reverberations experienced when participants' flesh moves due to momentum. These gelatinous feelings are associated with the movement of flesh that, although initiated through a dancer's muscle and skeletal movements, seems to then take on a life of their own, disconnected from the dancer's initiating impulse. As Daniella discusses:

Belly dance makes it okay for me to jiggle. You know? Like, when I'm walking down the street, having a belly that jiggles with each step, it's out of my control, and it's kind of a bad thing. Like, that shouldn't be happening. But in belly dance, if I shimmy and my belly goes, it's not bad. It's (pause) it's like gelatin.

Again, we see a reference to a dessert-like movement. Daniella uses gelatin to distinguish the pleasure and positive evaluation of flesh moving through dance from the negative evaluations associated with excess flesh that, in other contexts, "jiggles."

**Undulation.** The metaphors of wave, water, water beast, snake, and eel. By using wave and water, participants capture how they feel themselves to embody a liquid nature that is neither confined to, nor inhibited by, their bone structure. Daniella describes how:

When I undulate, I feel like I'm empty. Like there is nothing in me but flesh and liquid, and the liquid is just moving down and up, like an endless wave. It actually makes me feel weightless. Like I'm floating on water.

The lightness of the movement that Daniella refers to is captured also by Marianne.

Shoulder rolls to me are like, they are like waves that don't end. They just keep moving. Not harsh waves though, gentle waves. There is no crashing. There is just this continuous flow of water from the tips of my fingers, through my arms, shoulders, and out my other arms. And just like in water, it feels weightless.

Watery metaphors also allude to a lightness of the movements, almost a reflective transparency, embodied by the waves created in their bodies and arms. These waves are gentle, not the kind that stir up mud, but the kind that remain translucent and gently greet the shore. These light, peaceable metaphors are used exclusively by dancers at

Arabesque, whereas dancers from The Dark Side choose more animalistic, predatory metaphors to describe similar movements.

The Dark Side participants did not conceive of themselves in metaphorical terms to be akin to water; instead, they liken their experience to that of predatory creatures, such as water beast or eels that swim or slither through water. That such metaphors were used only by participants from The Dark Side may be because, embodying a sense of wily power as they do, these metaphors are more representative of the participants' sense of the ethos of Tribal Fusion. For example, The Dark Side dancers' use of the term Water Beast conveys an aggression that is not to be found in Arabesque dancers' descriptions of their movements. Although it is an imaginary creature, The Dark Side dancers characterize a Water Beast as forceful, strong, and menacing; an example is when Polly describes how shoulder rolls feel:

When I'm doing a shoulder roll and moving towards the audience, I feel like a Water Beast. There is nothing pretty about it. I'm there. I'm scary. And I'm going to get them with my long arms and intense eyes.

Polly adds a voracious component to my understanding of Water Beast in describing how she is "going to get them." Her shoulder rolls are not initiated solely to be aesthetically pleasing to the audience; they portray intent to pounce.

The snake metaphor was used by participants to emphasize the gothic energy of Tribal Fusion. It was used to describe undulations, shoulder rolls, and body waves (i.e., reverse undulations, in which the fluid movement travels from pelvis to chest as opposed to chest to pelvis). As Elena says:



When I watch myself in the mirror, I see two snakes attached at each side of my neck. I feel the movement is smooth, I feel like I have no bones, but it isn't pretty. It's not like, 'Oh! Look at my nice shoulder rolls.' It's darker. It's deeper. I stare at myself in the mirror with intensity. I feel that intensity flowing through my arms. And my – just, they become snakes.

Aileen employs the snake metaphor, but she uses it in a way that is more fun and mischievous.

Why do I love the body wave? Because it feels a little wild and mischievous. It's playful, like a snake that is playing around. I think, I think when I think of snakes having fun, I think of them being calculating and observant and aware. That's kind of how I feel. I feel aware that I am making this movement that is kind of neat, and that I am doing it to try to entice the audience, even if the audience is me. It's like, I know I'm impressing you right now, and I'm taking immense pleasure in it. Actually, I feel it even if no one's watching because, that snaky feeling is just there.

Although the participants do not reference it themselves, it is difficult not to consider such descriptions in relation to the story of Eve's original sin. Adding to the resemblance of the story of original sin, there is intention behind their snaky movements: not only do the dancers feel the movements are snake-like, they are intentionally employing the such movements in order to entice their audience, evoke certain emotions, and invite the audience to join them in their dance experience. The temptation, moreover, is to the dancers themselves.

The metaphor of an eel was used by participants to describe the "primal" and "natural" feelings they associate with belly dance movements. This discourse of primacy and the natural can be found in the way that dancers employ the metaphor of an eel to describe the feelings of undulations and body waves. For example, Samantha describes how:

Undulating always makes me think of creatures in evolution, or, like eels in water, who swim by moving waves through their bodies. These creatures are primal. They have existed for thousands of years. These movements are natural in other animals and now we are doing them. So, yeah, I feel like undulations make me feel like I'm an eel swimming through water.

Elizabeth too uses the metaphor of an eel to describe how an undulation feels.

Undulations are like, they feel like, well, you know what eels look like when they swim? When I undulate, I feel like an eel. And they are born knowing what to do. It's in their bodies. I feel like undulations are in my body too. They are effortless. There is this fluid movement that flows through me. It just feels, it feels very primal.

Despite the fact that it took the dancers considerable time and effort to learn this movement vocabulary, the dancers feel that it is more “natural” than those of other dances.

**Grounded.** At the same time as some of the dancers speak of a watery weightlessness, the dancers as a whole also emphasize a heaviness that they experience through belly dance movements. Characterizations of the dance as weighted and grounded are also used in opposition to what the dancers imagine ballet to feel like: light, ethereal, or feathery.<sup>32</sup> This comparison, then, describes their feelings not only through metaphors that describe what they feel, but also through the use of metaphors describing what they do not.

The dancers' use of a quicksand metaphor implies an element of gravity pulling downward or a feeling of sinking. This metaphor also alludes to a deepness to the movement, that their bodies, or parts of them, sink continuously deeper and deeper. There is a sense of inexorable suction that likely represents the feeling of control and resistance involved in movements. Joanne uses the metaphor of quicksand to describe how she feels

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<sup>32</sup> By comparing their movements to those of ballet, participants demonstrate the ways they read others' bodies, taking the outward appearance of them as an indication of the experience of balletic movements. However, research has shown that ballet is quite weightful and that the appearance of weightlessness is an illusion dancers work ardently to achieve (Howe, 1994).

when she is executing the maya, a common belly dance move that is described in detail later in this chapter:

I love the maya because it is so round and curvy. It's this continuous horizontal circling that just goes down, down, down. It always makes me think of quicksand because my hips are sinking, sinking, sinking, pulled by gravity, and then I, well, I feel like I'm getting deeper into dancing.

Due to the continuous movement, Joanne feels as though the effort is effortless ("pulled by gravity) and her hips are sinking, as if being pulled by quicksand.

Participants use the metaphor of wet cement to describe how their bodies feel when executing hip movements with downward accents, such as hip drops. Their behinds become "bags of wet cement" when they let the muscles go loose and allow their behinds to fall due to the momentum of their hips. For example, when Nicki teaches hip drops to her students, she instructs:

I want you to let everything go. See this? (she forcefully pushes her behind to make it jiggle) It's loose. I'm not holding anything. There is no tension here, so that when I drop my hip, the bum just falls in this very dramatic way. Loose. Everything loose. Your bum should feel like a bag of wet cement that is being tossed around by your hips and the power in your knees. Your bum does nothing though. Let the cement just fall and settle wherever it does.

By converting their bodily experience into metaphoric language, participants actively create their own language for bodily-felt experience where none existed before. This endeavor helps them to bridge the gap between somatic sensation and verbal communication. The gooey, undulating, and grounded metaphors support the processes of symbolizing embodiment, of successfully communicating their profound inner experiences to others, and of distinguishing their experiences from those of ballet dancers or belly dancers of other schools. Where verbal or technical language is limited, the use of metaphors offers new possibilities.

## **Writing ‘the’ Body In**

Translation scholars argue that almost every aspect of meaningful existence can be understood as translation. In fact, language is itself an act of translation (Roth, 2013; Wittgenstein, 2009). Although thinking and speaking exist in a co-constitutive relationship, they involve different processes, and it is through language that thought comes to be known, but in an alternate form (Roth, 2013, n.p.). Moreover, our everyday lives involve multiple acts of translation. When others ask “what do you mean?” and we rephrase our point, that too is an act of translation (Wittgenstein, 2009). Every new attempt to express our original intention differently constitutes translating a statement into one within the same language.

It is important for us to acknowledge the everydayness of translation, for, as qualitative researchers, our chief concern is to understand the experiences of others and elucidate the meanings individuals make of those experiences (Seidman, 1991). When our participants tell us their stories, they have already involved themselves in an act of translation, for it is impossible for them to relay the “very source of their experience” (Roth, 2013, n.p.).

Therefore, our capacity as researchers to access the original experience is limited, and although we develop techniques that strive to bring us closer to an understanding of lived experience, we must come to terms with the fact that truly grasping it may be impossible (Ricoeur, 1981). It is only through translation, a humanistic enterprise that seeks to bridge the gap between people (Niranjana, 1992, p. 47-48), that inner experiences can be made available to others.

At present, only a small amount of work on translation of somatic experiences has been published (see, for example, Hinton, Um & Ba, 2001). This work suggests that cultural experiences shape our somatic experiences are interpreted. For example, Devon Hinton, Khin Um and Phalnarith Ba (2001) demonstrate how the cultural experiences of Khmer refugees increase their risk of panic attacks when standing from sitting, which they describe as “wind overload.” Their attention to these somatic sensations, and their interpretations of them, have been shaped and formed by their experiences living under the Khmer regime. These authors demonstrate that there is a relationship between bodily experience, causal attribution, and the creation of interpersonal meaning.

In a similar fashion, my participants seem unaware of how the extent to which the truths they experience from their bodies are culturally mediated, particularly when it comes to their experiences associated with Orientalist discourses. For example, some dancers mention that belly dancing leads them to feel like an Arab Princess – that they experience a sense of exoticness associated with another world. Their experience of dance allows them to feel as though they are accessing another time and mode of living. As was mentioned in the Introduction to this dissertation, belly dance is marketed as a way to engage with the fantasy of the Orient through dance and exotic costuming. Moreover, as was presented in Chapter Four, the West’s conceptions of the East as timeless, undeveloped, static, and feminine (Said, 1978), can be found in their discourses. Therefore, what dancers experience as unique feelings brought about by dancing are actually culturally mediated.

Philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1981, p. 169) writes of the impossibility of perfect translation. Ricoeur argues that we must acknowledge the limits of our capacity to translate and,

therefore, to relate to those who are “other.” Yet, despite its theoretical impossibility, translation remains a necessity. According to Ricoeur, we should take on the task of translation with solemnity and mourn the fact that translated texts always fail to capture some of the meaning in the original. If we are to translate, we must recognize that something is always lost in the process, and accepting that deficiency is the only way to proceed. In so doing, we recognize the difference between the self and other, the limits of traversing our differences, while always working to overcome them.

Numerous authors (Halai, 2007; Tarozzi, 2013; Temple, 1997) have shown that projects involving translation have extra challenges. Researchers have provided accounts of the difficulties they have experienced in the field and suggestions to work towards overcoming them. Anjum Halai (2007) details her difficulties translating Urdu, mixed with English colloquialisms as well as English scientific terms, into English. Despite the strategies she devised to deal with these challenges, she finds there are differences between the languages that leave many aspects untranslatable. Life studies professor Massimiliano Tarozzi (2013) argues that proficiency in the applicable languages is not sufficient for accurate, meaningful translations. Drawing on his experiences translating texts from English to Italian, he argues that it is essential for translators to have lived experiences with the topic at hand. This enables them to more accurately capture the meanings of terms and concepts that are abstract or ambiguous. Bogusia Temple’s (1997) research with Polish communities in England led her to argue that we must be aware of the intellectual biographies of all individuals involved in the research process as translators, too, have an active role in the construction of meaning. Translators often interpret meaning based on their own experiences and knowledge base, and Temple

suggests that their intellectual biographies should be considered as part of our reflexive practices.

The difficulties inherent in the process of translation have led some academics to encourage social researchers to consider translation to be a creative process (Guerrero, 2010; Halai, 2007; Mookerjea, 2003; Roth, 2013; Temple, 1997). As previous research has shown, the idea of a perfect translation that captures and represents the meaning of the original text and/or speech is nearly impossible. Due to the points of intranslatability, as well as the involvement of individuals who influence translation outcomes via their social locations, there can be no perfect translation. Using a creative method of translation, fidelity to a source text is not the utmost priority. It seems appropriate, then, to think of a new text being produced based on a convergence of factors.

The translation issues I contend with in my work are not, of course, engendered by multiple languages but rather by different modes of experience. Somatic experiences are by their nature first person and therefore cannot fully be described, explained, or shared; they have been considered to be untranslatable (Longley, unpublished). The divide between the highly physical, complex world of felt-sensation, and the conceptual one of written language, seems near impossible to traverse. However, as my investigation of metaphors, above, has illustrated, somatic experiences are hugely generative of meaning: to fail to attempt to capture them is to miss a fundamental component of lived experience.

Contemporary ethnographers are now taking up the task of writing the somatic, attempting to articulate the kinesthetic, bodily sensations that emerge while in the field within a research format (Ness, 1992; Sklar, 2000; Stoller, 1994; Thonen, 1994).

Anthropologist and dance scholar Deidre Sklar (2000) argues that anthropology has “traditionally ignored kinesthesia” and examines the issue of “translating somatic knowledge into words” (p. 70). She suggests that the aesthetic element of writing could be leveraged to convey kinesthetic affect: “Writing is an aesthetic *embrace* that invites sensuous opening, almost as if words need to be irresistible, to partner bodily experience at all levels of intensity, intimacy, and multiplicity” (p. 73). The act of writing, then, contributes to the translation of embodied experience: it opens up new somatic ways of understanding lived experience. For example, Stoller’s (1994) ethnography of spirit possession ceremonies of the Songhay people of Niger and Mali begins with a description of what he is experiencing through his senses, such as “the acrid smell of burning resin” (p. 634). Incorporating the senses brings life to his descriptions and involves the reader more vividly in his journey. Later in his article, his use of short sentences confer upon the story a sense of speed and evoke in the audience feelings of suspense and mystery, which he describes as associated with this ceremony: “the musicians raise the tempo. The pulsations ripple like waves through Istambula’s body. He extends his arms and spins around like a top. He grunts and howls. Saliva flows like lava from his mouth” (p. 635). Stoller calls his method “incorporated writing”, as its aim is to incorporate more of the body and experience into ethnographic analysis. The capacity of readers to understand not only conceptually but on an embodied level is key to this method. Drawing on Stoller’s (1994) method, sports scholar Arto Thonen (1994) evokes in readers the feeling of playing sports with asthma. He uses short, telegraphic, incomplete sentences, heavy on verbs and nouns, that move quickly from one sensation to the next: “My legs give way. Vision clouds....Over the toilet bowl and hacking. Not



just a hack....Tearing lungs....I'm faint" (p. 51). This technique creates a sense of urgency in me, which I can imagine is only a fraction of the urgency that Stoller himself would feel under such conditions.

Such embodied accounts go beyond analytic description and aim to allow readers to experience the feelings associated with these phenomenon. In their writing, both Stoller (1994) and Thonen (1994) do not simply make lived experience into an object of analysis – they attempt to draw readers into it. As Norman Denzin (1997) proclaims, "Seeing is not understanding. Understanding is more than visual knowledge. Understanding is visceral" (p. 46). I seek to add to this work by proposing a new method for writing the body in dance, one that incorporates the sensual.

Encountering difficulties producing written accounts of embodied experiences of movement in my research, I considered many alternatives to "writing movement." I contemplated including photos, drawing pictures, coding movements into symbols, or creating a DVD of movement demonstrations. Such methods of presenting findings are often found in practice-led research, which is primarily used in the creative arts. The core tenet of practice led research is that creative practices carry and articulate knowledge in specific ways and therefore, creative work must be recognized as methods of research communication alongside more traditional forms of academic writing (Haseman, 2007; Heathfield, Quick, Templeton & Baker, 1997). In practice-led research, films, paintings, sculptures, dance, photography, poems, etc. are considered research outcomes. In addition, I also considered employing established movement notation systems such as Labanotation (Laban, 1966) or Sutton Movement Writing (Sutton, 1979), in which symbols written on a five-lined staff, similar to that of sheet music, represent movement.

However, these solutions all employ the body and are thus less than ideal for the social sciences, in which, as was previously mentioned, written language is the dominant tool for sharing ideas.

Novelists experience the same difficulties in communicating a sense of time (Silber, 2009); the amount of space on a page devoted to a particular scene or issue may not reflect the time that has passed in that section. Their particular skill is one of moving the story forward by years in which nothing important happens with phrases such as “five years later”, sparing the audience the accounts of daily, mundane activities (such as walking and brushing teeth), and then giving accounts of what does matter plot wise. Authors deliberately extend the descriptions of the moments that matter to *make* them matter. For example, when writing the first moment a detective enters a crime scene, an author is challenged to describe in a sequential fashion co-occurring experiences: they must describe the physical surroundings, as well as the sensory input and emotional responses of the character. Thus, a passage that may take a reader five to ten minutes to read describes a moment that lasted only seconds.

If we challenge ourselves to translate embodied experience into written text, how can we make movements accessible to audiences that have little to no emic knowledge of the experience of dance, of the difference between a belly dancer’s shimmy and an undulation? I propose this to be a matter of sampling. My approach to sampling a few movements to describe is like the novelists’ approach to sampling a few moments to describe in detail. Instead of attempting to capture all movements mentioned in the field notes and interviews, I have selected, in this chapter, two movements that are commonly used and representative of belly dance, and devoted myself to vivid descriptions of those

particular movements. My descriptions involve two elements, the first written in a technical, detailed manner, and second produced in a rich, evocative writing style. The first element is gaze-based. Here, a visual description of the movement from the audience's perspective is provided. Second, the phenomenological experience of the move is included to describe how executing the movement feels subjectively. This component provides visceral descriptions of the move based on my own sensuous experience as a participant observer in dance classes, and based on participants' descriptions.

The following is a demonstration of the use of my method, as described above, for the belly dance move called "maya."

Visual description: When performed correctly, the dancer's hips trace the infinity sign. Her upper body remains perfectly still and all the movement takes place just under her ribs with her hips going up, out and down in a continuous movement from side to side. The hips appear to be moving independently of the torso and legs.

Phenomenological description: When I dance the maya, I first feel my hips stretching down and in, and this leads me to go into myself. My attention turns inward; my awareness internal; I become introspective; the closeness of my arms to my body enhances the inward sensation of this move. It is personal. I am grounded and centred. I enter into a meditative state and just feel the fluid, flowy, never-ending continuity, like a fountain spouting water in an endless trail of arches.

I feel feminine in that I continuously create curves with my curves. Aware now of the full, circular flow of my hips stretching in and out, up and down, highlights and plays with an embodied form femininity that *feels* essential at the same time as the sociologist in me acknowledges that this is not a fact. Sensing the stretching of the muscles in my stomach and the movement of my hips makes me *feel* womanly and I revel in that. When I continuously perform the maya, I am centred, and my centre is soft, smooth, and fluid.

Below is a description of the shimmy by use of my two-pronged method of writing the body:

Visual Description: Because of the dancer's long skirt, the audience sees the illusion of the flesh of the buttocks, hips, and belly moving of its own volition. Dancers upper bodies, from the chest up, are still and poised, while below the chest, the dancer's mid-

section shakes at various speeds and intensity, depending on the amount of power she uses in her knees to make her flesh jiggle.

Phenomenological Description: My hips are completely relaxed. I feel my feet connect to the ground. I push down into the earth and feel the resistance give rise to energy, absorbed in my mid-section, reverberating everywhere. Despite the power I exert in my legs, I feel loose. My stomach jiggles continuously, as does my behind, and I revel in the sensation of my bones being massaged by my flesh. I feel the power in my knees that shakes the flesh around my hips. My hips themselves do nothing, and at the same time, they are everything.

## **Conclusion**

Expressing embodied experience linguistically appears to have its limitations: a great deal more that is felt and experienced that cannot be worded in any way. However, this does not mean that attempts to do so are futile. Different strategies, such as the use of metaphors, performance based texts, and methods such as the one I devised, can creatively interpret these experiences, even if they are not captured in their totality.

I argue that metaphors are useful in translating embodied experiences into language as they provide dancers with the means to express aspects of their experience that they cannot in any other way, precisely because the language is not available to do so. Dancers used grounded, gooey, and undulating metaphors to convey their experiences of dance. Future research should investigate the reciprocal nature of this relationship. Dance practitioners (Boger, 2011, as cited in Panhofer & Payne, 2011; Longley, unpublished) and arts therapists (Panhofer & Payne, 2011) argue that, while metaphors transform inner experiences into ones that can be expressed, expressing inner experiences through metaphors transform inner experiences. The quality of students' movements, for example, improves when metaphors are introduced as part of the instruction (Boger, 2011, as cited in Panhofer & Payne, 2011). Although follow-up interviews are not part of

my study, I wonder how my participants' efforts to translate their somatic experiences into language during the interviews has influenced their subsequent dance experiences.

My method of articulating embodied experience through text captures the two elements of movement most important for individuals outside of the dance community to understand the experience of dance: the visual from the audiences' perspectives and phenomenological components. By adding the phenomenological description, it adds to the work of ethnographers such as Stoller (1994) and Thonen (1994) who move beyond conventional descriptions of the body in motion, which focus mostly on the *what* of the body: *what* it looks like and *what* is happening to its parts. My method adds the *how*: *how* movement feels, thus establishing the primacy of one's body in the study of dance.

Moreover, including the phenomenological element makes the experience of dance more accessible to readers who may have little to no experience with belly dance.

As we might expect from other studies of movement, translating the visual components of movement is quite effective. Due to society's privileging of both the visual sense and scientific thinking, it is easy to draw an image of the body in writing and to elucidate body mechanics and technique. However, my work exposes a problem that needs to be taken up by others who study movement and embodiment more generally. Because we lack the language necessary to translate embodied experience, the academy's overreliance on text proves limiting. Despite employing evocative or performative methods, we may be expecting too much from written texts when it comes to articulating embodied experience. Furthermore, this expectation supports the production of disembodied texts that my work seeks to avoid.

Just as Lakoff and Johnson (2003, p. 5) talk about “experiencing one thing in terms of another,” it becomes evident that if the embodied experience is the “one thing” words do not necessarily have to be the other. This begs the question: why must we confine ourselves to the use of text for conveying knowledge? Alongside other arts-based researchers (Cancienne & Snowber, 2003), I suggest that social science researchers must rethink the use of text and advocate for the inclusion of other forms of knowledge sharing in the academy and beyond.

## Chapter 7: Reflections

This dissertation has explored the relationship between embodiment, lived experience and social structure through an examination of women's experiences belly dancing. Using the theoretical lenses of the male gaze, Orientalism, and phenomenology, my research demonstrates that lived experience is neither determined by social structure nor independent of it. The two are intimately intertwined, and the body is a mediating factor that reinforces the connection between the two. In this chapter, I show how including the body in research can provide embodied accounts of lived experience. First, I provide a brief background of the project. Second, I present an overview of my main findings. Third, outline my contributions to the field. Finally, I suggest future directions for research.

### Project Background

My interest in this project derived from my own experience as a belly dancer. I have belly danced for a total of nine years, four years of which I danced professionally, both teaching and performing in public. At the start of this project, I had been taking classes and specialty workshops for three years and was well integrated into Toronto's belly dance community.

Engaging with the academic literature caused me to reconsider my involvement: what had previously been a purely enjoyable experience to me became an activity fraught with contradictions. I had previously not considered the objectifying, overtly sexualizing aspects of belly dance that 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminists denote (Koritz, 1997; Lorus, 1996; Savigliano, 1995; Shay, 2008), nor had I considered the ways in which belly dance could

be perpetuating harmful stereotypes of an exotic Other (Dox, 2006; Fruhauf, 2009; Said, 1978; Savigliano, 1995). What could account for the discrepancy between my lived experience and the critical perspectives of these scholars? How did other belly dancers interpret their involvement? The disjuncture between my lived experience and the academic literature inspired me to dig deeper and explore the experiences of others. This dissertation is the result of the curiosity that arose so many years ago.

This work uses ethnographic methodology, which in turn employs an interpretative framework, one more concerned with an individual's perspective than with uncovering objective truths. Interpretive methodology was ideal for my phenomenologically informed work. Phenomenologists are concerned with uncovering individuals' first-hand, lived, subjective experiences, and participant observation and semi-structured interviews enable us to do so. The inclusion of women from two popular belly dance studios in downtown Toronto, Arabesque and The Dark Side, enabled me to compare the experiences of dancers at different levels (beginners through professionals), as well as dancers of different styles (Oriental or cabaret style and Tribal Fusion). Through participant observation and semi-structured interviews with 32 dancers, I gathered data pertinent to my main areas of interest: the gaze, Orientalism, and embodiment.

### **Summary of Findings**

My research was designed to address dancers' engagement of the male gaze (Bartky, 1988; Bordo, 1993; Mulvey, 1975), Orientalism (Maira, 2008; Said, 1978), and the lived experiences of the dance through the framework of phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Theories of the male gaze are based upon Laura Mulvey's (1975) polemic work,



which proposes that the patriarchal structure of the film industry, and specifically, the camera apparatus, sexualizes and objectifies women. She suggests that cinema forces audience members to identify with the dominant gaze of the camera which, in most cases, takes the perspective of the male protagonist. Thus, the women on screen come to be looked at and displayed, relegating them to the position of object. Bartky (1988) and Bordo (1993) have detailed the ways in which the male gaze has crossed over from film into women's daily life-worlds. For these feminist thinkers, women have now come to see themselves as objects and police themselves, in terms of their behavior and their appearance, by the tenets of the male gaze. This theoretical perspective was important for my research since belly dance, with its revealing costuming and sensualized movements, seems, on its surface, to be designed to appeal to the male gaze. How do dancers experience the gaze? To what degree does the heterosexual male gaze influence their lived experience of belly dance?

Before undertaking fieldwork, I anticipated that participants would feel oppressed by the male gaze. I hypothesized that professional dancers particularly, exposed to the subjectivities of the audience, would describe feeling pressure to conform to norms of feminine beauty, maintain a particular weight or shape, and have experiences of being objectified that leave them, at times, uncomfortable. However, my interviews demonstrated that the experience of the male gaze is not so straightforward.

My participants' experiences of what feminist theorists (Bartky, 1988; Bordo, 1993) have identified as "the male gaze" were fraught with conflict. Their stories point to the ways in which they have internalized gender norms of body comportment and self-presentation, thereby reinscribing the tenets of the male gaze. However, their responses also suggest

that the male gaze can offer a source of pleasure, irrespective of male desire. Furthermore, they speak to the ways in which they agentially use the male gaze to both escape and subvert the objectification and hypersexualization it imposes. These experiences are not compartmentalized, but occur simultaneously. Through belly dance, participants derive a sense of strength, agency, and pleasure, even though they are participating in a dance that may simultaneously be viewed and experienced as objectifying. Their interpretations, therefore, call for an expanded understanding of the male gaze, one that moves beyond simplistic explanations of the gaze as either positive or negative, objectifying or empowering. Belly dancers' experiences necessitate discussions of the gaze that traverse these divisions.

Theories of Orientalism also informed my work, particularly that of Said's *Orientalism* (1978), a cornerstone of post-colonial theory. Said argues that Orientalism can be characterized as a tool for establishing Western imperial hegemony. Drawing on Foucault's concept of power-knowledge relations, Said argues that the creation of knowledge in the West, and its imperialist ambitions, were intertwined. Thus, he exposed the production of knowledge as complicit in politics and Western power. This process created notions of Western superiority and Eastern inferiority, whereby the West is associated with development, rationality, and modernity, while the East is characterized as uncivilized, backward, unchanging, and effeminate. According to Maira (2008), these views have become embedded in Western consciousness, leading individuals to experience "imperial feelings" within their everyday lives. I wondered, how do Orientalist discourses factor into women's belly dance experiences? What evidence of

imperial feelings is found in their narratives? How do women negotiate the tensions between Orientalist stereotypes and their own involvement in belly dance?

As was the case with dancers' experiences of the male gaze, the contentions of Orientalism scholars also become more complex to consider when we account for the relations in lived experience among representation, discourse, and embodiment. At first glance, my participants' stories provide support for Orientalism theorists' arguments that, in the West, belly dance perpetuates Othering. Dancers do take pleasure in Orientalist imagery and enjoy Orientalist veils, make-up, hip scarves, and costumes that some even go so far as to compare to lingerie. The dancers do seem, in some ways, to exoticize the dance, and to be unaware of their own privilege and the issues of representation that their involvement in belly dance brings forth. Therefore, I would not call Orientalism scholars unequivocally wrong.

However, the meanings Orientalist scholars have, thus far, articulated fall short of capturing the complexities of lived experience. Dancers are not simply complicit with the colonial stance; their experiences cannot be reduced to the "imperial feelings" Maira (2008) describes. Dancers also bring awareness and critical thinking to their beloved leisure pursuit and actively work, in their own ways, to resist reinforcing harmful stereotypes. Although they seem reluctant to voice these issues publicly, they have privately devised personal strategies that they understand as helping them to negotiate the tensions between their love of belly dance and its appropriative elements. Thus, I suggest we move beyond notions of appropriation as either-or and instead, understand appropriation as having degrees. Belly dancers are working to challenge Orientalist

tropes, even if they do so imperfectly and with a privacy that allows Orientalist practices to seem unproblematically endorsed.

Merleau-Ponty's (1962) phenomenology is founded on the premise that the mind and body are interrelated. The body is not only an object; it is the vehicle for lived experiences and knowledge, which come to us through perception. Arguing against Cartesian dualisms, Merleau-Ponty demonstrates that one cannot be purely an object that is separated from or defined by one's mind. Rather, individuals are subjects who are "being-to-the-world" (p. viii). Because the body is both subject and object, it is "the instrument by which all information and knowledge is received and meaning is generated" (Grosz, 1994, p. 87). Therefore, for Merleau-Ponty, the mind is rooted in and through the body.

In Chapter Five and Six, I outlined dancers' difficulty in expressing their embodied experiences linguistically and how they moved subtly or danced while working to explain their interpretations and feelings. I understand these movements to convey additional information or to enhance the co-construction of meaning between the participants and me. Furthermore, I argue that these movements also serve non-communicative purposes; the body is important to cognitive processing and knowledge production, and when moving, dancers are in fact thinking through the body.

It is not only in speaking that we find difficulties expressing embodiment. In Chapter Six, I criticize the academy's privileging of text over other forms of knowledge sharing. Since we lack the language to access embodied experience, our overreliance on text proves limiting. Although the method I propose for writing movement, which includes both

visual and phenomenological descriptions, is intended to make movements more accessible to readers, like others, I question the degree to which we should charge text with such a task. As Law and Urry (2004, p. 403-404) contend, the written word cannot help but fall short when imparting the kinesthetic, sensory, and sensual components of findings.

### **Contributions to the Field**

Ann Cooper Albright (1997, p. 13) denounces theories about dance that privilege representation while ignoring the embodied experience of the dancer for, as she sees it, dance provides “a fascinating double moment in which performing bodies are both objects of the representation and subjects of their own experience.” Although my participants’ descriptions of their own dancing experiences do touch on visual and representational ways of knowing, they also privilege alternate experiences of being in the world, in particular, embodied ways of knowing. My research helps to fill the gaps between purely experiential (Kraus, 2009, 2010, 2014; Moe, 2012; Wright & Dreyfus, 1998) and text-based scholars’ (Dox, 2006; Koritz, 1997; Said, 1978; Savigliano, 1995; Shay, 2008) accounts by exploring more fully the affective, bodily, subjective aspects of dance. By privileging participants’ embodied understanding of their experiences, I provide a more textured account of belly dance than gaze-based theories produce.

In particular, this research has shown that somatic experiences heavily influence the meanings individuals associate with their lived experiences. My research with belly dancers demonstrates that the body knows. Part of the reason dancers enjoy and get so much pleasure from dancing is the kinesthetic component of their involvement. This is altogether ignored within representational studies of any phenomenon. Although dancers

enjoy the aesthetics of belly dance, the costuming, the props, and other facets, they (attempt to) describe embodied sensations that contribute as much, if not more, than those other more easily articulated, and more easily studied, factors. This supports the work of phenomenologists who argue that the body is the medium for our experiences, perception, and knowledge (Edie, 1964; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Primožic, 2001). As phenomenologist Linda Hartley (2004) asserts, “The body can reveal the secret, hidden, or forgotten areas of experience embedded within it, and as we learn to listen to the body in its constantly transforming expressions, we learn to know ourselves more deeply” (p. 246). Dancer and dance scholar Fraleigh (1987) agrees, as does philosopher Sheets-Johnstone (1999). These two thinkers add that the self-knowledge attained is not through one’s essential self being revealed but through constructive processes. Through dance, individual’s expressive actions and movements take them “beyond the confines of self,” enabling them to construct and know themselves in ways they would not through their everyday experiences (Fraleigh, 1987, p. xxii). Dancers know they love belly dance, because they feel it, and those inner sensations have transformed their lives and their selves in ways no representational theory could ever capture.

My work reinforces the work of Brenda Farnell and Charles Varela (2008) who argue that the somatic sense and the semiotic, or meaning making sense, are interdependent. They argue that kinesthesia is a sense that, alongside other senses, provides information to the brain and guides perception and semiosis. Semiosis refers to meaning making not through representational signs and symbols, but through embodied meaning making supported by the perceptions of taste, hearing, touch, pain, smell, sight and kinesthesia, all in relationship with language and movement. This supports Merleau-Ponty’s (1962, p.

285) suggestion that “my gaze, my touch and all my other senses are together the powers of one and the same body integrated into one and the same action.” My research with belly dancers shows how the senses and movements provide meaning to the self. For them, the somatic is semiotic. Their felt sensations, experienced through this embodied practice, produce significant meaning for self-knowledge, even if they have difficulty describing it linguistically.

Through this analysis, I do not wish to suggest that we do away with image and representation. The participants’ understanding of the dance is formed through input from several sources, including representation of the body and the societal discourses that speak to it. I suggest that we must think not in terms of rejecting the idea of bodily representation in favour of embodiment, but instead, I suggest we explore the permeable boundaries between them, for their relationship has implications for lived experience.

My research contributes to the development of an account of experience that explores how these categories, which academic research has traditionally considered separately, overlap and interact in the embodied practice of belly dance. Belly dance is experienced phenomenologically with and through the body, and bodily experiences are influenced through external sources, such as social interactions with other dancers, teachers, and audiences, as well as societal discourses. Therefore, dance offers us an opportunity to explore the intersection between representation, discourse, and corporeality, and the role they collectively play in lived experience. By addressing each of these components, my work moves beyond that of Orientalism (Said, 1978; Savigliano, 1995) and 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminist scholars (Koritz, 1997; Savigliano, 1995; Shay, 2008) because it allows for both felt sensation and the external life world to remain vital to lived experience. My project

contributes to sociological and dance literature not simply by enhancing representational theories by including embodiment, but by acknowledging how representation, discourse and embodiment work together to construct and reinforce each other.

This approach avoids the risk of conceptualizing lived-experience as a pre-reflective (Merleau-Ponty, 1962), individualized phenomenon that is independent of its social and political context. Although our embodied experiences are felt as primary, intuitive ways of knowing, my work suggests that they are shaped by the larger social relations that underpin our experiences. As Bowman (2004, p. 36) contends, “The body is minded, the mind is embodied, and both body and mind are culturally-mediated.” I argue for the need to conceptualize lived experience as connected to processes of socialization, premised upon wider societal discourses that inform our ways of being in and interpreting the world. By investigating the relationship between embodiment, representation, and discourse, I illuminate some of the means through which this process functions and enables us to make sense of dancers’ often contradictory reports of meaning and understanding.

Throughout the dissertation, I presented the perspectives of the women with whom I spoke, who describe their dance as empowering and note the ways in which belly dance has enhanced their lives and changed the way they experience their bodies. During analysis, participants’ confidence that their experiences translate to audience members caught my attention. They appear to be blissfully unaware that their performance of exoticized sensuality, which they see as an embodied challenge to the gaze, comes in a package that simultaneously caters to it. By embracing and taking pleasure in the gaze,



they own their sexuality in a way that may publicly be read as performing for the tastes of the colonial and heterosexual, male gazes. As Wright and Dreyfus (1998, p. 97) argue:

[a]s people watch the dance they make sense of it in relation to their own subjective experiences, investments and beliefs. The dancers can attempt to constitute the dance in ways that attempt to make the patriarchal gaze more difficult to sustain, but given the other elements of the dance, its overt eroticism, this is a major challenge – more so when the dancers are young and slim.

While an examination of audience interpretation is beyond the scope of this paper, I acknowledge that dancers' self-authored intentions may not be accurately read. Their dancing could potentially work to reinforce elements of a sexist, racist social order. As Wolff (1997, p. 82) points out, "there is a problem of using the female body for feminist ends. Its pre-existing meanings, as sex object, as subject of the male gaze, may prevail and re-appropriate the body, despite the intentions of the woman herself." Therefore, dancers' intended acts of transgression may at best fall flat or at worst, contribute to the perpetuation of female objectification (Bordo, 1993, p. 119; Denith, 2004, p. 460; Gill, 2007, p. 75; Manning, 1997, p. 159; Wolff, 1997, p. 88).

### **Moving Forward**

To explore the topics of this dissertation further, I propose that future research interrogate audience perceptions of belly dance. Chapters Three and Four showed that dancers consider themselves to be empowered by their dance and their interactions with the audience. They want their audience, which includes onlookers of diverse genders as well as fellow dancers, to identify with their projections of self-empowerment, which include comfort with themselves and their bodies, owning their sexuality, and their mastery of technique. Moreover, dancers from The Dark Side take particular care to transcend the Orientalist roots of belly dance. However, it is near impossible for dancers to control how

their performances are interpreted by audiences. This leaves me with the questions: How are belly dancers' self-authored intentions read? How are their individual attempts to avoid appropriating Middle Eastern culture, such as choosing not to wear a bindi or a hip scarf, understood by audience members, or are these practices even noticed? Does "an audience" even exist, or do the multiple and intersecting identities of audience members preclude a homogenous understanding of belly dance? How do the prevailing meanings associated with the female body limit the possibilities for resistance through personal empowerment? Is it possible, in the context of belly dance, for the personal to be read as political?

In Chapter Five, I turned to studies in cognitive science (Spivley, Tyler, Richardson, & Young 2000) and psychology (Glenberg & Kaschak 2002; Rauscher, Krauss, & Chen 1996; Schubert 2004) to support my conclusions that my participants' movements throughout the interviews were not simply an act of co-construction of meaning, but integral to their conceptual processing. In order to more fully substantiate my claims, I propose conducting experimental research with dancers that explores the effects of limiting movement on self-expression. To do so, I suggest following Rauscher, Krauss, and Chen's (1996) design in which one group of participants is allowed to move freely while another's movement was blocked. When comparing the two groups, I would be interested in exploring the following: What role does movement play in communication and cognitive processing? What are the effects of restricting participants' movement? Is it only when speaking about the body, movement, and internal sensations that movements help or hinder communication and knowledge production, or do we see difficulties in other content, such as references to spatial awareness, or abstract concepts such as love

and morality? Do such effects differ between dancers, a group more proficient in bodily forms of knowing than the general population? If my argument holds weight, we should find an even more marked difference among dancers than the general population in the quality of answers provided between those who are permitted to move and those whose movements are restricted.

In Chapter Six, I proposed we work to develop other forms of knowledge sharing within and outside the academy, due to the difficulties of translating embodied experience into text. When it comes to embodied experience, are we expecting too much of written texts? Might other methods of imparting information enable readers to more fully understand belly dance movements and the feelings they provoke? As I work towards publishing sections of this dissertation, I am considering the opportunities that web-based publications offer as platforms for more performative knowledge communication strategies. The proliferation of on-line journals and books would facilitate the quick adoption of performative publications, such as links to videos of belly dancing embedded directly into the text. Videos may enable readers to understand movements more efficiently and effectively. Also, the use of video may enhance the transmission of the kinesthetic, sensory, and sensual findings of my work that text simply cannot do justice. My goal is to infuse my publications with a playful creativity that reflects the tenor of my research process, and that fleshes out the aspects of embodiment that are pivotal to my work.

Already, in conference presentations, I do not rely solely linguistic representations of embodied experience; I dance sections of my papers. I find it useful to provide visual demonstrations of dance moves, to imitate participants' body language and facial

expressions, and to use bodily movement to help audience members more fully comprehend the somatic experiences of which I speak. A project like mine, so engrossed in embodied thought, meaning, and movement, almost necessitates a performative method; simply reciting a paper will not do. What other methods of sharing knowledge could be employed when presenting research? Is there a role for the involvement of research participants? How might audience participation enhance their understanding of research findings even further? What does audience participation in research dissemination look like? Would I attempt to teach them basic movements? Ask them to adopt certain postures and evaluate the differences in how each makes them feel? Would this actually deepen their understanding of the embodied experience, or is the common fifteen-minute presentation format an insufficient amount of time to accomplish these tasks? Such expansive and inclusive forms of publishing and presenting findings might enable this intimate insider to more effectively help an “interested outsider” (Pavidis & Olive, 2014) develop a more involved understanding of this embodied practice.

The questions posed above are only a handful of the many that have arisen through this process and with which I hope to engage further in the future. My passion for this topic has infused my way of living and altered my worldview. I understand the relevance, importance, and influences of embodied knowledge in all aspects of experience, and, as the significance of embodiment has not yet been taken-up in Western popular discourse, I intend to be one of its champions.

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## Appendix A

### Interviewing Guide

- 1) How did you get into belly dancing? What motivated you?
- 2) How long have you belly danced?
- 3) What pleasure do you receive from dancing?
- 4) How has involvement in belly dance benefited you and your life?
- 5) What are some common sentiments you hear other people express about belly dancing? What do you think the public perception is of belly dance and belly dancers?
- 6) Do you agree with those perceptions? Why or why not?
- 7) Would you please show me your favourite dance move? Please perform it a few times for me, paying attention to the sensations in your body while you move.
  - a. One of the things I had a hard time doing when I was taking notes in the classes was figuring out how to describe movements in words. I'm wondering if you could help me out by describing for me that move, in just words.
  - b. Why is that your favourite move?
  - c. How does it feel when you execute that move?
- 8) How does your experience of your body differ when you are dancing than when you are going about your other daily activities? For example, when you are walking down the street or at the gym?

- 9) More generally, how has belly dancing influenced your relationship to your body? Do you relate to your body similarly or differently now than you did before you started dancing?
- a. Has this changed over time as your dancing has progressed?
- 10) Please show me the object you brought that is your favourite article of clothing or jewelry worn while dancing.
- a. What appeals to you about this object?
  - b. How do you feel when you wear it?
- 11) If money was no object and you had infinite resources, where would you most like to dance?
- a. What is in this setting?
  - b. What kind of surface are you dancing on?
  - c. What are you wearing?
  - d. Who else is there?
  - e. How do you feel as you begin to dance?
  - f. Do your feelings change as your dance continues?
- 12) When you are dancing, do you feel like you are expressing yourself, or do you feel like you are becoming someone else?
- 13) On belly dancing blogs, there is a lot of discussion about personifying an "Arabic Princess". Is that something you feel is relevant to your dance experience?
- 14) Think, for a moment, about your experiences dancing in a private space, such as your home, in the studio, and performing in public.

- a. In which setting are you most comfortable? Why?
  - b. What do you find fulfilling or problematic about each?
- 15) Have you ever danced for either your current partner or previous partners in your home?
- a. Please describe that situation to me.
  - b. Do you enjoy having him or her watching you?
- 16) Do you tell potential partners about your dancing? Why or why not?
- 17) When you perform in public, who do you invite?
- 18) When you perform, do you dance under your own name? Why or why not?
- a. (If no) What do you fear about being associated with this?
  - b. (If no) How does using a different name benefit you?
- 19) How do you interpret the history of the dance and its cultural origins?
- 20) What does it mean to you to be doing a dance from this part of the world?
- 21) What is your understanding of the meaning of belly dance to individuals of Middle Eastern/Arabic/Egyptian descent?
- 22) Has your enjoyment of the dance shifted over time?
- a. Has your enjoyment increased and waned at different points? If so, why do you think that might be?
  - b. Have your reasons for dancing changed over time? How so?
  - c. Are the rewards you receive through dance different today than when you began? If so, how?
- 23) Are there any challenges you have faced due to your involvement in belly dance?

- a. Have you experienced any stigma?
- b. What do your friends and family think about your belly dancing?

24) If you could not belly dance, what would you do instead?

25) Is there anything else you would like to share that we have not yet covered in the interview?

26) Do you have any questions about my research that I could answer here?

27) To finish, I have some demographic questions to ask.

- a. How old are you?
- b. What is your educational background?
- c. What is your relationship status?
- d. What is your occupation?

## Appendix B

### Description of Participants

Aileen is a white, 49 year-old marketing executive who is married without children. She has been dancing at The Dark Side for seven years. She performs solos regularly at student events and teaches beginner classes for women in her office building.

Audrey is a white, 34 year-old stay-at-home mother of a toddler. She began dancing with Arabesque seven years ago. She is a lead dancer in Arabesque Dance Company, teaches at the studio, is part of the agency, and has also created her own fusion style of belly dance that she is working to popularize among dancers in the city.

Courtney is a white, 31 year-old graduate student. She has belly danced for six years, teaches at Arabesque, is apprenticing with Arabesque Dance Company and is part of the agency (meaning she is hired out to perform at private events).

Daniella is a white, 34 year-old billing administrator. She has belly danced for four years at Arabesque. She has travelled to Egypt to take specialty classes, although the dance is a leisure pursuit for her.

Donna is a white, 33 year-old marketing executive who is studying part-time to be a counselor. She has belly danced for 8 years with Arabesque. She teaches regularly, is a lead dancer in Arabesque Dance Company, and is part of the agency.

Elena is a white, 36 year-old freelance writer and part-time business student. She has belly danced for five years at The Dark Side. She performs solos regularly at The Dark Side events and is part of their student troupe, which performs at small-scale events in Toronto.

Elizabeth is a white 32 year-old model, yoga instructor, and massage therapist who is taking belly dance recreationally. She has danced for four years at The Dark Side studio.

Georgina is a white, 32 year-old seamstress. She has been a student with Arabesque for six years and regularly performs solos at events in her small town, which is approximately a 1.5 hours commute from downtown Toronto.

Jenna is a white, 38 year-old expectant mother who works part-time at various jobs in the service sector. She has been belly dancing for three years at Arabesque and performs with an amateur belly dance troupe at festivals and small-scale events in Toronto.

Joanne is a 26 year-old woman who is studying actuarial sciences who identifies as Trinidadian Canadian. She has danced with Arabesque for five years and has

- recently become a member of Arabesque Earth Shakers, a troupe for women of above average weight.
- Kara is a white, 32 year-old student from Brazil studying English in Canada. She has belly danced for one year at Arabesque.
- Laura is a white, 27 year-old woman who works in marketing. She began belly dancing at The Dark Side studio six years ago and she now teaches there part-time. She is a member of Lavish Dance Company, The Dark Side's professional dance company.
- Lorraine is a white, 45 year-old stay-at-home mother of two teenagers. She has been belly dancing at Arabesque for 12 years and is part of Arabesque's student troupe. She also performs regularly as part of another popular belly dance troupe in Toronto.
- Marianne is a white, 52 year-old federal government employee. She has been dancing at Arabesque for ten years. She danced for three years in Arabesque All Spice, a troupe for women who are aged 40 and above.
- Michelle is a white, 42 year-old mother of three daughters. She works part time bookkeeper and office manager. She has been belly dancing at various studios for eight years and is part of Arabesque's Earth Shakers.
- Monique is a 38 year-old public school teacher who identifies as Ghanaian Canadian. She has belly danced for 12 years, teaches at Arabesque, is a lead dancer in Arabesque Dance Company and belongs to the agency (meaning she is hired out to perform at private events)
- Nicki is a white, 35 year-old stay-at-home mother of one. She has belly danced for nine years. She is part of Arabesque Earth Shakers and also teaches a fusion class at Arabesque that combines belly dance with a different style in which she has trained for approximately 15 years.
- Polly is a white, 42 year-old graphic designer who is married with no children. She has been dancing at The Dark Side for five years. She is also the artistic director of a Tribal Belly Dance troupe that performs regularly across Toronto and hosts a monthly belly dance performance event highlighting performers from across the GTA.
- Riley is a white, 24-year-old university student. She has belly danced for two years at Arabesque and, due to her dedication, is quite advanced. She is part of Arabesque's student troupe, a troupe for advanced student dancers that performs at festivals across southwestern Ontario.
- Samantha is a white, 29 year-old graduate student and an intermediate dancer at The Dark Side.

Stacey is a white, 56 year-old freelance bookkeeper and mother of two grown daughters. Stacey has been belly dancing for 9 years at The Dark Side. Stacey still considers herself a beginner as she does not have as much time as she would like to devote to classes/practice. She has performed once at The Dark Side's student event.