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NEGOTIATING DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS OF BELLY DANCING IN  
NEW ZEALAND AND AUSTRALIAN DANCE COMMUNITIES

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

Master of Social Sciences

In Women's and Gender Studies

at

The University of Waikato

by

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The University of Waikato

2011



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## **Abstract**

The belly dancing subject is contained within dominant historical, Orientalist and essentialist discourses. An existing body of literature examines the belly dancer as ‘subject of’ and ‘subject to’ social and gendered discourses within social contexts. However, the literature has failed to address the question of relationships between three spheres of meaning in belly dancing, these being 1) the social sphere and discourses of the social world; 2) the individual and personal sphere; and 3) the spiritual and inspirational sphere. Nor have previous studies examined how effectively women are able to articulate their experiences of these relationships within the available discourses.

This research covers new academic ground by taking a more holistic approach to the exploration of experiences of the dance. An investigation into the meanings and relationships that 26 women from New Zealand and Australia attached to their experiences of belly dancing required the use of a combined theoretical paradigm to provide greater scope for the consideration of individual experiences of belly dancing. Therefore I developed a Poststructuralist, phenomenological and hermeneutical theoretical paradigm which allowed for examination of subjective experiences and consideration of the meanings that individual subjects may make of those experiences. As the women began to describe their experiences of belly dancing, dominant themes emerged relating to women’s perceptions of belly dancing, their experience of belly dancing in performance, their embodiment of belly dancing, and their resistance to the dominant discursive constructions.

Analysis of the interview material indicates that these women situated themselves ‘within’ the experience of belly dancing and many offered novel descriptions of those experiences, defining an emerging personal sphere as distinct from the established discursively constructed understandings available within the public sphere. Participants’ literal explanations of their own experiences often included faltering or tentative attempts at articulating their experiences, and frequently gave

way to spiritual and inspiration meanings and descriptions of altered states of awareness.

These results may suggest that the established dominant discourses within the wider social sphere were insufficient in terms of providing terms and concepts with which dancers could adequately express their feelings, understandings, sensations and experiences. Furthermore, the women's novel descriptions reveal previously unexplored spiritual and inspirational meanings and relationships to their experiences of this dance form, indicating an emerging spiritual or inspirational sphere. This research thus provides an opportunity for the discovery of new understandings of women's experiences, as women who belly dance.

## **Acknowledgements**

With the completion of this work I express my admiration and appreciation of Dr Carolyn Michelle for her invaluable support and supervision of this project.

With the completion of this work I pay tribute to my family, in particular my beautiful daughter Rhiannon and my mother Florence for their continued support of my academic commitments.

With the completion of this work I thank those amazing women who have generously contributed their experiences of belly dancing to this research.

I express my sincere gratitude to my sister Trish, who gave me the chance to open my eyes, and subsequently my heart, to belly dancing.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## Introduction

Belly dancing is symbolized by an established set of iconic moves which have social recognition as indicative of a style of Middle Eastern or North African dance. As an activity, belly dancing fits into the category of patterned movement of the body, with rhythmic and at times repetitive, movements of the body.

Moreover, the activity of belly dancing is a physical process whereby a relationship is developed between physical movement and rhythm with most of the body movement being generated from the core or mid-section of the body, and the pelvis (Al-Rawi, 1999; Sellers-Young, 1992; Shay, 1995). This qualitative research examines how the belly dancing subject has been discursively constructed within the social sphere through a review of literature and a Foucauldian inspired genealogical tracing of film and television representations of belly dancing. It also explores the activity of belly dancing from the perspectives of 26 female belly dancers from New Zealand and Australia, to examine the adequacy of the dominant discourses in providing women with a means to articulate their experiences of belly dancing.

## My Inspiration

One night, over two decades ago, my sister took me to dinner in a Middle Eastern restaurant in Australia, to share a meal and see a performance by a belly dancer. We were in the middle of our main courses when suddenly the music took on an energetic spark and a woman appeared from behind a curtain at the rear of the restaurant. As she began to dance, her costume sparkled with a mass of reflected light at every shift and shimmy of her body. The lines of fringing across her shoulders and bra followed her movement with a syncopated delay, as if the rhythm of the music and the flow of her movement were inseparable. As I continued to watch, the audience faded from my consciousness, and the dancer became the music, her smile and sparkling eyes communicating an inner delight, as if she held a fascinating secret. At times the dancer's body moved with ferocity, challenging the delicate beading on the costume; then the tempo would shift and her body would slow to a sensual and serpentine fluidity, only to burst back into a

frenetic pace mirroring the journey of the music. I watched, captivated by the kaleidoscope of light that cascaded off the sequins on her costume, combining to surround her. This contemporary vision of what may have existed long ago blew a breath of light throughout the room. Before the intimacy of the moment could be tarnished by familiarity, with a flourish and a brief pose, the dancer disappeared back through the curtain. The rising sounds of conversation and cutlery began to awaken me from my enchantment; however something inside me had changed. This mystical and unusual activity called belly dancing brought a curiosity from within me bubbling to the surface that has remained in my life as an enduring fascination to this day.

As a dancer for the last 10 years, I have searched for reasons as to why I feel such a depth of connection to this stylised set of movements. While I have found information describing the historic purposes of the dance and assumptions about traditional meanings and purposes, their conclusions failed to resonate with the depth of passion that I had felt within my 'self'. My own development as a belly dancer had resulted in some amazing personal experiences of harmony between my mind, body and soul that I had not experienced before in my life. At times when I danced, my physical energy and senses became heightened, my mind became peaceful and I felt a sense of well-being emerge within me that I could not easily explain. In my passion for learning I connected with other belly dancers, some who practiced this dance simply as a form of exercise and some who were passionate about performing. Many of these women were generating originality in their costume and dance style, and in curious and lively discussions with them about their selection of style element preferences, many expressed an intention to represent what they felt was a unique relationship to belly dancing. The women suggested that while dancing, they had become aware of a difference within themselves, a sense of newness or a change from how they had known themselves to be, although many expressed some difficulty in articulating this sense of newness. At this my academic curiosity was piqued - so I set out to discover how adequate the dominant discourses are in terms of allowing women to articulate the full range of meanings and relationships they encounter while belly dancing.

## **Purpose of the Research**

The belly dancing subject has been defined within the public sphere in terms of the Orientalist and essentialist dominant discursive constructions. However, some women have difficulty articulating experiences of dancing that they perceive as being spiritual or inspirational in nature. This research seeks to examine the nature of the relationships between three spheres of meaning in belly dancing, these being 1) the social sphere and discourses of the social sphere; 2) the individual and personal sphere; and 3) the spiritual and inspirational sphere. These relationships are explored by counter-posing a Foucauldian genealogical tracing of dominant discursive constructions within the wider social sphere with women's own accounts of their experiences of belly dancing obtained through email and face to face interviews.

## **Aims and Objectives of the Research**

This research was guided by four objectives:

1. To seek to determine the dominant discursive constructions of the belly dancing subject.
2. To investigate whether women feel they are able to adequately express their own meanings and perceived relationships between the social, personal and spiritual aspects of belly dancing within the available discourses.
3. To utilize qualitative interview methods to allow for unique articulations and novel descriptions of belly dancing to come to light throughout the interview process.
4. To explore the range of discourses that 26 women adopt to describe their experiences of belly dancing.

## **Structure of the Thesis**

Chapter One provides an outline of the purpose, aims and objectives of this research and includes a brief personal reflection on my own introduction to belly dancing, including my motivation for embarking on this research.

Chapter Two offers a brief historical overview which explores how belly dancing and the belly dancing subject have been discursively constructed in a historical context. The overview segues into a broad literature review, drawing on journal articles, unpublished theses and literature from the public domain, to overview core debates within the relevant scholarship, and to provide an overview of how belly dancing and the belly dancing subject have been conceived in Orientalist and essentialist terms within dominant discursive constructions.

Chapter Three presents the theoretical paradigm used, outlines the research problem and details the methodological approach taken to the research. My choice of a combined poststructuralist, phenomenological and hermeneutical theoretical paradigm provides scope for consideration of the belly dancing subject as part of a set of known international and historical references, and as an individual engaging in the activity of belly dancing. Furthermore, this interpretivist approach allows for the examination of subjective experiences and consideration of the meanings that participants may make of those experiences.

Chapter Four presents a genealogical tracing of the discursively constructed belly dancing subject in a representative selection of scenes from 13 films and three television episodes, which have emerged in the public domain over the last 120 years. This chapter includes a discourse analysis of the dominant discursive formations within these scenes and examines how belly dancing has been constructed within a wider discursive field, which may provide possible frames of reference that shape women's understandings of belly dancing.

Chapter Five presents the results from an inductive thematic analysis of the transcripts from 19 email interviews and six face-to-face interviews, resulting in the identification of five key discursive themes, these being perceptions of belly dancing, belly dancing in performance, embodiment of belly dancing, examples of resistance, and novel discursive alternatives. In Chapter Five I present and discuss extracts from the interviews that are representative of both the discursive constructions under discussion in the previous chapters, and the five key themes identified in the analysis of the interviews.

Chapter Six discusses the key discursive themes identified in the participant interviews, and compares the findings of this study with insights drawn from the literature reviewed in Chapter Two. This final chapter shows how this research makes an original contribution to the body of academic scholarship by engaging a more holistic approach to the investigation of women's experiences of belly dancing. Employing a combined theoretical approach provides opportunities for participants to move beyond the known discursive horizon when relating their experiences of belly dancing and addresses an inadequacy in the body of existing literature, which has remained tethered to the dominant discursive constructions of belly dancing. This chapter provides an indication of the strengths and limitations of this research, the research implications and questions arising out of this work, and possible practical benefits arising from my research into negotiating the discursive constructions of belly dancing in New Zealand and Australia.

# CHAPTER TWO

## A Brief History of Belly Dancing

Belly dancing is a form of dance that has been referred to within the literature as an activity with unique historical, cultural and social meanings that have survived since Ancient times in the Middle East (Biran, 2003; Collon, 2003; Conover, 2007; Dallal, 2005; Dox, 2006; Garfinkel, 2003; Geer, 1992; Mazar, 2003; Sellers-Young, 1992; Sharif, 2004; Shay & Sellers-Young, 2003; Spencer, 2003; Tubb, 2003).

The practice of dancing has journeyed from Ancient Ur, 3000-6000 years BCE, with ancient artefacts, cave paintings, pottery and mythology dating from around 4000 BCE depicting images of women in poses that are similar to those achieved by women when belly dancing. Moreover, some of the artefacts and art from the ancient Near East has portrayed women engaged in activities such as weeping, playing musical instruments, singing and dancing (Spencer, 2003). The activity of dancing and belly dancing was common practice in some communities particularly during festival times and to mark special calendar events that had religious or cultural significance. A further purpose of ancient forms of dance presumed to be the cultural practice of worship of the Gods and Goddesses in an attempt to improve and protect both communities and individuals in early times (Al-Rawi, 1999; Andes, 1998; Sharif, 2004; Spencer, 2003; van Nieuwkerk, 1995).

Scholars suggest that during the early bronze-age, Egypt, Mesopotamia and the Levant became reliant on trade from surrounding areas and trade routes became the norm for the exchange of goods and services within the fertile crescent of the ancient Middle-East. The Levant became a central site of trade and exchange for Persians, Ottoman Turks, Phoenicians, Indians, nomadic Gypsies and Spaniards, among others. Many styles of dance also travelled these trade routes for many centuries, influencing and being influenced by many cultures along the way.

There was a shift in societal attitudes about dance with the reformation during the 15<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries AD when the practice of dance as ritual moved to a focus on the dance as a manifestation of the body in opposition to the intellect. Many forms of dance, including belly dancing, became discursively linked with paganism, and came under scrutiny as a base and uncontrolled manifestation of the body and of emotion and hence discouraged by the Christian Church (Arcangeli, 1994). When discussing dance in the religious literature in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Arcangeli (1994) suggests “the stereotype of the Witches’ Sabbath reached the peak of its diffusion in the same period, and it included dance as an inversion of religious procession and a way of worshipping the devil” (p. 145). Religious doctrine saw dancing as a form of madness and instructed that Christians needed to be more concerned with their souls than the impulses of their bodies, and consequently there was a prohibition on pictures and public performance (Arcangeli, 1994). The very pronounced religious views of the Christian Church and religious doctrine sent dance back behind closed doors and into disrepute.

It was in the time of the Napoleonic campaign in Egypt between 1789 and 1801 that a particular style of Middle Eastern and North African dance became known as belly dance amongst many other names and once again became known as entertainment (Keft-Kennedy, 2005; van Nieuwkerk, 1995; Sellers-Young, 1992). Belly dancing was subsequently introduced to the West by a group of Algerian dancers called Little Egypt, managed by Sol Bloom, who were taken through France and to the Chicago World’s Columbian Exhibition in 1893 (Sellers-Young, 1992). Between 1898 and 1930 there were several key who were actors and dancers who became known for portraying the Oriental style of dance in performances style throughout France, the United Kingdom and the United States. Some of these dancers achieved international fame for performing what became known as a style of modern dance with many names, including ‘danse du ventre’, Oriental dance, exotic dance, the stomach dance and the koochi koochi, as belly dancing moved from stage to film at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Very little is written about belly dancing from this time until the dance underwent something of a renaissance in the 1970s. More recently belly dancing is being performed within a range of modern contexts, sometimes with the use of contemporary music and cultural elements, and in non-traditional places such as concerts and street performances. Furthermore, contemporary belly dancing continues to be signified by an established set of iconic moves that are specific to belly dancing and give this style of dance societal recognition within New Zealand and Australia, such as ‘snake arms’ as depicted in the following image.



Figure 1: *Saida* [Photograph]. (2008). Courtesy of Marion Cowper



In recent times a range of styles of belly dancing have started to emerge which indicate a fusion of styles from dance forms such as Turkish, Arabic, Persian, African tribal, American tribal and modern Egyptian, through to hip hop, ballroom dance, and the emerging style of industrial belly dancing. These complex fusions of style elements and have developed in the contemporary belly dancing within the context of sometimes contradictory and competitive discourses. What is worn, what movements are preferred, what attitudes are acceptable, and what name the style has, are important in differentiating between both individuals and groups of dancers. The following image depicts one of the many styles of individually designed costumes that fall into the category of Tribal belly dance.



**Figure 2:** *Trish: Tribal Belly Dancer* [Photograph]. (2005). Courtesy of Trish Cowper.

This brief historical overview has shown how belly dancing has emerged through many different eras over thousands of years and has been influenced by both cultural and contextual expectations throughout these times.

## **Literature Review**

There exists a considerable body of historical, anthropological and ethnographic scholarship relating to belly dancing. While some of this body of known work has been in development over the last 35 years or so, the bulk of the literature has been written within the last 20 years. From the 1970s, scholarship began to discuss embedded Orientalist and essentialist assumptions, which were seen as part of the assumed culture of belly dancing. The belly dancer is positioned within the current literature as a cultural manifestation, existing relative to aspects of social life and structures (Bock, 2005; Conover, 2007; Desmond, 1993; Hanna, 1979; Kelly, 2008; Koritz, 1994; Garfias, 1984; McDearmon, 1978; van Nieuwkerk, 1995; Potuoglu-Cook, 2006; Shay, 1995; Walkowitz, 2003). More recently the literature has sharpened the focus onto embodiment of the dance, the performing body in the global context, and identity development in belly dancing. The latest empirical research in this area has been three master's theses and a Doctoral thesis which authors explore belly dancing as a counter-culture with values and practices that are enacted in response to dominant cultural themes (Bock, 2005; Conover, 2007; Kelly, 2008; Keft-Kennedy, 2005). In what follows, I trace the trends in the existing literature and examine core debates within the existing scholarship, and then review the most recent and immediately relevant empirical research relating to women's engagement in belly dancing as a practice.

Some of literature proposes that dance and belly dancing has survived from Ancient times in the Middle East, and has existed in the context of a relationship to numinous, religious or culturally significant activities (Collon, 2003; Mazar, 2003; Sharif, 2004; Spencer, 2003). However there has been recent debate over the authenticity of some conclusions drawn about dance which have associated contemporary styles of belly dancing with ancient forms of dance.

Some authors have begun to question contemporary individual identification with historical representations of belly dancing that may have emerged from Ancient times, challenging the authenticity of some of the conclusions that have been drawn about belly dancing, from depictions and two dimensional artefacts (Bock, 2005; Conover, 2007; Dox, 2006; Lorraine, 1993; Sellers-Young, 1992; Shay & Sellers-Young, 2003; Spencer, 2003).

Throughout the 1900s, the West had been in the process of recreating the orient through Orientalist discourses and enduring style elements. Belly dancing too, has been constructed within a set of imaginative geographies, or associated discursive formations, centred on 'here' and projected towards 'there'. Some of the idealized Orientalised beliefs have been used to characterise belly dancing with the qualities of spirituality, sensuality, mystery, exoticism, and the forbidden (Bock, 2005; Conover, 2007; Dallal, 2005; Dox, 2006; Keft-Kennedy, 2005; Kelly, 2008; Koritz, 1994; Sellers-Young, 1992; Shay & Sellers-Young, 2003). A section of the literature clusters around postcolonial critiques of Orientalism and the ways in which the West has recreated the Orient and the belly dancer through Orientalist discourses.

During the second-wave of feminism in the 1970s, belly dancing became popularized as a subversive practice. Many of the publications about the belly dancing subject coded belly dancer as an exercise which connected women with female empowerment. Belly dancing was marketed as a healthy and liberating exercise that could bring women closer to her essential nature and achieve a closer relationship to her body, a trend which has since moved to DVD's and continued to grow in popularity (Dallal, 2004; Meilach, 1975; Shariff, 2004; Wilson, 1972). However, the resulting commodification of belly dancing marked an intersection between redevelopment of the dance as a fetishized object and transgression of the common stereotypes to codify belly dancing as a site of female agency and empowerment (Bock, 2005; Conover, 2007; Dox, 2007; Kelly, 2008; Keft-Kennedy, 2005; Sellers-Young, 1992; Shay & Sellers-Young 2003).

This literature has identified the process of Western appropriation and Imperialist coding of the belly dancing subject as the ‘Other’ as eroticizing the East through the practice of belly dancing. Furthermore, discussion of belly dancing as Orientalist self-exoticism has been extended through Orientalist fantasies of the Mother Goddess and notions of female empowerment associated with the belly dancing subject (Andes, 1998; Bock, 2005; Conover, 2007; Dox, 2006; Keft-Kennedy, 2005; Kelly, 2008; Koritz, 1994; Shay & Sellers-Young 2003).

Authors continue to critique Orientalist assumptions that the belly dancing subject has been constructed by, and subsequently enacts, a selection of universalised historical assumptions which have signified a belly dancing subject (Conover, 2007; Deagon, 2006; Dox, 2006; Kelly, 2008; Shay & Sellers-Young, 2003). Sellers-Young and Shay (2003) argue that some of the universalised less concrete artefacts relating to belly dance are explanations and assumptions that are ‘Orientalist and romantic projections’ (p. 25). Authors suggest that embedded Orientalist and essentialist assumptions which codify the belly dancing subject, construct a picture of the Orient with just a selection of information, from which many subjects and individual stories have been excluded.

Recent research has been undertaken by Brigid Kelly, who problematized the Middle Eastern/ Western binary by introducing the notion of a globalised context, and juxtaposing indigenous belly dancing with globalized and hybridized belly dancing. The author had a focus on trans-culturation and some of the different ways globalised belly dance has become local in the hands of New Zealand belly dancers. Kelly completed a focus group, one-to-one interviews and email interviews and the resulting data was separated into documents, of which one centred on ideas about embodiment and femininity, and the other relating to trans-culturation and local identity. The author provided a critical examination of New Zealand belly dancers’ perceptions about the dance, about femininity, and about doing belly dance in a New Zealand context. Kelly (2008) suggests that “experiences of the dance becoming ‘natural,’ or habitual, almost certainly fuel some dancers’ ideas about women bonding across cultures via a sort of universal female movement system, or of belly dancing generating greater intercultural

recognition and understanding” (p. 108). Furthermore, Kelly (2008) found that “Globalised belly dance culture, draws on real and imagined elements of Middle Eastern/North African cultures, as well as aspects of the culture(s) in which the individual belly dance community is based” (p.16). The researcher concluded that Orientalist assumptions by the dancers became diminished through familiarity with the dance and suggested that belly dancers “are not homogeneous and enjoy the dance form in multiple and diverse ways” (p. 110) and suggests that participants “are acculturated not to Middle Eastern/North African cultures, but to globalised belly dance culture, which is not solely a ‘Western’ fantasy but a trans-cultural hybrid into which all interested parties may have input” (p. 113).

Much of the cultural coding of the belly dancing subject is underpinned by essentialised assumptions regarding the sexualised female body (Bock, 2005; Dallal, 2005; Kelly, 2008; Sellers-Young, 1992; Sharif, 2004). Many of the dominant discourses have contextually defined belly dancing as a natural expression of a woman, whilst women continue to be sexualized through their appropriation of and participation in the practice of this form of dance. Furthermore, the belly dancing subject continues to be coded with the feminized qualities of sensuality, mystery, exoticism, the forbidden, including female only experiences such as childbirth and female empowerment, amongst others (Al-Rawi, 1996; Andes, 1998; Buonaventura, 1998; Dallal, 2005). However, much of the literature demonstrates an acknowledgement of the recent shift from coding belly dancing as a gendered homogeneous activity to a focus on a belly dancing ‘subject’ who participates in the activity of belly dancing at some level. Consequentially, the literature debates the inherent limitations in characterising belly dancing and the belly dancing subject, solely in essentialist terms (Bock, 2005; Conover, 2007; Dox, 2006; Keft-Kennedy, 2005; Kelly, 2008; Koritz, 1994; Sellers-Young, 1992; Shay & Sellers-Young, 2003; Wright & Dreyfus, 1998).

Recent literature brings the belly dancing subject into discussion as challenging the assumptions of the dominant Western cultural context through the use of fused or cross-cultural elements in costume and performance.

The latest research in this area was a report from Sheila Bock (2005). The author explores how dancers “engage with the contradictory meanings communicated through the dance” and “the way that global has been annexed to the cultural” through a focus on the belly dancing body (p. 9). Bock (2005) conducted interviews with dancers to investigate the strategies employed by dancers in the process of reframing the meanings of their performances, while colluding with existing popular understandings of belly dancing. This scholar’s research engages with current discussion in the literature suggesting that belly dancing is meaningful to individuals and to communities. Bock proposes that “it is through flexible rhetorical strategies in internal evaluations of the dance that women have been able to define and redefine the meanings of the dance, allowing it to evolve in shifting contexts without completely abandoning the power of the margins that many women have found so valuable” (p. 70). The author suggests that the belly dancer is in the process of style construction however the attributed meanings may be ambiguous to onlookers.

The discussion of the belly dancing subject and the experience of belly dancing has often been framed in terms of the Cartesian mind/body dualism, the dance movements treated as a method of communication, demonstrative of social attitude and relations that are both enacted and produced through the body (Desmond, 1993; Keft-Kennedy, 2005). The female belly dancing body continues to come under discussion as the exotic body, the erotic body, the performing body and the exercising body (Bock, 2005; Conover, 2007; Kelly, 2008; Keft-Kennedy, 2005; van Nieuwkerk, 1995; Shay & Sellers-Young, 2003; Wright & Dreyfus, 1998). Frequently this corporeal coding is underpinned by the Cartesian dualism and linked to the sexualised female body and biological role (Bock, 2005; Dallal, 2005; Kelly, 2008; Sellers-Young, 1992; Sharif, 2004).

However, more recent literature brings into discussion a non-normative belly dancing body (Bock, 2005; Conover, 2007; Kelly, 2008; Keft-Kennedy, 2005). This non-normative body has been signified by the addition of tattoos, piercings and a compilation of styles elements in costume.

The latest research in this area was a report from Georgia Conover (2007). Conover examined how tribal style dancers use two embodied devices, signification and performativity, to challenge naturalised identity constructions of gender and sexuality that are layered onto belly dancing bodies. The author brings tribal style dance into discussion as a cyborg creation that transgresses power relationships inherent in borrowing elements of dance and costume from other cultures. Moreover, the author suggests that “because the dance is temporally and spatially enmeshed within national social constructions *and* the processes of globalization, dancers are able to pull from multiple cultural sources for inspiration to create identities that have localized meaning” (p. 119). Conover’s research methodology included participant observation, seven interviews, and process-tracking using secondary source data, including videos and magazines. Further, Conover’s research examines the construction of belly dancing with respect to Orientalist discourses and a third space or in-between space where differences are negotiated (Conover, 2007).

Idealised Orientalised and essentialised beliefs are not always seen as positive attributes. Keft-Kennedy (2005) describes belly dancing in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century as being known publically as the “culturally essentialised stereotype of Eastern sensuality and depravity” (p. 85). Furthermore, Keft-Kennedy (2005) suggests that “belly dance is transgressive because it disables social assumptions that women should not (publicly) shake, wobble or draw attention to their breasts, hips, abdomens and especially their pelvises” (p. 292).

## **Significance of the Literature**

This chapter has provided a brief analysis of the body of literature that discusses belly dancing and the belly dancing subject as a generic form of folk dance, though to a distinct sub-culture, indicating how the belly dancing subject has been contained in historical, Orientalist and essentialist discourses. Further, this review identifies how recent discussion in the literature has re-focused on the subject through the use of postcolonial critique, to examine the emergence of a counter culture of belly dancing, with values and practices that are embodied in response to dominant cultural themes.

Recent scholarship critiques Orientalist discursive constructions of the belly dancing subject by questioning whether the subject can be contained by existing Orientalist and essentialist assumptions which codify the belly dancing subject. Authors have recently brought into debate dominant discursive constructions that attempt to generalise information about the East in constructing a broader picture, at the expense of individual stories. Recent scholarship characterises the belly dancing subject as representative of a combination of fused or cross-cultural elements that challenge and disrupt established dominant Western cultural contexts. However, by attempting to examine counter-cultural resistance, the authors have not escaped Orientalist dichotomies as non-normal space may be considered to be defined on all sides by the Orientalised 'Other'.

Further, recent discussion of the non-normative and performative belly dancing body considers transitions across the boundaries of the established constructions to be signified and located in the corporeal, whether in the adornments of the body or the physical expressions of the body. Subsequently, corporeal constructions of the belly dancing subject continue a discursive dependence on some interaction with the public sphere, inclusive of a presumed male gaze. Therefore, although recent research appears unified in an attempt to counter some of the assumptions imbedded in the dominant discourses, the discussion cannot dislodge Cartesian dualism by continuing to consider belly dancing as a product of the relationship between what is known about the subject and how the subject becomes embodied.

Contemporary discussions of belly dancing draw from a broader globalized pool of information, largely due to the influence of the internet, and these discussions reflect a developing trend in a focus on a belly dancing subject, rather than the activity of belly dancing as a cultural construct. Recent empirical research discusses a more post-modernist belly dancing subject, who is an autonomous agent in the process of appropriating belly dancing as a hybrid or fusion of cultural styles and identity. Consequently, the universalizing discourses have become destabilized and space has been created for individual narratives.



However, while the belly dancing subject continues to be defined by embodiment of the iconic dance, the belly dancer will remain subject to those dominant discursive constructions prevailing within the public sphere. Furthermore, the literature shows that continued research and discussion of the belly dancing subject has provided no guarantee that mind/body dualism has proved less effective when employed as a means of unifying and stabilizing the meanings of belly dancing for some dancers, with much of the existing literature remaining tethered to a discursively constructed Cartesian belly dancing subject. Moreover, the literature has been unable to completely dismantle the Orientalist and essentialist dominant discursive constructions, thus the belly dancing subject has remained firmly attached to continued objectification under the male gaze.

In the process of conducting this review, I identified a gap where there had been no discussion on the question of an individual's relationship with and between three spheres of meaning in belly dancing, these being; the social sphere and discourses of the social world, the individual and personal sphere and the spiritual and inspirational sphere. Hence, a central question for this research was: If dominant discursive understandings of the dance are defined in terms of Orientalism and essentialism, how do women articulate alternative meanings and experiences that they may perceive as being spiritual or inspirational in nature? My research into this question consequently began by investigating how the belly dancing subject has been constructed within the wider cultural realm, and then asking how effectively women were able to articulate their experiences using the available discourses. In the discussion that follows, I will outline how I went about investigating the questions that arose from the literature review.

# CHAPTER THREE

## Research Paradigm and Methodology

Feminist theory has examined gendered power relationships and the ways in which the female subject has been categorised, historicised and enculturated in societies that are influenced by an androcentric bias (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007; Desmond, 1999; Hesse-Biber, 2007). Belly dancing too has been viewed through a patriarchal gaze by dancers and by others in society (Deagon, 1999; Keft-Kennedy, 2005; Wright et al, 1998). Contemporary belly dancers are subject to, and bearers of, the established discourse and the associated meanings, relations of power, and rules and regulations that have shaped the practice of belly dancing to date (Bock, 2005; Collon, 2003; Conover, 2007; Desmond, 1993; Kelly, 2008; Koritz, 1994; Garfias, 1984; Mazar, 2003; McDearmon, 1978; van Nieuwkerk, 1995; Sharif, 2004; Shay, 1995; Spencer, 2003; Walkowitz, 2003). The objective of this thesis is to investigate the discourses that women use to articulate the meanings and understandings they have about the practice of belly dancing from a poststructuralist standpoint. In this chapter I outline the research paradigms of post-positivism, phenomenology and hermeneutics, which underpin the primary methodological approach of poststructuralist discourse analysis.

## Research Problem

The literature review in the previous chapter has examined how contemporary literature has framed the belly dancing subject as a culturally and discursively constructed subject. However the relationship between the individual experience of belly dancing and the social construction of the belly dancing subject generated many questions, including: How are meanings, relationships and experiences that may be unique to belly dance recognised and articulated by individual dancers?

Furthermore, how adequate are the dominant discourses in terms of allowing women to articulate the full range of meanings and relationships they encounter while belly dancing? And do women create counter or hybrid discourses in order to articulate unique aspects of their belly dancing experience?

## **Research Perspectives**

### **Post-Positivism**

My intention was to investigate the dominant social reality of belly dancing while creating space for a multiplicity of meanings that may exist for dancers outside of the dominant discourses (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007; Green & Stinson, 1999). Due to my desire to do more than merely look for a set of reliable ‘facts’ about the shared experience of belly dancing, and after considering the limitations of the positivist reliance on an assumption that a universal truth can be attained by the use of scientific procedures, I decided to employ a post-positivist approach (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007; Green & Stinson, 1999; Hawkesworth, 2007; Hesse-Biber, 2007). Post-positivism is a critique of Positivism, which maintains the basic assumptions of Positivism: ontological realism, the possibility and desirability of objective truth, and the use of experimental methodology, while concluding that human knowledge is based on conjecture rather than on a set of verifiable facts.

### **Poststructuralism**

In opposition to the Humanist theoretical assumption that each individual has a unique essence, post structuralism proposes that subjectivity is irreducible to essence, contradictory and constantly being recomposed within various discourses from various discursive positions. Poststructuralism is underpinned by an ontological assumption that reality is socially constructed, and the epistemological belief that exploring subjectivity can facilitate more meaningful understandings of people’s beliefs and motivations (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007; Green & Stinson, 1999; Weedon, 1997).

I also employed the theories of Cartesian dualism, phenomenology and hermeneutics to investigate how the belly dancing subject has been constructed within the public sphere.

## **The Cartesian Dualism**

In Cartesian terms, the mind and the body are positioned in opposition, with mental processes being understood to have superiority over the physical body, and human action attributed to the rational processes of the mind (Csikszentmihayli & Hunter, 2000). The mechanistic mind/body dualism was popularised by Descartes from the late 1600s and suggests that sense perceptions are dependent on the body, but awareness of them is registered by the soul, as a part of the mind.

## **Phenomenology**

Phenomenology sits in stark contrast to the Cartesian system of representation by suggesting that there are active structures to subjective consciousness through which knowledge is gained and meanings are bestowed (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007; Finlay, 2008). Both intuitive and interpretive, the phenomenological process results in understandings that embody two levels of meaning; the first level is improvisatory, which in turn informs the second level, the rendering of meaning from the experience (Fraleigh, 2000).

Because an act of phenomenological embodied cognition requires the interaction of brain, body and world, experiences of belly dancing can be considered, through the phenomenological lens, to be a result of interactions between these three components. Finlay (2008) explains, “Phenomenology is retaining an empathic openness to the world while reflexively identifying and restraining pre-understandings, so as to engage phenomena in them-selves” (p. 29).

Further, “the reward comes with extraordinary, though fleeting, moments of disclosure where the phenomenon reveals something new about itself and understanding acquires greater depth” (p. 29). Consequently, the phenomenological theoretical focus provides space for the unexpected within this research.

## **Hermeneutics**

McNamara (1999) suggests “the primary aim of hermeneutics is to discover the significant meaning of the phenomenon” (p. 173). A hermeneutical theoretical standpoint considers existence from a temporal and historical standpoint and from within two realms of experience, or inner and outer worlds, that form the

individual horizon (McNamara, 1999). The presumed horizon of experience creates space for the attribution of meaning to significant phenomena that may be experienced by women who belly dance, occurring beyond the definitions of the established rhetoric. Language, too, is an important consideration in hermeneutics, as it is through the spoken or written language that contextual meanings are conveyed, although meanings are not considered to be purely bound to either the text or the interpretation of the text (Kearney, 2007; McNamara, 1999). McNamara provides a useful explanation thus, “As the researcher gathers data, the essences of the phenomena are discerned and described, forming a foundation for the construction of themes, and later analysis of the data” (p. 172). The inclusion of a hermeneutical theoretical perspective in a combined theoretical approach provides a useful framework the investigation of the experience of belly dancing beyond the known discursive horizon.

## **Methodological Approach**

### **Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis**

Representations of the belly dancing subject within society appear to provide historical and contemporary evidence of a broader ‘truth’ about the belly dancing subject. The following selection of Foucault’s ideas on genealogy, subjectivity, regimes of truth and sexuality provided the theoretical underpinnings for an exploration into the established discursive constructions of the belly dancing subject within the social sphere. Many representations of the belly dancing subject become common knowledge by being communicated through film and television media. Genealogy considers regimes of truth to be inconsistent, unstable and at times contradictory, and attempts to parody the established truths to expose how power has influenced the construction of truth throughout history (Foucault, 1977). Foucault’s genealogical method provided scope for tracing the presumed ahistorical belly dancing subject as a historical artefact defined by plural, and contradictory, historical definitions. Therefore, I have deployed a Foucauldian genealogical tracing of film and television depictions to examine the belly dancing subject as a historical and cultural artefact, produced by dominant discursive constructions.

People are said to actively internalize social and cultural norms and to enact established physical, mental and behavioural techniques (Gatenby & Hume, 2004; Weedon, 1997). The individual is subjectified by enacting the available discursive constructions, and consequently participating in maintaining their own subjectivity, and socially constructed divisions then isolate individuals from each other by privileging what is considered normal over what is defined as abnormal.

Foucault proposes that regimes of truth or discursive constructions are based on interpretation, are produced within a historical context, and as such privileged truths subjugate lesser truths (Rittenburg, 2010). Furthermore, forms of power are seen to perpetually produce systems of knowledge or regimes of truth by making forms of truth historically possible and by determining the conditions under which knowledge is deemed to be true or false (Foucault, 1982; Gatenby and Hume, 2004; Rabinow, 1984). Power is said to pervade and operate in the individual's everyday practices and requires the discipline of self-surveillance and introspective habits (Foucault, 1977; Webb, 1997). Sex is recognised as a primary locus of power with no essential nature which is always historically and socially specific and made recognizable through discourses, and is seen also as a mechanism for constituting subjects by governing them and exercising control over their bodies. The belly dancing body is the primary interface of information between the audience and the dancer and Foucault suggests that there is no natural body and that, as a corporeal reality, the body is constructed through discourse (Weedon, 1997). Sexuality can be further defined in terms of the Eastern art erotic or the confessional, as in the West (Bolar, 1999; Desmond, 1991; Foucault, 1978).

By embodying belly dancing, the dancer is seen as embodying the societal and cultural assumptions that belong to that construction and is consequently subjectified through an association with the dominant discursive constructions. To investigate the relationships between the discursively constructed belly dancing subject and the public sphere, this research has drawn on the ideas of John Berger and Laura Mulvey concerning the male gaze. The belly dancing subject has been characterised in film and television media as in performance, and therefore dependent on the gaze.

Furthermore, that gaze is male and presumed to be heterosexual (Berger, 1972). The belly dancing subject is presumed to be aware that she is both surveyed by the male gaze and surveyor of herself through the internalised male gaze, with her identity and self-esteem defined by how successful she is at maintaining the 'visage'. Mulvey argues that the camera engages voyeuristically and sadistically with the female object, therefore disempowering her. Women 'appear' to be on display for the gaze, while the owner of the gaze remains outside of the frame and the viewer oscillates between the fetishistic and the voyeuristic. Women are voyeuristically objectified and identify with the 'ideal image' on screen in a narcissistic process. The passive female object appears to be surveyed, compliant and mute, while the active male gaze is assumed to be constant, watching, and assesses according to pre-set male standards for desirability (Mulvey, 1975).

## **Deconstruction**

Foucault, Berger and Mulvey provided a contemporary theoretical focus to this poststructuralist research which enabled deconstruction of the dominant discursive constructions of the belly dancing subject in film and television media.

The process of deconstruction is underpinned by the assumption that power relations exist in discourse, can be seen in the privileging of discourses, and that there are no objective, universal truths (Green & Stinson, 1999).

A selection of scenes from film and television media were examined to look for contradictions and internal oppositions and to investigate what is present and what is absent by juxtaposing appearances of the belly dancer in film and television narratives. It was believed that by examining and destabilizing the existing binaries in the dominant discursive constructions employed to define the belly dancing subject, the meta-narratives or privileged discursive meanings that hold the subject belly dancer as a construction would be revealed. The dominant discursive systems of representation - being the gaze, Orientalism, and essentialism - that entangled the construction of the subject belly dancer, could also then be dismantled. As Foucault (1978) suggests, due to a multiplicity of power relations at play, resistance can occur at the points of weakness where these power relations intersect.

## **Methodology for the Discourse Analysis**

This research employed the research methods of the genealogy and both face to face and email interviews. Dominant discursive constructions of belly dancing were examined for their potential influence within three spheres of meaning for belly dancers: the social sphere, the personal sphere, and the spiritual sphere. The discourse analysis identified the range of discourses in circulation within the wider public domain, while the interview process investigated the efficacy of these discourses for describing the experiences of belly dancing.

The investigation of belly dancing in media began with a broad search of information in film and television depictions gathered from relevant journal articles and the web sites Wikipedia, IMDB, [www.filmsite.org](http://www.filmsite.org), TCM movie database, Google searches, You tube, and Archive.Org. The You Tube results provided particular references to the appearance of belly dancing in film and the search brought up references to films that identified different names for the dance - for example 'exotic dance' or 'Little Egypt'. The search brought up proper names of dancers such as Princess Raja, Isadora Duncan, Maud Allen and Ruth St Denis, and while some of these were proper names, some were shown to have become generic terms for performers of belly dancing for example Little Egypt. The search included researching DVDs of films from as early as 1929, some of which were accessed through video rental shops, or purchased on the internet; however some were accessible only through the belly dance community. In many cases the name of the dancer within any particular scene from the selection was not readily available and therefore details of the film selections were compiled including the year of the film, film title, dancer (if available), and documented information about the context of the dance within the film.

In order to keep this analysis within manageable constraints I deconstructed 13 film scenes and three television scenes, and conducted a discourse analysis drawing on Mulvey and Berger's ideas to reveal any common discursive constructions, categorised the resulting data into dominant themes. Subsequently, a discussion of the interview data included an examination into resistance to further aid in defining the power dynamics in play.



This was because resistance is the point at which power is confronted, limits are defined, and new understandings can be developed (Foucault, 1982).

## **Participants**

Participants for the face to face and email interviews were recruited from belly dancing classes and from approaches made to established tutors that are working in the field of belly dancing as well as email approaches to dancers within the belly dance community. Potential participants were provided with a letter of introduction that introduced this research and included an invitation to participate (Appendix 1). The letter clearly stated that participants were free to agree or decline to take part in this study, and that their decision would not affect their participation in classes in any way. Should they have expressed an interest in participating in the survey, they were to contact the researcher to confirm their interest. The email and interview respondents were all women and they were not required to provide their age, although most did so. Each respondent was familiar with the research topic and with what they understand to be belly dancing and were all dancers with prior ideas and experience of what belly dancing is. The sample was comprised of 19 email respondents and six face-to-face interviewees between the ages of 25 and 50 years, who had experience of belly dancing ranging from 9 months to fourteen years.

As this was an exploratory study, and the number of participants was not large or in any way a representative sample, respondents were not required to provide any personal demographic information. This also assisted in protecting participants' autonomy, as the belly dance community is quite small.

## **Methodology for the Interview Process**

The post-positivist qualitative method of open ended interviews was chosen to allow the participants to define their own experiences and provide insight into participants' understandings and experiences of belly dancing. The open ended questions (Appendix 3) were designed to place each participant in the position of reflecting on her own, individual experiences of her dance practice, and provided an opportunity for participants to suggest meanings that they may have made of these experiences.

The open-ended questions allowed space for the participant to attempt to articulate any inspirational and spiritual experiences that may have occurred during dancing. The selection of an open ended interview schedule allowed spaces for both usual and unusual concepts to emerge within the participants' narratives. A post-positivist approach allowed for more in depth investigation into experiences that might initially have proved challenging to articulate or to find an adequate explanation for. The participants were provided with opportunities to consider their responses, to add any information, clarify any statements and following the completion of the interview were invited to go back through the questions to make any further comment if they wished. This method of interviewing allowed time for each participant to consider and articulate her responses throughout the interview and subsequently be free to feel differently from that time on. Each interview was conducted in a safe and private place as agreed to by both researcher and participant, and was between 45 to 90 minutes in duration. The interview schedule was also available by email when geographical or time constraints made a face-to-face interview impossible for some participants. If potential participants responded by email a hard copy of the information letter and consent form was sent to their physical address. When these consent forms had been returned and received by the researcher, then the respondent was emailed the questions.

## **Ethical Issues**

### **Informed Consent**

The sample was adult women who were provided with a letter informing them about the project and a consent form outlining their rights and the possible risks involved (Appendix 1). Respondents were informed that this research comprised some part of the course requirements for a Masters of Social Sciences degree at the University of Waikato, had been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, and that their participation was both voluntary and anonymous. They were also reminded of their option to decline to participate or to subsequently withdraw from the project and have their information removed from the data corpus. They were advised that they had the right to withdraw from this research up to and including July 30<sup>th</sup> 2010, but that after this date they wouldn't be able to withdraw information.

If participants did wish to withdraw before this date, they were made aware that they could contact the researcher, Marion Cowper, or the researcher's supervisor Dr. Carolyn Michelle, at the University of Waikato. Full contact details were provided on the letter of invitation that was given to potential participants.

### **Potential Harm to Participants, Confidentiality and Anonymity**

The belly dancing community is inclusive of much fusion and individuality, largely due to the absence of a universal curriculum or syllabus. Hence, the possibility existed that potential participants may have developed recognizable, stylistic aspects of belly dancing that may have made them identifiable within the belly dance community. Therefore the participants were consulted prior to the face-to-face interviews, to ascertain whether there were unique aspects of their participation in belly dancing (such as recognizable costume or style of dance) that would aid in their identification. Where necessary, these details were omitted or changed and the participants were informed that pseudonyms would be used in the written report. The completed interviews were then selectively transcribed for analysis. The narratives were then examined to reveal both discursive regularities and dominant discursive trends.

### **Ethical Issues relating to a Postmodernist Theoretical Approach**

There are some potential ethical risks associated with the use of discourse analysis as a tool. These include the risk of reifying discourse, an emphasis on the linguistic construction of a social reality at the risk of overshadowing other contributors, and the possible consequences of shifting the attention away from what is being analysed, towards the analysis itself (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). When discourse is under investigation there also needs to be a consideration that all discursive impacts are not equal (Hein, 1993). For example, in the case of the topics within this research, some participants may hear a descriptor and then extend it into a verb; for instance they may hear the term 'feminine' and extend it to the term 'sexual', or some may hear the term 'spiritual' and extend to it the term 'religious'.

Further, Poststructuralist analysis may produce new discursive formations that then generate new power/knowledge constellations (Hawkesworth, 2007) and hence as a researcher I was alert for any developing unintended constructions or recreations of another grand narrative or fixed category defining ‘the belly dancer’ that might lead me to universalize or generalize across participants. While the participants all dance in a genre that they believe is belly dancing, sharing the name does not guarantee any other shared assumptions as to the purpose or practice of this dance for each individual. Individual dancers may experience dance in different ways as self-determining agents (Mc Nay, 1992). Also, I did not intend to focus on any particular style, as it was crucial for this research to acknowledge difference and diversity (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007; Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007).

### **Ethical Issues relating to my Role as a Researcher**

As Hesse Biber and Piatelli (2007) suggest, “multiple truths and diverse knowledges become the actual product of research when the subjectivity, location and humanness of the knower are included” (p. 498). As a researcher who is also a belly dancer and a tutor of belly dancers, I have my own position and unique scaffolding of knowledge and assumptions about what I believe belly dancing is and can be. Just as the participants in this research exist within their own social constructs, I exist within my own, yet both my understandings and those of other dancers around me are mediated through common discursive constructs. This underlying assumption influenced my decision to use a schedule of open-ended questions as a qualitative research tool which would facilitate individual investigation and solicit unique, subjective understandings from the participants. The participants were made aware of my position as a tutor and my passion for belly dancing at the onset of the face-to-face interviews. Some participants may have initially perceived an unequal balance of power between themselves and me due to my position as researcher and tutor. However, I believed that by providing information about ‘who’ I was and my connection to belly dancing, I offered an opportunity for each participant to define herself. Once I had advised the participant of my feelings for belly dancing my point of view was then retired for the rest of the interview.

Therefore, while I felt very much like a collaborator with other dancers in these research relationships, the interview was intended to focus on their responses and at no time could be classified as a discussion of my point of view. The schedule of questions was designed to facilitate the participants in responding from their own perspective, about their own individual experiences, and this focus was also made clear to the participants at the onset of the interview.

The main interview techniques that I used included minimal encouragers, reflection, and asking for clarification of any main points.

Although I had been in a position of instructing some of the possible respondents, class participation had not been assessed and the information sheet clearly stated that agreeing or declining to participate in the research would not affect their participation in classes in any way.

### **Copyright**

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### **Conclusion**

By combining the poststructuralist, phenomenological and hermeneutical theoretical frameworks, I was able to consider the belly dancing subject as part of a set of known international historical references, *and* as a unique individual experience. This combined standpoint has been underpinned by qualitative assumptions, including the dependence of the subject of belly dancing on historical and contemporary contexts, the subjective lived experience of belly dancing, and presupposed internal and external horizons of experience.

Furthermore, this combined interpretivist approach allowed for the study of subjective experiences and the consideration of the meanings that the participants may make of those experiences. In the next chapter I will present a genealogical tracing of the belly dancing subject in film and television over the last 120 years. I will analyse how the belly dancing subject has been discursively constructed in 13 film scenes and three television scenes, which best represent how the belly dancing subject has been constructed within this media.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## **Belly Dancing within the Social Sphere**

The belly dancing subject has been represented in the social sphere through film and television media depictions from the late 1800s through to the present day. The purpose of this chapter is to present a genealogical investigation into a representative sample of 13 film and three television media depictions of the belly dancing subject from 1923, extending across this timeline. My research questions intended to gain insight into the experience of belly dancing and whether established discourses are sufficient for dancers to articulate their personal experiences. This genealogy will complement my research enquiry by examining the dominant discourses that have been employed by film and television media in constructing images of the belly dancing subject. The analysis of relevant scenes from film and television media provide a key component of the wider discursive field in which women make sense of belly dancing and hence may provide frames of reference that shape their expectations, understandings and experiences. This analysis begins with a brief review of the emergence of belly dancing in the late 1800s and a profile of Maud Allen, one of the key performers at that time.

## **The Orientalized Belly Dancer**

The appropriation of the Oriental dancer within film began in the early 1900s, when the film industry began the construction of an imagined geography of the East. As Orientalized dance moved through France to the UK and into the United States, this dance was attributed with many descriptive names along the way, such as danse du ventre, Oriental dance, exotic dance, the stomach dance and the koochi koochi amongst others. Likewise, there were several key Western artists performing the dance, including Theda Bara, Mata Hari, Little Egypt, Princess Raja, Ella Lola, Isadora Duncan, Ruth St Denis, Gertrude Hoffman and Maud Allen. These, and other Western dancers, became known for performing what was presumed to be the newly appropriated Oriental dance style, which was more a novel fusion of style elements from the performer's own dance background and training.



**Figure 3:** *Fritzi Schaffer as Salome* [Photograph]. (1910). Library of Congress LC-B2- 2471-4

The many names for the dance styles and performers eroticised and romanticised the Oriental dance style in historical, social and political discourse and exemplified the Orient/Occident binary that existed in common rhetoric of the time. Commonalities across artists' renderings of the dance included depictions of the disassociated 'Other', the sexualised 'Other', and the feminized Orient, achieved by employing Orientalized elements and building on the imaginative identities of the gendered East (Deagon, 2006; Desmond, 1991; Desmond, 1999, Keft-Kennedy, 2005; Kelly, 2008).



**Figure 4:** *Mata Hari* [Photograph]. (1905). Museum Guimet, Paris

Orientalism was pervasive in England in the early 1900s, and the majority of the information that was available to the West about the East had been written by travellers, reflecting a Western colonialist imagining of the East. By 1908, barefoot dancing was a new arrival in England, and Maud Allan was emerging as a key figure in the arrival of an Eastern style of dance as a barefoot dancer in England. A Canadian born Californian, Maud Allan began her career in dancing 1908 at the age of 35, a career which lasted over two years with an eventual unprecedented run of over 250 performances. The sexualised and mysterious Oriental style of performance, with its associated explicit and revealing costuming and unusual body movements, was a contrast to the popular classical ballet style and challenged established societal boundaries of what had been considered socially appropriate.





**Figure 5:** *Maud Allan as Cleopatra* [Photograph]. (1909).

Walkowitz (2003) summarizes what she calls “the striking features of the body idiom performed across Allan’s repertoire; a solitary, autonomous, unfettered, mobile, weighted, and scantily clad female body whose movements delineated emotional interiority, shifting states of consciousness and autoeroticism” (p. 340).

In 1914, Allen's version of Salome was associated with the sadism of Wilde's Salome, and was linked to repressed sexual aggression said to manifest in the political disruption of the Edwardian suffragettes (Walkowitz, 2003).

Furthermore, the younger generation of feminists embraced the dance as their own cultural form, and used it as a way to "claim possession of their own erotic gaze, albeit a hostile and aggressive one" (Walkowitz, 2003; p.370). On Allen's arrival in London, her performance attracted the attention of the suffragettes, who appropriated Allen's Salome, and rendered Salome a new icon for the militant operations of the Women's Social and Political Union.

When making reference to a critical review of Maud Allen dancing 'The Vision of Salome' in the early 1900s, Koritz (1994) responded to Maud Allen's translation of the spirit of the East within an English cultural context by stating, "Gender and Orientalist ideologies work hand-in-hand to contain Western women within the realm of the spiritual, to affirm the west's superior knowledge of and thus rightful domination of the East, and finally, to help constitute a Western (male) subject in opposition to both the Oriental and the western woman" (p. 70). Walkowitz (2003) suggests, "by combining Greek neo-classical dance with her own original composition the "Vision of Salome," based on the work of Oscar Wilde, Allan introduced a set of codes for female bodily expression that disrupted Victorian conventional dichotomies of female virtue and female vice, and pushed beyond such dualisms" (p.346).

However, Maud Allen herself rejected the suffragette movement, instead aligning herself with Margot Asquith and the cultural modernists who sought mobile, expressive individualism (Walkowitz, 2003; Koritz, 1994). Allen was said to believe in education and job opportunities for women, and emphasized the spiritual tasks of moral guidance that were assigned to women in that era (Koritz, 1994; Walkowitz, 2003). By performing in public, Allen's performances could be interpreted as either morally lax or the product of moral conviction. However, Allen went on to perform in ever more prestigious performances in front of King Edward the VII, eventually touring the United States in 1910, and Asia in 1913 and 1914.

## **The Belly Dancer as the Object of Gaze**

In early film footage from the late 1800s and in film and television through to the present day, the belly dancing subject is depicted in performance, and delimited by her relationship to an audience. The belly dancing subject has repeatedly been constructed through imaginary landscapes of the exotic East, including costuming and story lines, and in alignment with embedded patriarchal social and cultural assumptions. The dancer has been costumed as a sexualised object, and constrained within boundaries of performance, enmeshing the belly dancing subject in a relational dependence on the male gaze. As the belly dancing subject moves into and out of a performance area, her fleeting appearance connotes the temporality of women's sexuality against the permanence of the audience.

The story of Salome is based on a story from the New Testament where Salome, Herod's step daughter, dances for him on his birthday. Herod was said to be so pleased with her performance that he offered her anything from his Kingdom, and after consultation with her mother, Salome asked for the head of John the Baptist. Salome has been reproduced in many performance genres, through repeated characterisations, as a self-motivated hyper-sexualised Oriental seductress, who would go to any lengths to secure the head of John the Baptist.

In Nazimova's 1923 version, the character of Salome is played Nazimova and Herod is played by Mitchell Lewis. Herod is a constant within this performance setting, remaining seated as the dancer enters the stage, performs for him and subsequently leaves the stage. Herod is representative of social and patriarchal rules and she must learn to interpret his rules based on his responses to her performance to succeed at gaining his approval.

During Nazimova's performance, the audience behind the camera is positioned to adopt a voyeuristic gaze while the performance defines Herod's superiority, and his sexuality. His gaze through the fourth wall communicates a complicit relationship with the male gaze as he projects his desire onto the image of Salome, the mentally diseased femme fatale who is also his step daughter. Herod is a fused characterisation of the male sexualised response, and the male gaze.

Positioned within the frame, his open mouthed gaze is staring straight at the audience through the fourth wall, drawing the gaze and compelling the audience to focus on his responses rather than the dancer's performance. His gaze communicates his presence, and his ownership of the performance, and as judge, he holds the dance and the dancer in his possession.

### **The Goddess, the Femme Fatale and the Whore**

The audience has been consistently presented with the image of a belly dancer who is familiar to us as a woman; young and slim she complies with prevailing Western standards of beauty. Although the dancer may be depicted with a happy demeanour, in the case of a film script, we cannot assume that the dancer has an opportunity to present her own interpretation of the dance and therefore we must assume that the dancer is required to enact the intention of the film's director.

From the turn of the last century the dancer was characterised as an entertainer, a step away from virtuous women who were compelled to follow societal moral conventions of pastoral power established during the mental hygiene movement in the early 1900s (Bolar, 1999; Conover 2007; Desmond, 1991). Early story lines were dependent on iconic Oriental characters and depictions of characters such as Cleopatra and the Queen of Sheba were characterisations of women from history who had held power and authority, and who were attributed with the power of life and death, intention, authority and self-determined action.

These characterisations of powerful women were closely linked to constructions of the Goddess. The Goddess construction is based on the Goddess archetype, characterised by spiritual awareness, and known to embody a power over life and death. The term Goddess signifies a social and cultural construction which has been reliant on essentialist stereotypes suggesting that feminine power has been in existence, and is an integral part of female identity that should be reclaimed. Furthermore, characterisations of the Goddess have been Orientalised and essentialised, and subsequently extrapolated onto media constructions of the belly dancing subject.



**Figure 6:** *Theda Bara as Cleopatra* [Photograph]. (1917).

Film's such as Fox's (1917) film The Queen of Sheba, and Edwards's (1917) film Cleopatra, are examples of connections made between the Orientalised female subject and the Goddess archetype, through the use of storyline characterisations presenting scenes depicting images of imagined identities of the East. The actresses in the film representations of both Cleopatra and the Queen of Sheba were well known for their risqué costuming and nudity, and these movies herald the contradiction between the Goddess and the femme fatale on film.

The newly emerging performance of the Oriental style of belly dance on film in the early 1900s expressed a developing discursive split between characterisations of the belly dancing subject as the Goddess, and developing constructions of the belly dancer as the femme fatale or whore.



**Figure 7:** *Theda Bara as Cleopatra* [Photograph]. (1917). NYPL, Billy Rose Theatre Collection 77187

Film media of the time associated characterisations of Orientalised powerful women with the Goddess archetype, a representation that had established notions of embodied sexual power (Andes, 1998). However, film constructions began to attribute the sexual awareness of the whore to the Goddess construction, resulted in a tension in the Madonna/whore dichotomy. The connection made between the embodied sexual awareness of the Goddess archetype connection and the belly dancing subject became co-opted into depictions indicative of sexual availability and willingness.

No part of Fox's film The Queen of Sheba remains, however this exotic silent film is known for the risqué costumes which are in photographs that still exist, and Blyth was said to have shown ample nudity whilst wearing 28 different costumes.



**Figure 8:** *Theda Bara as Cleopatra* [Photograph]. (1917).

Orientalised constructions of the belly dancing subject as femme fatale were also indicative of the medicalization of women's sexuality that had been emerging during the Nineteenth century, when medical discourses were making a connection between women's sexuality and madness (Foucault, 1981). The commodification and medicalization of women's sexuality implied that women embodied a corrupt repressed or chaotic sexual power that should be subject to the discipline of a more stable, controlled external system of regulation (Foucault, 1981). This repressed female power became an assumption underpinning the femme fatale, a complex characterisation with several consistent traits including sexually depravity, mental instability and moral bankruptcy.

There was a clear shift in film depictions of the belly dancer when movie content came under the requirements of the newly introduced Motion Picture Production Code or 'The Hays Code' published on March 31, 1930. The film industry's use of risqué costuming and nudity came under review and films that were made up to, and after, the introduction of the Hays Code were subject to judgements of the censor. Hence the film industry could not use images of the semi-naked female body to the same explicit degree in contextualising the Orient. One example of this censorship was The American Mutoscope and Biograph Company's 1896 film Fatima's Coochi Coochi dance; which was censored due to images of her gyrating and moving her pelvis which were subsequently covered up with a grid-like pattern of white lines over the film.

The use of censorship as a control over film representations of the dance brought established perpetuated meanings under social control. The dancer was contextualized, controlled and disciplined by the requirements and dictates of the time, and was also subject to censorship which came to represent the discipline of the patriarchal gaze. Depictions that purported to signify the mystical and magical East were now subject to the authority of the censor, and the application of the Hays Code as a discipline of censorship further inscribed Western control and regulation of the belly dancing subject. The belly dancer continued to be heavily invested with the fantasy and imaginary elements in costume and film settings and the Western colonization of the Eastern belly dancing subject continued. Furthermore, film depictions of the belly dancing subject continued a reliance on the Madonna/whore oppositional dichotomy to continuously reinvest the subject with meaning.

With the Western male once again in control, film makers cooperated with the rules of censorship and the film company's reliance on imaginative discursive formations of the appropriated Eastern landscape, and in doing so, reasserted Western superiority over the East.



The continued reconstruction of a sexualized and compliant belly dancing subject disguised the censorship mechanism by fostering an impression of the dancer's willingness, as representative of the East, to comply with the process of appropriation by the West.

Lesser's (1938) film Tarzan's Revenge is an example depicting the re-emergence of the belly dancer as the object of the male gaze. In this film, the dancer is dancing for the wealthy Sheik that she 'belongs' to. The Sheik as spectator-owner is seated and relaxed, indulging in gazing upon the dancer's performance. He is in control of the performance because he is the reason for her appearance. He controls whether she exists within the frame or not, and retains control over when she will be dismissed from the scene and will no longer exist in the frame/film or to the viewer.

The seated man has ownership of the dancer and although he is costumed as an Eastern character, the narrative aligns his character with established notions of Western patriarchal superiority. The dancer looks at the Sheik to draw his gaze and confirm his superiority while affirming her objectification by the male gaze outside of the frame. As the bearer of the male gaze, he is assessing and judging the performance, whilst the dancer is assumed to be conducting her performance according to pre-set standards and conventions for desirability (Berger, 1972). However, the belly dancer's performance in front of women has an alternative meaning. In this scene the women who watch the dancer informs the audience that the dancer perform under the surveillance of both the male and female gaze, and for both of these reasons she must develop her own internalized gaze (Berger, 1972). In this case, performing for other women, the dancer comes under the gaze of a female hierarchy who can confirm or condemn her. The dancer's identity as a belly dancer and a woman is tied into how successful she is at maintaining the 'visage'. The audience gaze is positioned as voyeur, leaving no doubt that this dancer is performing for the seated man, and the audience behind the camera are able to adopt authority vicariously; the female gaze critiques the performance of the belly dancer while the male gaze fetishizes the belly dancing subject.

The appropriation and resulting positioning of the subject belly dancer as a performer within the Western context aligns the subject closer to the Western ideal, as therefore hierarchically superior to the more primitive 'Other' - the Oriental woman. The belly dancing subject has been consistently positioned as 'Other' to the Western characters, and furthermore, the belly dancer has been constructed as subservient to other characters, be they men or Western women. This subjugation of the dancer diametrically positioned the male as superior, and the Occident/Orient and male/female dichotomies were reinstated.

Film narratives have also depicted the belly dancer as femme fatale or temptress, intent on subverting the hero's main intentions or disabling the villain on behalf of the hero. In the majority of the scenes explored in this genealogy, the dancer is performing for a male, therefore positioning male sexuality as the superior moderator. The resulting tension from the dichotomous and subservient positioning of the dancer suggests that female sexuality is both malleable and treacherous, and hence in need of external control.

Wanger's 1942 production of Arabian Nights is another example of the femme fatale in film. The character of Sherazade is played by Maria Montez who is not solely a performer. She is shown talking to other characters, and making plans to support the leading man in his goals, including dropping poison into the King's goblet whilst she is performing. Even though she dances for him, right under his gaze, only the audience behind the camera can see her poisoning his drink. This depiction of the belly dancing subject is an example of how the dancer is frequently characterised in film and television media, as employing devious means to ensure her intended outcome; including employing her sexuality in performance as a distraction. Furthermore, the dancer is seldom shown to be acting on her own behalf when, even as Goddess or powerful femme fatale, she is scripted to act on behalf of the leading male role, rather than from her own individual motivations. Furthermore, the dancer is attributed responsibility for the safety and well-being of other characters, while being depicted as chaotic and dangerous.

These essentialising constructions reflect an enduring utilizing of the belly dancing subject as an expression of nature, re-establishing connectivity to the illogical, passionate and irrational.

The film narratives of the 1950s depict a shift as the previously attributed moral agency became redefined to include the morally ambiguous femme fatale who began to re-emerge in film; beautiful, powerful and dangerous. Films from the 1950s that feature a belly dancing theme include Brackett's (1950) production of the motion picture Sunset Boulevard. Sunset Boulevard has been classified as classic film noir and the lead actress Gloria Swanson plays Norma Desmond, an older, wealthy, out of work movie star who has become mentally ill. The character of Norma Dean is acting as an actor, and is enacting the East.

Swanson's portrayal of Norma Dean is reminiscent of earlier film depictions of Salome in that Salome is re-attributed with the Orientalist/shadow persona, the femme fatale. Swanson's character is a sexually powerful woman, who selects, seduces and then kills her lover. Swanson's character temporarily shifts her position as a Western woman from the superior Occident into the inferior Orient, all the while bearing the psychological consequences of spurning cultural rules by being portrayed as insane. However, her proposed embodiment of the disowned and corrupt female sexuality resulted in her character psychologically sliding into pathology and murder.

This characterisation of Norma Dean confirms core assumptions of the medical discourses of the nineteenth century, that women's embodiment of the 'corrupt' female sexual power and autonomy was dangerous, resulting in mental frailty. Swanson's enactment of a Western woman embodying the Oriental dancer functions to defer Western morality and by embodying and enacting the Oriental 'Other', her character is exempted from moral agency. The character of Norma Dean thereby re-establishes patriarchal superiority and hegemonic domination within the West, by being hierarchically positioned below and under the gaze of the Western male, but above the Middle or Eastern woman.

The final scene in the movie shows the powerless and mentally incapacitated character Norma Desmond moving down the stairs, acknowledging the cameras and making the statement ‘Alright Mr De Mille, I’m ready for my close-up’ (Sunset Boulevard, Paramount Pictures, 1950).

Scary’s (1953) film Dream Wife, offers a characterisation of a contractual economic relationship between the Oriental dancer and the main male character. This film tells a story of the character played by Cary Grant who is looking for a woman that will be happy to be a homemaker and to raise children. However, to forward a business deal he proposes to Princess Tarji (Betta St John) who is ‘trained in all the arts of pleasing men’ (IMDB). Betta St John plays Tarji, Princess of a fictional Islamic country, who is characterised within the Orientalized discourse as hyper-sexual and simultaneously depicted as ‘Other’ to a controlled and disciplined Western sexuality. The film script depends on Tarji submitting to the regulation of Western values, being disciplined into compliance by her dislocation from the imaginary East into the West, and by her implied inferiority to the characters played by the two leading actors, Cary Grant and Deborah Kerr. The depiction of the belly dancer in this film narrative objectifies the belly dancing subject as functional, transient and disposable, by attributing value and implying ownership as if the subject were a commodity in a capitalist system. Her character represents possession and a utility and she embodies the chattel and the whore.

The next scene under discussion in this genealogy is from Broccoli and Saltzman’s (1963) film From Russia with Love starring Sean Connery and Lisa Guiraut as the belly dancer. In this scene the Orientalised and essentialised dancer is on display and Sean Connery as James Bond, the leading man, is assessing her. While her body is moving, her eyes appear to be shut as if she is totally passive, either engaged in an interior experience or disconnected from herself. Her interiority is still interpreted as sexual and subservient because of her movement style and her physical exposure due to her costume. She presents him with her throat and substantiates a version of the socially constructed truth – that belly dancers are sexually available.

Even though she may be looking through her lashes at him, he confirms her position as the object of gaze by appearing to look at her breasts, rather than her face or eyes. This image clearly depicts the fetishization of the dancer by the leading male character and in so doing confirms objectification of the belly dancing subject.

The next scene under discussion is from Wallis's (1964) film Roustabout. The film depicts Elvis Presley as Charlie Rogers, and Wilda Taylor as Little Egypt, a belly dancer who is simultaneously defining, constructing and maintaining Orientalised imaginary and is subject to the discipline of maintaining the rules of her character's construction. The framing of the performance mimics the traditional stage, however Elvis's character stands in between the dancers and the voyeuristic judgement of the male gaze. He draws the gaze of the audience as a testimony to his authority, empowered with superiority at possessing what can only be admired by the male viewers behind the camera.

Another example of a scene where the dancer draws the gaze is Tania Lemani from Roddenbury's (1967) season 2 television episode 43: Wolf in the Fold from the television series Star Trek. An audience of seated men surround Tania Lemani who is performing as Kara the belly dancer. The men are looking at her, yet she appears to be looking at the camera. This image suggests that the dancer has been successful in attracting and maintaining the male gaze within the room, and is therefore able to interpret male sexual desire. However, by looking past the seated audience in the room and drawing the gaze, she is communicating that the men within the frame do not have the same importance as the viewer who exists outside the frame. In this image the belly dancing subject draws the gaze of the male voyeur outside of the frame, by looking toward the camera and toward an audience who will watch her image on the screen. By looking at the viewer behind the camera, she offers an opportunity for voyeuristic judgement of her as a performer, whilst leaving assumptions of passivity and servitude unchallenged, and reconfirming her compliance at the external objectification of her as a belly dancer.

Broccoli and Saltzman's production of the (1975) film The Man with the Golden Gun illustrates the construction of the belly dancing subject within essentialising discourses, as the whore. Carmen du Sautoy, as Saida the dancer, is fully costumed for dance performance. However, she is standing still as Bond is preparing to kiss her belly. In this scene the dancer is associated with sexual availability. Removed from performance and the stage, any association with expertise or art is diffused and she is depicted as passive and sexually available. The scene fetishizes both Bond and the dancer, as he actively objectifies and takes ownership of her and she becomes an object for his possession. This form of subjectification of the belly dancer is representative of a passive and Orientalised belly dancing subject who is decorated, posed and scripted and therefore coded as a commodity made available for male pleasure. This stereotype functions to confirm the hierarchical superiority of the male as in control of both the dancer as the Orientalised subject and as a woman.

The next film under discussion is Corke's 1988 version of Salome's Last Dance. This film has scenes where bare breasted women have their nipples covered by pasties in the burlesque style, and this is the only recent film in this genealogy that was so explicit. Corke's version of Salome could be interpreted as counter-discursive based on the explicit nature of the images, although the level of nudity is comparable to earlier depictions of nudity from the turn of the last century prior to the introduction of the Hays Code. There is one scene in the film where Imogen Millias Scott as Salome, is kissing the dismembered head of John the Baptist which is on a tray. The scene represents the contestation of the space between the intentional and sane Goddess and the unpredictable or insane femme fatale. The implication of deceptive intentions bleeds across any middle ground, universalizing and supporting prevailing hegemonic patriarchal assumptions undergirding the nature/culture dichotomy associating nature with chaos. Characterisations of the belly dancer as the chaotic and corrupt femme fatale have endured since the turn of last century and when juxtaposed, presume an uncontrolled and chaotic female sexuality.

A scene from Jean's 1990 television episode 10: Homer's Night Out from the series The Simpsons provides an example of the enduring association of the belly dancing performance with entertainment and deception. The scene is of a group composed solely of men, who are watching Homer Simpson and a belly dancer dancing together on a table. This scene imposes a heterosexual hegemony around the voyeuristic pleasures afforded the absent male spectator. Frequently, characterisations suggest that as a performer, the belly dancer is dependent on the leading man that she is performing for, for either approval or for economic potential. Often, her performance defines her audience as economically powerful, even though no money has changed hands to confirm an economic transaction. Even when the narrative has suggested remuneration, such as receiving tips, money is seldom seen to change hands for the performance. As a performer who embodies the Orientalised 'other', the dancer continues to be framed as a visitor, performing for those who exist within that public sphere and defining the male viewer's sexuality as heterosexual and voyeuristic.

The essentialised discourses of the Goddess, femme fatale and whore have continually been applied to co-construct the belly dancing subject as a seductress, who is concealing an autonomous and illogical intention to subvert established moral codes and to destabilise the ideals of Western patriarchal superiority.

However, there are alternative constructions within the public domain also. For example, the television episode from Sony Pictures Television's (2009) The Dr Oz Show portrayed belly dancing as a life style tool that is beneficial for women's fitness, a characterisation reminiscent of the fitness movement discourse's commodification and marketing of belly dancing of the late 1970s.

In this television representation of belly dancing, the woman is the skilled expert in the practical execution of the dance and she is in the process of tutoring Dr Oz and the viewing audience about how to execute belly dance movements.

However, while the mechanical skill of dance form is attributed to the dancer, the meaning of the dance shifts as it is interpreted by the authority figure of the expert/male medical Doctor. As the medical authority, and due to the focus of the segment being about fitness, Doctor Oz is attributed with the defining corporeal

assessment of the dance and is in a position to establish the primacy of corporeal meanings. The corporeal based discursive construction reflects a shift from participation in belly dancing as public or performance-based, to an individual discourse of fitness, health, self-control, and personal responsibility. Whether the term 'fitness' refers to physical and mental health or to 'fitting in' with the world, or your 'fitness' for being in the world, is under debate. Furthermore, the use of corporeal discourse in this instance is underpinned by a gendered requirement that women need to discipline themselves and their bodies to an external set of prevailing societal standards. In this context where belly dancing is presented as a skill to be learned, the belly dancer is constructed as responsible for disciplining her own docile body, to become the sexualised disciplined body, yet no purposeful outcome is given other than to fall right back into the ranks of the performers dancing for the male gaze. The dancer is once again being recruited into her oppositional status as 'other than', and continues to inhabit a supporting position in a dominant male/non-dominant female dichotomy.

The characterisation of belly dancing as a discipline of the body echoes Foucault's (1977) contextualisation of the body as

"The body of exercise, rather than of speculative physical; a body manipulated by authority, rather than imbued with animal spirits; a body of useful training and not of rational mechanics, but one in which, by virtue of that very fact, a number of natural requirements and functional restraints are beginning to emerge" (p. 155).

The belly dancing body is required to submit to Western ideals while maintaining the Orientalised mystique, an exercise in re-colonisation of the Oriental dance style and of female sexuality, and shaped and disciplined by a Western patriarchy. Furthermore, personal meanings of belly dancing have been reduced to an auxiliary sense of self-esteem promoted as a result of dancing, a feeling that has been described as being more confident in your own body and within society.



Contemporary film and television references to belly dancing have begun to construct belly dancing as a subject, rather than constructing the belly ‘dancer’ as a Subject. The contemporary dancer is defined in contrast to previous passive constructions by being discursively tied to the individual discourses of fitness, health, control of the body and personal responsibility as ways of being in the world. By attaching the sexualised belly dancing subject to the fitness discourse, the context of the passive belly dancer is disabled, as the onus of personal agency is attributed to the individual who is belly dancing. Furthermore, this power shift disassembles the subject/object sexualised dichotomy by reinstating the purpose of the dance within the belly dancing subject and the gaze appears to drop out of view. Women are still being bought back to the same old societal constructions and the same narratives, with the motivation for becoming fit attached to becoming physically and sexually attractive to the observer. The belly dancing body is once again being subjected to the discipline of the prescriptive societal norms for sexual beings to be thin and athletic, a return of the dancer to subjectification and subordination under the male gaze. Therefore, performance becomes re-established as a priority, the belly dancing subject is re-appropriated, re-objectified, thereby de-emphasising personal meanings or relationships to the belly dance experience.

The last scene in this genealogy is taken from Star’s 2010 film Sex and the City 2 and is the most recent of the film and television images under discussion within this thesis. The scene depicts a karaoke bar in Abu Dhabi, where a group of belly dancers dance around on a walkway at second story level, dancing in bra and belt costumes to Western songs as Westerners sing to personalised karaoke selections. This scene depicts the colonised and contained belly dancing subject who can no longer be recognised outside of the established context of sexualised entertainment and therefore must remain within the confines and the discipline of dominant discourses. Moreover, this scene concisely exemplifies the progression of the historical narrative of the subject belly dancer, who, as compliant entertainment, has been dragged from the Eastern non-temporal to the Western mundane, and continues to be re-objectified as a part of the Orientalised backdrop.

## Conclusions

This genealogy has examined film and television media images within the public sphere for dominant discursive constructions and found that the belly dancing subject has been represented in limited ways. The belly dancing subject has been constructed and positioned diametrically to the socially constructed virtuous Western woman, who was constrained by Western standards of morality dating from Victorian times. The dancer has been represented as reconstructing the East in her image, resulting in Western commodification of hybrid sexuality further degrading the discursively constructed colonized East, and allowing for the commodification of the belly dancing subject through film and television media for the male gaze. Colonialist and Imperialist rhetoric of earlier times attributed the Orient with the stereotypical feminine characteristics of mystery, sensuality, sexuality, lack of sophistication, and chaos amongst others. Subsequently, the gendering of the Orient and the essentialising of the belly dancing subject has been sustained throughout many film representations of the belly dancing subject, which have served to continuously re-inscribe the Oriental/Occidental dichotomy to present day. Enduring Orientalised representations of the belly dancing subject which have included costuming, venue and performance styles, have acted as technologies of external and self-regulation of the belly dancing subject within the Western context. Within the public sphere the belly dancing subject has consistently been constructed in terms of three dominant discursive themes. These themes are Orientalism, essentialism and the construction of the belly dancer as the object of the male gaze. Ultimately, the person who has control of the performance, and of the dancer, is the man who is sitting eating and drinking whilst the performance is underway, whether he is on or off the screen.

The Orientalised belly dancing subject has consistently been characterised as the performer, situated, contained and objectified under surveillance as the object of the Western gaze. As the performer, the subject has been repeatedly represented as subservient to an assumed present and dominant male and as a passive and feminine 'Other' in relation to the masculine West.

The belly dancing body has been essentialised as the Goddess, sexualised as the whore, and aligned with the chaotic actions of the unpredictable femme fatale. Subsequently, the dancer is constrained within a discursively contested space which repeatedly destabilises the characterisation of the belly dancing subject by associating that subject with characteristics of deceit, mental instability and chaos. Furthermore, film and television have consistently characterised the belly dancing subject in terms of exclusivity, commodification, economic potentiality and ownership.

This analysis of scenes depicting characterisations of the belly dancing subject are representative of a relative few that have emerged in film and television media within the public domain throughout the past 120 years. Therefore it seems likely that these primary depictions of belly dancing will shape and form the wider discursive field within which women encounter belly dancing, potentially providing sets of concepts, terms and phrases through which women's experiences of belly dancing can be represented and understood.

The dominant discursive constructions of the belly dancing subject with the public sphere, fail to provide information about personal meanings that belly dancers might attach to their experiences of belly dancing and it is to this that I turn to in the next chapter.

# CHAPTER FIVE

## The Interview Findings

This chapter presents evidence in support of my proposal that individual experiences of belly dancing exist in the fragile interstices where the boundaries of the social sphere, the personal sphere and the spiritual sphere connect. I argue that glimpses of these interstices are recognizable by belly dancers, who then circumvent the limitations of the common patriarchal discursive constructions of belly dancing through the use of metaphor and counter-discourses when articulating their own experiences of belly dancing.

In this chapter I discuss a selection of individual narrative statements from 19 email interviewees and six face to face interviewees, which I have endeavored to represent accurately and in their intended context. The respondents were from New Zealand and Australia and ranged in age from 25 to 50 years old. Some were relatively new to belly dancing, while others have been dancing for more than 15 years and in a few cases were teachers of this dance form.

I have identified five dominant themes from the interviews. These themes were perceptions of belly dancing, belly dancing in performance, embodiment of belly dancing, resistance to the dominant discursive constructions, articulating novel descriptions, and these themes will be discussed in separate sections. The first section is concerned with women's perceptions and initial understandings of belly dancing, and the level of influence of dominant discursive constructions on the women's a priori ideas about belly dancing. The second section explores how women perceive the belly dancing subject as a performer and how women describe being in performance. The third section is concerned with the embodied experiences of belly dancing and the influence of Cartesian dualism, and the fourth section deals with whether participant responses indicated resistance to the dominant discursive constructions of belly dancing. Finally, I will present and bring into discussion the novel ways that women have articulated their experiences of belly dancing.

## **Section 1: Perceptions of Belly Dancing**

This section deals with assessing the level of influence that existing dominant discursive constructions have had in shaping women's a priori ideas and understandings of the belly dancing subject. While a few respondents did appear to draw from the dominant discourses highlighted in the previous chapter and these clearly framed their initial understandings, others drew from different sets of understandings and from personal, social, numinous and inspirational discourses. For example, Jane and Michelle articulated a priori ideas about belly dancing by employing a selection of adjectives consistent with the Orientalist and essentialist discursive constructions of belly dancing. Jane was an email respondent, in her mid-40s, and had been belly dancing for eight years. Jane had first seen belly dancing in a performance and said of this experience that "It looked womanly, exotic, sensual, clever and feminine. It looked like I already felt when I danced". Michelle, an email respondent in her mid-40s who had been dancing for 11 years, had seen a belly dance class advertised. Michelle's response was consistent with the Orientalist discourse:

I thought it was feminine, exotic, a little sexy. I know it was from some generic Middle Easterny Indian place.....when I think about it now I tend to visualise beaded curtains and incense sticks and cushions...very harem fantasy type stuff.

Carol, in her early 30s, attended a face to face interview and had been belly dancing for three years. Carol's response was consistent with corporeal and essentialist constructions of belly dancing. Carol said:

Well when I first started I liked the fact that it's all women and just that it was good for exercise. I thought it was a sensual dance, I love the costumes that they wore, oh it's just a real womanly sort of dance I know that just looking at it, it looked like a seductive dance as well.

Sally, an email respondent in her 40s who had been dancing for four years, articulated essentialist and corporeal understandings: "[I thought] that it was really easy and good for fitness. Also I thought that it was a bit on the sleazy side because of the cabaret aspect which was the only exposure I had". Margaret, an email respondent brought up on the European continent, was familiar with music and dancing from her culture and had been dancing for 14 years. Margaret wrote:

It was powerful to me. The women who danced it seemed very brave. Growing up in a ( ...) community, I knew that those who perform this dance form are looked at a bit funny, maybe not as respected.

However, Michelle's subsequent response countered and reframed underpinning essentialist assumptions generalizing women's relationships as positive. She wrote:

The 'by women for women' and 'sisterhood' myths have gone by the by. There's a lot of bitchy competitiveness in belly dance, always has been, though it seems more overt and divided along style lines now.

The respondents' apparently limited connectivity to these constructions began to elucidate a developing boundary between the construction of the belly dancing subject in the public sphere and how they experienced themselves and others as performers.

## **Section 2: Perceptions of Performance**

This section is concerned with the participants' perceptions of the male gaze as it relates to belly dancing performance. The responses show a marked contrast to the sadistic and disempowering engagement of the camera with the female belly dancer. The women responded to performances by defining relationships between what they saw and how they felt. While the women voyeuristically identified with the performance, their descriptions appear to counter the antagonistic and disempowering voyeuristic assumptions of the male gaze. Juliet, an email respondent who has been belly dancing for 14 years, commented:

I can still recall the first time I saw a belly dancer perform, it was like there was an aura surrounding her, she was shining and beautiful like a rainbow. A warmth and excitement and feeling of wellbeing welled up in me and I forgot about everything else outside of watching her dance. I loved the opportunity to see other teachers and dancers perform at concerts and just enjoy experiencing being swept away to another place while watching.

Miranda, in her late 40s, attended a face- to-face interview and had been dancing for five years. Miranda's description of the first time she had seen a performance is another example countering the voyeuristic assumptions of the male gaze.

Miranda said:

I had never seen it and I suppose in the back of my mind sleaze was attached to it so I wasn't sure what I was getting myself into. So snap, in that instance everything changed, I thought that's something that I thought I wanted to do but had no idea what it was. I was mesmerized by them I really was. They had so much fun, they were entertaining us but having heaps of fun themselves. So to me they would have had just as much fun and done everything the same even if they had been in an empty room but we were allowed to see what they were doing.

Emily also described a feeling of individual identification with the performance. Emily, an email respondent in her early 20s who had been dancing for 10 months, wrote:

I was mesmerized by the beauty, not by which was ordinarily held by her but that which was revealed when her body was moving intuitively in time with the music. It captured some knowing in me about women, God and creation and how we are perfect no matter how we look, or feel about ourselves.

Some of the women's descriptions suggest a process of subjecting themselves to their own gaze during performances. These reflections are made retrospectively, and detail an active and central role in the dance performance which constituted resistance to the compliant and passive dominant discursive constructions of belly dancing. For example Jane, an email respondent in her late 40's who had been dancing for eight years, suggested that rather than being dependent on the audience, the audience is dependent on her presence as a performer:

I like to perform and I feel I am connecting to the audience and perhaps feeling the power the dancer has over the situation/scene/audience for that short while. You can share so much of an aspect of yourself or of a character you are being for that short moment: it is like being able to manipulate them but in a nice way; taking them with you on a little

magical journey and sensing that they are feeling that (they are) with you is extremely rewarding and uplifting. When dancing for myself/by myself – I could be any place, any time, anyone, somebody in a novel, but also myself very fully.

In the following excerpt Sarah, who is in her mid 20s and has been dancing for 10 years, describes a relationship to performance which is not defined by surveying herself from the perspective of the male gaze or engaging in thinking like a dominant male in her view of herself. In the following excerpt, Sarah commented:

the fun is just getting up there, enjoying yourself and forgetting about everyone else and you don't have to worry at all or think about anybody else is up there or whatever, you know...because you're just focussing on the music...you're not really paying attention to who else is around you...you're just out there for yourself and to enjoy your own company.

Carol, in her early 40s, attended a face-to-face interview, and responded similarly by positioning herself within her experience of belly dancing:

This is who I am, it's like you become...well for me...I AM the belly dancer. It's not just that I'm performing it or um that I'm on show or whatever...all you can really do is be yourself so when I become the belly dancer, I'm giving an expression of myself, it's who I am, it's not going to be exactly the same as everyone else. It's an opportunity to become something else as well, the fantasy I guess, I have my own [dance] name and that is because it's an alter ego of who I am you know...it's like going into another world.

Sarah provided description of how she positions herself within the experience of belly dancing by adopting the position of the observer, while experiencing herself in a non-ordinary way as a dance persona or alter ego, thus:

You have a dance persona and your normal every day persona um so once you really get into the dance you have a whole other side of you seems to come forward... she's happy with who she is and doesn't care what the others think, it's just "this is me, this is who I am, take me as you see me sort of thing and "if you don't like it that's just too bad 'cause I don't care", so I think that's why she gets away with a lot more than what I get away with cause I'm too restrained. I wouldn't do it ...



Ruby, in her late 40's, had been dancing for 18 months. Ruby's response employed an essentialist mixed metaphor and adds meaning to the construction by articulating the potential of the experience to perceive herself in a non-ordinary way: "It's like reaching down into yourself and pulling that woman out who's been lying there dormant, like she could be quite wild if you let her be and it's just that release and bringing it out".

The range of atypical responses to the assumptions of the male gaze demarcate a boundary between the discursive contestations of the public sphere and participants' performance experiences. The women articulations emanate from a position central to the experience of belly dancing, rather than from an externalised perspective of examining or observing themselves as a belly dancing subject. However, the responses have failed to clearly indicate whether their experiences of belly dancing have an underpinning relationship to the Cartesian mind/body dualism.

### **Section 3: The Cartesian Belly Dancer**

This section deals with the embodied experience of belly dancing. In Cartesian logic the systems of representation describe the body as a passive instrument which must be subjected to the discipline of the intellect. Furthermore, the Cartesian dualism positions the mind and the body in opposition, attributing human action to the rational processes of the mind. The dominant discursive constructions that delimit the belly dancing subject are reliant on the underpinning Cartesian duality, inferring that the dancer is either intellectually superior to her body or that she is chaotic and therefore intellectually inferior to her body. Women's responses described their experiences in terms of either the mind or the body, employing the corporeal discourse and then expanding on these original descriptions. Michelle wrote:

Thoughts and emotions I have are accompanied by strong feelings of movement in the BODY. For me belly dance is very much about how the dancer feels internally, not just about being watched or creating shapes in space. I'm very conscious of my feet and legs these days, and any torso work is about the sensations of tensions, and shimmies about the feeling of

looseness and the shake passing through the right part of my body (buttocks usually), and the pleasure of those feelings.

Another example of description that employed the corporeal discourse was offered by Jane who said: “When really trying to get a new move or improve a move or being challenged in a class, I like the feeling that I have gone right inside myself, into the muscles, the bones, and I inhabit myself fully at that time.”

Sarah’s response describes a corporeal privileging of the body over the mind:

You hear there’s a really strong beat there so if you hear a strong beat you want to do a strong move so you just sort of go ah do a hip flick or something, you’re interpreting the music by using the movements of your body so yeah it’s not completely a non-thinking but just, you know, you’re not thinking about the rest of the world, you’re thinking about the bit of music and what the music is telling you to do.

Leanne, an email respondent who had been belly dancing for four years described belly dancing in terms of embodiment of the dance. Leanne said:

Physical enjoyment...the feeling of being grounded is the one thing that I only get with belly dancing, particularly with tribal dance. It’s like my body, the music and the earth are all combined into one. It feels like a release of pressure – an openness.

Hannah, an email respondent who had been dancing for 14 years, elaborated on a priori corporeal understandings:

I have noticed that whatever one needs to work on emotionally it will present itself physically in their movement. I love it when the movement connects well with the music as it makes me feel like a physical manifestation of the music; an extension of the music.

Similarly, Emily said:

Belly dancing is a medium for my body to interpret the outside world. Whatever one needs to work on emotionally it will present itself physically in their movement. My cells vibrate with the music.

The interview findings show that some participants' descriptions were based in the corporeal discourses and elucidated a personal embodied relationship to the experience. However, some women's attempts at further elaboration extended beyond the established mind/body dualism of the public and personal spheres.

#### **Section 4: The Difficulties of Discursive Negotiation**

Many of the participants indicated difficulties in articulating a priori meanings of and relationships to their experience of belly dancing, suggesting that some of their experiences had not solely been the result of adhering to the established truths. This is an example from Ruby's narrative relating her attempts at employing essentialist discourses with some difficulty and attempting to elaborate beyond the discursive limits:

Um your mind sort of goes elsewhere and its more of a female or woman thing I don't quite know how to explain it um....kind of a special feeling.....sort of puts you on a high. Um I don't know, I think it's an inbuilt thing in a woman that um I didn't have before....yeah and not quite sure what it is but it is all to do with being feminine and everything to do with women and female I'm not quite sure what it is but....You sort of feel like you can do anything. Yeah it puts you there and it's um and it only like visits me every now and then, that's sort of more of a primitive feeling.....kind of thing, I don't wanna use the word ancient but um....and I don't wanna use the word ritual but along those lines.

The hesitancy in Ruby's speech which was not evident at other moments, indicates her intention to articulate a priori meanings or relationships to her belly dance experience and her discontinuous and irregular narrative is indicative of an inability to express her views within the terms of the available discursive options. Miranda's attempt at describing a belly dancing performance is another example of the limitations of the prevailing discursive constructions of belly dancing:

So I don't see it without its imperfections. I don't know. I don't think it's the look of it, it's just the style, like I don't think it's the costuming, I don't think it's what I see, I like the costumes but I don't think, it doesn't matter what you're wearing, I dunno, I love to watch it.

Sarah's response indicates the limits of the dominant discursive constructions in providing adequate terms and concepts for her to describe how she experiences the dance. Sarah said:

Well It's hard to describe. You can try and describe the emotions, you can feel it for yourself, what really does it for you the most, what gives you the most sense of well-being...or I don't know what you want to call it

Some participants indicated difficulties in articulating their meanings of and relationships to the experience of belly dancing and their difficulties have revealed some limitations and shortcomings of the dominant discursive constructions. Furthermore, the interviews showed that subsequent to their own practice of the dance, respondents showed a tendency to broaden their scope of meanings with women looking beyond the dominant discursive constructions in an attempt to describe their experiences.

### **Section 5: Articulating Novel Discursive Alternatives**

Some women described the experience of belly dancing from a position which cannot be solely contained within the discourses of either the mind or the body or essentialist or Orientalist discourses, and participants frequently elaborated on their original descriptions. According to Csikszentmihayi and Hunter (2000), "The blind spot of Cartesian dualism is its inability to consider the importance of first person quality of experience" (p.23). Some of the participants marked resistance to the established discourses by actively reconstructing or overturning them through the use of elaboration and the recruitment of novel descriptions that better fitted their meanings. The novel descriptions and figurative language include the metaphorical, the transpersonal discourse indicating altered states of consciousness, spiritual, inspirational, and therapeutic discourses.

The following descriptions exemplify how participants' experienced the dance beyond the body or the mind by connecting to the dance experience as though they are central to their experiences of belly dancing. Carol explains: "It's not about anybody else, it's not about, it's not even about knowledge; it's a knowing.

For me it is a knowing that this is my world, you know, it is my space that I've created". Jasmine, an email respondent who had been dancing for two years said "Belly dancing is a way to take care of myself and to help keep me moving, healthy and to lift my spirit". Lilly, a face to face interview participant in her late 40s who had been dancing for two years, described how she took ownership of her experiences of belly dancing:

Um I guess a lot of my life I've been doing things for other people.....but this is mine, this is my space and I do it...not for anyone else, I do it for me and I like that aspect of it because I feel like I'm giving something back that's just for me, that's not for sharing or because somebody thinks I should or I think I should, It's my space.

Juliet drew on metaphors in her response when articulating a position 'within' the belly dance experience. Juliet said: "There is a feeling of 'belonging' a feeling that this is where my life was leading to and it's like a garment that fits me perfectly". Likewise, Emily employed a metaphorical figure of speech in describing how her ideas about belly dancing have changed: "I believe that it is one, if not the only dance, that seems to have branches like a tree, universal movements that are basic laws of our anatomy; there for us to encompass and use for our wellbeing". Jane too employed the use of metaphor in her descriptions: "Then, if I love a piece of music I want to unlock it or unwrap it piece by piece. I then see what needs to be danced to that piece of music".

Many participants articulated their experiences of belly dancing in novel ways beyond the known hermeneutical horizon of explanation expressed by the dominant discursive constructions. The novel, counter discursive descriptions elucidated a fluid hermeneutical horizon of belly dance experience between inner and outer worlds. For example, Helen wrote:

Every now and then I am totally captured by the moment, everything falls into place and I feel balanced and peaceful...belly dancing or any sport/dance has moments like this.....I think it is when we are so immersed in what we are doing and outside considerations disappear and we reach a state of 'grace', a moment of balance, of revelation which is a personal

spiritual experience - not religious but I am sure religion followers experience this moment of 'grace' too.

Individual and unique horizons were further demarcated by some of the women's articulations that employed spiritual, inspirational descriptors drawn from the transpersonal discourse. Transpersonal psychology deals with five key themes in the human experience, these being states of consciousness, higher or ultimate potential, beyond the ego or personal self, transcendence, and the spiritual (Lajoie and Shapiro, 1992). Transpersonal psychology has often been associated with Maslow's concept of Peak experiences. Peak experience is a term used to describe transpersonal and ecstatic states, which may include feelings of euphoria, harmonization and interconnectedness and includes mystical experiences and altered states of consciousness (Maslow, 1970). Some of the participants associate their experiences of belly dancing with a relationship to energy in some form. While energy can be related to the physical body, some believe there is also spiritual energy which can be described in different ways; either as a physical sensation, as visible "auras", "rays", or "fields" and sometimes registered within the audible or tactile fields as vibration (Stenger, 2001). Awareness of spiritual energy is inclusive of feelings of bliss or contentment and may be similar to Maslow's understanding of peak experience.

Juliet wrote of her personal connection to the dance on an emotional level before elaborating further to describe her experience of belly dancing in terms of energy, combining spiritual and corporeal discourses:

I experience happiness, warmth, relaxation, stimulation, creativity, excitement, feeling a sense of enjoyment, sense of freedom, peace – a great feeling of peace while at the same time great energy - a moving meditation - like yoga. However, it's a creative meditation as though you were creating shapes and new worlds with your movements. Physically you are more aware of your breathing and the space you occupy you're your muscles at work.....

Emily too expressed a relationship to energy and the mystical or spiritual when describing her experiences of belly dancing:

In those moments of belly dancing I get glimpses of how powerful I really am, like when I was giving birth, or living a completely organic

lifestyle.....a self- love and acceptance that I have never felt at any other time. A moment of communication with my creator about my potential that I hold onto....somehow it shifts some sort of blocked energy, I don't think the blocked energy is always personal either.....belly dancing is art, creates nothing; except energy, and it's that energy that makes the world go around.

Margaret also elaborated on her experiences by adopting spiritual or transpersonal discourse when stating:

I believe that I am channelling energy from 'above', at the same time I reveal my inner soul. Sounds very spiritual, and that's a big part. Belly dance helps to connect to this very primal urge to express your-self.

In the following description, Ruby may be referring to feeling physically energised, although her association of the word energy with the word freedom makes her intended response unclear. Ruby said:

I can sort of do what I want, yep, emotions like just letting yourself go and just doing it...and you just feel renewed energy, something that I hadn't really felt before...but um it's a freedom kind of thing and you just feel like reenergized.

Here, Carol describes her experience in similar terms to the others:

Just letting the music and the movement come together like that and you're like a vessel that can experience that and can express it...because you can't separate yourself from being a belly dancer...I bring that sort of energy with me because that's a part of who I am now, I've embraced it and it will always be a part of who I am.

Further, Carol suggested that other dancers might find it possible to perceive and embody the energy she speaks of:

I did a bit of teaching for a while, I said to them you're coming in here as a Goddess, don't just walk like a Goddess, become the Goddess, act that way because you are. Hold yourself like you are a person that is a creator, you are creating an energy; and that's something that only you can bring here.

Some women employed the descriptors 'zone' or 'flow', and zone has been used in contemporary discourse as a colloquialism for flow. Flow has been defined as a feeling of spontaneous joy, even rapture, while performing a task (Goleman, 1996). However, most participant responses that have indicated flow or zone states did not suggest that these descriptions related to task competence and efficacy. Some women suggested that being 'in the zone' or 'going with the flow' were indicative of a state of freedom or not thinking, suggesting an atypical response inconsistent with Goleman's (1996) definition of rapture. Below, Margaret articulates a shift out of every day experience and into a different state of consciousness. She indicates a focus for her intended task, however she makes no connection between successfully completing her task and how she feels.

Margaret said:

I feel whole when I am dancing, channelling some energy with the focus of lifting the atmosphere and making people happy. I am in a different zone.....I am almost stepping into a different world. I feel free. I feel beautiful. I have experienced those feelings etc, at other times, but with dancing I can access them immediately. It's so easy.

Sarah too described flow in terms of an altered state of awareness rather than attributing her feelings to the successful completion of her intended task:

You're just concentrating listening to the music.....you're just not thinking.....you can just go with the flow...you've gone into that no thinking zone where you're not worried about everything else that's going on...you're just going with the flow, your just like the water, running with the water and it's going to take you where it's going to take you...

There were some participants who employed a discourse which was descriptive of what they felt were the healing aspects of belly dancing experiences. This healing or therapeutic discourse can also be considered as part of the Transpersonal discourse. For example Juliet:

But it's a time for dreaming about what you can do, you think anything is possible. I feel washed clean and refreshed and my senses are more aware....There have been frustrating, stressful and irritating times but the overriding experiences have been positive and life affirming.



Margaret too employed the therapeutic discourse in her description:

It was very healing. I wasn't aware of that at the beginning. It is very healing emotionally, mentally.

I often break into spontaneous dancing to express joy and excitement, or when I am stressed and down to release those emotions.

Jane commented by using a description referring to physical healing followed by the words 'relaxed' and 'buzzy', which may refer to a physical response or an altered state of awareness:

If you drag yourself along to belly dancing feeling like hell, not intending to dance, just to watch or say hi, guaranteed you'll end up dancing away any headache, cough, cold, exhaustion, sore back, and leave feeling revitalised and buzzy, or even if you dance at home or the same reason.

Carol was an example of the participant fusing the therapeutic, spiritual and psychoanalytic discourses:

It's meditative or um it's healing in its own way, it is a healing as well so I put that word up there 'cause I haven't really thought of any words that I could use. It's a healing place for me because it's not just a physical healing, it's everything else that comes with it that is also laid to rest as well.

My analysis has shown that the participants displayed a tendency to situate themselves within the experience of belly dancing and as central to the experience. Furthermore, some participants expanded on their experiences of centrality, abandoning the position as the internalized onlooker or voyeur – the (male) “spectator within” as John Berger suggests. Participants' frequently employed figures of speech and metaphors in their attempts at articulating their perceptions of belly dancing, with faltering or tentative attempts at literal explanations often gave way to spiritual and inspirational descriptions.

The following chapter include a discussion of the interview data, present the strengths and limitations of this research and suggest the broader implications arising from this investigation into the meanings women attach to their experiences of belly dancing.

# CHAPTER SIX

## Discussion and Conclusions

This thesis contributes to the still small field of scholarly writing about belly dancing by documenting an exploration into the relationship between three spheres of meaning in belly dancing, these being 1) the social sphere and discourses of the social sphere; 2) the individual and personal sphere; and 3) the spiritual and inspirational sphere.

In examining the belly dancing subject within the public sphere, I reviewed the relevant literature in Chapter Two, and in Chapter Three I provided a genealogical tracing of how the belly dancing subject has been constructed within a selection of film and television media depictions. The central question for this research had been: If dominant discursive understandings socially define the belly dancing subject in terms of the Orientalist and essentialist discourses, how then can women talk about experiences of dancing that they perceive as being spiritual or inspirational in nature? With this question at the fore, I had intentionally set out to provide opportunities for participants to explore any spiritual and inspirational meanings.

This final chapter is a discussion of five key themes identified in the analysis of the participant interviews. These five themes were: women's initial understandings of belly dancing, perceptions of performance, embodied experiences of belly dancing, examples of counter-discursive resistance, and novel articulations of the experience of belly dancing. Here, I will compare the findings of this study with insights drawn from the literature reviewed in Chapter Two.

The genealogical tracing has found Orientalist and essentialist dominant discursive constructions have consistently been employed by film and television media in constructing the belly dancing subject as the object of the male gaze.

Furthermore, the results of the genealogy have shown how the belly dancer has been depicted as a willing participant in the appropriation of this dance form, and constructed as complicit in maintaining the patriarchal assumptions underpinning established systems of representation within the public sphere. However, recent research within the literature debates constructions which have contained the belly dancing subject in historical, Orientalist and essentialist discourses.

Kelly (2008) problematized the “Middle Eastern/Western” binary around which it has largely centred, and proposed a globalised model instead (p. 106). She found that contemporary belly dancers are acculturated to a trans-culturally hybridized and globalised belly dance culture. The findings of my own study were fairly consistent with Kelly’s findings, with many women describing the activity of belly dancing in broader, more generalised terms consistent with a globalised belly dance cultural context. However, participants made very few references to any specific or established culture of belly dancing within their descriptions, moving quickly beyond describing belly dancing as an activity of the public sphere into descriptions of their personal experiences of belly dancing.

The results from my analysis of the interviews found that while the women voyeuristically identified with the performance, their descriptions appeared to counter the antagonistic and disempowering voyeuristic assumptions of the male gaze. When reflecting on their own performances, the participants’ descriptions suggested a process of subjecting themselves to their own gaze and were reflections made retrospectively, describing an active and central role in the dance performance. Their experiences of performative centrality are in alignment with both Bock’s (2005) research suggesting that the belly dancer is in a process of style construction, and Conover’s (2007) research suggesting that tribal style dancers use two embodied devices, signification and performativity, to challenge naturalized identity constructions of gender and sexuality that are layered onto belly dancing bodies. However, while both Conover and Bock’s research concludes that dancers are in a process of constructing themselves as the belly dancing subject, my interview analysis found that women’s articulations also emanated from a position central to the experience of belly dancing, rather than

solely from an externalised perspective of examining or observing themselves as a belly dancing subject.

Kelly (2008) found that “dancers reported a strong focus on feeling the movement in the body while learning, but their consciousness turned to how the movement looked once some skill was achieved” (p.110). The participants in my research described their experiences in terms of either the mind or the body, employing the corporeal discourse and then expanding on these original descriptions in a process similar to that found by Conover and Kelly. However, participant responses from my research failed to clearly indicate whether their experiences of belly dancing had an underpinning relationship to the Cartesian mind/body dualism, as the women showed a tendency to define relationships between what they saw and how they felt.

My research supports Bock’s (2005) findings that some dancers define and redefine the meanings of the dance through flexible rhetorical strategies, engaging in internal evaluations of the dance while retaining the power of a marginal position. While the participants in this research initially demonstrated a limited deployment of the dominant discursive constructions, they tended to describe themselves as engaging in an active and central role in the dance performance. This centrality constitutes resistance to the compliant and passive dominant discursive constructions of belly dancing. This research showed that participants’ references to the dominant discursive landscape became increasingly scarce and participants marked resistance to the established discourses by actively reconstructing or overturning them through the use of elaboration and the recruitment of novel descriptions that better fitted their meanings.

Much of the existing literature has remained tethered to the dominant discursive constructions and has been unable to completely dismantle the Orientalist and essentialist discourses. Whereas my research has shown that some women purposefully move away from the dominant discursive constructions in attempting to articulate their meanings of, and relationships to, the activity of belly dancing.

The participants in this research presented novel descriptions and used figurative language in their descriptions, which were inclusive of metaphorical, spiritual, inspirational, and therapeutic discourses, consistent with Transpersonal psychology. These discourses were examples of strategies that were employed by women in their attempts to explain experiences of belly dancing that they could not explain using the available dominant discourses.

As this research has shown, women frequently pushed beyond boundaries indicating the known discursive horizon of the public sphere in their attempts to articulate their experiences. As a consequence of their elaboration and novel descriptions, a personal sphere of experience began to emerge, heralded by the women's articulations of unique and largely unrecorded experiences. This burgeoning personal sphere gained further definition with participants' continued attempts at elaboration, indicting the inadequacy of the dominant discourses for elucidating their experiences. Furthermore, women also reported significant spiritual, inspirational and Transpersonal experiences of belly dancing which were far removed from the dominant discursive constructions of the public sphere. As a result of the participants' candid and revealing descriptions, both the developing personal sphere and the emerging spiritual and inspirational sphere have begun to re-shape the known discursive horizon, resulting in new and alternative discursive spaces for women to articulate their experiences beyond the dominant discourses.

In terms of the strengths and limitations of this research, due to the interview data being compiled as case studies, the results are specific to these participants. Should this research be replicated, there may be as many alternative explanations of belly dancing as there are individuals. Furthermore, the information provided by the participants cannot be generalized across the wider belly dancing population. Indeed, my research methodology was employed with the intention of avoiding generalization across the group as a whole

This research has covered new academic ground by taking a more holistic approach to the investigation of women's individual experiences of belly dancing.

My research methodology has displayed a degree of originality by providing participants with an opportunity to explore any spiritual and inspirational meanings and relationships to their experiences of belly dancing beyond the boundaries of the dominant discursive constructions at play within the public sphere. Furthermore, my research contributes to the greater body of work about belly dancing and to the field of Women's and Gender Studies by providing firsthand examples and analysis of non-normative states experienced by women in their participation in the activity of belly dancing.

Questions arising from this research will provide opportunities for further research and investigation and include:

- Is the activity of belly dancing dependant on identification with the dominant discursive constructions?
- To what extent are associated spiritual and inspirational meanings and relationships restricted to the activity of belly dancing?

This research has illustrated how women articulate their experiences of belly dancing by moving beyond the dominant discursive constructions of the public sphere. Therefore, practical implications of this research may be that women reconsider their own established meanings and relationships to a range of activities beyond the limitations of the known discursively constructed boundaries. Theoretically, any departure from the dominant discursive constructions and resulting transgression of the hermeneutical horizon has the potential to undermine the embedded authority of existing patriarchal stereotypes and assumptions.

In sum, this research has shown that dominant discursive constructions of the social sphere cannot provide adequately for women when describing their experiences, particularly experiences that are spiritual and inspirational in nature. I suggest that some experiences of belly dancing can prove difficult to explain because belly dancing is experienced as the Gestalt, and as an activity constitutes much more than the collective sum of the dominant discursive constructions.

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## **Appendix 1: Letter and Consent Form**

Marion Cowper (BSocSc Hons)

119 Fairview Rd,

Chartwell,

Hamilton 3210

New Zealand.

My name is Marion Cowper and I am a graduate student at the University of Waikato studying for a Masters degree in Women's and Gender Studies. This letter invites you to take part in my research project on 'The experience of belly dancing', which has the approval of the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences.

1. The purpose of this study is to explore your experiences of belly dancing.
2. Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. If you agree to participate, you will take part in an interview with the researcher, Marion Cowper, and will be asked a series of questions about your experience of belly dancing. Alternatively, these questions may be sent by email for a written response from you. The interview will take between 45 and 90 minutes in total, and arrangements can be made for you to be interviewed at a location and time that suits both yourself and the researcher. Alternatively you can answer the questions through email should geographical or time constraints make a face-to-face interview impossible.
3. Interviews will be recorded on audio tape and then transcribed. Tapes and transcripts and email responses will only be seen by the researcher and her supervisor, and will be kept in a locked drawer that only the researcher has access to in a safe location for 5 years.
4. The information you provide will be confidential, and you will not be asked for any personal details such as age, income, or marital status.
5. Your identity will be protected in the written report through the use of a pseudonym, and if necessary, details that might identify you to others will be omitted or changed.

6. This research project has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. Any questions about the ethical conduct of this research may be sent to the Secretary of the Committee, email [fass-ethics@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:fass-ethics@waikato.ac.nz), postal address, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Te Kura Kete Aronui, University of Waikato, Te Whare Wananga o Waikato, Private Bag 3105, Hamilton 3240.
7. If you agree to take part, you will be asked to sign a written consent form. Participation in this research will not affect your participation in belly dancing classes in any way. If you later change your mind about participating, you are free to withdraw from this research but please note that the final date for withdrawal of your information from the research is July 30th, 2010.
8. The information you provide will be interpreted and the resulting interpretation and discussion will be included anonymously within the thesis and reproduced in full both on the internet at the Australian Digital Thesis Program at web address <http://adt.caul.edu.au/> . This thesis will be bound in hard copy for public access at the University of Waikato Library. It is also possible that future articles and presentations may result from the research, but in all such cases your identity will not be revealed, and pseudonyms will be used if and when the text refers to your experiences.
9. You can ask for a summary of the research findings by circling the appropriate response on the consent form.

If you interested in taking part, or would like any further information, please contact me (phone or text) on 0276646983, or email [marion\\_j\\_c@hotmail.com](mailto:marion_j_c@hotmail.com).

You are free to agree or decline to take part in this study and if (now or later) you have any concerns about this study, please contact my supervisor Dr Carolyn Michelle, Department of Women's and Gender Studies, on 078562889, Ext, 6828 or [caro@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:caro@waikato.ac.nz).

Thank you for your consideration.

Marion Cowper

The experience of belly dancing.

Consent form for participants.

Your permission is required before any material provided by you is used in this project.

Please read and respond to the following statements, and sign below:

“I understand that compiled data from this project may be included in a Master’s thesis and the completed thesis will be available to the public held in the Waikato University Library and on the internet at the Australian Digital Thesis Program. I also understand that articles and presentations may be a possible outcome of the research.”

**Please circle that which applies.**

I have read and understood the information sheet.    Yes        No

I have had any questions about this project answered.    Yes        No

I agree to provide information to the researcher under the conditions of confidentiality set out in the information sheet.    Yes        No

I give permission for my interview material to be included in this project.    Yes        No

I wish to receive a summary of the findings.    Yes        No

Full name: (please print) .....email address.....

Signature: .....Date:.....

Researcher's signature: .....Date:.....

Researcher's name and contact information:        Supervisor's name and contact information:

Marion Cowper 027 6646983        Dr Carolyn Michelle 078562889,

[marion\\_j\\_c@hotmail.com](mailto:marion_j_c@hotmail.com)

Ext, 6828 [caro@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:caro@waikato.ac.nz)

University of Waikato

## **Appendix 2: The Interview Questions**

- 1) Why did you begin to belly dance?
- 2) How long have you been belly dancing?
- 3) Describe any ideas you may have had about belly dancing before you began to dance.
- 4) Describe any ideas about belly dancing that have changed since you began to dance.
- 5) What does belly dancing mean to you now?
- 6) What purpose does the activity of belly dancing serve for you?
- 7) Describe the emotions, thoughts and experiences that are most often evoked when you are dancing (these emotions/thoughts/experiences could be physical/spiritual or other).
- 8) Are there particular emotions, thoughts and experiences that you have *only* when you are dancing? Please describe.
- 9) Why do you think you have these particular emotions, thoughts or experiences while you are dancing?
- 10) How do you feel about them?



