FROM VIBRATION TO VISUAL AESTHETICS: POLITICAL ECONOMIES OF ATTENTION IN CAIRO'S CONTEMPORARY BELLY DANCE INDUSTRY

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For the international belly dance community.

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Margaret L. Morley

From Vibration to Visual Aesthetics: Political Economies of Attention in Cairo's Contemporary Belly Dance Industry

This dissertation seeks to answer the question: how have foreign dancers come to seemingly dominate the belly dance industry in Egypt, in spite of most Egyptians' negative evaluations of foreigners' competence in the skills essential to Egyptian belly dance? Through answering, I also argue that the shifting values of the senses and beauty standards towards what sells best on social media exemplifies what I am calling "aesthetic colonization." Foreigners are only dominating the parts of the industry visible to the general public — those whose marketing is entwined with social media — while Egyptians continue to predominate in venues operating largely outside of social media. In the latter, the aesthetic favors attunement to senses of vibration (sound, affect) and attention as interpersonal care is bought and sold, cultivating relational value. In the former, the visual aesthetics of Instagram prevail, and female beauty and attention are commodified to circulate online. The movement from prioritizing senses of vibration to a visual aesthetic is symptomatic of ongoing colonization processes, in particular the expansion and intensification of neoliberal capitalism and with it the increasingly onerous discipling of bodies. Due to the coloniality of power, proximity to whiteness and wealth are valued, putting foreign dancers at an advantage over Egyptians in contexts where the visual is more important than the vibrational. Furthermore, as discipline in the Foucauldian sense is based on the threat of possible attention and women in Egyptian society are generally supposed to avoid drawing attention to their moving bodies, the visibility demands of media capitalism and its attendant political

economies of attention are dangerous to Egyptian women in ways that often don't apply to foreign dancers. Thus, I argue that attention is both a resource and a weapon, and in both cases, is used to further discipline women's adherence to gender norms and beauty ideals, intensifying as the visual becomes more important than the vibrational.

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Notes on Transliteration

This text follows the Arabic transliteration rules of the International Journal of Middle East Studies. The details can be found here and here. For non-Arabic speakers, a few key transliterations and their pronunciations are below. Transliterations are usually given for Egyptian Arabic pronunciations.

ʾ = ء (hamza and its variations, pronounced as a glottal stop; this is sometimes substituted for q following Egyptian pronunciation)

ā = ا (alif and its variations – a long A sound, varying from ah to eh depending on the surrounding consonants)

g or j = ج (this character represents a soft J sound in Modern Standard Arabic, but is often pronounced as a hard G in Egyptian Arabic, and will be transliterated according to most common usage)

ḥ = ح (a slightly aspirated H sound)

kh = خ (a more aspirated H sound)

ṣ = ص (an emphatic S sound articulated towards the back of the mouth)

ḍ = ض (an emphatic D sound articulated towards the back of the mouth)

ṭ = ط (an emphatic T sound articulated towards the back of the mouth)

ʿ = ع (a consonant pronounced in the back of the throat, resembling ahhh)

gh = غ (a French R sound)

q = ق (an emphatic K sound articulated towards the back of the mouth)

ū = و (as a long vowel, pronounced like oo)

ī = ي (as a long vowel, pronounced like ee)

1. Introduction

Settling into the backseat of my Uber as I head out for another evening of research in Cairo, I greet the driver, who is a young Egyptian man.

Me: *Msa' al-kheir* (Good evening).

Driver: *Msa' a-nnūr* (Good evening [literally evening of light]). You speak Arabic?

Me: *Aiwa* (yes).

Driver: From where?

Me: *Min Amrīka* (from America, i.e., the USA).

Driver: *Nawārit Misr* (welcome [literally "Egypt is lit by you"]).

Me: *Binawārek* (by your light [the formulaic response]).

Driver: Where did you learn Arabic? Are you married with an Egyptian?

Me: No, I'm married to an American. I learned Arabic in university.

Driver: Welcome to Egypt. Do you work here? Teaching?

Me: No, I'm doing research for my PhD.

Driver: Research on what? The pyramids?

Me: No. *Ra's shar'i* (Egyptian pronunciation of *raqṣ sharqī*). Belly dance.

Driver: Belly dance? You can get a PhD in that?

Me: Well, in cultural anthropology, but I focus on Egyptian belly dance.

Driver: You know, all the dancers are Russian now.

Me: Yeah, I've heard. There are a lot from other countries in Eastern Europe and Latin America, too.

Driver: These foreign dancers like Safinaz, people only like them for their bodies. They're vulgar and wear naked costumes. They don't have *iḥsās* (feelings) like Fifi Abdou or Taheya Carioca, Nagwa Fouad, Nai'met Mokhtar…Souheir Zaki. Mafeesh *rūḥ* (there is no soul). But they can do acrobatics and erotics, these foreign dancers.

Me: So, why do you think there are so many foreign dancers? Why aren't there any famous Egyptian dancers anymore?

Driver: The foreigners <u>they take care of themselves, they take care of everything.</u> Their bodies, their hair, their nails, their makeup. They eat healthy, they workout, they are educated. They practice and work hard. They are beautiful and sexy. The Egyptian girls, they don't

> take care of their bodies, they look cheap and *beledī* (in this sense, tacky). Their costumes aren't good. They don't look good. They're lazy, they don't want to work hard.

I repeated versions of this conversation — a composite sketch — with Uber drivers, tourism workers, Egyptian belly dance students, musicians, waiters, and costumers. Several of these opinions were also shared by Egyptian and foreign belly dancers (following Egyptian usage, I utilize "foreign" to mean dancers of non-Egyptian and non-Arab origin). The story of the ongoing cultural encounter of foreign belly dancers working in Egypt and coming to dominate the industry is complex, entangling issues of attention, beauty, class, race, gender, and sexuality with/on social media. Many of the arguments that I am about to make hinge on the ideas expressed in these conversations, in particular the vexed comparison of the bodies and behaviors of Egyptian and foreign dancers. While Egyptians nearly always evaluate foreign dancers as superior in physical appearance and elegant comportment, stressing the "care" they take of themselves (by which they mean disciplined diet, exercise, and beauty regimens), their dancing itself is seen as inferior in the ways that truly matter to Egyptians — their feelings, presence, interpretation of the music, and interactions with the audience (see also (Morley 2023)). Note also how foreign dancers are perceived as simultaneously vulgar and overly sexual and as disciplined and classy and better groomed. Ironically, the discipline that makes foreign dancers more physically appealing in the eyes of Egyptians judging by global cosmopolitan beauty standards is also at the root of what makes their dancing seem to lack soul, keeping the focus on perfecting how the dancer's body looks rather than on spontaneous connection with the music and the audience. How foreign dancers have flourished in Egypt despite these contradictions tells us much about the workings of colonial matrices of power through media, attention, gender norms, beauty ideals, and global

capitalism in contemporary Egyptian society.

This work answers the question of how foreign belly dancers have seemingly come to dominate the belly dance industry in Egypt despite many Egyptians' negative evaluations of their skills in the essentials of Egyptian belly dance. Throughout the answer to this question, I weave a complex theoretical argument: the shifting values of the senses and beauty standards towards what sells best on social media exemplifies what I am calling "aesthetic colonization." Briefly, the cultural organization of the senses, including which senses are valued culturally and economically as well as what makes something beautiful, are being brought into alignment with the demands of global media capitalism, which runs on attention as both capital and commodity. Foreigners are only dominating the parts of the industry visible to the general public — those whose marketing is entwined with social media — while Egyptians continue to predominate in venues operating largely outside of social media. In the latter, the aesthetic favors attunement to senses of vibration (sound, affect) and attention as interpersonal care is bought and sold, cultivating relational value. In the former, the visual aesthetics of Instagram prevail, and female beauty and attention are commodified to circulate online. The movement from prioritizing senses of vibration to a visual aesthetic is symptomatic of ongoing colonization processes, in particular the expansion and intensification of neoliberal capitalism and with it the increasingly onerous discipling of bodies. Due to the legacies of global colonial hierarchies of race and class (i.e., the coloniality of power — see pages 17-20), proximity to whiteness and wealth are valued, putting foreign dancers at an advantage over Egyptians in contexts where the visual is more important than the vibrational. Furthermore, as discipline in the Foucauldian sense is based on the threat of possible attention and women in Egyptian society are generally supposed to avoid drawing attention to

their moving bodies, the visibility demands of media capitalism and its attendant political economies of attention are dangerous to Egyptian women in ways that often don't apply to foreign dancers. Thus, I argue that attention is both a resource and a weapon, and in both cases, is used to further discipline women's adherence to gender norms and beauty ideals, intensifying as the visual becomes more important than the vibrational.

Before I proceed any further, a note/disclaimer. This is a critical ethnography of the contemporary belly dance industry in Egypt and to an extent of the international belly dance industry, but I do not intend it as a criticism of any particular individuals or their choices. I hope my friends who are foreign dancers working in Egypt will bear this in mind throughout their reading. My critique is aimed at the systems of oppression within which we are all operating, and it is my hope that my writing will be thought-provoking for readers from the international belly dance community, helping them to understand the power fields in which we are involved. This tension also informs the somewhat unusual approach I take to naming the dancers who figured in my research, or not naming them. As there is so little written about contemporary professional Egyptian dancers, I wish to name as many as I can, but as I demonstrate throughout this work, attention can be dangerous, and this is a small community. Thus, I often use composite stories to present the patterns I encountered in my research without making any particular dancer identifiable, and I use pseudonyms in non-composite stories. Wanting to give credit to Egyptian dancers when it is safe to do so, I do give quotes I deem non-controversial (primarily about the importance of feelings in belly dance) their true attribution.

This rest of this introduction will provide a summary of key terms and concepts in my theoretical framework. First, I will introduce belly dance – the form and the term, explaining why

I use the term “belly dance” despite its problematic origins — then give a brief summary of relevant history. Next, I will explain the foundations of inequality in race, gender, and class that are at play throughout the industry and the text. We will then proceed to the concept of Orientalism (Said 1978) — briefly, the stereotyped representation of the East as exotic and primitive, justifying Western domination — which frames all conversations about cultural contact between “the West” and “the Middle East”, and thus must remain at the heart of all my analysis. Following this, I will sketch the most salient points of the history of belly dance in the US. The section “Attention and…” will trace my theoretical framework, drawing connections between attention, political economy, aesthetics and the senses, and discipline as I am applying them. Finally, I will reflect on my positionality as a white woman who belly dances moving in public in Egypt, summarize my methods, and provide an outline of the remaining chapters.

What is Belly Dance: History and Definition from an Egyptian-centric Perspective

Belly dance is an umbrella term for a family of hip- and torso-centered dance forms which originated in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and are most often performed by women. It can be performed in very small spaces, since traveling and footwork are optional. It is characterized by small, isolated movements of the hips, pelvis, chest, and shoulders — sinuous circles, eights, and undulations as well as percussive accents and shimmies, accompanied by flowing or articulated arm movements. Ideally, these movements physically manifest the music, which is the foundation of the dance. Rooted in social dances, performances are often improvised, although choreography has become common in certain styles and contexts.

The term “belly dance” has Orientalist origins. Although there are folk etymologies

claiming that belly is a corruption/mishearing of Egyptian *beledī,*[1] it in fact comes from a French Orientalist painting (Hawthorn 2019). The French phrase *danse du ventre* (dance of the belly) became a popular alternative title for an 1863 painting of an Egyptian dancer, and eventually became the standard way to refer to solo women's dances from the Middle East and North Africa. The English translation, "belly dance" was then used in media coverage of the *Parisian Exposition Universelle*, and as imitations and imaginings of the dance form spread across Europe and the US, belly dance became the standard term. There has long been a push to replace "belly dance" with "*raqṣ sharqī*" (eastern or Oriental dance), the Arabic term for the professional dance style which emerged in Egypt in the early twentieth century from which most contemporary styles derive. However, most of the venues I attended and people I spoke with in Egypt used the English terms "belly dance" and "belly dancer" and often drew clear distinctions between the contemporary social-based styles performed in Egypt and fusion styles developed abroad, on the one hand, and raqṣ sharqī on the other. I saw Egyptians increasingly using "raqṣ sharqī" to refer to the professional stage style common to Egyptian films and public popular culture of the mid-twentieth century. I suspect three reasons for this. First, as many Egyptians have told me, Egyptian society tends to suffer from internalized colonization (see also chapter four) and often prizes foreign — especially English or European — words, ideas, and products as superior to Egyptian versions, giving the term "belly dance" more prestige in some senses. Second, using the English term "belly dancer" gives an alternative to the stigma attached to the Egyptian Arabic term *rā'aṣa* (dancer), which is a synonym for prostitute (for the same reason, many dancers refer to themselves as *fanāna,* meaning artist, or use the Modern Standard Arabic *rāqiṣa*, which has less

[1] An adjective meaning "of the country," here it refers to native Egyptian styles and manifestations.

negative connotations). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, belly dance as a label also better encompasses the many different but related dance forms that a belly dancer in Egypt is responsible for performing, several of which people take pains to differentiate from raqṣ sharqī. It may be a foreign loan word rooted in colonialism, but "belly dance" seems to be used by many Egyptians — perhaps empoweringly so — as an umbrella term encompassing all the forms a dancer is expected to know, while raqṣ sharqī is increasingly used to specify a classic professional style most popular from approximately 1930 to the 1980s that is seen as more elegant and artistic than what is performed to most contemporary music. Therefore, following my interlocutors' example, I use "belly dance" and "belly dancer" throughout this work except when referring to a more specific dance style.

Ancient Egyptian art suggests that belly dance may have roots in pharaonic rituals (Lexova 1974), and this is what many Egyptians told me. Many practitioners of belly dance in the Western world believe that belly dance originated in ancient birthing and/or goddess-worshipping rituals, fed in part by the non-academic book *Serpent of the Nile* (Buonaventura 1989). Although this theory is not incompatible with the idea of origins in ancient Egyptian rituals, it is most often framed as culturally non-specific, and has thus mainly served to prop up white women's sense of feminist entitlement to belly dance as part of our heritage destroyed by patriarchy, side-stepping questions of cultural appropriation. Written accounts of public dancers performing around the Mediterranean in the late Roman and early Byzantine empires describe a dance form that sounds similar to the belly dance we have seen documented on film since the late nineteenth century (Shay 2014).

While we have archival records concerning the taxing and regulation of dancers and

prostitutes in Egypt (Tucker 1986; Biancani 2018) most of what we know about the history of dance in Egypt is from accounts by colonizers and European travelers in the early nineteenth century. Given the inherent Orientalism (Said 1978) and potential bias of these writings and their authors, we must be wary of relying on their complete accuracy, but enough commonality exists that several scholars have pieced together a rough picture of the dance industry in Egypt from the writings of Lane, Flaubert, and others.

In the nineteenth century, dancers were an established part of public life, broadly but not totally divided into two groups. There was a lower status group of street dancers who also performed at mixed gender weddings, known as *ghawāzī*, and a higher status group of women educated in Arabic poetry and other arts who performed in the women's quarters of elite homes (where men could listen to their poetry and singing, but not see them) and were known as *'awālim*, the plural of '*alma* (female scholar) (Van Nieuwkerk 1995; Roushdy 2009; Fraser 2015; Ward 2018). Since most of the Europeans writing about dance in Egypt were men, they did not have access to the performances of 'awālim, in the women's quarters, and we don't know as much about them.[2] The ghawāzī were also supposedly paid to be fortunetellers and prostitutes (Roushdy 2009), and are often thought to be a nomadic group not originally from Egypt; they may be a branch of Roma (Nieuwkerk 1995, 26-27), and some contemporary families of ghawāzī entertainers in Upper Egypt do claim descent from Roma groups known to be in Egypt (Ward 2018). The 'awālim were native Muslim Egyptian women and highly trained, although most seem to have originally come from the lower classes of society. The fact that the publicly performing

[2] Heather Ward is engaged in ongoing research about the history of dance in Egypt, in particular the differences and overlaps between 'awālim and ghawāzī. Her in-progress book may complicate or disprove some of the information given here.

ghawāzī were far more stigmatized than the ‘awālim performing privately in elite houses suggests that the problem with dancers was largely their publicness and visibility to men, an observation to which I will return in chapter five.

Of people who told me that belly dance originated in ancient Egypt, many then claimed it was corrupted by some imperial/colonial encounter or other. Some said it was the Turks (Egypt became part of the Ottoman Empire in 1517), others say it was corrupted when French and English colonizers demanded public performances in the nineteenth century (although this is demonstrably false, given the accounts of public dance performances in Egypt and the wider Roman and Byzantine Empires). Still others claim that the raqṣ sharqī that developed in Egypt at the turn of the nineteenth to twentieth century was born of a love affair with Hollywood and pandering to English and American imperialists. This is not supported by the historical evidence, which shows that performances in late nineteenth and early twentieth century entertainment halls were geared primarily towards Egyptians and Arabic-speakers, with the style’s development driven primarily by Egyptian and Arab women’s participation in projects of Egyptian national identity (Ward 2018), although Hollywood was certainly an influence, amongst many others.

The style that came to be known as raqṣ sharqī developed in the new entertainment halls of Cairo and Alexandria during the early period of British occupation (officially beginning in 1882). Driven by changing economies and government regulations, many ‘awālim and ghawāzī began performing in these new venues, which removed performances from their traditional context of social celebrations (Ward 2018). The dances of the ‘awālim and ghawāzī were based in Egyptian women’s social dance forms (*raqṣ baladi,* meaning local dance)*,* to which they were known to occasionally add feats of acrobatics and balancing. As Ward argues, working in entertainment

halls, traditional Egyptian entertainers encountered professional dancers from around North Africa, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East, as well as some singers and dancers from Europe. From these dancers, Egyptians adapted movement and costume elements to develop an artistic form, raqṣ sharqī, that was self-consciously both traditionally Egyptian as well as cosmopolitan and modern (Ward 2018). Ward argues that the label sharqī (eastern) was used in opposition to afrangi (specifically Western foreign) to assert Egyptian authenticity against foreign domination. These developments tie the dance form to overall projects of modern Egyptian identity and help explain the preponderance of belly dancers in mid-twentieth century Egyptian films.

Audiovisual media has been an important arena for constructing and negotiating Egyptian identity for nearly one hundred years. Walter Armbrust (1996) has argued that mass audiovisual media is to Egyptian nationalism what print capitalism forms like newspapers were to the development of nationalism in the Americas and Europe: the medium through which people sharing a vernacular language began to imagine themselves as a community (Anderson 1983). Due to low literacy rates and the discrepancies between Modern Standard Arabic and Egyptian dialect, only formats that did not require reading — such as radio broadcasts, music recordings, and films — had the potential to reach and mobilize the Egyptian masses. Therefore, Armbrust argues that Egyptian films are an important forum for contesting notions of Egyptian identity, trying to find the right balance of conservative and modern, tradition and progress.

Dance is a key part of Egyptian cinema, particularly from its inception through the 1960s (M. A. Franken 1996; Dougherty 2005). The films of the mid-twentieth century are representative of a certain form of Egyptian nationalism, in which the ideal Egyptian is presented as modern, worldly, and sophisticated, yet still rooted in local cultures and norms (Armbrust 2002). Within

the films, there are often nightclubs featuring dancers performing a modern hybrid belly dance, with the dance and the dancers combining elements of modernity — like Western-style clothing, choreographed stage shows, and elevated balletic posture — with an adherence to perceived Egyptian values such as family and honor. These films continue to be aired on Egyptian television, thus cementing the raqṣ sharqī of that era as part of Egyptian heritage. Following the 1952 revolution and President Gamal Abdel Nasser's turn to Arab socialism, Egyptian nationalism began taking a different turn. With the establishment of national folkloric dance troupes in the 1960s — in particular the Reda troupe — and the government professionalization of Egyptian entertainment industries, raqṣ sharqī began losing status, and dancers in movies were no longer portrayed by professional dancers, contributing to a negative image in several respects (Dougherty 2005; Ward 2018). Today, belly dancers and related forms of dance remain popular in music videos, especially for the newer genres of *sh'abī* (popular) and *mahragan/mahraganat* (festival(s)). Both styles are associated with the lower classes and are often denigrated as a result, but they remain extremely popular, especially in nightlife spaces.

While other countries in the Middle East, in particular Lebanon and Turkey, have specific belly dance performance styles, many Egyptians assert that belly dance/raqṣ sharqī is at its heart Egyptian; in no other country is belly dance as ubiquitous as it is in Egypt, and Cairo, the regional capital of culture and media for decades, spread its artistic and cultural influence outward, disseminating the raqṣ sharqī seen in classic Egyptian films. Only in Egypt — primarily lower Egypt — do you find dancers performing at so many weddings and public celebrations, as well as being in high demand at mainstream entertainment venues of all classes. In other countries in the region, belly dance performances are generally limited to tourist attractions and entertainment

for the elite. Egypt is also the only place in the world where I have accidentally seen a belly dance performance. The centrality of Egypt in belly dance is also why so many dancers from other countries dream of dancing there.

A central theme in this dissertation is the growing number of foreign dancers seeming to dominate the scene. This trend is long enough that in 2003, the government banned foreign dancers (Arvizu 2004), saying that they were vulgar and taking work from Egyptian dancers and claiming that, as an important part of Egyptian identity, raqṣ sharqī performance jobs should not go to foreigners (McDonald 2012). However, many upper class venues were unwilling to hire Egyptians (for reasons explored throughout this dissertation) and instead stopped offering performances, eventually convincing the government, with the help of some lobbying by foreign dancers, to lift the ban (Arvizu 2004).

Important Concepts and Styles in Egyptian Belly Dance

This dissertation is by no means meant to be a complete survey of belly dance around the world, or even in Egypt. Rather, I examine certain key nodes in the contemporary industry that exemplify trends and changes in progress. I say little about weddings, which are one of the most common and important belly dance performance contexts. While many of the videos on social media are from weddings, I found it difficult to access weddings in person. Despite my selective approach, there are a few general stylistic concepts I want to introduce before continuing.

Beledī is a very complicated concept in Egyptian culture. Deriving from the noun *beled* (country), beledī technically denotes something of the country, in this case Egypt, and grammatically can also mean “my country.” Locally grown lemons are called beledī lemons, and

the Egyptian version of flatbread — with whole meal and fluffier than the pita encountered in Lebanese food — is called *'aīsh beledī* (local/Egyptian bread/life). But beledī also refers to people and things of rural origin, and thus has lower class associations, implying lack of sophistication. The ubiquitous street cats and dogs of Egypt are referred to as beledī cats and beledī dogs, in contradistinction to purebred pets imported from abroad. [3] However, for the same reason, beledī has connotations of Egyptian authenticity, implying adherence to Egyptian values, as well as simplicity and spontaneity. As Noha Roushdy explains, "[a]s employed in common usage, anyone, irrespective of wealth, religion, or gender, can exhibit *baladi*[4] qualities in a given context. In effect, it is sometimes admirable among middle and upper class Egyptians to express *baladi* qualities, but one would not be perceived with admiration if one were to be or act *baladi* all the time" (2013, 23).

As I have already mentioned, raqṣ beledī is the term used for general Egyptian social dancing, and thus is the basis of raqṣ sharqī and modern belly dance. Within the international belly dance community, beledī is used to refer to a particular folkloric genre that stages Cairene women's social dancing, emphasizing the grounded and relaxed qualities associated with beledī. Confusingly, neither the rhythm nor the music that the international belly dance community calls beledī are commonly called that in Arabic today. However, certain dancers may be said to exemplify beledī — Fifi Abdou being the prime example.

[3] See also my personal side project with Jeff, the Instagram account @allthecatsincairo .
[4] The word can be transliterated baladi or beledī, with baladi being more common for Modern Standard Arabic, but beledī being closer to the Egyptian pronunciation, which favors e and i sounds.

The concept of *sh'abī* is similar to beledi, with *sh'ab* meaning people and sh'abī, its adjective derivative, meaning popular.[5] Sh'abī refers more to the urban lower classes than the rural, and has similar connotations of poverty and unsophistication, but less of the positive connotations of beledī. It also refers to a popular musical genre that developed in Cairo in the second half of the twentieth century, one that is associated with the lower classes and considered somewhat less respectable and artistic than the famous classics of singers like Umm Kulthum and Abdel Halim Hafez, although 1970s sh'abī icons like Abdel Basset Hamouda have now garnered a certain amount of respect. The dancing done to sh'abī music is likewise crowd-pleasing but considered coarse. The music of earlier greats like Umm Kulthum is coming to be called ṭarab music, with ṭarab referring to a sense of aesthetic rapture that will be discussed in great detail in chapter three.

The last two decades have seen the development of a new Egyptian musical genre, sparking changes in the entertainment industry. Starting around 2005, young men in the poorer neighborhoods of Cairo began experimenting with easily accessible music and sound editing software and applications, like auto-tune (Benchouia 2015). The result was the style Egyptians call *mahragan* or *mahraganat* (festival(s)). Based on the sh'abī music of the previous three or so decades, *mahraganat* adds electronic musical layers and the influence of other popular music genres from around the globe, particularly hip hop and reggaeton. Because of its origins in the lower classes, popularity at lower class street weddings, and associations with drugs and alcohol, *mahraganat* is not considered respectable by many Egyptians. Nonetheless, the genre's popularity has grown steadily, and it has become much more mainstream since the 2011

[5] Commonly transliterated as shaabi.

revolution. Now most Egyptians listen to and love *mahraganat,* despite its lower-class origins and immoral associations. For examples, see the popular songs of artists like Oka wi Ortega, El Sawareekh, Hassan Shakoush, and actor-singer Mohamed Ramadan.

Finally, the concept of *dall'a*, often translated as coquettishness, is important in Egyptian belly dance. Dall'a has also been described as flirtation in a manner that is not overtly sexual, but rather "a teasing appeal through femininity" (Zuhur 2021, 65). In essence, dall'a means playing with the musicians and the audience in a way that exemplifies Egyptian ideas of femininity, namely softness. Play is an important part of belly dance in general, and raqṣ beledī in particular (Lorius 1996; Adra 2005). Chapter three will show how the playfulness of dall'a is put to work in cabarets, although in such contexts the flirtatious quality tends to — but does not have to — take on a more sexual edge.

Stigmatization and Links with Prostitution

The dancing body is, in many social contexts, a sexualized body (cf. Cowan 1990; Desmond 1999; 2001). As such, dancers are often thought of as sexually loose/available and have long been regarded as potential prostitutes in many societies, including around the Mediterranean (Shay 2014). The extent to which dancers in Egypt have historically also engaged in prostitution is less relevant to our present concerns than the general public perception and assumption that dancers are akin to prostitutes. Although belly dancers in Egypt have long been popular at weddings, saints' day celebrations, and a variety of entertainment venues, they are also stigmatized and associated with prostitution (Van Nieuwkerk 1995). As Van Nieuwkerk argues, this is due in part to the general global distrust of performers and dancers (cf. Barish 1981; Seizer 2005). Dancers and other public performers have long been marginalized to the lowest levels of many societies,

accused of and associated with prostitution, an Other both reviled and desired (Stallybrass 1986). In my view, the stigmatization of both dancers and prostitutes is also because of a patriarchal discomfort with female sexuality (Morley 2007), a problem by no means exclusive to Middle Eastern cultures. In the sources I examined, Egyptians usually morally objected to belly dancers because they believed a woman revealing her body and moving it excites and tempts men. While belly dancing socially – often in women-only settings – helps Egyptian women negotiate and release the tensions of cultural expectations of female modesty (Roushdy 2009), the stigmatization of women who dance professionally helps to uphold those norms by punishing their transgressions. Thus, belly dancers remain marginalized but important figures in Egyptian culture.

In 1834, Egyptian ruler Muhammad ʻAli issued a decree banning "public women" — all public female dancing, singing, and sex work were forbidden in Cairo and Alexandria. This caused many professional dancers to relocate to Luxor and Esna in Upper Egypt. The ban seems to have been sparked by several factors: public outcry over the government taxing, and thus profiting from, immoral occupations; corruptions and abuses of tax system against "honorable women" (Tucker 1986), and indignation about colonial dominance as dancers increasingly plied their trade for foreigners (Ward 2018). The ban also served Muhammad Ali's modernization project and concern that dancers undermined efforts to present Egypt to foreigners as a modern nation, linking the criminalization of dancers to Egypt's efforts to develop a system of law and order in the style of a European state (Tucker 1986; Van Nieuwkerk 1995; Roushdy 2009). The regulation and criminalization of belly dancers is thus part of the advancing colonial project of discipline as outlined by Foucault (1975) and as described in Egypt by Timothy Mitchell (1991) — more

discussion of discipline and colonization will follow in the next section.

The ban was not very successful, and in fact the resulting higher prominence of male dancers may have further reduced Egypt's image in homophobic European eyes; it also forced some dancers to engage in prostitution. With less work to support themselves and further away from the center of power, dancers were more likely to have to engage in prostitution and give in to European travelers' demands for naked performances and sex. Rather than hiding dancers from the Europeans, travelers simply went to Upper Egypt in search of the fabled dancers (Nieuwkerk 1995, Roushdy 2009). In fact, Europeans found the Egyptian desire to keep women inside and out of public life backwards and frustrating to their colonizing Orientalist impulses, and often went to great lengths to get Egyptian women where they could see them. As part of a general expansion of taxation under Khedive Ismā'īl, the licensing and taxing dancers resumed by 1866 (Fraser 2015; Ward 2018), and continues today.

Regulating dancers not only advances the colonial disciplinary project, it helps to reinforce colonial hierarchies of race, gender, and class through differential enforcement. Six weeks after the British officially took control of Egypt in 1882 after the Urabi rebellion, new laws regulating prostitution were promulgated. Imperial rule was dependent on preserving the basic health of foot soldiers — thus necessitating regulation of prostitution to try to limit the spread and effects of venereal disease — and on upholding the racial hierarchy of empire (Biancani 2018). As such, a roughly two-tiered prostitution industry developed, with roots in the system of valuing slaves. Prostitutes of European origin were more expensive than native Egyptians, and they were to be found in distinct areas, with Egyptian prostitutes considered to be for the lower Egyptian classes, while anybody who could afford to would be expected to prefer to patronize white prostitutes.

The system of capitulations and mixed courts that developed in early modern Egypt provided certain privileges and immunities to most European nationals, making them subject only to the laws and jurisdiction of their own countries. In practice this meant that prostitutes, procurers, and pimps of European origin could evade most state regulations and punishments. Egyptian prostitutes, however, were subjected to much harsher circumstances; for example, weekly medical checks were required, and if evidence of venereal disease was found, they were locked in a hospital where they could not work but were forced to pay for their own treatment (Biancani 2018). Although the capitulations are no longer in place, the relative privileges of foreign dancers in comparison to Egyptian dancers discussed throughout this work is similar to that seen in the tiered prostitution system.

Female entertainment was also racially segregated In the newly thriving nightlife district of Azbekiyyah at the turn of the twentieth century. White artistes sang and danced to European music, while Egyptian women performed sexualized versions of their local social dances. The venues in which singers and dancers worked were generally associated with prostitution, and customers tended to expect that all the women working there were open to offers of transactional sex. This was partially due to the practice of *fath,* in which cabaret dancers were expected to sit, drink, and flirt with customers to encourage them to spend more money, a percentage of which was shared with the dancer (Biancani 2018). If the customer requested sex at the end of the night, the dancer was generally expected to comply. The money earned through *fath* often constituted the majority of a dancer's income. Because of the associations with prostitutions, fath has been forbidden to Egyptian women since 1933 and banned outright since 1952. However, we will see in chapter three that other female employees — waitresses or reklam,

depending on the venue — as well as the practices surrounding renting and throwing money, take the place of fath and continue to provide customers with sexually-inflected female attention.

Foundations of Inequality: The Coloniality of Race and Gender

My analysis is built on a foundation of theories concerning interlocking systems of oppression rooted in patriarchy, capitalism, and colonization/coloniality. I will sketch the salient points below, explaining how the axes of inequality work together in the contexts I describe, always lurking in the shadows of social interactions. As theorists of coloniality explain (Quijano 2000; Mignolo 2011; 2021; Lugones 2016), in restructuring colonized societies to serve capitalism and modernity, colonizing Europeans destroyed existing social structures and imposed relations of domination and exploitation, classifying the entire population of the planet into hierarchies of race and gender. With the global expansion of colonialism and capitalism, these classifications have been imposed on all people and the hierarchies have permeated all of social existence. Coloniality refers to the legacy of these hierarchies imposed in the service of colonial capitalism, upon which capitalist modernity is dependent, enmeshed in our very existence and with continually reverberating effects.

In my master's thesis (Morley 2007), I argued that the stigmatization of belly dancers in Egypt was rooted in patriarchal fear of female sexuality. Several scholars have written about the conceptualization of women as primarily and sometimes exclusively sexual and reproductive beings in Islamic discourse (cf. Sabbah 1984; Mernissi 1987; Ahmed 1992), and this view is at the core of female modesty norms and the stigmatization of belly dancers in Egypt. My conclusion came from the specific discourse in Egypt concerning belly dancers, but patriarchy and the male

desire for/fear of women's bodies are found in many cultures around the world today. Many feminist scholars have argued that the oppression of women stems from men's desire to control reproduction and property inheritance (cf. Rubin 1975; McClintock 1993), intensifying as capitalism developed and necessitated that women's bodies and labor be devoted exclusively to reproduction (Federici 2004).

However, prior to colonization and capitalism, not all societies used gender as an organizing principle; the very idea that patriarchy is about heterosexual reproduction and inheritance comes from a colonialist understanding of human relations. That is, "to think the scope of the gender system of Eurocentered global capitalism it is necessary to understand the extent to which *the very process of narrowing* of the concept of gender to the control of sex, its resources, and products constitutes gender domination" (Lugones 2016, 12). Many pre-colonial societies in Africa and the Americas did not see gender as biological and dimorphic; three or more genders were socially accepted and anatomy did not determine social roles, nor were intersex individuals forced to fit into a gender binary, nor were cultural concepts of gender always hierarchical (Allen 1986; Oyewumi 1997; Lugones 2016). But it is important to remember that race and gender are inseparable when analyzing the oppression of women (Crenshaw 1991; Lugones 2016). As Lugones explains, "the characterization of white European women as fragile and sexually passive opposed them to non-white, colonized women, including women slaves, who were characterized along a gamut of sexual aggression and perversion, and as strong enough to do any sort of labor" (2016, 13). Thus, as colonial modernity and capitalism have expanded and evolved, new types of "women" have evolved. Due to the coloniality of power, race, and gender (Quijano 2000; Mignolo 2011; Lugones 2016), women of color remain invested with

excess sexuality and sensuality in comparison to the supposed sexual morality of white women. This racialized hierarchy of women generates a peculiar tension in Egyptian views of foreign dancers; foreign women are known to come from societies where sexual mores are much looser than in Egypt, but according to the colonial hierarchies described above, white women are more virtuous and less sexual than Egyptian women. Although the dancers from Latin America are not as high in the global hierarchies as unquestionably white women of European descent, in Egypt their foreign-ness seems to place them in the same category, above Egyptian women. Even as foreign dancers are denigrated as vulgar, the bourgeois white aesthetic in which they display their bodies leads to their being esteemed as classier.

The same colonial hierarchies are at the root of our attitudes towards fat bodies and the near-global valorization of thinness. As black scholars have recently demonstrated, fatphobia is rooted in racism and fear of the black body (Strings 2019; Harrison 2021). Many have noted the changing bodies visible in European art, with abundantly fleshy women depicted as goddesses and objects of beauty from the Renaissance until the 1800s. The explanation most commonly given for the modern preference for thin bodies centers class and changing diets: when most people were thin because it was hard to get adequate nutrition, fatness was desirable as a marker of wealth, but modern sedentary lifestyles and processed foods have made most people fat, and thus thinness is now what demonstrates affluence. While this is true, it is only a partial explanation.

As Strings (2019) demonstrates, through the drive to consolidate racial hierarchies and clearly delineate racial differences, upholding slavery and colonization, fatness became tied to Blackness. In philosophy, travel memoirs, anthropology, medical science, and women's

magazines, fatness was repeatedly tied to black women, inferiority, gluttony, lust, laziness, and monstrosity. Ladies' magazines began to exhort women that it was their Christian duty to be as thin as possible, to starve themselves if necessary, in order to demonstrate the moral superiority of white Christian women (Strings 2019, 122).[6] In nineteenth-century travel memoirs, women in Turkey and Egypt were described similarly, often in tones of sexual fascination when written by men. As women of color were invested with excess sensuality, so they were made the repository of flesh deemed excessive, tying thinness to whiteness and positions of power. As such, we can see the coloniality of race and gender shaping inequalities in the Egyptian dance industry.

Orientalism and Belly Dance in the US

Theories of coloniality come from Latin American scholars, placing the colonization of the Americas at the center of founding modernity and global capitalism, while European colonization of the Middle East and North Africa came several centuries later. Thus, we might think of Orientalism as a manifestation of the coloniality of power, race, and gender. Orientalism describes a set of representational practices in which Westerners depict the East and particularly the Middle East as exotic and other, projecting onto it many of the shadow aspects of the West. The East is essentialized as not only exotic, but sensuous, lazy, uncontrolled, irrational, weak, feminine,

[6] To anybody who would respond to the above by pointing out that fatness is a health concern: It is not. No causative correlation between body weight/fat and health problems has ever been conclusively demonstrated. The increased incidence of medical issues could equally be caused by the physical and mental stresses of weight cycling (from repeated dieting attempts) and fat stigma. The extremes to which people go to try to lose weight and the proliferation of medical procedures and medications to "fix" fatness are all symptomatic of how thoroughly fatness has been relegated to the bottom of social hierarchies. For a thorough review of scientific studies on weight loss and their problems, see the Substack writings of Ragan Chastain at https://weightandhealthcare.substack.com/.

inferior, underdeveloped – all the things that Europe and the US denigrate and repress. Sometimes the difference of the East is depicted as a positive alternative to Western culture, but this fetishization of difference still embodies a colonialist attitude, reduces and distorts the reality of Middle Eastern cultures, and often provides a pretext for Western domination of the Middle East. While the patterns of Orientalism first came to the attention of Western academia through the seminal writings of Palestinian-American scholar Edward Said (1978), it is important to note that similar critiques had previously been made by Arab intellectuals (cf. Abdel-Malek 1963) as well as nationalists and Islamists (as documented in al-Sayyid 2004). Although I have not read them, I have no doubt that intellectuals and activists in South Asia and East Asia have also long been making similar critiques of Western representations of their societies.

In his influential book, Said describes Orientalism as several things: an institution for dealing with "the Orient", a discourse, a will to understand and sometimes control "the Orient", and a distribution of geopolitical awareness into scholarly and popular cultures. Within this discourse, the Orient is a representation, rather than itself or a truth. The Orient and "the Oriental" are always represented as Other, as a surrogate self for the West. That Orientalism has largely been an institution for dominating and restraining the Orient is a product of the ongoing relationship of domination and hegemony between the West and the Middle and Far East.

As Foucault argues (1978), no production of knowledge is free of the historical and positional circumstances surrounding the individual or institution producing it. Thanks to Enlightenment beliefs, Orientalist scholars working in Europe and North America from the late eighteenth century until at least the late twentieth century have often obscured and ignored their own positionality through a claim of rational, scientific, and disinterested objectivity. As European

imperial entanglements in the "Orient" increased, most scholarship was anything but disinterested, and was intimately tied to efforts to know and control the region and its people. As such, Orientalist discourse eventually took a more instrumental turn, and developed from a need to understand the Orient into a need to control it and make it perform as the West desired. As actual commercial and political contact between the regions increased, Western tourists, merchants, officers, and diplomats would prepare for their encounters with Orientalist scholarship and often treat the people they met accordingly. Thus, the people of the Middle East have long had to deal with representations of themselves and their world as exotic, lazy, backward, hypersexual/sensuous, violent, dishonest, unchanging, and irreducibly different. Said comments that this experience can have a self-reinforcing effect, feeding internalized colonization and the foreigner complex I discuss in chapter four. Conversely, Egyptians working in the tourism industry often feel an obligation to meet expectations, and thus playfully engage in some of the Orientalist stereotypes attributed to them (Wynn 2007; 2018).

Belly dancing in Euro-American contexts has Orientalist roots. The story goes that belly dance was first seen in the US at the Chicago World Fair in 1893, where a belly dancer called Little Egypt performed on the Midway Plaisance. Whether or not the dancer was Egyptian and how much her dancing resembled any dance of North Africa and the Middle East remains an open question (Carlton 1995). As Carlton explains, the Orientalist misinformation and scandals surrounding Little Egypt's dancing and vaudevillian reinterpretations of it remained attached to public perceptions of belly dance as it developed. The first style of belly dance to spread around the US was generally called "Oriental" or "Cabaret" and was a fusion of music, dance and costuming from around the Mediterranean – particularly Lebanese, Turkish, Egyptian, and Greek.

This style developed in Arab diaspora spaces, primarily Arab-owned nightclubs where musicians from around the Middle East would gather and play together (Rasmussen 1992). Most of the performing dancers were white women of Euro-American heritage, given the stigma of being a professional female dancer in MENA cultures. Even today, this stigma remains a problem for women of middle eastern heritage in the Global North who want to become belly dancers. Roxxanne Shelaby, daughter of a Syrian-Lebanese nightclub owner who was key in the development of the belly dance scene in the US, explains:

> When I was in my late 20's I decided to pursue a career as a solo dancer much to the disappointment of my father. You see, even though he loved Bellydance, it was ok for others to become a professional dancer but not his daughter. I got away with dancing mostly folklore with a group, but being a soloist was a whole different thing. "I understand why you love the dance," he said, "but our people don't understand, and no good man will want to marry you if you are a dancer" (Shelaby 2023a).

The American dancers learned largely from the male musicians, but also from MENA women dancing socially and professionally, and tried to teach themselves from videos of Egyptian belly dancers in movies when they could get their hands on them. These circumstances resulted in a pan-MENA fusion style which is now called American Cabaret. As ethnomusicologist Anne Rasmussen (1992) explains, many of the people involved in the first Middle Eastern nightclubs and restaurants in the US consciously chose to play to Orientalist stereotypes of exoticism, sensuality, and spectacle in order to make more money. And many of these earliest American belly dancers were at least partially aware of the disparate geographic origins of different parts of their art form. But this knowledge was not always communicated to new generations of dancers, especially as women began teaching belly dance to others with less and less training and experience, and without contact with local Arab and MENA communities. For information on other fusion forms, see ((Sellers-Young 2005) for American Tribal Style (now Fat Chance Belly

Dance Style) and (Frühauf 2009; Mejia 2023) for Tribal Fusion and the genre's struggles with decolonization (including a proliferation of alternative terms). While belly dance industries in other countries outside MENA all have their own origin stories, the US industry played a major role in their development.

It is my contention that the overall slant of existing belly dance scholarship is Orientalist. Most of the literature concerns belly dance in the rest of the world, especially the US and Europe, generally analyzing either the form's benefits for women from the Global North (cf. Sellers-Young 2005; Downey et al. 2010; Bock and Borland 2011; Moe 2014; Boing et al. 2018) or the Orientalism of their renditions of the dance form (cf. Dox 2006; Maira 2008; Deagon 2016; Mansbridge 2016). Academic literature on dance in the Middle East itself has primarily been interested in men's folkloric dancing (cf. Shay 2002; 2005; 2008) and state dance troupes (Franken 2001; Siebert 2002; Shay 2002; 2008; Vermeyden 2017) and not women's professional contemporary dance styles. What little work there is on professional female dancers has generally been about dancers from the lower classes working in traditional public festivals and weddings (cf. Van Nieuwkerk 1995). There is some scholarship on the history of professional female dancers in Egypt (Fraser 2015; Ward 2018), some by women with roots in the region largely focused on social belly dancing (Adra 2005; Roushdy 2009; 2013), and one other scholar working on contemporary professional belly dancers in Cairo (Şahin 2018). Nor are the research topics of extant literature unimportant; I am merely pointing out that on the whole, we focus far more on Western representations of the dance form than on belly dance in its place of origin. Evolving professional dance and contemporary musical genres are shunned in favor of traditional, lower class, rural, and folkloric topics that are deemed more culturally "authentic", thus freezing the

dance form and culture in timelessness. I do not suggest that the situation is due only to scholarly choice; structural inequalities as well as cultural norms and respectability politics play important parts in who is able to research what topics, both in terms of access and career trajectories. It is also because in Egypt, research interest in belly dance is risky and discouraged, implying serious concern for something that society would prefer remain meaningless and marginal (Roushdy 2009).

Considering the history of Orientalism — both in general and in belly dance — and my positionality as a white scholar from the US, this work risks repeating more of the same. The comparative aesthetic schemes I construct also have the potential to reiterate Orientalist binaries. I contrast the traditional Egyptian aesthetic as vibrational, improvisational, and connection-focused with the visual, disciplined, self-perfection of the trending foreign media aesthetic. However, as I try to emphasize, these aesthetic approaches are not binary oppositions and not mutually exclusive. Rather, all of the above are properties of dance and dancers of all classes and nationalities and in all venues in Egypt but prioritized at varying levels like the tuning sliders on a stereo. Nor do I position one approach as better than another, though I do suggest that Euro-American culture does not sufficiently appreciate aesthetics of vibration. It is this nuance combined with a critical stance towards power relations that I hope helps me avoid perpetuating Orientalist stereotypes.

I am certainly not claiming to know belly dance in Egypt better than Egyptians themselves. As a belly dancer myself, I do, however, have access to the industry that would be difficult for Egyptian scholars; the stigmatization of professional dancers makes doing research with them

socially dangerous for Egyptians, especially women.[7] Being a Western scholar does not grant me objectivity or any special knowledge, but it does grant me the privilege to do the research I have done without risk of social consequences. I had hoped to write something more focused on amplifying the voices of Egyptian dancers but due to both my access and the topic's ubiquity, I have instead ended up writing about the seeming dominance of foreign dancers. I hope that by writing about the impact of the forces of colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism, I can escape the traps of Orientalism. But given the Orientalism and other biases that I am still unlearning, I am sure I've made some missteps.

Attention and…

The main theoretical through-line of this dissertation is attention — its uses, qualities, and relation with the senses. This section relates attention to several key theories and bodies of scholarship as I will employ them.

Political Economy

There is much scholarly discourse on attention and attention economies, but very little of it is in the discipline of anthropology or uses ethnographic research methods. The term "attention economy" was coined by political scientist Herbert Simon, observing that "a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention" (Simon 1971, 40), making attention a key resource and form of labor in emerging forms of capitalism. With the rise of digital and internet technologies in the 1990s, the concept was further developed by scholars in media and

[7] Roushdy (2009) notes that her status as a middle-class Egyptian woman made it very difficult to do research with professional belly dancers.

technology studies (cf. Goldhaber 1997; Crary 1999; Beller 2012). My analysis draws primarily on Citton's theories of attention ecology (2017), supplemented by insights from a recent review of the political economy of attention in anthropological literature (Pedersen, Albris, and Seaver 2021), to explain the political economies of attention operating in different Egyptian belly dance venues. It is important to remember that none of the types of attention or political economies thereof are conceived of as binaries or mutually exclusive but exist on overlapping spectrums sometimes flowing together and sometimes generating friction (Tsing 2005). While most scholarship explicitly about attention examines it at the scale of corporations and mass media, I will analyze how attention is exchanged and commodified at individual and local scales, as well as how attention can be used as both resource and weapon.

As such, this work is a contribution to the nascent anthropology of attention, and a demonstration of the contrapuntal and nuanced perspectives that anthropology can add to the study of human attention, currently dominated by universalist-leaning disciplines like philosophy, economics, and psychology. Citton (2017) defines concealment and discretion as resistance to attention capitalism, but my analysis shows that in the context of Egyptian night life, it often cannot be seen as such. Rather, discretion and inattention are commodified through the political economies of attention dominating these contexts, and from the standpoint of Egyptian belly dancers, it becomes clear that there IS such a thing as bad publicity. As I describe in chapter three, the discretion of maintaining customers' privacy is part of the product being sold. Furthermore, commodified inattention — bribery of government officials to ignore regulatory infractions — is what allows many venues to run as they do, granting certain protections to those who can afford it. If digital attention capitalism is the "light side" of our current iteration of coloniality/modernity

(Quijano 2000; Mignolo 2011; Lugones 2016; Mignolo 2021), then the economies of attention where discretion and inattention as well as attention are commodified, and that structure the lives of people living under restrictive governance around the world, are part of the "dark side" that we must seek to understand.

Aesthetics and the Senses

There is a huge body of scholarship on aesthetics, exploring questions of philosophy like what we find beautiful and why, debating the merits of form over function, and so forth. Anthropology generally takes a comparative approach, examining what is found beautiful in different cultures and finding that often the relations and process that go into making something are more important in its beauty than the physical form (cf. Sharman 1997; Bunn 2018). Furthermore, critical social theorists have demonstrated that aesthetics are intimately tied up with social capital; wealth allows people to prioritize form over function (Bourdieu 1984; Eagleton 1990) and a disinterested contemplation of beauty and art becomes a mark of distinction. As Bourdieu explains, our taste is not natural, but becomes embedded in our habitus — the way we perceive and respond to the world — at bodily and subconscious levels through our education and enculturation. As such, taste and aesthetics are social and economic matters rather than mere personal preference or a universal standard.

Aesthetics is ultimately about attention to the senses. As "a distribution of the sensible" (Rancière and Žižek 2004), aesthetics direct and attune our senses. What can we sense and what do we not admit to sensing? Which bodily senses are most important to us, and which are least valued? Western culture has prioritized vision as the most important sense going back at least as far as Aristotle (Classen 1997), while the senses of proprioception (sense of self-movement, force,

and bodily position) and kinesthesia (sense of bodily movement) are generally excluded from the Western sensorium (Sklar 2008). As such, an aesthetic change that elevates how things look over how they feel — emotionally or physically — may be regarded as colonial insofar as it represents the distribution of the sensible constructed by global Eurocentered capitalism overtaking indigenous organizations of the senses.

The aesthetic turn of this work was inspired by a panel featuring fellow MENA anthropologist Jessica Winegar and Egyptian street artist Ganzeer (2023). In it, they discussed an Egyptian aesthetics of collaboration, interaction, and improvisation — what they called an everyday aesthetic politics of co-producing art. Note that none of these qualities are primarily visual but have more to do with affect and the senses of connection with others. It is this same aesthetic of collaboration and improvisation that I find to be at the heart of Egyptian belly dance. As I argue in chapter three, Egyptian dance operating beyond the attention economies of social media prioritizes an aesthetics of vibration, centering sound and affect. This is in contrast to the visually oriented aesthetics and political economies of attention operating in belly dance spaces entwined with social media. For other considerations of the sensory organization of dance forms, see (Browning 1995; Bull 1997; Grau 2005).

Discipline

Throughout the pages of this work, my interlocutors will use several terms — take care of, learn, work on yourself —to mean engaging in rigorous aesthetic labor (Holla 2016; Elias 2017) and bodily discipline. Discipline, in the Foucauldian sense of meticulously training the body and the self, is becoming ever more important in the global belly dance industry. Throughout this dissertation, I will discuss discipline as manifested in beauty norms; women, belly dancers in

particular, are pressured to “take care of themselves” meaning to keep their bodies as young and beautiful as possible, conforming to whatever combination of thinness and voluptuousness is currently in fashion.

As Foucault details the shift towards a society of self-disciplining subjects (Foucault 1975), one of his central theoretical devices is the panopticon, which works via attention. Prisoners in the panopticon conform to all rules and expectations because of **the possibility of attention**; they never know when someone might be watching them. Foucault frames this threat as visibility, rather than attention, but I would add that just because something is visible does not mean anybody is paying attention to it, and attention includes all the senses. The self-disciplining subject can not only be seen by others; they can be heard, smelled, felt, and otherwise sensed, and yet none of this matters to anybody else unless it somehow catches their attention.

Foucault argues that imprisonment became the primary form of punishment largely because of the ways in which it allowed the powerful to shape obedient subjects. The disciplinary methods that have become part of not only prisons, but also the military, hospitals, factories, and schools, make the bodies of individuals more practiced, useful, and subservient. This is accomplished by isolating or distributing subjects (homogenously and/or hierarchically), training their posture, gestures, and activities, imposing a rhythm of movement and activities, subjecting them to constant surveillance, and punishing failure to meet norms or standards as well as actual breaches of rules. Surveillance in the form of a pyramid or panopticism is particularly key; when people know they are always potentially being watched but can never verify whether or not they are actually being watched, they tend to control their own behavior.

The gathering of knowledge about individuals is also an important part of discipline; through examinations and surveillance, those in power can fix and make subjects visible, judge their normativity or lack thereof, and adjust their methods of control and coercion accordingly. Linking back to coloniality, "the cognitive needs of capitalism include "measurement, quantification, externalization (or objectification) of what is knowable with respect to the knower so as to control the relations among people and nature and among them with respect to it, in particular the property in means of production" (Lugones 2016, 4). Social media can be seen as an intensification of both surveillance and knowledge gathering, deepening discipline.

Foucault suggests that these changes are linked to population increases, particularly an increase in the floating population, and the progression of industrialization and capitalism, which required such disciplinary techniques to make effective use of more people and technology. As punishment changed, new laws made more and more things illegal, imposing capitalist rule on the poor and allowing the rich and powerful to pathologize, separate and surveil those who resisted. The proliferation of illegalities enables controlled illicit rings of trafficking in sex, drugs, and arms, from which the rich and powerful profit. Thus, the regulation and policing of dancers is part of this same pattern of strategies to extend disciplinary technologies.

Dance training is both a technology of the self and a technology of power, in Foucault's terms, training bodies in particular ways (Grau 2005). In the West, where dance training is often modeled on ballet methods, training is organized around the visual, objectifying the body for others' viewing (Bull 1997). In chapter two, we will see how belly dancers in Euro-American contexts approach belly dance as discipline, both the movements and as part of a regimen of achieving the normative female body. The discipline of perfecting movements builds what

dancers generally call technique. While I have frequently heard that good technique is the foundation that permits the dancer to focus on interaction and expression, this is somewhat backwards from the Egyptian approach, in which improvisation and connection are the foundation for technique. In chapter four, we learn how Euro-American disciplinary approaches are received and subsequently promoted in Egyptian media and upper-class dance spaces. Finally, chapter five discusses how attention is used as a weapon against women and a disciplinary tool to coerce conformity to ideals of female modesty.

Reflexivity and Whiteness

I really wanted this to be a project that centered the voices and needs of Egyptian dancers, particularly those coming from the lower classes. Lower-class Egyptian dancers remain a primary concern in my mind, but the difficulties of me, an educated white woman presumed to be upper-middle class, accessing the same spaces as these dancers has transformed my approach. I often hear, in social justice-oriented spaces, that we don't need white people to study people of color, we need them to study themselves and understand whiteness. This work has thus, out of intention and necessity, become a kind of auto-ethnography of whiteness and gender in the belly dance industry in Cairo, and in Egypt more broadly. Although I describe what it was like to move through various spaces in Egypt as a white woman, the point is not how it feels for me or the foreign dancers or white women, but what that says about whiteness as social capital in Egypt. As a context in which whiteness is hyper-visible rather than unmarked (Waugh 1982), but still positively valued, it is revealing.

Moving through public spaces in Egypt, I stand out. I darkened my brown hair — light enough naturally that Egyptians call it blonde — and in the daytime dressed in plain loose clothing that covered my shoulders and legs (nightlife is a totally different world where many women, myself included, wear the same tight and revealing clothing you see for clubbing in the West). But my light skin, my blue-green eyes, the style of my clothes and hair, my posture, the way I walk — my whole habitus (Mauss 1973; Bourdieu 1980) marked me as different. It was clear that my whiteness made me sexually attractive in Egyptian contexts, more than making up for the potential flaws of my pear-shaped figure (too large by American/global cosmopolitan standards, but generally within an acceptable range for less Westernized Egyptians). As such, I was always hyper-aware of myself as I would be viewed by others, and that while women in Egypt should not draw attention to their moving bodies in public, my white body drew attention to itself simply by existing in public. It is worth reflecting that many people of color in the US and Europe experience hypervisibility as well, but theirs is generally negatively valued while my white hypervisibility was positively valued in Egypt.

I found, often to my annoyance, that my obvious whiteness was always assumed to come with wealth. To be fair, compared to Egyptian incomes, I am and always have been quite well off. By American standards, I grew up lower middle-class and through higher education have come to have more social capital but less economic resources. My husband, Jeff, is also clearly white; his greying dark brown hair stands out less than mine, but he is pale and freckled and burns easily. Nor do his style choices mark him as especially wealthy, as he tends to wear cargo shorts and nerd culture t-shirts with beat up green Converse and punk-inflected accessories. But we were both treated as wealthy potential patrons nearly everywhere we went in Egypt. In a country

where poverty and income inequality are as rampant as they are now in Egypt, if people perceive you as wealthy it is very difficult to move in public spaces without them trying to get money from you.

Depending on the specific context, they may beg, demand tips, try to sell you goods or services, try to earn tips and future business through ingratiation, or all of the above. Furthermore, people become very concerned about you in spaces they think of as beneath you; I can't count the number of times Egyptians discouraged me from going to any belly dance venues and often any place not associated with tourists and rich people. "It's not nice," they would say, often in English (or *mish kwayyis* – not good), and sometimes even after explaining my research, they would suggest that I just focus on the "nice" dance in "nice" places and not go to the cabarets and nightarts. While this concern stemmed from my race and class, it is also a gendered concern.

In Egyptian society, as across much of the Middle East and North Africa, people generally think of women as needing protection from men, and therefore safest in the home and gender-segregated spaces (cf. Mernissi 1987). Most of the people discouraging me from visiting cabarets would have said the same thing to another woman of any race or class. Having my husband with me definitely made people more comfortable with me going to these spaces, but most had little confidence in him as a protector because he's not Egyptian. An Egyptian woman going to any nightlife space alone might as well wear a sign saying she is a prostitute, as far as many Egyptians are concerned. Thus, many Egyptian friends and colleagues were horrified at my idea to work as a *reklam* in cabarets; these women — paid to look pretty, sit and smoke shisha, and dance in the absence of professional dancers — are assumed to be sexually available for a price. Even if everyone working in the cabaret came to understand that I was there for research, many

customers would assume that the staff could approach me with prostitution offers on their behalf. To see dancers I didn't yet know, my other option was to come as a paying customer, which has its own downfalls, but was central to forming my understandings of the economies of belly dance venues in Egypt.[8] Ironically, when I went to cabarets with other belly dancers, we often ended up being like free reklam for the venue (see chapter three).

At belly dance venues broadly marketed to tourists of all nationalities — Nile cruises and Red Sea resort hotels — Jeff and I did not stand out from the rest of the audience and so only experienced the same moderate targeting for money as everyone else in tourist service spaces. But white people rarely go to the nightarts, cabarets, discos, and nightclubs where belly dancing is watched by Egyptians and Arab visitors. My appearance in these spaces with other white people nearly always seemed to occasion curiosity on the part of other patrons and excitement on the staff's. These spaces are already organized to encourage as much spending and tipping as possible, and white equals rich, so here, suddenly, is a huge opportunity for everyone working there to make money.

I went to several cabarets on my first trip to Egypt in 2018, sometimes as a guest of the dancer (also white) and sometimes with other white North American belly dancers. These were all pleasant experiences where I was treated very courteously by the staff — attentive service from the wait staff, excitement over my appearance and belly dance abilities by the bathroom attendants — and I tipped, but nobody ever requested or demanded money from me. Having only visited cabarets with other women, I was unable to properly equip Jeff for his first cabaret

[8] I was able to come to work with dancers I knew, acting as their assistant for the evening and helping them backstage before and after the performance so that I could watch their performances from the back edges of the venues.

visit. About two weeks into our time in Cairo, we went to an upscale cabaret with a group of American belly dancers. Although the trip was organized by a dancer known to many of the musicians and venue staff, all the workers looked to my husband as the head of the group; in fact, coming in with six white, English-speaking women who could belly dance seemed to signal that Jeff was a baller. A small mob of waiters immediately descended on him, offering whole bottles of imported liquor, tea, coffee, shisha, snacks — anything he could want. Within half an hour, one was giving him unsolicited shoulder rubs, in an hour they were making money rubbing motions at him, and in ninety minutes they started demanding tips by accompanying the gesture with "*ba'shīsh*!" Unfortunately, Jeff spoke very little Arabic at this point, is about as far away from the baller archetype as it's possible to get while still identifying as male and heterosexual, and always wants to please everybody. This was such a stressful experience for him that he generally declined to go to cabarets with me if other dancers were going; just the two of us still resulted in significantly more ingratiation and requests for money than when I went with only women, but much less than when Jeff seemed to have an entourage of belly dancer escorts.

By the end of our time in Egypt, we could mitigate this enough for Jeff to enjoy cabaret if I took a really strong lead of the group as we entered the cabaret, but it seemed to bemuse many Egyptians. Egyptian ideals of masculinity dictate that if a man is going to take a woman to a nightlife space, he will lead, he will pay, he will do the talking, and will generally protect her from having to interact with unknown men. So why was Jeff doing the opposite? Why was he letting me go to the bathroom in clubs unattended, allowing any other man in the room to come talk to

me?[9] Even once it was clear that I spoke good Arabic and Jeff spoke minimal Arabic, most Egyptians in the service industry could not seem to conceive of a reason for me to speak Arabic other than being married to an Egyptian. They are not used to white people who speak Arabic, especially not colloquial Egyptian Arabic, or who can do and are interested in Egyptian dance styles. I think we remained an enigma to many Egyptians who saw us in these places. But the reactions to our white bodies and unexpected behaviors make clear certain Egyptian notions of gender, race, and class and their convergent operations in these spaces.

Embodied Research

My entire approach is inspired by my mentor's goal for the anthropology of dance to treat dance as embodied knowledge (Royce 1977). I have found that to really get into writing this dissertation, I had to set the right atmosphere. The Spotify playlists "Dark Academia Classical" and "Work From Home – Feel Good Focus" were not doing it – none of the standard academic habits were. I needed to recreate, at least partially, the environment in which I did all this research. Put on "Egyptian Classics" — how could I write this accompanied by anything other than Egyptian music? If I were going to be fully true to my research venues, I would write in a dark, smokey, crowded room with blaring music — more mahraganat, sh'abī , and pop than Egyptian classics — at 3am, wearing a cocktail dress and heavy makeup, with people periodically interrupting to ask for or try to earn tips. I'm not someone who can write in such circumstances,

[9] Jeff's abdication of duty to escort me to the bathroom in Egyptian nightlife venues usually led to bouncers or other employees pressing their escort services upon me, taking my hand to lead me through the crowds and waiting to do the same when I returned. My interlocutors tell me that this was because they were trying to prevent a fight; the number one cause being a man talking to a woman who is with another man. Of course, this also provided an excuse to ask Jeff for tips.

so I opt for older acoustic Egyptian music, sitting upright in a padded chair as I so often did in these venues, drinking something sweet, smoking shisha, periodically interrupted by cats demanding attention and food (a frequent feature of my outdoor and home life in Egypt). Adding to the vibe, the live recordings of Umm Kulthum include long rapturous applause breaks with whistling and Arabic exclamations. But comfortable clothes, no makeup; maybe dressing up to write would do something important to my process, but after a year of being constantly focused on my physical appearance and another reflecting on beauty standards, I'm still re-teaching myself how to be comfortable in my body and appearance. I need to not do that work, to stop doing aesthetic labor so I can write about it.

Suffering from a lot of post-field anxiety and depression, I decided I needed a break from the sensory assault that had been my fieldwork and the constant pushing myself, physically and emotionally. I had stopped dancing, but I couldn't really dive into writing until I started dancing again, specifically to Egyptian music and especially music I heard a lot during my time in Cairo. To be able to think about aesthetics, I had to embody them. After an intense session of reading, I was buzzing with anxiety and decided to dance it out before relaxing for the evening. Each new song would bring different moods of movement out of me, inspiring insights into the aesthetic politics I had experienced in Egypt and how they contrasted with the habitus of belly dance in the US. Sweating and out of breath, I would dash over to my laptop every few minutes to make a note or even write this passage. A peppy song with lyrics about hummers on the moon is playing as I type ("Falatet Meny"). As time gets shorter, and my anxiety increases, I find I need the harder edged mahraganat and Egyptian hip hop of my "Badass Egyptian" playlist. Now off to dance a few more minutes so my body can help surface the wisdom it absorbed in Egypt. Unfortunately, I'm

still working on fully internalizing the most important wisdom that Egyptian women's dance has to offer: follow the music, but take your time, relax and enjoy the movement, and don't let anyone or anything push you to do more, give more, or go faster than feels comfortable to you.

Always I needed to return to my body, and practice returning to it. I have always struggled to consciously experience my entire body. Without effort, my awareness is usually in my head, behind and in my eyes, with a constant silent monologue enunciated to myself. Earlier in my PhD program, I looked for academic writing to help me overcome this issue. While there is plenty of writing critiquing mind-body dualism, I did not find any instructional manuals on how to experience your mind and body as one and learn from the body. Of course, the problem here is that they are still being thought of as separate and I needed a wider perspective. As a white middle class American woman, I have been almost completely alienated from my body by capitalism and patriarchy, and in a privileged kind of way by racial hierarchies. If the tools of the master will never dismantle the master's house (Lorde 2018), I cannot hope to transcend the binary and reintegrate myself with colonial forms of knowledge. I have to practice attending to and experiencing my body, trust in myself and my body, and listen to the suppressed wisdom of other ways of being.

Methods and Other Considerations

This project is in some senses an autoethnography. In particular, my summary and analysis of what belly dance is like in the US, and by extension the entire non-MENA world, stems largely from my twenty years of experience as a student and practitioner of belly dance. From January

2003 to September 2006, and again from January 2010 to August 2016 I took regular belly dance classes, becoming intently focused on mastering the dance form, taking private lessons, traveling to attend workshops and festivals with well-known dancers. I also collected instructional and workout DVDs from dancers I admired, and primarily relied on these to continue my training when I was in London from September 2006 until December 2009. I did some classes and workshops during my time in the UK, but what I wanted from a teacher at that time did not align well with what London had to offer then. For the bulk of the twenty years I have been belly dancing, I practiced at home at least five hours per week in addition to the two or more hours of class I was attending weekly. I began helping dance studios I attended with administrative and production work in trade, and because I wanted to feel more a part of the community. I performed in some student showcases before going to London and began pursuing more performance opportunities when I returned to the US, ultimately performing primarily at events for other dancers, but sometimes in restaurants and public festivals, both group and solo. These experiences have given me a lot of knowledge on which to draw: countless conversations and interactions with belly dancers from all over the world, in person and online.

In many ways, my entire adult life has been devoted to belly dance. The vast majority of my leisure time and disposable income have been spent on belly dance. Outside of academic settings, most of the friends I have made have been through belly dance. My master's dissertation (UK terminology – thesis in the US) was about the stigmatization of belly dancers in Egypt and other Muslim-majority societies. And now my doctoral research examines the effects of women like me, white and white-passing belly dance enthusiasts, on the belly dance industry in its home country of Egypt.

My officially sanctioned research activities included a variety of participant observations and interviews. I took a one-month research trip to Cairo in summer 2018, where I conducted participant observation at two major belly dance festivals (discussed in chapter two), and at a variety of performance venues, as well as several interviews. After that trip, I began scouring social media (Instagram, Facebook, later TikTok) for dancers working in Egypt to follow and analyzing dancer content and my feed for patterns.

I spent September 1, 2021 through August 1, 2022 living in Cairo, improving my Arabic, conducting research, and taking tourist trips to Hurghada, Sharm el Sheikh, Aswan, Luxor, Alexandria, and Dahab. Although the terms of my Fulbright award forbade doing research outside of Cairo, I saw belly dance performances on half of these trips (often unplanned, and I maintain that Egypt is the only country in the world where you are so likely to accidentally see a belly dancer). I observed performances in Cairo cabarets, discos, bars, nightarts, cruise boats, hotels, swimming pools, and ladies' gyms, and chatted with the performers, the other audience members, and the venue staff where possible. I also ended up talking to a lot of Uber drivers and tour guides about my research, and many of them had strong opinions about belly dance today. I took a 6-week professional course at a ladies' gym to be certified as a belly dance coach and attended belly dance classes and special dance party events at ladies' only gyms and dance studios. I hung out with resident and visiting belly dancers socially and followed a few dancers through evenings of work to see backstage. Jeff and I helped with the technical and backstage portions of a recurring online belly dance performance with live performances from Cairo. Between my time in Egypt and some interviews via Zoom during the height of pandemic restrictions, I interviewed 13 foreign dancers, 13 Egyptian dancers and dance coaches, and 4

dancers of mixed Arab and Euro-American heritage. I hung out with belly dance costumers at festivals and in their shops in Khan el-Khalili and Giza while they fitted dancers, listening to the gossip. All the while, I kept my eye on Instagram and my WhatsApp messages from venues to see what was happening where.

As is probably common, I didn't feel ready to think and write when I first returned from doing my research. I needed a break from Egypt and belly dance. And although part of my brain screamed that I wasn't working enough, I chose to heed the greater part of myself that insisted I needed a break. In a capitalist society that demands constant growth and labor, rest is resistance. I not only refused to force myself into the writing process, but I also eschewed the linear and disciplining analysis process that felt expected in traditional social anthropology. I would not systematically re-listen to all my interviews, transcribe and code them, then look for patterns. Instead, I listened to specific interviews that seemed most relevant to what I was working on and transcribed key quotes which I then wove into my thinking and writing. I tried to relax and trust the wisdom of my intuition and the themes that had gradually come to seem important to me, to learn the un-disciplining lesson that Egypt tried to teach me. My process was recursive, with intense flurries of reading, listening, thinking, and writing separated by longer periods of rest. It was also recursive in that I circled back to things I had read years ago, suddenly recognizing that I had more to learn from various key texts in light of other experiences and exchanges.

While I had (and sometimes still have) significant anxiety over departing from the received approach to data analysis in cultural anthropology, I have come to embrace it as an experiment in applying decolonial thinking to ethnographic methods. What I find particularly helpful about decolonial theory is its emphasis on options and pluralities; it facilitates moving beyond dualistic

thinking. Thus, while the linear and systematic approach is a valid, if often colonially inflected, approach, an improvisational recursive approach is also valid. This approach is also particularly appropriate for a project on dance that seeks to contribute to projects of delinking from the coloniality of power, of gender and the body. Spiraling in and out, returning to teachers and lessons when I am able to both comprehend and contribute more, when the knowledge becomes specifically relevant, is a process that echoes pre- and de-colonial approaches to learning and knowledge sharing. I hope it may also help me avoid an extractive approach to data collection and analysis – I take only what I need and use everything I take with the ultimate aim of supporting Egyptian dancers.

Outline

Chapter two compares the pedagogical approaches to belly dance in the US — visual and disciplined — and Egypt — vibrational — and traces the common career trajectories for Euro-American, Latin American, and Egyptian dancers. In chapter three, I examine belly dance in its more traditional contexts to argue that it prioritizes vibrational aesthetics over the visual before explaining how attention, affect, and relational value are cultivated and exchanged in cabarets and other Egyptian dance venues that operate beyond social media attention economies. Chapter four summarizes how social media and high-pressure beauty ideals — and therefore foreign dancers — have come to dominate sectors of the Egyptian belly dance industry, providing an overview of the effects of internalized colonization, and detailing the requirements of cultivating corporeal capital to compete in the attention economies of social media. In chapter five, I will delineate the darker side of attention for belly dancers and the ways in which attention has been

and can be wielded as a weapon against women who dance in public, relating a recent spate of arrests to the current Egyptian regime's need for legitimacy. My conclusion will draw attention to the manifestation of colonizing processes in Egyptian belly dance throughout its known history. I will argue that although nobody is intending to colonize Egyptian belly dance, the systems that have brought foreign belly dancers to such success in Egypt are consolidating coloniality and perpetuating the global dominance of neoliberal attention capitalism.

2. Discipline vs. Improvisation: Becoming a Belly Dancer

This chapter will explore the different paths to becoming a belly dancer, in terms of both pedagogy and professional trajectories, noting different relations with the senses and with attention. First, I will discuss the different teaching approaches that characterized my experiences with belly dance classes in the US and in Egypt. Classes in the US discipline bodies through analysis and compartmentalized drilling with attention to the visual, while classes in Egypt use the vibrational transmission method of bodies dancing together, always improvising to the music. In the former, the attention is on perfecting the self, in the latter, it is on connecting with music and others around you. In both spaces, beauty ideals and aesthetic labor to meet them are implicitly encouraged. Finally, a series of career archetypes will illustrate how these different pedagogical and social foundations lead to different professional possibilities.

Visual Discipline: Learning Belly Dance in the Global North

I am in one of the thousands of belly dance classes I have taken in the US. In a wood-floored dance studio, about ten other women and I face the fully mirrored wall, staggered into neat rows behind the teacher. We are all wearing dance or yoga pants — most bought from the dance studio — as well as midriff-bearing tops (most designed for belly dancers) and sparkling decorative scarves around our hips. As we follow the teacher in a warmup routine, we focus our attention on visually analyzing her body and her reflection, doing our best to copy her movements. We occasionally check ourselves in the mirror. Next, we get down on the floor all together to do a series of exercises for strengthening and isolating different abdominal muscles.

The teacher walks over to the stereo system to stop the music, turning to us and saying, "OK, today we're going to work on undulations. Let's start on the floor where you are." We start with a yoga savasana called cat/cow; the teacher leads us in alternatingly arching upwards into our spines and contracting all our abdominal muscles with pushing our stomachs down while arching up from the hips and chest, giving verbal instruction the entire time. Eventually, we turn this alternation into a roll, transitioning smoothly between the positions. Next, the teacher has us sit up with crossed legs and straight spines, watching ourselves in the mirror as we try to separately contract and release our upper abs, then middle abdominal muscles, then lower abs. "Just your muscles right now; don't move your spine. And if you're having trouble keeping the abs separate, try putting your hand on your middle abdominals to stop them from helping," the teacher advises. She gets up to walk around, offering verbal feedback and corrections to several students. Then she asks us to smooth these isolations out into an undulation of the abdominal muscles, holding our arms above our heads. She watches in the mirror as she leads from the front of the room. Finally, she says we can allow the muscular contractions to move the spine. Getting up and heading back to the stereo, she says "OK, let's drill that a bit standing up."

An electronic remix of a well-known Arabic song starts, and the teacher returns to the front of the studio. Looking at us in the mirror where we are still lined up behind her, she says, "we're going to start really slow — 16 counts each." For several repetitions, she just demonstrates the movement and counts for us, dividing the music into two counts of 8. Then she begins offering feedback as she watches us in the mirror while we copy her, advising us to really work our muscles to keep the movement slow, smooth, and even. We then speed the movement up, drilling it in eight counts, then four, then two, then one. We alternate between adding a spinal wave to the

movement and just rolling our abdominal muscles. The music changes as we do this, but the quality of our movements remains the same, merely matching the tempo. As we dance, we watch ourselves in the mirror, scrutinizing the movement of our bodies and checking our alignment with the teacher and her reflection out of the corners of our eyes. Overall, we have spent about thirty minutes working on this movement.

We finish the class by working on a piece of choreography that is in progress. The teacher verbally walks us through what we have learned so far as she marks the steps, all counted in eights; some of the students follow her, others stand and watch her intently. We run through it once with the music, our focus on the mirror — the teacher if we're feeling unsure of the order of movements in the choreography, or ourselves to make sure everything looks right if we feel comfortable in our memory of the choreography. Afterwards, the teacher gives a few notes, demonstrating a movement that several of us are doing wrong. We practice that phrase a few times, then do the choreography again to music. This time, the teacher continues dancing past the point we had stopped learning, showing us what is next in the choreography. Several of us are able to follow along, since this is a well-known combination (four counts of eight) that many of us learned a few years ago in a workshop with a famous dancer and which has appeared in many of the choreographies we have done since. For those who don't know or remember this combination well, the teacher then talks through it, slowly marking the movements. After practicing it several times without music, we try it with music, then do the whole choreography to music twice. We end the class with a brief cool down and stretch.

As this example demonstrates, belly dance in the US is taught with physical discipline, verbal explanations, and attention to how the body appears. Muscles are isolated and trained to

work independently; movements are broken down and compartmentalized, then drilled in multiple variations to help perfect the movement. You are supposed to be able to do it the same every time, and once that muscle memory has developed, you may stylize the movements in choreographies. Music is used as a metronome for drilling the movements, and for some choreographers, any combination can be used to any music, meaning that the music really is not driving movement choices. We follow the teacher's movements, but there is nearly always verbal explanation before, during, and/or after. We focus our eyes on multiple reflections — our own or the teacher's — nearly always thinking about how things look. Depending on the dance teacher, emphasis may be placed on using the "correct" muscular technique or on getting your movements to have the right look. This is very different from the approach taken in belly dance classes in Egypt, where, as we will see, dance is transmitted from body to body and always improvised to the music. There is of course a spectrum of approaches to belly dance in the US, with Tribal Fusion[1] tending to take the most technical approach to muscle use and Oriental (American Cabaret/modern Egyptian and Turkish styles) tending to focus on the visual. This is not to say that the approaches I describe in Egypt are not at all present in American belly dance classes; they can be, to some degree, depending on the teacher and the style. But overall, the belly dance training I have had in the US and by dancers from Europe has been disciplined and visual in approach.

We are in a dance studio getting ready for a performance, listening to an electronic remix of a classic Egyptian song. Women of varied ages, shapes, sizes, and ethnicity sit on the wooden

[1] Now coming to be called Transnational Fusion.

floors in front of mirrored walls, carrying on conversations as they lean forward with widened eyes or stretched mouths to apply thick black eyeliner and bold red lipstick. Some of the American Tribal Style[2] dancers use the eyeliner to draw lines and dots on their faces, in imitation of traditional Amazigh tattoos (though most of them don't know of this origin); they add bejeweled bindis to their foreheads and cheekbones. Others sprawl in the middle of the dance floor to stretch or stand at the back of the room and stare intently at themselves in the mirror as they drill movements. My belly dance teacher and some of the older women are large and curvy, but there are also many teenage girls and young women with flat stomachs and visible hip bones and ribs. My own body is somewhere in the middle — probably a size ten at the time — but it feels unsatisfactory to me. Although I frequently feel too fat to be beautiful, I will eventually look back at pictures of myself at this time and think how thin I looked.

A larger young woman walks in after changing in another room, baring her soft midriff and adorned in fringe and sequins. Seeing her in the mirror, the teacher gasps and exclaims, "you look stunning! I just can't take my eyes off you in those colors," and the woman smiles with pleasure at the compliment and chorus of agreement. A few minutes later, someone comments to the teacher that she is looking great herself, like maybe she has lost some weight. "Yes! I'm doing the HCG diet and it's really working for me," she replies. "You know it's so hard for me usually, I have to be really good just to keep from gaining weight, but this totally resets your metabolism so you can keep the weight off and eat like normal. I did it last year and lost like 40 pounds. But I've been bad and gained a lot of that back, so I need to do it again."

Not noting the contradiction of the need to repeat a diet that's supposed to reset your

[2] Now known as Fat Chance Belly Dance Style, after the company/studio of founder Carolena Nericcio.

metabolism so you can eat like "normal," several women excitedly inquire as to what this miraculous diet involves. She explains: "So, the thing that really makes it work is the HCG – for eight weeks, you get daily injections of this pregnancy hormone and that's what resets your metabolism. And you stick to 500 calories per day the whole time." She lists several other women involved with the dance studio who have "successfully" done this diet, and the conversation continues with requests for recommendations of doctors who are willing to administer the shots.

Belly dance classes in the US generally purport to be spaces where bodies of all shapes and sizes are celebrated. But as always, deeply internalized hegemonic ideas remain active, complicating and undermining the body-positive ostensibly weight-neutral rhetoric officially endorsed in most of these same spaces. Firstly, there is a major silent caveat to the idea that belly dance is for "all bodies": as a hobby. All bodies are capable of doing this dance form, but there is subtle pressure in various ways to restrict larger women from performing publicly, especially professionally for the general public (student showcases for friends and family are different). Women of color, especially black women, are also discriminated against on the professional level.

Unless a dancer is capable (stylistically and geographically) of dancing for MENA-diaspora crowds at weddings, nightclubs, and shisha bars, the only real way to monetize belly dance in the US is to teach and perform for other belly dancers. Soloists in these spaces are rarely larger than a women's size 14, which is to say at the upper end of "straight" clothing sizes but below average size for an American woman overall. Performing belly dance groups in the US may include a few women on the lower end of the plus size spectrum. Belly Dance Superstars, an international touring company of American Cabaret and Tribal Fusion style belly dancers put together by Miles

Copeland (manager of Sting and The Police), only included thin dancers. I have heard that this was because early on, the company was dependent on using costumes from artistic director Jillina Carlano's LA dance troupe, which seems to have contained only dancers ranging from sizes zero through six. Regardless of the reason, that only thin women are consistently chosen for professional and high-profile belly dance performances sends a message that only certain bodies should be seen.

This message is reinforced in thousands of little ways by women in the belly dance community, for whom fatphobia is everywhere in our society. Most of my dance teachers and many of the women I have danced with have been constantly engaged in restrictive dieting, often following dangerous trend diets. Although there are naturally some differences, belly dance spaces in Russia seem to have a similar focus on bodily discipline and perfection (Khartulari 2014). While women who express dissatisfaction with their bodies are likely to be reassured that they are beautiful by fellow belly dance enthusiasts, it is also likely that they will hear a lot of recommendations about new diet and fitness plans that other dancers are trying. At one point, at least 5 different dancers I knew were doing the HCG diet, following the example of the main teacher at the studio. This diet requires participants to restrict their eating to 500 calories per day (remember the recommended daily intake for US women is 2000 calories) and get daily injections of human chorionic gonadotropin, a hormone released in large amounts in the early phases of pregnancy. Lasting for 8 weeks, this diet was invented in the 1950s (Harvard Health 2010) and supposedly "resets your metabolism" to encourage burning stored fat. Going to such lengths to lose weight reinforces fatphobic and misogynistic messages that women need to take up as little space as possible, that women must be thin in order to be acceptable and desirable. Just like 95%

of the time for any diet, once the women I knew stopped doing this diet, they gradually gained the weight back (Stunkard and McLaren-Hume 1959; Mann et al. 2007). And just as is intended in our neoliberal consumerist economy, most of the women went back to that diet or tried another restrictive eating plan, believing that the problem was their individual failure to keep up the discipline and will-power required to keep the weight off., rather than recognizing that society and the industries that profit from our weight loss attempts are setting unrealistic expectations for our abilities to control and manipulate the size and shape of our bodies. This feeds a cycle of bodily discipline through diet and exercise, as well as the weight loss industry.

The pedagogical focus on the visual is in a feedback loop with disciplining the body, keeping attention on perfecting the self. As we stare at ourselves in the mirror, often with bare midriffs, we might learn to feel more comfortable with our bodies, but it also nearly impossible not to notice and fixate on all the ways our bodies do not conform to the desired shape and size we constantly see in media. In many ways, the more time we spend looking in the mirror, the less we are able to fully accept and benefit from the stated goal of body acceptance. Compartmentalized attention to isolated body parts also facilitates self-objectification; once I have spent thousands of hours scrutinizing the minute movements of all my separate abdominal muscles in the mirror, it is easier to think of liposuction or other fat reduction procedures as just another technique to gain control of the body.[3] Restrictive dieting, disordered eating, and excessive exercise can also come to seem like a natural extension of physical training. We might think of these actions as being purely in pursuit of dance skill, and if we make money from our dancing, then technique is indeed corporeal capital. But as these actions also help our bodies

[3] This is not to say that plastic surgery and cosmetic procedures are always and entirely self-objectification.

more closely conform to the ideal of a thin waist and curvy but toned hips, we are also cultivating aesthetic capital/beauty capital/erotic capital (cf. Anderson et al. 2010; Edmonds 2010; Hakim 2010; Green 2013). The disciplined attention we pay to controlling and sculpting our bodies leads to career rewards in both teaching and performing.

It is difficult to connect with others when so much of your attention is focused on controlling your body. This and a general lack of practice with improvisation, combined with common teaching approaches, leads to many dancers from a Euro-American background being most comfortable with choreography. I never felt like I was really dancing when I did choreographies. I know other belly dancers who feel this way, but I have also frequently heard that you just need to learn the choreography so well that you're not thinking about it. It seems I was never quite disciplined enough to get to that point. Or maybe it depends on what you do with your attention once it is no longer on remembering the steps. I have learned choreographies from several Egyptian dancers and teachers and gotten a lot out of doing so. And yet, in many ways the discipline of choreography, the attention to perfecting the self, and the visual focus common in belly dance spaces in the Global North, coming from the dominant models of Western dance pedagogy, are contrary to the spirit of Egyptian belly dance. As Egyptian belly dancer Amie Sultan, who started out in ballet, explains:

> I was very analytical towards my body when I was in classical ballet. I was always stepping outside of myself, looking at myself as an audience. And you know of course, all day you're looking at mirrors, so you're always seeing yourself reflected in a mirror. Whereas with raqṣ sharqī, it's from the inside, it's very different, so I've actually had to connect with myself again and this has been a process, actually, something that I'm constantly working on. And sometimes there are moments on stage, even until now, that I struggle with, where I feel myself, I find myself disconnecting and I start analyzing myself while I'm performing live, and then I quickly remind myself to get back inside (personal interview).

Vibration: Learning to Belly Dance in Egypt

I am standing in the back of a classroom in an all-ladies' gym, approximately 30 Egyptian women crowded in between me and the small platform where the teacher will dance. There are some mirrors on the side walls, but it is clear we are not expecting to use them. The women around me chat excitedly, some wearing athletic wear, some in the cheap belly dance costumes you can buy in many Egyptian lingerie stores, and some wearing just straight up lingerie. They take this opportunity to dance with other women to wear any number of things they would never wear in mixed-gender company. Some of them not only cover their hair in public; they wear a full black abaya and niqab.[4] The teacher/coach enters the room, wearing a simple belly dance costume, and everyone cheers.

The teacher asks an assistant to start the music, and a recent popular hit starts playing at maximum volume. There are exclamations of excitement, and then we start dancing. The teacher dances on the platform, facing us. She improvises to the music but tries to keep her movements simple and to repeat small phrases to matching music. The students enthusiastically try to follow along, but if they can't copy what the teacher is doing, they happily improvise their own dancing until they can match the teacher again.[5] No matter what, everyone adds their own flair. We do this for four songs straight, no stopping.

Finally, the teacher pauses the music and asks (in Arabic) if there are any questions. One woman raises her hand, and when the teacher looks at her, she tries to demonstrate a kind of chest circle that the teacher had done repeatedly in the last song, asking "what's this?". The

[4] The full outfit you probably imagine a Saudi woman to wear; a niqab is a face covering.
[5] Conversely, when Euro-American belly dancers follow a teacher improvising, they often stutter to a standstill if they feel unable to do "the right" movements.

teacher does the movement slowly, using her fingers to trace the same circle on the floor and saying, “from my chest, like this”. She comes and stands very close to the woman who asked the question, leading her to repeat the movement. She looks around the room at the rest of us practicing and then does the same to a few other students, sometimes physically correcting them by gently pulling their shoulders back or adjusting their heads.

The teacher returns to the platform and another song starts. She does several of the chest circles we had just worked on, changing the timing to match the melody of the song. She then starts adding other movements, dancing to the rest of the song, but repeating the chest circle we are working on several times each chorus. We dance a few more songs as in the beginning, and then pause again for questions, which are handled the same way.

Towards the end of the class, the teacher has us gather in a circle facing inwards. She asks what song we want, and after a few yelled suggestions, she puts one on. She comes and dances in the middle of the circle while we cheer and dance along, improvising our own movements. The teacher interacts with several students as she makes her way around the circle, dancing together for a few seconds with each before she leads one out into the middle of the circle and gestures for her to dance. The teacher joins the circle and the student in the middle dances around the circle, interacting playfully with several other students as we cheer before tapping another to switch places with. This continues for a few songs, until everybody has danced in the center at least once. This is how the class ends.

As this vignette demonstrates, belly dance in Egypt is improvised together, transmitted primarily from body to body rather than through verbal explanations and drills. Women in Egypt first learn dancing socially, as little girls imitating their older relatives and the dancers they see in

old movies on TV. Group belly dance classes are a new development in Egypt (over the past two to three decades). These classes generally use the teaching methods described above, and while some do include breaking down movement technique, the classes are explicitly for exercise and fun, NOT to become a performer. Egyptian dancers who have become stars likely had lessons with a mentor at some point, which would involve some of what was described above and a significant amount of the mentor watching the dancer and correcting her physically or with brief verbal instructions. Several star Egyptian belly dancers came out of the folkloric troupes, in which they would have taken ballet and other dance technique classes. But there is no formal training to become a belly dancer in Egypt, and many of the dancers working in cabarets have never taken any dance classes or lessons.

"Professional courses" are to become a belly dance coach in a gym, not a performer. For much of Egyptian society, this is the only potentially respectable way for Egyptian women to make money with belly dance, and it is not without its challenges, as we will see in chapter five. Even special events with famous dancers often use the same dance-along format that I have described. A few foreign dancers who have taught at gyms in Egypt tell me that they have had to significantly adjust their teaching styles; they say Egyptian women get bored and frustrated if the teacher talks too much and doesn't dance enough.

Although group belly dance classes are not aiming to produce performing dancers, they still demonstrate the prioritization of vibration and improvisation that I am arguing are central to the philosophy and aesthetics of Egyptian belly dance. Movements are learned through the body, sharing space with another body, coming from inside the dancer and motivated by the music, improvised in the moment. Mirrors are ignored because the students are focusing on how the

movement (and the music) feel in their body rather than what their bodies look like. The senses are focused on the vibrations of music and affect — on proprioception/kinesthesia, with visual attention entirely on another person rather than the self. By prioritizing vibrations of affect, the door is opened for attention to be on others and our interactions with them, rather than just what our own bodies look like.

Despite the less visual focus of the teaching methods, group belly dance classes in Cairo still subject women to body image pressures. Many of the classes take place in gyms, which of course promote weight loss and the achievement of a certain body size and shape. The gyms and the dance studios also offer various spa and cosmetic treatments, encouraging visual aesthetic investment. Modesty norms do not preclude an interest in looking your best, and many women who cover their hair wear fashionable makeup and clothing. There is also a lot of discourse about looking good for your husband, including some talk of dancing for your husband. And as we will see in chapter four, Egyptian belly dance teachers often advocate for bodily discipline in pursuit of thinness — although Egyptian ideals of thinness are not quite the same as American ideals of thinness. Yet.

Still the overall priorities in Egyptian belly dance learning spaces are in definite contrast to the visually oriented, disciplined, verbal, self-perfecting approach to belly dance described in US contexts. There are, of course, belly dance teachers in the Global North who do not teach in the ways I have described and who are aware of the contrast between how we are used to learning dance in the West (like ballet is taught) and how Egyptians approach teaching and learning their own dance. The international festivals that bring belly dancers from all over the world to Cairo every summer create a kind of hybrid pedagogical approach.

The International Festivals

I am in a carpeted hotel ballroom with at least a hundred other women; about a third of them are from Eastern Europe (Russia and Ukraine), another third from Asia (China, Japan, and South Korea), and most of the rest from Latin America (Brazil, Argentina, Chile). A few women are from the US, Western Europe, and Australia, but there are no Egyptian students and none from other MENA countries. We are all wearing some kind of professional belly dance practice attire — specialized pants/skirts, crop tops, and hip scarves made and sold by other belly dancers. A platform stage has been erected at one end, and on this stage a well-known Egyptian dancer is trying to teach us a belly dance choreography. This is a struggle for several reasons. Choreography is a rarity in the life of a working dancer in Egypt, and if she does choreograph it will likely be mostly sung to the music rather than evenly counted. It will also never be exactly the same twice, with variations in arm movements often sneaking in. The less verbal and more physical Egyptian approach to teaching dance and the dancer's somewhat limited English make the class a struggle for those of us accustomed to different ways of learning. English is also a second language for most of the participants, but most are also used to learning in English at international belly dance workshops, including with artists visiting their home countries. The teacher is facing us, forcing us to mirror her rather than follow from behind, which is also hard for many of us. But there are no mirrors in hotel ballrooms, and her arms and the expression of her face are more important than getting the movements to match on the correct side.

She demonstrates a short section of the choreography. Everyone claps. Trying to employ the teaching style that most of the students are used to, the teacher marks and talks through the section. There is no standardized terminology for belly dance movements, and most of what is

commonly used is in English. Thus, her explanatory singing primarily employs English movement and body part names as well as “doom” to indicate a low drum sound, and “tek” to indicate higher pitched percussive accents, sounding something like this: “tek…tek…tek tek tek with the chest…doom…doom doom on the right hip. Now maya (she moves her hips in vertical figure eights matching the melody she hums). Shiiiiiimmmmmmmmmyyyyyyyy. And the arms go with the music (she demonstrates again, with slight variations, moving her arms in concert with her hummed version of the song).” Everyone claps after each demonstration.

We practice the section together a few times, the students intently focused on trying to follow the teacher, who sings along with the song while she dances. She checks in with us, and one student asks what exactly the second “tek” is – is it a pelvic tuck, or a belly pop? The teacher ponders for a minute, then demonstrates several times, saying “I am pulling my belly in very tight — tek — and I hold it until the next tek — when I lift my chest.” She watches us try, continuing to demonstrate and say “tek,” occasionally offering verbal feedback to a dancer or two in the front. We try the whole section again with music, and then the teacher says, “OK, now you,” starts the music, and watches us struggle through what she taught us without her. I think she expects us to improvise what we didn’t get, but we are all trying to imitate her in minute detail right now, not put our own spin on things.

This vignette demonstrates the hybrid teaching approaches — giving verbal explanation but centering the music — taken by Egyptian teachers at international belly dance festival workshops. Belly dance has been thriving around the world for several decades – at least since the 1960s here in the US, with various festivals and intensives becoming popular in the US starting

in the 1980s and 1990s. In the late 1990s, Egyptian dance teacher and chorographer Raqia Hassan decided to try to increase Egyptian influence on the global circulation of their art form, and she started the festival *Ahlan wa Sahlan* (Welcome), which has since spawned at least five other belly dance festivals in Cairo. As part of my research, I attended several of these Egyptian festivals in both 2018 and 2022. The festivals are always based at nice tourist hotels with high security that treats Egyptians with suspicion. Star dancers from Egypt and elsewhere teach two to three-hour workshops, and for one week, hundreds of attendees from all over the world take as many workshops as they want to, can afford, or can physically do, sometimes dancing for 10 hours straight. On the opening and closing nights, attendees are treated to a gala dinner and show, where the star teachers perform. Every other night of the week, attendees can pay to perform with a live Egyptian band or to compete, and there are an ever-growing number of competition categories, going on for about 5 hours each night.

Although the goal of the festivals is ostensibly to improve dancers' knowledge of Egyptian belly dance and folkloric styles, usually less than half of the featured teacher-performers are Egyptian, and with so many of the nights devoted to competition, most of the dancing you see at these festivals is in fact done by non-Egyptians. [6] At the time of research, Russians and Ukrainians were especially prevalent, but there were also several teachers and many attendees from Brazil, Argentina, South Korea, China, and Japan. Western Europe and the US are not very well represented, with only a few attendees and a small proportion of instructors at each festival, although this was different before the revolution. Many dancers also don't leave the hotel (not that there is much time for it), unless it is to take a guided tour of the pyramids, and so get

[6] Since starting back up after COVID, some festivals have begun to focus on having primarily Egyptian teachers.

relatively little exposure to the realities of belly dance as performed and received in Egypt. This is somewhat ironic, given that attending these festivals is a form of apprenticeship pilgrimage (Griffith and Marion 2018) – performers travel to gain both skill and legitimacy in their artform, with the legitimacy coming from experience with the original cultural context of the form.

As the Egyptian teachers at these festivals become part of the international belly dance workshop circuit, they are part of the elite tier of dancers in Egypt, and as such often worlds away from the Egyptian dancers performing in working class cabarets. Some Egyptian teachers discourage foreign dancers from doing too much sh'abī . Sh'abī is a popular working-class musical style, accompanied by a dance style which is related to raqṣ sharqī movements, but which people tend to refer to as a street dance and denounce as vulgar. During her workshop, one well-known Egyptian told us that we shouldn't dance too much sh'abī , no matter how much the audience likes it, because it would ruin our dancing. One of her Brazilian students, she claimed, has danced sh'abī so much that she can't do classic Oriental (raqṣ sharqī) anymore. So, it is clear that there are deep class divides in Egypt which are replicated in the music and dance businesses. If dancers do venture out of the hotel to see dance performances, they will see the classic Oriental style valorized by the Egyptian teachers, and a little folkloric dancing, but more than any other style, they will see sh'abī . At the new Western style nightclubs, they will see almost nothing but sh'abī and mahraganat. And they will see a lot of foreign dancers doing it, including some of the foreign dancers teaching at the festivals.

The Industry in Egypt Today

In Egypt today, belly dance continues to be performed in traditional contexts like weddings and public saints' day celebrations, but it has moved into a number of new modern venues, most

of which are not very accessible to the general public. These venues have a hierarchy of supposed dance quality and respectability, and generally the less accessible the venue is to average Egyptians – that is, the less public – the more respectable it is, with a similar hierarchical ranking between venues within each venue type. Figure 1 at the end of this section provides a summary of venues and the class and nationalities of their customers; notice that dancing for the lower classes and Egyptians tends to prioritize vibrational aesthetics while that for the upper classes and foreigners favors visual aesthetics. The overall class system in Egypt is more complex than I am able to portray in this work; the reader should keep in mind that as in most countries, there are fine distinctions within the broad categories — between new money and the old, landed aristocracy, for example, or by career, region, or length of familial residence in Cairo. Within each class category may be found subgroups with a variety of attitudes towards watching belly dancers.

At the top of the hierarchy respectability-wise are the five-star hotel night clubs and cruise boats. The dancers in these venues are considered “first degree” dancers, and many of them are foreign. The audiences are largely tourists, including wealthy Arabs (particularly at the hotels), and the shows are considered more family-friendly; the shows on the cruise boats start at 8pm, as opposed to the midnight and later start times for cabarets. The top-tier nightclubs are basically dinner theaters, consisting of tables arranged to see a large, raised stage. These venues may serve alcohol, but people do not go there in order to drink. While the cruise boats tend to focus on displaying Egyptian heritage for tourists and include a folkloric dance performance as well, the few remaining five-star hotel nightclub shows are explicitly about the artistry of the dancer. Given that performing bodies are key to a sense of authenticity in tourist encounters (Desmond 1999), it is ironic that the bodies performing for the tourists on cruise boats are usually foreign.

The new Western-style nightclubs — or discos and restobars — that have been popping up in Cairo since the 2011 revolution fall somewhere in the middle of the respectability hierarchy. They serve alcohol and people go there to drink and dance, making the venues morally suspect and not family friendly, but that fact is mitigated by their expensive cover charges and drink prices; the clubs are only accessible to wealthy Egyptians, foreign nationals, and tourists. The performances here tend to be more explicitly sexual than those in cruise boats or five-star hotel nightclubs, and the dancer performs on the bar or a small stage with music played by a DJ. The dancers perform to a lot of sh'abī and mahraganat music, making their dancing more "street" or "lower class". While the lower-class origins and nature of sh'abī music and dancing make it less respectable, the wealthy clientele at the clubs love to sing and dance along with it. Many of the performers in these nightclubs are foreign; also counterbalancing the perceived trashiness of drinking and lower-class musical genres with their presumed foreign classiness.

At the bottom of the venue hierarchy are the cabarets. There are in fact a wide variety of cabarets, with some being more upscale and expensive (or even located in three and four-star hotels) and others being thought of as very cheap (in multiple senses of the word). The general perception is that men go to these venues to drink, smoke shisha and hash, and see sexy women (Van Nieuwkerk 1995; Wynn 2007). Most of the dancers here, especially in the cheaper cabarets, are Egyptian, as the foreign dancers prefer to work in "cleaner" venues and the Arab and Egyptian clientele expect interaction and emotional connection to the music that foreign dancers cannot always deliver (see further discussion in chapter three). Performances start around midnight and continue until well after sunrise, offering a constantly rotating selection of singers and dancers. The venues hire reklam girls to sit around the venue in skimpy clothing and dance when there is

not a professional dancer onstage in order to create a sexy party atmosphere and help keep the money flying. Men can often also find actual prostitutes in these venues, sitting amongst the reklam, and it is the presence of prostitutes as well as alcohol and drugs which make cabarets so disdained by most Egyptians. With the dancers so intent on eliciting money from the clients, and thus having to flirt, the performances here may be the least obviously artistic for those who would separate sex and art, but take a huge amount of skill and finesse to negotiate — a different kind of art, if you will. Further discussion of cabarets can be found in chapter three.

Depending on the occasion or venue, a dancer may be expected to perform raqṣ sharqī, as well as modified versions of Egyptian folkloric forms such as raqṣ baladi, *raqṣ sa'īdī* (dance of the Nile valley south of Cairo), and *raqṣ assaya* (stick dance); other regional folkloric dances such as *khalīgī* (Gulf); and the contemporary social dance forms accompanying the sh'abī and mahraganat hit songs. The latter are associated with the lower classes and street dancing, incorporating musical elements and movements from breakdancing, hip hop, reggaeton, and EDM. Many view such dancing as vulgar, thus they stress that it is *not* raqṣ sharqī. Yet there are few if any performance jobs in Egypt today that would not require the dancer to perform to sh'abī and mahraganat*;* these are the popular songs that nearly everyone wants to hear and dance to.

Figure 1

Generally Prioritize Vibrational Aesthetics				
Venue	**Location**	**Audience**	**Dancers**	**Notes**
Sh'abī weddings	Residential streets	Lower class Egyptians	Lower class Egyptians	
Saints' days	Public squares, etc.	Lower- & middle-class Egyptians	Lower class Egyptians, often from artist families	Mostly Upper Egypt
Weddings	Hotels	Middle- & upper-class Egyptians	Middle- and Upper-class Egyptians and foreigners	
Henna parties	Homes	Egyptian & Arab women of all classes	All classes and nationalities	
Nightarts	Downtown, Mohandiseen	Middle to Lower class Egyptians	Lower class Egyptians	
Cabarets	Haram St, Downtown	Middle & upper class Khalīgī Arabs	Lower- and Middle-class Egyptians	some foreigners in more upscale
Generally Prioritize Visual Aesthetics				
Venue	**Location**	**Audience**	**Dancers**	**Notes**
Restobars	New Cairo	Upper class Egyptians & Arabs	Mostly foreign, a few Egyptians with a more upper-class aesthetic	
Discos	Docked Nile boats; hotels	Upper class Egyptians & Arabs	Mostly foreign, a few Egyptians with a more upper-class aesthetic	
5-star hotel nightclubs	Along Nile near downtown; New Cairo	Upper classes all nationalities, esp. Egyptian & Arab	Egyptians and foreigners with fame and/or upper-class aesthetic	
Dinner cruises	Along Nile	Middle classes and up, local & international tourists	Middle-class foreigners	Overnight cruises in Upper Egypt feature local lower-class dancers
Special Gym Events	Cairo	Middle- & upper-class Egyptian & Arab women	Must be stars – almost exclusively foreign	Note this is different from regular gym classes with a coach
Resort Hotels	Red Sea	Middle- & upper-class tourists, esp. Russian	Mostly middle-class foreigners	
Sahel Clubs	Mediterranean coast	Middle- & Upper-class Egyptians and Arabs	Mostly foreign stars	

Becoming a Belly Dancer: 4 Career Archetypes

The following stories relate the common paths taken to a career as a belly dancer in Egypt.

I should clarify that the foreign dancers' stories characterize dancers who came to Egypt after the revolutions of 2011 and 2013; career trajectories for foreign dancers in the Mubarak era were very different. While I tell the stories in a way that shows the patterns I noticed — e.g., Euro-Americans usually come through festivals, Latin Americans are often recruited online — there are always variations. There are dancers from Latin America whose career paths more closely resemble the Russian's story, dancers from the US whose stories are closer to that of the Latin American, and so forth. While I will describe offers of transactional intimacy (i.e., sex or companionship in exchange for money or gifts), since all dancers **receive** these kinds of offers (see also (Wynn 2007; 2018), I do **NOT** want to imply that all dancers of a given nationality accept these offers. Dancers who do not accept such offers often have strong feelings about prostitution and the importance of distancing belly dance from it. I move into using a hypothetical tense to make clear that these offers are possibilities for the fictionalized dancer, but not every dancer chooses them, and most dancers I spoke to reject such offers. The names I use are fictional, and I have combined elements of stories related to me by multiple dancers both to illustrate patterns and to preserve anonymity for my interlocutors.

Nadia

Nadia is from Russia. She may, in fact, be from Ukraine or Armenia, or any number of other countries in Eastern Europe, but Egyptians will just call her Russian. She started dancing at a very young age, starting with ballet at age three and slowly experimenting with other dance forms until she stumbled onto belly dance a few years later. She pursued mastery of belly dance with love and extreme discipline, endlessly drilling movements, taking as many classes and workshops as possible, and by the time Nadia was a teenager she was competing in belly dance competitions

around Russia nearly every weekend. When it was clear that she was very good at winning belly dance competitions, her family supported her traveling internationally — especially to Egypt — to attend festivals where she could take more workshops, win more competitions, and make connections. Throughout all of this she is also in school, eventually finishing college with a business degree. At some point in her mid to late teens, she started teaching belly dance to younger girls in Russia, and then teaching workshops at festivals in Russia, and eventually Cairo.

Once she made the right connections in Egypt and won enough/the right competitions, Nadia moved to Cairo to start a career as a belly dancer. There were of course many challenges for her in moving to and starting a career in a foreign country where she speaks little of the language, but in many ways she had much more support and protection than the other dancers I will tell you about. She came with the encouragement of industry personnel she met through the festivals, and they used their contacts to find her a manager, work, and housing. But like every single foreign dancer I talked to, her first manager exploited her or lied to her in some way. He said he was getting her license taken care of, but he was just paying people off when the question came up. Maybe he used her to get work for another dancer with whom he is in a relationship, demanding that if the venue wants Nadia, they have to hire his girlfriend too.

Nadia starts out working on a dinner cruise and doing a few disco gigs. The theatrical presentation of the dinner cruise allows her to do choreographies that show off all her carefully cultivated skills just as she did at competitions back home. The discos are an adjustment, though; it takes her quite a while to feel comfortable with improvising and to interact with the crowd as much as they want, seemingly naturally. But the longer she is in Egypt, the more her dancing changes to align more closely with Egyptian and Arab audience expectations.

Nadia posts constantly on Instagram about her exciting life in Egypt, appealing to an audience of fellow belly dancers from around the world and slowly accumulating Egyptian and Arab followers. She always looks flawless, and we know that she takes care of her body because she posts a lot of content about her diet, exercise, and skincare routines. She has been told many times by her manager that she can't leave the house looking anything less than perfect. She may be pressured to get plastic surgery, or she may have already had several procedures before moving to Egypt. Her manager encourages or perhaps requires her to appear with him and his friends in public, partying at clubs.[7] Eventually she finds her way to a better manager who treats her with honesty and respect.

A viral video gets Nadia a bump in attention and fame, helping her to get higher profile work at more elite venues. She appears in a music video. If she wants to, she can have a very rich boyfriend who will take her on trips and buy her expensive gifts, adding to the glamour of her Instagram. The more famous she becomes, the more opportunities for wealth and glamour she has, and the more she can supplement her lifestyle in Egypt with teaching online and at international festivals. To become a true household name in Egypt, she will have to do several popular music videos and movies. When I quote an interlocutor in chapter four saying that Egyptians cannot compete with foreign dancers, Nadia is one of the dancers she is thinking of.

This is the general pattern of Euro-American paths to dancing in Egypt, but it is important to emphasize that the Russian version is the most intense and competitive. While Americans and other Europeans often start dancing young and make connections in Egypt through the festival

[7] There are a few female managers, venue owners, and so forth, but the dancers who have worked with them tell me that most of the women in the business are not any less exploitative than the male managers and venue managers.

circuits, there are far fewer competitions in the US and Western Europe than in Russia.

Lucia

Lucia is from Brazil. She also started dancing at young age, but ballet didn't feel quite right to her. After experimenting with hip hop and some other styles, she found belly dance and fell in love. The popular fascination with belly dance stemming from a story line in soap opera *El Clon* probably also contributed to her interest, as did continent-wide interest in Shakira. She was devoted to learning belly dance, so she took classes whenever her family could afford it — there were a few periods when they couldn't. She also went to school and studied business and got a "good" job. But she was bored. And then she lost her job, or the love of her life broke up with her, and she felt the need for a big change.

One of Lucia's belly dancing friends is working at a hotel in Sharm el-Sheikh, dancing in both group and solo performances of various styles for the entertainment of the (mostly Russian) guests. Her friend was recruited by an Egyptian man who saw her social media and messaged her about an opportunity to dance in Egypt. The friend says they need another dancer in the troupe and encourages Lucia to come join her. Lucia decides to go for it. Performers are housed together in the hotel. At first, Lucia is enjoying her new life, posting on social media about her life on the Egyptian coast. But eventually, there are problems; the hotel is not paying her as much as promised, and she finds it difficult to cover her expenses with what she is being paid. Lucia has met other Egyptians and they tell her that she is being taken advantage of. One man offers to help her make it in Cairo.

Lucia moves to Cairo, where her new manager friend houses her in a small apartment with several other Latin American dancers. He says he needs her passport to get her papers, but

she refuses to give it to him, fearing he just wants to have control over her.[8] She is working a lot on cruise boats and at less elite discos, in fact she is working almost constantly, but she isn't making very much money. Gradually, as she manages to talk to other belly dancers working in Cairo, she discovers that her new manager is also taking advantage of her, only giving her half of the pay from her work. Some of Lucia's new dancer friends in Cairo help her leave this manager, finding a more trustworthy manager. With his help, she navigates the many venue managers and stage managers who hire dancers, fending off those who expect dancers to accompany them clubbing or provide sexual favors in order to be hired. If she does this for long enough, she eventually has the connections to manage herself. She posts on social media fairly frequently, similar content to Nadia. She has enough work, but it will take a viral video or the right connections to get her famous and into the upper tier of belly dance venues. Once she gets there, she too can have rich boyfriends and glamorous gifts, if she wants. If she can stay famous online for a long enough time, the international belly dance community may take notice, providing opportunities to teach at festivals in Egypt, Brazil, and eventually the rest of the world.

Hanem

Hanem grew up in Alexandria in a middle-class Egyptian family. Like many Egyptian girls, she learned to dance by watching her female relatives dance at family gatherings and imitating them. She also imitated the stars she saw dancing in movies — especially Taheya Kariokka and Fifi Abdou. When she was young, her family encouraged her dancing, but as she grew older, they

[8] Based on my experiences with Egyptian bureaucracy, it is entirely possible that he would need her passport to get her papers, but based on what dancers have told me, he probably wasn't going to bother, and if he had, her passport may have spent months shuffling between bureaucrats and middle men.

began to discourage dancing in public. She loved to dance, and so she pursued it in the socially acceptable ways — taking classes at school or in community centers in ballet and Egyptian folkloric dance. As a teenager, she joined the local folkloric dance troupe and learned the joys of performing. One day, she was asked to fill in for the dancer who did the raqṣ sharqī solos, and then her life changed.

People told Hanem that she was a natural and encouraged her to be a belly dancer, not just a folkloric dancer. She worked a little bit in cabarets but didn't feel able to practice belly dance as a respected art like she could on a folkloric stage. She took lessons with a mentor and quickly found her way to higher class venues like dinner cruises and five-star hotel night clubs, using the respectability of her folkloric training and middle-class background. She uses social media, but she posts much less than her foreign counterparts — mostly just videos of her dancing, maybe some personal content in which she is fashionably but modestly dressed. She is very careful about what she posts on social media, how she can be tagged, and so forth. Her family objected at first, but now that they have seen that she is an artist (fanāna) and is not "doing anything bad" or anything other than dancing (i.e., prostitution), they have come around to accepting her career.

Hanem has developed a reputation for being a diva, but it is because she has to be fierce to protect herself from many of the men in the industry. They cannot take advantage of her in the same way they can foreign dancers, but that doesn't always stop them from trying. She hopes to become a famous actress, which would lend more respect to her dancing, but she must be careful to become famous in the right way and not through a salacious viral video. What might help some foreign dancers' careers could destroy an Egyptian dancer (see chapters four and five). If she is lucky, she will become known in the international belly dance community, allowing her to teach

and perform for foreign belly dancers in Egypt and eventually all over the world.

Būsī

Būsī grew up in a lower-class neighborhood in Cairo. Just like Hanem, she learned to dance from watching the women of her family and was encouraged to dance at celebrations up until a certain age. When she disobeyed the new modesty rules for her pubescent body and danced at a neighbor's celebration, her family beat her. In her late teens, Būsī found herself needing money after a failed marriage, so she used her connections to find work as a dancer in a cabaret. She knows it's considered haram, but a dancer can make in one week what respectable jobs pay in a month. When her family learns that she is working as a dancer, her father comes and beats her. But she must keep dancing; she has dependents to care for.

So, she dances every night, usually looking bored between bouts of flirting with customers, trying to evade handsy drunks with finesse and stay out of trouble with the police. Without any of the connections that protect dancers in elite venues and dancers from foreign and higher-class backgrounds, Būsī is an easy target for the police. They frequently hit up the venues where she works, demanding bribes and arresting dancers on the slightest provocation. She is not on social media professionally; it would do her far more harm than good. The best thing she can do for her family is keep her career as quiet as possible. Maybe she would actually like to be a famous dancer, but it doesn't matter because none of the higher-class venues will give her a chance.

Conclusion

As the next few chapters will demonstrate, the different foci of attention and pedagogical approaches to belly dance as described above have major repercussions on the belly dance industry today. Although the discipline of foreign dancers is seen as classy, it also leads to Egyptians viewing foreign dancers as robotic and cold. However, the foreign dancers' enskillment in an environment that prioritizes discipline and visual aesthetics often makes it difficult for them to live up Egyptian vibrational aesthetic standards. Chapters three, four, and five will explore the aesthetics and political economies of attention in the varied career trajectories available to belly dancers in Egypt depending on their nationality and class.

3. Before/Beyond Social Media: Vibrational Aesthetics and Attention as Care

Tonight, I am going to a cabaret of middling class in the center of Cairo with a group of belly dancers from the US. The name of the venue is on the building outside, but it is not clear what the business is, and there are several other businesses in the same space. Although we can already hear the music pounding, the entrance to the cabaret is tucked away upstairs, and when we reach it, we are greeted by several men in suits. After informing them of our reservations, one gestures for us to follow him, pushing aside a heavy curtain of maroon velvet to usher us into the performance space. Feeling the music reverberate in our bodies, we walk through the dimly lit space to a table at the edge of the long rectangular dance floor where a band is already performing. The tables are arranged around three edges of the floor, with the back edge serving as the entry point for performers and playing host to the keyboardists and players of any other stationary instruments, while the singer and percussionists rove the space. Having placed our drink orders, we are free to observe and have limited shouted conversations with each other, although a waiter or two always hovers nearby, ready to pour our drinks and see to our every need.

Our table on the edge of the stage is the most prestigious place to sit, and the most important guests at each table are expected to be seated in the seats next to the stage. I take one of these, and my companions trade off sitting in the seat across from me; most find the interaction with the performers that comes from sitting in these seats to be a bit overwhelming and can only handle it in small doses. There is another row of tables surrounding the first, and another against the walls on three sides. Low red light casts some illumination on the tables, but the stage is brightly lit. There are a few other groups of customers – all Egyptian and Arab men, perhaps one

table in each row. We have arrived early at 11pm; the tables will start to fill in around midnight, and the performances will continue until about four a.m. Before COVID, that would have been an early night, with six or seven a.m. being a more usual ending time. One of my companions is taking selfies; our servers eye her but say nothing until she turns the camera to the venue at large. A more senior server gently gestures to her to stop, smiling and saying, "here, you can do anything, but you cannot take a photo."

In addition to the other groups of customers, attractive young Egyptian women, wearing heavy makeup and revealing clothing, are sitting singly and in pairs, looking dispassionately at their phones. Of varying body types, these women are called reklam; they serve as eye candy and dance to keep the party going between professional dance acts (rotating every 45 minutes or so). Most of them are not prostitutes, but there are often a few prostitutes sitting amongst them. Many customers expect that the reklam will be open to offers, and much of Egyptian society considers women like them prostitutes regardless of whether or not they ever actually exchange sexual services for money (Wynn 2018).

The singer is making his way around the stage, shaking hands with the guests at each table and asking where they are from. At the table next to us, the singer turns to the room and shouts into the microphone, "*Taḥaya a-sSaʿūdiyīn*" (~Greetings to the Saudis) as the band continues to play. Coming to our table, he recognizes that we are foreign (i.e., non-Arabs), and thus speaks to us in English. "From where," he asks, and I respond in Arabic "*min Amrīka*" (from the US), prompting him to shout "*Taḥaya al-Amrīkān*!" (~greetings to the Americans!). Bands will often play a little riff of music known to come from the Arab country or Egyptian region of the guests, but they always seem stumped by what to play for Americans, and I imagine, any other foreigners.

The singer announces the dancer — we will call her Būsī (~Kissy), perhaps the most common stage name for Egyptian belly dancers — and the band launches into her mejance (entrance piece). Būsī enters and stops center stage to shimmy, the flesh of her entire body vibrating and reverberating in time with the music and her movements. This is the only part of her set that she can predict; after the mejance, the band will play whatever the customers request, sometimes switching mid-song. Her two-piece lycra costume is simply made, decorated with colorful beads and sequins, and shows the curves and fat rolls of her medium-sized body, her voluminous breasts seeming on the verge of overflowing the cups of her bra (though it is in fact thick and heavily padded, unlikely to reveal more unless the back hooks fail). Her straightened black hair falls to her waist, and she wears heavy makeup with thick black eyeliner around her eyes and bold red lipstick. Her eyebrows are obviously drawn on/over with black pencil, and they extend in to the edges of the bridge of her nose. Būsī moves around the edges of the stage, greeting each table with handshakes and a moment of dancing. Although her dancing is good, her focus is more on interacting with the customers; she pauses between movements to make jokes.

As her set progresses, her interactional techniques expand; she sashays languidly over to another table, where she flutters her eyelashes, makes a laughing comment to the guest, and lays her head lightly on his shoulder. This is dall'a. She encourages female customers to get up and dance with her. Coming to our table full of women, she bounces her chest a few times on percussive accents in the music, then crosses her arms underneath her breasts and uses her hands to push each one up separately in time to the music. A few of my companions laughingly

imitate her, but noticing one who seems shy, Būsī switches to a shoulder shimmy and places the bashful woman's hands on her jiggling breasts.

It is worth noting two things at this point: one, that a dancer must be much more careful with her interactions with men (as will be discussed further in chapter five) and most will not let men touch anything other than their hands; and two, although watching men may view such interactions through a sexualized lens, this playful appreciation of the way reverberations move through the flesh of female bodies is common when women dance together. Since women are generally viewed as quintessentially sexual — enticing bodies first and foremost (discussed further in chapter five; see also (Sabbah 1984; Van Nieuwkerk 1995)) — it is the social context that determines when a movement is (too) sexual, rather than the movement itself.

This opening vignette, a composite of actual cabaret performances I witnessed, highlights the two themes of this chapter: the primacy of vibrational aesthetics, and the use of attention to produce relational value (Elyachar 2005). Although I do not conceive of any of the concepts I employ as binary oppositions, it is important to keep in mind that the dancing in this chapter is in contrast to that discussed in the next chapter, where visual aesthetics become more important than vibrational, and where attention is commodified in service of social media image. While I am focusing on the aesthetics of vibration, I by no means want to imply that the visual is unimportant in these performance settings. It IS important; as all of my interlocutors have told me, you must always "look like a dancer." But as will be suggested throughout my vignettes, the dancer look expected in cabarets tends to differ from what is coming to be expected in the more visually oriented venues that I will discuss next chapter. In both cases, attention is for sale, but there are

different qualities of attention exchanged for different reasons. In the case of cabarets and other traditional Egyptian dance venues, the emphasis on vibrational aesthetics and interpersonal interactions gives Egyptian dancers an overall advantage over foreign dancers, although the local and global hierarchies of race and class which give foreign dancers an edge are also always at work. In this chapter, I am primarily using cabaret performances to stand for Egyptian belly dance performances before/beyond social media, but I also draw from performances in more upscale and family-friendly venues where similar aesthetic and attentional dynamics are at work (e.g., the increasingly rare five-star hotel night clubs) as well as in more traditional dance spaces like Henna parties. [1] The upper-class and gender-segregated dance contexts are the ideal, but the interpersonal connection through the vibration of shared music and affect are always present in Egyptian dance contexts, complicated in various ways by the dynamics of class, race, and gender at work in any given space.

As I explained in the introduction, attention is central to aesthetics. As a "distribution of the sensible" (Rancière and Žižek 2004), the aesthetics of any given culture, genre, etc., not only determine what we can and cannot sense, but how our senses are prioritized and directed. In other words, aesthetics guide our attention and attune our senses. By using the terms "vibrational aesthetics" or "aesthetics of vibration," I am asserting that our senses of vibration are prioritized. To vibrate is generally defined as rapidly moving back and forth, and physics and chemistry tell us that everything vibrates at an atomic level. In a basic sense, music is made through organizing the vibration of different materials. Thus, vibrational aesthetics obviously includes our sense of

[1] Henna parties are a traditional part of wedding celebrations similar to bachelorette parties, with all the female friends and family of the bride celebrating before the wedding.

hearing, but perhaps less obviously includes touch — the way we feel sound and the vibration of other energetic forces on our skin and in our bodies. An aesthetics of vibration also prioritizes affect, which we may gloss as feelings and emotions, but is better defined as "the energetic dimension of the encounter between bodies that together make up more complex, emergent phenomena" (Garcia 2020, 24) (following (Deleuze 1980; Massumi 2002)). In shared space, the vibrations of emotions and feelings travel from body to body, causing reverberation and a variety of other effects as they move. I will discuss the ways that vibration is prioritized in belly dance before turning to the qualities of attention for sale in cabarets and similar venues and their use to produce relational value.

Aesthetics of Vibration

"The power of the body in dance stems from…the capacity to generate a kinesthetic response in the observer" (Royce 2007) and each dance form tunes the senses in distinct ways (Bull 1997). I argue that Egyptian belly dance generates an especially powerful kinesthetic response because it is primarily attuned to vibration. Its most defining visible feature is the shimmering vibration of flesh in time to music – whether drawn out in extended shimmies to string instruments like the oud and *qanūn*, or the quick reverberations following muscle contractions in time to percussive accents. But there are many other ways in which vibration is central to Egyptian belly dance, as seen in the opening vignette in the loud music and the prioritization of affect and interpersonal interactions, and as I will detail below.

When asked what is essential to *Egyptian* belly dance (as opposed to other forms of belly dance), every single dancer and spectator I spoke to said it is the feelings *(iḥsas*). Many also used

the Arabic word *rūḥ*, meaning spirit or soul. “The important thing is that I touch the people,” said Egyptian dancer/teacher Randa Kamel, “…communication, there is contact between us. Not a show like big stage, big theater, and you are far, no” (translated from private interview). Dance studies scholar Christine Şahin argues that “the very understandings of raqs sharqi within most Cairo contexts revolves around the *tafaal* (interaction), *hadoor* (chemistry, often stated as charisma), and *ihsas* (feeling) that comes from the combined and shared relationality of the musicians, dancer, and audience” (Şahin 2018, 44). Nor is the importance of feelings new; Heather Ward (2018) notes the importance of feeling and improvisation in the aesthetic of traditional entertainers and early raqs sharqī. Thus, I argue that the vibrations of affect, in the form of iḥsas, are the essence of Egyptian belly dance.

This is also demonstrated by the primacy of music in Egyptian belly dance, and in Arab dance in general (al Faruqi 1978). As I have heard from countless Egyptian dance teachers, the dancer’s job is “to interpret the emotions in the music through her body…[with] music as the *single most important factor* which links dance with emotion and audience connection” (Bordelon 2013, 34). A dancer must embody the music, feeling it internally and allowing it to motivate movements from deep in her core. Egyptian dance superstar Dina says, “I feel the music going in my body. I don’t know what happens to me. When I hear something I like…It’s coming in my body. I feel something in my hand, in my heart” (personal interview). The movements of Egyptian belly dance make the music visual in a way that I rarely see in other dance forms. While forms like ballet and ballroom move to the underlying beat of the music and make occasional flourishes reflecting specific elements of the music, every movement in a (good) Egyptian belly dance performance is responding to a certain part of the music. The dancer does not follow every single

part — most songs are far too complex for that — but tacks between reflecting the melody, the percussive accents, supporting musical elements, and sometimes mixing them together with intricately layered movements. The music itself is very finely attuned to vibrations; Arabic *maqāmāt* (melodic modes akin to scales) use quartertones, thus tuning the ear to smaller increments of tonal vibration than Western music does.

This goal of becoming an embodiment of the music is another way in which Egyptian belly dance attunes the senses to vibration. The dancer allows her body to resonate with the vibrations of the sound around her. But remember, she must "touch the people" — communicate with her audience, share her experience of the music with them so that they can feel the music with her. This may be accomplished by being attentive to how dance movements shape and propel energy through the dancer's body and around the performance space; shimmying to generate energy, using the arms and hands to project energy towards the spectators or gather their energy into the performer. Ideally, the dancer, musicians/music, and audience will vibrate and reverberate together, sharing iḥsas and rūḥ. This brings us to a discussion of the Arabic concept of *ṭarab*, an interrelational experience of aesthetic bliss.

Ṭarab – often translated as enchantment or rapture – is defined by Arab ethnomusicologist/musician Ali Jihad Racy as a "musically induced state of ecstasy" (Racy 2003, 6). It is primarily associated with the art music of mid-twentieth century capitals of Arab culture such as Cairo, Aleppo, Damascus, and Beirut. In Egypt, the label ṭarab music has come to specifically refer to the compositions and performances of mid-twentieth century artists such as Umm Kulthum, Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab, and Farid al-Atrash. Ṭarab is considered an emotional state experienced by the audience — as well as musicians and dancers — and indicated

by spectators' performative vocalizations (e.g., sighs, *Allah, Ya salaam*) and gestures (bodily swaying, hand waving)[2].

While many would call ṭarab the product of a good performance of the specific genres described, ethnomusicologist Jonathan Shannon has argued that ṭarab is the product of the relationship between performers and audience (2003). As Shannon's interlocutors explain, ṭarab can sometimes be experienced during a bad musical performance because the atmosphere and connection were good, while a good performance may not always result in ṭarab if something is not in harmony within the audience, the environment, or within the performer's relationship with themselves. Thus, ṭarab is ultimately a communal experience of affect. Some argue (cf. (Sellers-Young 2016)) that ṭarab is essentially a form of spontaneous communitas (Turner 1977), an intense but transient feeling of togetherness. Furthermore, there is evidence that ṭarab is generated by bodies resonating together. People across the Arab world experienced ṭarab when *gathered together* around radios and listening to Umm Kulthum (Danielson 1997). One of Shannon's interlocutors claims that contemporary singers have weak voices and cannot induce ṭarab because they don't eat enough fat (Shannon 2003, 73). I infer from this that generating ṭarab requires vibrating flesh – the more the better. Furthermore, Deborah Kapchan (2008), has noted that ṭarab is contagious, with Western tourists at Moroccan music festivals able to "catch" ṭarab from the Moroccans in the crowd despite having no previous experience or knowledge of Moroccan or Arab music. Thus, I argue that ṭarab is part of an aesthetics of vibration, cultivated by human and musical bodies resonating together.

[2] For a similar phenomenon, see the description of ras, an aesthetic pleasure experienced sensually and intellectually in the dancer, in (Katrak 2008).

Many Egyptians laugh at the idea that other musical genres or performance art forms could generate ṭarab (Gilman 2014). Dismissing the idea that ṭarab could be produced by modern Egyptian pop music, one of Gilman's interlocutors nonetheless claims to have experienced ṭarab while listening to North American pop divas Celine Dion and Whitney Houston. When discussing the experience of ṭarab with Egyptian dancers, several told me that while they can feel a similar feeling when dancing to shʻabī or mahraganat, it is different from the feelings of dancing to ṭarab music. None of them have been able to articulate a physical difference between the experiences but suggest a qualitative difference. "Ṭarab feels like something almost sacred…mahraganat feels more like venting and a way to show people your power" (personal conversation). Yet when I asked if you could experience ṭarab to other genres of music, Egyptian dance teacher Raqia Hassan said that of course you could experience ṭarab with "any good music."

Conversely, another Egyptian teacher responded that you can't experience ṭarab with mahraganat music because it is "just nonsense" and there's no story you can relate to. While there are some mahraganat songs that are just "nonsense", many tell stories of struggle, betrayal, and feeling overlooked — things that many lower-class Egyptians relate to. Thus, I suspect that classism influences attitudes toward ṭarab insofar as ṭarab requires shared experiences to generate feelings of community and equality. Although the different emotional qualities associated with the genres and classist denigration of contemporary popular music genres prevent most Egyptians from associating those forms with ṭarab, it can potentially be experienced in response to any genre of music given the right interrelationship between music/musicians, dancer, and audience.

The dance contexts in which I have experienced the most communitas — potentially ṭarab — are Henna parties and dance classes/events at gyms; women's only events where participants can build community and relax away from the eyes of men, releasing some of the tension of adhering to modesty expectations in public. This is a primary function of social dancing for many Egyptian women (Roushdy 2009). For some observant Muslim women, participating in belly dance classes or teaching them (always in carefully protected women's only spaces) provides a way to engage in the dance form while keeping their reputation in-tact[3]. Egyptian women are the most supportive and enthusiastic audiences for belly dance I have ever encountered; most performances have elicited near continuous cheering and *zagharīt* (high, ululating cries). Several of the dancers I spoke with prefer women's only events because of this enthusiasm and the fact that "there are no creepy men, just good vibes" (personal conversation). Here, the performer can shimmy her shoulders, glance at her wildly wobbling breasts with an expression of awe, and share amusement with other women at the weird things our bodies can do without worrying about becoming a sexual object.

Here, the audience is excited to engage, and they make the dancer's job easy. Women cheer for the professional, the bride, or anybody else who takes the center of attention while dancing, and just get louder and more excited the better the dancer and/or the more they like the song. At one henna party, when the dancer and the guests were really feeling the song (a mahragan hit), the dancer nailed a beat drop after a pause, and the women burst into zagharīt

[3] This career path also has its challenges, particularly with the growing importance of social media meaning that a belly dance teacher must be advertised and think about what name to use, how to dress for promotional photos, etc. Family and friends are not always supportive of belly dancing even in gender-segregated contexts – see also chapter five.

and exclamations of "'aiwa!" (yes). I don't know what sensations the other women felt, but I experienced chills of bliss (ṭarab?). The dancer connected with the music and shared her experience with the audience; everyone was vibrating together. As this shows, ṭarab is easier to achieve the more is shared between participants, perhaps especially when coming together away from the watchful eyes of restrictive social norms and structures.

Improvisation

The importance of responsiveness and interrelationship in Egyptian belly dance means that it is usually improvised. While a dancer performing to the same song played by the same band every night for a month or more may come to dance mostly the same, giving an appearance of choreography, if she and the musicians are remaining responsive to reverberations, each night will also be a little different. At the very least, most songs include an improvised vocal or instrumental solo, and Egyptian musicians play by ear and from memory, so the music will differ slightly each night. But the atmosphere created by the mood of the audience, dancer, and musicians will also lead to very different performance conditions. Performers who are doing their duty to share iḥsas will allow themselves to respond to the vibrations of the affective environment and improvise interactions with the audience in the moment. This improvisational approach is in contradistinction to the choreographed approach to dance performance that is common in the Global North.

Anthropological writing on improvisation has noted that both culture and anthropological theory are, in many senses, improvised (Cerwonka and Malkki 2008; Hallam and Ingold 2021), but there are particular parallels between improvised belly dance and life in Egypt. As one long-

term foreign resident of Egypt describes: "The whole country improvises. They will sew three cars together[4]; do you know what I mean? They will fix your washing machine with a piece of tape. Everything is improvised in Egypt. They still mend things here…they make it work." Improvisation is also key to the quality of baladi, [5] which, amongst other connotations, "expresses an appreciation for spontaneity and sincerity" (Roushdy 2013, 23). Professional belly dancing in Egypt is ultimately a descendent of local social dancing, referred to as baladi, and so a certain sense of baladi is essential to good Egyptian belly dancing. As Egyptian cultural anthropologist Noha Roushdy found in her research on baladi dance:

> Not surprisingly, when asked about their opinion of the performance of *al-raqs al-baladi* by foreign women, all of my interlocutors found them to be lacking. Since for most of them unpretentiousness and simplicity characterized *baladi* behavioral patterns, what they found to be imperfect about non-Egyptian belly dancers was that their performances exposed their training. When I asked Omneya, for instance, why she does not like foreign belly dancers, she answered: "Because they have learned the dance; they did not drink it. How can they carry this spirit of *baladi*" (Roushdy 2013, 27).

Here again we see how foreign dancers are at certain disadvantages. Not only do many lack what Egyptians see as true baladi feeling, they often have been taught to rely on choreography, and many are initially very uncomfortable with improvisation.

One night towards the end of my time in Cairo, I went to a cabaret to see an Egyptian dancer who knew me as a researcher and fellow dancer. There was a major belly dance festival happening, I had seen her at the opening gala earlier in the week, and she was to perform at the closing gala the next night. When she saw me sitting in the cabaret, she danced over to our table at the edge of the stage to greet me and said, "what I do tonight… [dismissive gesture] I will be

[4] This is not an exaggeration. For examples of the ways that Egyptians make things work that are disconcerting to those used to American safety laws, see the Instagram account @idontfeelsafeinegypt and twitter.com/idontfeelsafeeg.

[5] For an in-depth discussion of the concept of baladi, see chapter one.

so much better at the closing tomorrow." Gala performances for international belly dancer audiences at festivals allow dancers to give much more theatrical and artistically focused performances than a cabaret, and she seemed to think that, like many foreign dancers, I would have little appreciation or respect for her cabaret dancing. I tried to reassure her that I liked cabaret performances. Later in her set, which was early in the night, one of the few other customers gave her a Bounty Bar as a tip/present. She balanced the candy bar on her cleavage for a moment, then moved it onto her head as she made her way over to my table, where she unwrapped it and insisted that I take some. This is one of my favorite cabaret moments, and it struck me as a playful way to handle a somewhat odd gesture from a customer and recirculate the energy by coming back to the edge of the stage to a customer she felt certain would engage in a supportive way. Cabaret dancers often must improvise in this way to react to customers, trying to minimize any risk to themselves while keeping all the customers engaged and happy. [6] While her dancing was good, though minimal, it was her improvised interactions with people that made her set successful.

Personally, I have often thought that Egyptian style belly dancing is much like driving in Cairo; there are no hard and fast rules except one — you need to be aware of everyone around you. For people from the United States, Cairo traffic can be terrifying at first; we are so used to expecting everybody to follow all the rules that we do not need to pay as much attention to others. But in Cairo, there are very few stop signs or traffic lights, people ignore lane lines and

[6] Dancers in cabarets are not only at risk of being touched, propositioned, etc. by customers in unwelcome ways, but will be punished if the police see the interaction. The offending customers rarely face consequences. See stories of cabaret dancers in the dissertation (Şahin 2018) soon to be published as a book by Oxford University Press, and in chapter five of this work.

squeeze their vehicles in any gaps they can, and drivers honk their horns nearly constantly to communicate with the cars, horse-drawn carts, donkeys, scooters, tuk-tuks, street cats, stray dogs, and pedestrians with whom they are sharing the road.

At a party, an Egyptian woman once told me that the secret to driving here is understanding everyone and what they want. “The minibus drivers are miserable; he drives around all day in a hot, crowded, smelly van for not much money, and he just wants to feel important, so you always have to let him go first. The tuk-tuks, they really want to be a car.” Similarly, a successful belly dancer in Cairo must understand the expectations and desires of all her different audience members and try to meet them, which requires improvising. Arguably, the need to improvise in daily life in such ways is a product of poverty and colonization, at least in part. But the awareness of others and their needs and the attempts to ‘make things work’ also point to the importance of relationships in Egyptian society.

Attention as Interpersonal Care and the Production of Relational Value

The remainder of this chapter utilizes Julia Elyachar’s concept of “relational value” (2005) to explain the qualities and purposes of attention on offer in Egyptian cabarets and other dance venues that operate away from the eyes of social media. Elyachar developed her theory in the context of craft workshops in Cairo, explaining why certain financial decisions which seem irrational in the Eurocentric economic models of the NGOs on the scene in the 1990s in fact made perfect sense for Egyptians. “Relational value…expresses the positive value attached to the creation, reproduction, and extension of relationships in communities in Cairo” (Elyachar 2005, 6). The prime importance of relationships in Egyptian and Middle Eastern societies is attested in

a wide body of literature (cf. (Abu-Lughod 1989). But Elyachar's work (2005; 2010) and my own are more specifically tying the cultural valuing of relationships with economic value.

Wasṭa (connections or nepotism) is all-important in Egypt. From the poorest neighborhoods in Cairo, where connections help you borrow what you need (cf. (Elyachar 2005; 2010), to the highest levels of government, it is difficult to get anything done without wasṭa. In this context — a product of both colonization and a culture that highly values relationships — connections are everything. This fact helps to clarify the arguments I am making about the importance of vibrational aesthetics that connect people through shared reverberations, and about the importance of cultivating relational value.

I argue that in venues like Egyptian cabarets, attention as care (Thelen 2015; Citton 2017; Pedersen, Albris, and Seaver 2021) is bought and sold, producing and growing relational value. There are three broad categories of attention as care being sold in Egyptian cabarets: one, discretion (care for customers' reputations, shielding them from unwanted attention); two, deference (treating customers as important, caring for their needs); and three, masculinity affirmation (flirting — from innocent jokes to the explicitly sexual — and employing other techniques to flatter men's sense of pride in their Egyptian/Arab masculinity, including providing opportunities for displays of wealth). Wealth is entwined with masculinity by the primary expectation of Egyptian and Arab men: they must care for the honor and material needs of the women they are responsible for (cf. (Abu-Lughod 1986; Ghannam 2013; Wynn 2018)). Across categories, we find that the attention of attractive women has particular value, as does the privilege of being able to pay attention to the women, which is in some senses what customers are paying for. I have already sketched the marketing of these qualities in the opening vignette of

this chapter, indicating discretion with the subtle signage, hidden entrance, dim lighting, and photography bans, suggesting attentive care in the hovering waiters. I will now tell several other stories that demonstrate economic exchanges surrounding discretion, deference, and masculinity affirmation.

In a run-down cabaret in downtown Cairo, I watch the first dancer of the evening; if everything goes to plan, there will be five Egyptian dancers, a different one performing with the house band every 45 minutes or so. As a regular customer enters the room, the singer seamlessly transitions from the song into a "taḥaya" or shout out to acknowledge him. The dancer shimmies her chest and pouts at another customer, hoping he will shower her with some of the giant stacks of five-pound notes sitting on his table, but it is early yet. Known as *kīt*, this money is rented to customers to throw for tipping, constantly recycled by young men who scramble around the floor, shoveling it into boxes. This money is only for renting and throwing; the performers no longer receive any, but I hear that they used to. Since getting money thrown profits the venue through the rental fees and thus enhance a performer's employability, most performers still strive to get money thrown, and flirting is usually a winning strategy.

In this cabaret, the servers are women (young, attractive, of varying body sizes, dressed in tight jeans and t-shirts); one flirts while she lights a customer's cigarette, and another cheekily swipes a potato chip from a different customer while making eye contact. We are sitting in the back row and have arranged just to pay for our drinks, thanks to one of my companions having danced here. She says that often on slower nights, cabarets like this will allow younger men with less money to sit in the back like us, buying little, *as long as they don't take up the attention of*

the performers. Since my friend has danced here, the singer eventually recognizes her, and he and the dancer make their way back to our table, encouraging us to get up and dance. My friend then tells my husband to go tip the dancer and singer for paying attention to the women he is seen as responsible for (just one of thousands of moments where Egyptian masculinity expectations made Jeff, who abhors most masculinity norms, extremely uncomfortable).

Suddenly, someone yells "*hukumah* (government)!" and the music stops; the dancer is hustled offstage. [7] The police come in and we all sit quietly for about half an hour until they leave and the music resumes, shortly accompanied by a second dancer. The hasty removal of the dancer may indicate that some law was being broken, but it may just be the result of a reasonable fear of mistreatment. Either way, the authorities were probably paid off to allow the cabaret to operate for the rest of the night.

Lower-class cabarets are more heavily policed than the upscale venues not because they frequently break the law, but in a sense because they don't. Opening and running an upper-class venue for dance in Cairo takes a huge amount of money and wasṭa, and as such, these venues cannot be checked by just any old police officer. The owners and venues, and thus to a certain extent the performers, are rarely subject to police supervision because they either have high-ranking government/military[8] connections or enough money to have arranged to give the police regular "*shay*" (tea, i.e., bribes) to be mostly left alone and warned of any police visits. Lower

[7] There are several different parts of the Egyptian government — mostly plain clothes officials — referred to as police or *hukumah* in belly dance contexts*:* the *musannafat* (deal with licensing), the *'adeb* (morality police), the *niqaba* (musician's syndicate). There are also regular police, tourist police, and the military. Everyone is clear on who is in the military, but it seems difficult to distinguish between the different branches monitoring belly dancing.
[8] Technically the government and military are separate, but everyone in Egypt knows that the military runs everything.

class cabarets and nightarts do not have the money or connections to get this kind of protection. They are therefore usually much more scrupulous in following laws than the upper-class venues and are frequent targets of lower-level police and government officials trying to exploit their power. The laws regarding belly dancing and nightlife venues are vague enough that it is very easy for police to have a reason to arrest the dancer or demand bribes, depending on his mood. Thus, the police are able to commodify their discretion/inattention, at a smaller scale in incidents like raiding a cabaret, but at a larger scale in the case of regular bribes. One dancer working in cabarets told me that at one venue, her pay was 50 LE less every Thursday to pay for the government's tea.

We will return to the taḥaya and kīt after a few more examples, but for now I will note that they function as both deference, in treating the customer as important, and masculinity affirmation, in enabling displays of wealth. In the dancer's pouting and the waitress's snack-stealing, we see some examples of dall'a and flirting as masculinity affirmation. The equation of attention with money is evident in the expectations that cheap customers will not pull attention from the performers, and that personal interactions be rewarded with tips. Discretion and the commodification of inattention are demonstrated in the interaction with police and their presumed acceptance of a bribe.

A few months later, I try to return to the same cabaret and find it has been permanently closed by the government. When the men in front understand that I am looking for belly dancers and not the 'nice' café that has replaced the cabaret, they guide us to a place across the street

that turns out to be a nightart (a smaller, lower status cabaret).[9] As I enter with three other white people — two North American women and my husband — the waitresses and male managers descend on us, jostling to provide service which they expect to result in tips. After we have settled in, three of the waitresses insist that the three women at the table get up to dance with them. Once we are up and dancing, one grabs my hands and says 'Money! Money, money, money, money' The others are more subtle in their requests for tips, but it is clear that we are expected to pay for their attentions.

An electric keyboardist sits at one end of the long, narrow open space between tables, and on a loud microphone heavy with reverb, the singer announces the dancer. She saunters in, looking much like the dancer I described in the beginning of this chapter. She happily dances with the waitresses and the three white women (two belly dancers and one adventurous visiting actress friend) — we all imitate each other, laughing and smiling. The same waitress who was so blunt in her requests for money takes delight in leading me to do hip shimmies while bending forward, displaying our vibrating behinds to the spectators. The dancer eventually goes to attend to the Egyptian men sitting around the room, the usual customers. She does so with a blank face, looking bored. As she takes her second turn around the room, she sneaks a sip of beer from the table next to us; nobody else seems to notice or care. Later in her set, I see her freely smoking from another customer's selection of pipes in between brief spurts of dancing.

In this vignette, we see many of the same economic exchanges around attention as the previous. The servers are attentive and act with deference, they also flirt and employ dall'a, and

[9] Note that the terminology categorizing different kinds of dance venues in Cairo is vague and ever shifting.

the dancer and female servers dance with customers on a pay-to-play basis. I am fairly certain that most of the pipes the customer shared with the dancer did not contain legal substances, but this and any other illicit activities were always handled with discretion, usually just ignored. Allowing dancers and waitresses to "steal" their food, alcohol, and drugs may be read as an affirmation of masculinity for some customers, demonstrating their generosity and willingness to care for women.

I walk onto a boat docked on the Giza side of the Nile Corniche in Cairo, one of several in the area and the city that host a variety of nightlife venues — cabarets, nightclubs, discos, bars — that feature music and belly dancing. I am trailed by my husband, a clearly white American man, and several visiting belly dancers from the US, dressed and made up for a night out. As such, we pull the attention of the employees and casual laborers gathered on the boat. Bemused and wondering if we might be lost, the men hail us in English, offering a variety of services. I keep walking quickly, saying "la, shukran" (no, thank you) without making eye contact; I have learned that the more attention you give in these situations the harder it is to disentangle yourself.

In Egyptian Arabic, I tell the men at the door to the upscale cabaret that we have a reservation. They blink at me and look at my husband, who makes a motion of refusal (he speaks little Arabic) and redirects their attention to me. We confirm the agreed upon entry fee (1000 LE per person, approximately $50-60 USD at the time of research) and what it includes (the plates of mezze that will be kept stocked throughout the night and two soft drinks per person). Shisha, alcohol, other food, and kīt are extra.[10]

[10] This is not a great deal; this was a "foreigner price" for seeing a well-known dancer.

As we sit, at least three waiters descend on my husband and offer coffee, dinner, bottles of vodka, and services with an attentiveness that overwhelms him. Other customers — all men of Egyptian and Arab origin — slowly fill in the tables, and some order kīt, which the waiters set trays of in prominent places at the foot of the table, on the edge of the stage. Another server carefully lays out a tissue above my plate and places my phone precisely in the center, then begins spearing fruit on a fork and offering it to me. One waiter gives my husband a brief unsolicited shoulder rub. A few moments later, he begins holding out his hand in a money gesture and saying 'ba'shīsh.' For the rest of the evening, my husband is asked for tips every few minutes by nearly every employee in the venue, only ending when we closed the door of our Uber to head home at 4:30 am.

The dancer, recognizing the group of foreign belly dancers, comes to dance in front of our table, and we are permitted to record our interactions with her if other customers are not on camera. One of my companions used to dance in this venue, and as the singer finishes another interaction, he recognizes my friend and hails her with a taḥaya. The dancer encourages my friend to get up and dance with her, and when she does so several other customers approach to throw kīt on both women. They then encourage the rest of us to get up and dance, which elicits a veritable storm of kīt. One customer sends a reklam to throw money on us, while a few others send managers. The kīt is constantly recycle by a small army of young men crawling around the floor and shoveling the money into chests to be counted, stacked, and recirculated. Seeing that we know how to dance, the reklam become keen to dance with us and beckon whenever they are up and dancing.

Throughout the rest of the night, we are periodically showered with kīt by managers on behalf of other customers. We laugh and dance in our chairs under the showers of money, attentive to the boys scrambling under our table to pick it up, joking that the venue should comp us for helping them to rent out so much kīt. We are having fun, but on another level, I am deeply uncomfortable with the ways I am both objectified and privileged by the hierarchies of race, gender, and class at work in the cabaret.

This story demonstrates the deference with which customers are treated at more upscale venues, especially when they are assumed to be wealthy foreigners. The staff continually tried to affirm Jeff's masculinity by deferring to him when I spoke, and by offering him special services and opportunities to display his generosity through purchases and tipping. They became quite frustrated when he didn't fulfill his role as expected. On the other hand, if he had acted as an Egyptian man is expected to, he probably would not have allowed the women he was responsible for to dance for kīt, so I think the cabaret — not the performers or the servers— came out on top financially in the end.

I now want to focus on the taḥaya and kīt, which are key mechanisms for commodifying attention as deference and masculinity affirmation in cabarets. These gendered encounters are rich with layers of meaning, but I will restrict my analysis to the political economy of attention for now. The taḥaya (Arabic plural *taḥayāt)* function to draw the attention of the dancer, reklam, and other customers to the guest or table singled out. They are thus commodified attention (from the singer, dancer, reklam, and/or other clients) exchangeable for money. This exchange is made into a

spectacle for the entire venue to generate a variety of effects, including competitive masculine tipping wars see (see Şahin 2018 - book forthcoming with Oxford Press)) while the actual economic exchange is accomplished when the customer rents the tray of *kīt* to throw.

Here we can see at work a number of the principles of attention capitalism outlined by Citton (2017); there is a "circular self-reinforcing dynamic" (55) wherein the attention paid to the dancer and other performers in the form of a money shower increases the value of their labor for the cabaret while also drawing the attention and money showers of other clients, in other words, "valorization through attention" (54), here made material in the piling up of kīt. In the terms of Franck (2019) and van Krieken (2019), this is attention earning interest, which the venue appropriates in the form of the kīt rental fees. Note that sexualized female bodies, especially rare bodies, add value to these exchanges, exponentially increasing the interest earned by attention. Although the performers in most cabarets no longer get any of the tip money, the profitability of renting out kīt incentivizes getting as much money thrown as possible; the more money showers a performer seems able to elicit and the more real tips by hand they can get (but are still not allowed to keep), the more and better work they will get because they bring in money for the venue.

While cabarets run on attention internally, their marketing is not based on the mass accumulation of attention. Clients are gained through word of mouth and night life brokers, using an informal marketing based on social networks, and attention is retained through loyalty. The vibrations of affect generated and shared in the interpersonal interactions I have described here cultivate relational value, which is exchangeable as regular custom. This discrete system is to protect the privacy and reputation of the clients, who want the attention of dancers, singers, and waitresses/reklam but <u>don't</u> want their friends and family to know they drink and go to places

associated with immorality. Additionally, nobody wants the attention of the police; as I will explain more in chapter five, the many laws regulating dancers and venue are frequently broken in the name of doing business. Briefly, dancers stepping off the stage to interact with customers is illegal,[11] as is a bare navel, but both as well as other regulatory infractions are frequently encouraged where the venue thinks they can get away with it. This situation enables (often severely underpaid) government officials to commodify their inattention by demanding bribes in return for ignoring regulatory infractions.

Foreign Dancers at a Disadvantage

The business models of cabarets as described above generally puts foreign dancers at a disadvantage. Very few foreigners work in cabarets, partially due to the common perception that cabarets are "seedy" and their desire to work in "cleaner" and "classier" places. However, it also has a lot to do with many foreign dancers not being culturally competent enough to succeed in cabarets. Depending on the class and location of the cabaret, the audience may be mostly Khalīgī (Gulf Arabs), mostly Egyptians, or a mix from different Arabic-speaking countries. But nearly all the customers understand Egyptian Arabic, are familiar with Egyptian belly dance, expect interaction with the performers, and know the norms of the venue. Every foreign dancer I have interviewed who has tried working in cabarets has been told, when she first starts, not to dance so much. She needs to relax and interact with the customers. But conversely, she needs to be metaphorically on her toes and ready to change from a classic Egyptian song to a folkloric *khaleegi* to a modern sh'abī at the drop of a 5 LE note, led by the singer signaling changes to the band and

[11] Probably a legacy of fath; dancers who leave their stage can be accused of soliciting prostitution.

verbally acknowledging the important customer of the moment. So, a competent cabaret dancer must speak good Egyptian Arabic, be comfortable chatting and joking with customers, and be familiar with a wide variety of music and dance genres from around the Arab world. Above all she must understand the vibrational aesthetics and relational value that are at the heart of Egyptian belly dance in these spaces.

Most foreign dancers working in Egypt speak little Arabic, and while they are often familiar with a variety of Arabic music and dance styles, are not comfortable or competent enough in cultural and venue norms to interact with the customers as expected. The few who have committed themselves to understanding Egyptian language and culture may succeed in cabarets, especially once they have learned the many different and less overtly performative feelings, expressions, and interactions at the heart of Egyptian belly dance. I have seen a foreign dancer with great technique give an all-out stage performance for the full hour of her set, and the only money that was thrown was when the singer led her over to the table of a regular. It was the more social party-like atmosphere created by the dancer sitting at his table for a few seconds and then dancing *with* him next to the table instead of *for* him that finally gained his appreciation and earned a money shower. This dancer speaks decent Arabic and is very familiar with many Egyptian social norms, but her lack of understanding of the profoundly interactive nature of Egyptian belly dance in cabarets led to a stilted atmosphere and not very successful performance. The need for deep cultural competence and advanced Arabic language skills puts Egyptian dancers at an advantage over foreign dancers in these contexts, although internalized colonization and class and race hierarchies still give foreign dancers a certain edge in initial hiring opportunities.

The Visual Aspects in Cabaret

As we will be focusing on visual aesthetics in the next chapter, I want to finish with a brief discussion of the visual elements of Egyptian belly dance in cabarets. As you may have noted from my descriptions of the dancers, waitresses, and reklam in these spaces, ideas of beauty are varied and realistic when it comes to body types. In each job, at all venues of this type, I have seen women with a wide range of body sizes and types, from thin and bony to large and fleshy. I never noted any negativity directed towards fat rolls and lumps, visible outside and underneath clothes on women of all sizes. Tight and revealing clothing seems to be embraced as sexy regardless of the woman's body size or shape. This is not to say that Egyptians have no preferences in this regard; women with large breasts and hips and smaller waists (though not as small as current US expectations) are generally considered most desirable, and most Egyptians will not hesitate to tell a dancer if they think she is too fat. But the beauty standards in Egyptian belly dance spaces beyond social media, including those just for women, felt much less onerous than those I found in discos and social media-oriented dance spaces.

For me, the casualness with which Egyptian dancers and reklam of more voluptuous build revealed the lumpiness of their bodies was a welcome relief from the thin perfection presented on social media and in discos. It was when I started going to more cabarets in the second half of my stay that I stopped considering fat reduction procedures for myself. By the time I first went to Egypt in 2018, I no longer had any desire to be a professionally performing belly dancer, and while my research has only reinforced my feelings on the subject, the intensity of the beauty norms and aesthetic labor I was seeing on Instagram and in adjacent performance spaces was such that, at

size 12 to 14, I simply felt inadequate and unacceptably fat.[12] I can only imagine how women who want to perform professionally feel in the face of such pressures, particularly when compounded with having more racialized features than mine.

It is also important to note that the aesthetic labor that women working in these venues engage in is not concealed. Part of "looking like a dancer" or looking your most attractive in these spaces is wearing makeup, but you are not expected to hide it. Eye makeup in particular tends to be heavy, and we might see this as quite traditional given the Egyptian origin of kohl eyeliner (Adal 2019). One very obviously white foreigner dancer told me that managers have specifically asked her not to wear very much eye makeup because it makes her look "too Egyptian." This is very different from the social media-entangled dance venues we will discuss in the next chapter, where we will discover that intensive aesthetic labor is required, but it is also required to be concealed.

[12] As I have previously noted, this is towards the upper end of the "straight-size" spectrum, but below average and often still seen as thin by those who tend towards the upper-end of the plus-sizes.

4. Social Media, Visual Aesthetics, and the Commodification of Attention

I am in an upscale restobar with a glamorous view of Cairo. To be here, I made a reservation via WhatsApp that required me to send links to the Instagram or Facebook profiles of everyone in my party. While my party of white scholars affiliated with the American University in Cairo secured a reservation without question, I later learned that my Egyptian-European friend and her Egyptian husband had been turned away with a (false) claim that the event was sold out. My confirmation text advised me of the venue policies:

- Entrance is limited to couples and mixed groups[1]
- Dress code is SMART CASUAL/ELEGANT
- Head accessories are not allowed (head scarves, caps, etc.)[2]
- Kindly note that your reservation is subject to door selection, this message does not guarantee your entry

A crowd has gathered in front of the small stage to watch one of the most famous belly dancers in Egypt — a Russian — dance to the latest hit songs, played for her by a DJ. She is styled in immaculate "Instagram Face" glam makeup — contouring and airbrushing effects detectable but not clearly visible as makeup — her eyebrows microbladed into a bold but natural-looking shape (and not extending as far inwards as those of most Egyptian dancers), and her waist-length brown hair (almost certainly enhanced by extensions) falls down her back in glossy waves. Her two-piece lycra costume is a medium cream color, covered in large and small Swarovski crystals, and has artful cut-outs around the hips. I have a theory that costumes like this are popular

[1] This is ostensibly to discourage prostitution, but it does not preclude bringing your own prostitute.
[2] In other words, no women who are conservative enough to cover their hair are allowed.

because they give an illusion of nudity. The dancer is beautiful and thin by US standards, with the assistance of breast implants, liposuction, and lip fillers as well as highly disciplined diet and exercise regimes.

At least half the spectators are recording video or taking photos with their mobile phones. The dancer lip syncs and gestures along with the song as she dances, making eye contact with a different audience member – or their phone – every few seconds. Some flip their phones around and use the selfie camera to take videos of themselves singing and dancing with the star, and if she notices she will come interact with them. Tomorrow, the dancer can expect to be tagged on social media in several video clips of her performance, and to appear in hundreds more circulating without her knowledge.

This composite vignette illustrates the centrality of contemporary Eurocentric visual aesthetics of female beauty and glamor in the political economies of attention at work in Cairo nightclubs, discos, restobars, and other elite venues using social media for marketing. While the dancer's skill at interacting with customers is still important, in these performance contexts, her appearance becomes paramount. She must balance live attention and generating the embodied affect that is her job with the ruthless visual economy of attention on social media. This story also suggests the attention "priming effects" of the crowds' recording mobile devices; "*the presence of a thing in our sensory field affects our way of thinking, speaking and acting, without our being aware of it"* (Citton 2017, 124).

Although they initially operated with the same discretion as cabarets, the business models of discos and similar venues in Cairo are now deeply entwined with social media and the

concomitant political economies of attention concerned with image and valuing whiteness. The practice of requiring social media links in order to secure a reservation pretends to maintain image through attentional logics — are you someone they want to be "seen with?" — and is therefore also an excuse to pre-screen customers by race and class, in addition to screening for class at the door. Door men are taught to admit people who can speak exclusively in English and wear expensive clothes, but to reject their fellow middle class Egyptians (Daly 2021). While these venues present themselves as exclusive, they also capitalize on the spectacle of the dancer spread across the internet. Since this capitalization rests in part on the dancer's fame, it is not surprising that several of my interlocutors report that some managers require certain Instagram follower counts in order to hire a dancer, which leads to some dancers buying Instagram accounts for the follower numbers and then converting it to their own content.

As I mentioned in the introduction, belly dancers are very common in "Golden Era" Egyptian films of the mid-twentieth century. Dancer-actresses like Taheyya Kariokka, Samia Gamal, and Fifi Abdou gained fame and a certain respect from their film stardom (cf. Dougherty 2005; Ward 2018; Cormack 2021). As such, the mass media logics of attention capitalism are not new to Egypt (see also Fahmy 2010). Nonetheless, the principles of digital attention capitalism that dominate social media forms *are* largely new and in conflict with some aspects of the existing political economies of attention in which discretion has a high value.

Submitting to the visual ontology of social media and attention capitalism has three main consequences for belly dancers. First, the imperative to attract attention multiplies the risks of a stigmatized career, as we will discuss next chapter. Second, visual aesthetics and logics become primary (Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin 2020). This promotes a focus on beauty, glamour,

and sexuality —increasing pressure for dancers to use all the techniques at their disposal to make their bodies conform to the desired ideals, doing intensive and extensive aesthetic labor to have the corporeal capital to compete in this attention economy. Third, as scholars have shown, when social media content is subjected to the standardization and ranking of platform algorithms, it is filtered through the racist, patriarchal, capitalist values of the generating society (cf. Bucher 2018; Noble 2018). As such, the profiles and content of belly dancers on social media are subject to Eurocentric algorithmic logics that prioritize what sells, namely certain brands of sexuality. As elite venues are basing hiring decisions on social media metrics, this contributes to a feedback loop with existing biases in Egyptian society, amplifying the advantages of those deemed sexy and high class (thin, cosmetically- and surgically enhanced, white-passing foreign women) and invisibilizes those deemed unworthy of attention (Egyptian women from the lower classes with larger and minimally modified bodies).

In this chapter, I will explain how social media came to be so important to some dance venues in Egypt and the resulting ascendancy of visual aesthetics, with far-reaching consequences for Egyptian dancers as attention becomes commodified at a large public scale. Becoming subject to the forces of the global attention economies of social media and the concomitant valuing of white supremacist beauty ideals and expectations of extensive — but concealed — aesthetic labor has put Egyptian dancers at a distinct disadvantage in comparison to foreign dancers.

Colonization and Visual Aesthetics

The movement of belly dance performances from streets and homes to stages and film can be seen as part of Egyptian dancers exercising agency in the project of modern Egyptian national

identity, as Heather Ward has recently argued (2018). It can also be seen as a part of the colonization process; modern European capitalism sets up the world as an exhibition in which the object is separated from its observer and given meaning by a frame or structure (Mitchell 1991). Egypt, and the Orient in general, was thought to lack this structure and European visitors experienced the East as chaotic and illegible. Mitchell details how British colonization and modernization sought to bring order by disciplining the body through the military and the mind through education, turning Egypt into a structured spectacle for their colonial gaze. When dance performances moved from the chaotic streets and the privacy of homes to the public stage and film, they were separated from the viewer, given the framing of a stage performance, yet made more explicitly for the viewer, and turned into part of the world as exhibition. These processes continue to the present day. As belly dance is elevated to the stage, more intimate interactions are prevented, contributing to the sanitized eroticism we often see in gentrified spaces (Potuoğlu-Cook 2006). With the increased staging of life and dance, spectacle and the visual become imperative.

Visualization processes have intensified with the ever-growing ubiquity of digital media in our lives. In Egypt, we can trace an especially marked shift towards the visual in the music and dance industries with the proliferation of video clips, a.k.a. music videos (Moataz Abdel Aziz 2010). As making video clips to accompany hit songs became an expectation for successful singers in Egypt and the Middle East, the visual became an important criterion for judging musicians. As Egyptians told anthropologist Daniel J. Gilman during his research on contemporary pop music, "'Well, now we are no longer talking about listening to singers but about watching them.'" (Gilman 2014, 72). The author continues, "there simply is no avoiding the importance of the

commercial video clip as a key form of technological mediation… especially because music consumers in Cairo receive a wealth of messages and cues that touch upon their attitudes toward nationalism, sexuality, and race."

With the growing importance of visual aesthetics in the music industry came an increased valorization of whiteness and thinness. In the early 2000s, Lebanese singers Nancy Ajram and Haifa Wahbe rose to fame through videos that combined their white-passing sex appeal with ties to Egyptian and Arab culture. Nancy Ajram in particular is often cited as the originator of the Lebanese "New Look" that is now mandatory for female singers seeking popularity in Egypt and the Middle East (Gilman 2014, 86). The desired look requires the singer to have light skin, sculpted cheekbones, a small nose, and a relatively thin body by Middle Eastern standards, but full lips and large breasts. Blue or green eyes are ideal. For many of the singers, including Ajram herself, plastic surgery and cosmetic tricks are required to achieve this look.

The "New Look" is ultimately about looking more European, and less Arab or African. As Gilman (2014) explains and I repeatedly witnessed during my time in Egypt, in general, Egyptians, although technically African, devalue and stigmatize African-ness. In Upper Egypt or the company of Nubians[3], my black acquaintances were constantly hailed affectionately with "welcome, cousin!" and my darker skinned friends told me that Nubians were the only people in Egypt who automatically treated them with respect and kindness. In Lower Egypt, people often assumed they were "African" (meaning sub-Saharan African migrants) and therefore treated them with disdain. Once people realized my friends were, in fact, African American, the coolness of being

[3] Nubians are a minoritized group from Upper Egypt, considered by many Egyptians to be more closely related to sub-Saharan Africans than to themselves. Much of their homeland was flooded by the construction of the High Dam at Aswan in the 1960s, driving migration to Cairo.

American and value of being foreign earned them better treatment. Traveling with white people could insulate my black acquaintances somewhat by loudly signaling their foreignness but could also bring different racist assumptions to bear. My husband and I frequently went sight-seeing with a black friend in her early twenties and we all realized that Egyptians seemed to be assuming that she was our adopted child. She started talking, with heavy sarcasm, about how grateful she was to have this opportunity to see what we had saved her from by removing her from Africa. For more on anti-black racism and colorism in North Africa and the Middle East, see (Ghannam 2008; Tayeb 2021).

As I explained in the introduction, white supremacy is tied with thinness, and fatness is associated with blackness and the lowest levels of global Eurocentered capitalist social hierarchies. These hierarchies — denigrating women, especially those who are darker skinned, fatter, and more overtly sexual — feed a bourgeois aesthetic of bodily containment. Thus, being white means being thin, and for those not naturally thin and pale, disordered eating and obsessive exercise can now be helped along or replaced by numerous cosmetic and surgical procedures, as well as increasingly sophisticated digital photo and video editing applications. In fact, the more inhumanly "perfect" a woman looks, the more her body is distanced from the feared and overflowing sensuality of the lower levels of hierarchies of race, gender, and class. As Egypt has become increasingly enmeshed in global media circulations that glorify glamorous, perfected, thin, white-passing beauty (e.g., Instagram, Netflix), the current iterations of Western beauty infiltrate Egyptian society, gradually changing beauty ideals and expectations of aesthetic labor for women.

Al Rāqisa and "The Foreigner Complex"

In a sense there have always been foreign dancers working in Egypt, but until recently they were mostly from elsewhere in the region of the former Ottoman Empire. Badi'a Masabni, one of the main figures in the development of the modern Egyptian belly dance industry, was Syrian-Lebanese and Golden Era dancer Kitty was Greek-Egyptian. It wasn't until the 1970s and 1980s that non-Arabs — women who Egyptians would really call foreign — began working as dancers in Egypt (Shira n.d.). But Egyptians have long suffered from what they call *'ou'dit al-afrangi*[4] or "the foreigner complex": "an indescribable and irrational reverence for all that is foreign to us. Tell any Egyptian something is locally made, they'll criticize and scoff. The second you stick a "Made In (insert Western country here)" label, it immediately triples in value – both monetary and socially" (Osman 2014). This is an Egyptian colloquial version of internalized colonization, the psychological incorporation of colonially imposed hierarchies in which aspects of the subject are negatively valued. And as we have seen in other colonized countries around the world, this phenomenon is entangled with classism, colorism, and racism. Thus, an Egyptian bias towards singers and dancers with lighter skin and hair and more European features is not new but part of a long history of and far-reaching internalized racism.

It is within this context that we must understand *Al Rāqisa: The Bellydancer*, a reality-television style talent contest for belly dancers. Featuring Egyptian superstar belly dancer Dina as the main judge and mentor for contestants, the series was produced by Egyptian company Luv Media and aired on the Egyptian television channel Al Qahera W Al Nas…for one episode in 2014 (Kingsley 2014b). After the program was pulled due to religious backlash, fans were still able to

[4] In Modern Standard Arabic: عقدة الأفرنجي

watch the entire series on YouTube, and the show has had a lasting impact on the belly dance industry in Egypt. Before turning to the legacy of *Al Rāqisa*, I want to discuss the ways in which racism, fatphobia, and the foreigner complex are evident in the production.

Episode four begins with a review of the previous episode's competition results, showing how American dancer Miasia — one of only two black contestants, and one of only two fat contestants[5] — beat out the two other contestants in her heat (Al Rakesa 2014c). After the standard recap, the program moves on to a special section emphasizing exactly how much of a surprise her win was. "Miasia was not a traditional dancer," asserts the narrator over footage of her dancing. "Neither her look, nor her hair, nor her body are the body of a traditional dancer" (Al Rakesa 2014c, my translation). When her stay in Egypt for filming extended beyond the two weeks producers initially told Miasia to plan for, they told her outright that they had not expected her to do as well as she had (Iana Dance, n.d.). As mentioned in chapter two, this kind of treatment of black dancers has also long been a problem in the US belly dance industry. Given the history of colorism in Egypt, the growing media preference for whiteness and thinness, and the expectation that dancers meet beauty ideals, it is frustrating, but not surprising, that a fat black contestant who wears her hair in braids and locs was not treated as a serious contender for the title of "best belly dancer."

While *Al Rāqisa* implied that a belly dancer should be thin and light-skinned with straight or wavy hair, the competition also clearly did not favor Egyptians. Of the 27 contestants selected to participate, only eight were Egyptian. The first episode shows 11 additional Egyptian women

[5] The other black contestant, also African American, was very thin; the other fat contestant was a Russian woman with pale skin and blonde hair.

auditioning and being rejected (Al Rakesa 2014a). There were four dancers of Arab heritage, with the remaining 15 contestants being foreign (in the sense Egyptians use it), including six Russians and four Americans. When all the competitors are re-introduced in the second episode, many of the Egyptians are shown screaming and crying, while the foreign dancers are shown as happy or dignified under pressure (Al Rakesa 2014d). The only Egyptian to make it to the final round, Sahar Samara, recently said in an interview: "[they were] especially mean to me and the other Egyptian dancers…I feel the show tried to show me up as being '*Beta*[6]' or *'a crazy Egyptian'…*The producers of the show would stir up trouble on purpose and make contestants paranoid about each other. And I feel they would always use material of me that showed me in a bad light" (Zara Dance 2023).

Indeed, *Al Rāqisa* made editing choices that really emphasized the education and training levels of foreign dancers while showing the Egyptian dancers as untrained and unwilling to learn. Episode three shows Egyptian dancers having several tense arguments in dance classes, commenting "Farida has a problem: that she learns steps in a different way from teacher Rita El Hachem…Not only Farida. Also Karmen, another [Egyptian] contestant had the same problem" (Al Rakesa 2014b, my translation). The show does not explain, but I learned from another contestant that Hachem was a Lebanese modern dance teacher and choreographer and that all contestants found lessons with her to be most challenging because she was teaching modern dance technique and not belly dance (personal interview). In the fourth episode, we are shown two of the foreign contestants conversing about their college education — both studied business management — immediately before scenes of another Egyptian dancer, Henna, struggling with the dance classes. "From the beginning of the program and she has a problem because they are

[6] Egyptian colloquial slang for poor, low-class Egyptian people and things.

learning steps and she doesn't want to participate in the group dancing," says the narrator (Al Rakesa 2014c, my translation). It is thus suggested that if the Egyptians are losing, it is their own fault because they are uneducated and unwilling to study.

This brings us to a slight linguistic detour. Arabic is largely structured around a three-letter root and pattern system in which the meaning of a three-letter root can be modified along specific patterns to create words with predictably related meaning. For example, the root d-r-s is the verb *darasa* (to study) and using patterns, we can derive *darrasa* (to teach), *mudaris* (teacher, or person who teaches), *madrasa* (school, or the place where you study), and so forth. A three-letter root that came up frequently in both *al Rāqisa* and my research is 'a-l-m, relating to knowing or knowledge. This is the root of *'ulama*, the scholars of Islam responsible for interpreting texts and making legal rulings, as well as of *'ālmah* (plural *'awālim*), the more respected of the public dancers in nineteenth century Egypt. The 'awālim were educated in poetry and the arts of conversation and singing as well as dancing and have thus often been compared to geishas and courtesans.[7] I want to point out that using this term for professional dancers implies the importance of being knowledgeable in the wisdom of the body. Today, comparing a dancer to an 'ālmah is a compliment, implying she is grounded in tradition and worthy of respect. But 'a-l-m is also the root used in the negative depictions of the Egyptian dancers' learning (*tet'alim* – she learns, or rather, she doesn't learn). It is also the root of a common complaint about Egyptian dancers made by other Egyptians, especially those who mentor or manage foreign dancers: "there's a big problem with Egyptians: they don't learn (*ma-byit'alimūsh*). We have this mentality that we are born dancing. OK, we're born dancing in terms

[7] For more on the 'awālim, see the introduction.

of art, that doesn't make us professional. All the stars before now were learned. We have to learn to become professional, to become stars" (translated from personal interview).

Al *Rāqisa* sought to elevate the status of belly dance in Egypt, in part by associating dancers with education and training. Due to the longstanding stigmatization of dancers (as explained in the introduction),

> even dancers who seemingly took pride in their profession were reluctant to audition for the program due to a fear of being publicly recognized and labelled as a "belly dancer".
>
> This self-conscious and publicly shamed archetype stands in stark contrast to the profile of an international belly dancer. While belly dancers in Egypt stereotypically come from a lower socioeconomic background, hold no academic degree or professional training, and utilize belly dancing as a source of income to scrape money together, that is not the case elsewhere.
>
> As audiences will see firsthand through the show, the international belly dancer is not a morally depraved hustler. She is a teacher, a competitor. She has taken workshops in technique, and spent grueling hours perfecting her art. She has made a financial investment in her trade, traveling to festivals and competitions. She holds a Bachelor's, Master's or even a PhD. She could be a TV presenter, a reporter, or an advertising executive or she could have a full-time job, steady income, and concrete career path as a belly dancer. She is a belly dancer by choice, not by necessity (Osman 2014).

Unfortunately, only the foreign dancers on the show were shown in the positive light described by this reporter. The perceived superiority of foreign dancers to Egyptians was reinforced by Ukrainian Alla Kushnir's win over Greek-Egyptian Soraya. Rather than bringing respect to all belly dancers in Egypt, the program primarily served to provide a more respectable alternative to Egyptian belly dancers in the form of beautiful, white, highly trained foreign dancers. As one Egyptian teacher who mentors foreign dancers explained:

> they found out there are dancers that are good looking, clean, and they dress well. And they look nice. No belly: the body is good…Most of them, they are clever. They are

> educated, and good looking, and they take care of everything – makeup, hands, everything. And there is no Egyptian that can compete. If you want to compete you have to WORK a lot on yourself. And nobody – until now, I don't see ONE who can compete (personal interview).

Here again we see Egyptian dancers framed as lazy, unwilling to learn and work. But it's not that Egyptians need to study dance, they are expected to become generally educated and work on themselves, meaning their bodies. Here, care is equated with the self-discipline to work on your appearance. And with five of the foreign contestants[8] moving to Egypt and pursuing high-profile belly dance careers, increasingly visible on social media, the pressure to look a certain way only increased, even in dance venues with photography bans.

Aesthetic Labor and Corporeal Capital

Meleka, an Egyptian-American who was trying to start a career as a belly dancer in Cairo, accompanied me one night to a class with a well-known Egyptian dancer who I will call Amar. I knew that she had been struggling to get and keep steady work and was frustrated with the preference for white-passing dancers, so I asked her how it was going. "It's rough," she replied. "I'm working regularly on a boat, but I keep losing my cabaret jobs. One, on the third night, my costume was too conservative, and the other, my hair frizzed up."

We discussed the styling of her hair – dark brown, roughly type 3c curly (Mello Hair 2020), and hitting around her shoulders. She had worn it in a ponytail to keep it contained, but they (i.e., the venue/stage managers hiring her) wanted to see her hair down and moving around. This resulted in the frizzing, and it didn't move the way her employers were hoping. Nearly every other

[8] Alla Kushnir (Ukraine – the winner), Oxana (Russia — the favorite), Brenda (Argentina), Arielle (USA), and Farah (France/Algeria)

dancer working in Cairo, foreign or Egyptian, was wearing her hair around waist-length (often requiring extensions) and down straight or in loose waves (neither one accomplished without significant labor and products). I pointed out that many of the foreign dancers were wearing their hair in high, sleek ponytails to perform that summer. She objected: “But they’re whiter than me. The more a dancer looks like a thin white woman, the more they can get away with. Like my hair might be OK if my skin was lighter, or if I were lighter, I could get away with being chubbier.”

Chatting with Amar after class, she was outraged on Meleka’s behalf that men were daring to judge her naturally curly and dark hair, a feature shared by many Egyptians. “Look at Samia Gamal, and Taheya Kariokka,” she exclaimed. “They wore their hair curly at their shoulders, and they were beautiful in their dancing. That’s more important.”

Yet moments later, watching a video of Meleka dancing, Amar pointed to her stomach and said she had to get rid of it, to lose weight and flatten her stomach. I found this especially painful to hear since Meleka is relatively slim, particularly in comparison to myself. She doesn’t have the nearly fatless sculpted abs seen on many of the foreign dancers working in Cairo, but almost none of the Egyptian dancers do, and I have learned through interviews that these visible abdominal muscles were often accomplished through liposuction.

Being Egyptian-American put Meleka in an awkward position for belly dance career paths in Cairo. Her understated natural look did not fit in with the voluptuous and heavily made-up aesthetic of most Egyptian dancers and her lack of performance experience in Egypt was hindering her, but she wasn’t putting in the aesthetic labor to look whiter, thinner, and more “upper class” expected of foreign dancers and in the more upscale venues where she was hoping to work. Meleka ordered a sandwich delivered while we sat and chatted, and when it arrived,

Amar shamed her for eating. Upon hearing that it had been eight hours or more since Meleka had eaten, Amar relented somewhat. But she still objected to the sandwich, exclaiming, "no, it's wrong to eat that! After exercising, eat protein bars or bananas."

Throughout my interview with her, Amar made multiple comments about dancers needing to stay slim, saying that her mentors encouraged her to follow the example of the star dancers of old by drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes rather than eating. My final interview question is always if there is anything else important that I need to know or should be asking about. Amar's response was, "two things from the days of the dancers [Golden Era stars]: they didn't eat too much. It's very dangerous for a dancer to eat. And never ever ever drink water when she's training or when she's dancing."[9]

Taken all together, Amar's comments paint a complex and contradictory picture of changing beauty expectations in the Egyptian belly dance industry. On the one hand, the stars of the Golden Era were considered beautiful for their dancing rather than their hairstyle. As Egyptian dancer Randa Kamel told me, confirming the primacy of vibrational aesthetics as argued last chapter, "there are a lot of dancers who weren't stunning, you know not very beautiful. But they are very beautiful — with their skills, with their feelings, with their personality…it's not beauty — no, no, raqṣ sharqī is not dessert. Raqṣ sharqī is soul (rūḥ)! Soul and beauty of personality" (translated from personal interview). On the other hand, at least in Amar's opinion, dancers — in the past and today — should replace food with coffee and cigarettes in order to stay thin and achieve a flat stomach. Between Amar's comments and Meleka's struggles, we can see the

[9] The prohibition on drinking water turned out to be somewhat common among Egyptian teachers, believing that the cool water is bad for warm kidneys and so you should wait at least twenty minutes after exercising to drink water.

negotiations of beauty standards required to succeed in the Egyptian belly dance industry.

As Joyce Carol Oates commented, “dancers, like boxers, ARE their bodies” (as quoted in Wacquant 1995, 65). Their bodies are the sites of their labor and the source of all their economic capital. Some have written about the kind of labor or corporeal capital that goes into developing an economically productive body (cf. Wacquant 2004 for boxing; Tuchman-Rosta 2020 for dance). The foreign dancers who are coming to dominate the industry in Egypt tend to come with extensive technical training, cultivating corporeal capital with what Foucault would call discipline (1975) and Weber would recognize as a Protestant work ethic (2011). But the most valuable kind of bodily capital in Egyptian dance is coming to be that of appearance; beauty has become “the ultimate commodity” (Edmonds 2008, 156).

Cultivating and maintaining the corporeal capital of beauty requires extensive and intensive aesthetic labor (Elias 2017) — in this case, diet, exercise, often plastic surgery and non-surgical cosmetic procedures, as well as time and money spent on makeup, hair, nails, and flattering costumes. Maintaining oneself as an exceptionally sexually attractive woman in just about any modern society is extremely laborious, and often requires significant financial resources. While attractiveness has always been one of the requirements to succeed in dance in Egypt, the standards for physical beauty have not always been so high and it has not always been so essential.

The Golden Era dancers were not traditionally beautiful in every way, but their dancing abilities — along with their pale skin and general thinness for the era — made up for the traits they lacked. Today, as visual aesthetics surpass vibrational aesthetics in importance, the demand

for dancers to meet as many physical beauty standards as possible becomes very strong. As philosopher Heather Widdows explains regarding beauty as an ethical imperative:

> in some contexts, so much value is placed on skin tone that the failure to meet other features is negated: 'fair skin makes up for other bodily flaws.' In other contexts, the opposite is true. For instance, skin color may be irrelevant as long as other features — for example thinness — are met. … That some features matter less in some contexts does not shake the dominance of the ideal as some of the key features are always required, in some or other combination. For example, it is possible to be bigger, if you are also firm, smooth, and young. It is less likely you will be considered beautiful, or just good enough, if you are bigger and hairy and have cellulite and jowls. The emerging global beauty ideal promotes thinness, firmness, smoothness, and youth — collectively or in combination (Widdows 2020, 72).

As this global beauty ideal solidifies its hold, we see the growing pressure for belly dancers in Egypt to meet these standards by any means necessary. In doing so, many of the foreign dancers end up having "Instagram Face":

> the gradual emergence, **among professionally beautiful women** (my emphasis), of a single, cyborgian face. It's a young face, of course, with poreless skin and plump, high cheekbones. It has catlike eyes and long, cartoonish lashes; it has a small, neat nose and full, lush lips. It looks at you coyly…The face is distinctly white but ambiguously ethnic—it suggests a *National Geographic* composite illustrating what Americans will look like in 2050, if every American of the future were to be a direct descendant of Kim Kardashian West, Bella Hadid, Emily Ratajkowski, and Kendall Jenner (who looks exactly like Emily Ratajkowski). "It's like a sexy . . . baby . . . tiger," Cara Craig, a high-end New York colorist, observed to me recently. The celebrity makeup artist Colby Smith told me, "It's Instagram Face, duh. It's like an unrealistic sculpture. Volume on volume. A face that looks like it's made out of clay"(Tolentino 2019).

Whether a dancer favors the contoured inhuman perfection of Instagram Face or the heavier eye makeup of the Egyptian look, a lot of aesthetic labor is required.

Regarding the onerous grooming and styling requirements of dancing in discos and venues of similar class, one Egyptian dancer told me, "You must. They're like accessories. You

have to light up the stage…You have to (do) your nails, you have to (do) your hair, you have to (do) lipstick, you have to (have nice) shoes, you have to (have nice) tattoos, you have to (take care of) your skin tone. If there is even one hair on your hand, it won't work" (translated from personal interview). This perfection must be maintained both in person and online: "I open the picture and zoom in and look at my chest, my eyes, my mouth, the shape of my ears, the shape of my nails, and if everything is perfect, I post it. If it's not perfect, no way, because everybody concentrates on everything" (translated from personal interview).

But this pressure extends beyond getting manicures, styling hair, putting on makeup, and so forth. Many dancers, foreign and Egyptian, have had cosmetic procedures and plastic surgery. The most commonly used enhancements are Botox, lip fillers, and breast implants, but there is often an expectation to do more. When I asked if she felt pressure to get plastic surgery, one foreign dancer answered:

> A hundred and ten percent. Like, when I first moved here, I got just a little bit of work on a boat; that was where I was working before Corona happened. And that was the only place that would hire me, because of my nose. And every place was like 'we love you so much, but we cannot hire you with that nose. You have to change it, or you're not going to work in Egypt'…But it came that point either I leave Egypt, or I do it. So, I did it. And then it turned out crooked. So, then the next year I went back, and made it straight-er, but now it's drooped.
>
> It's like every time you do something you often have to do something to cover that up. Like my baby Botox and meso-botox for the sweat, it affected my smile…I was like, I don't want big lips, but I had to do something because I couldn't smile fully. Which doesn't work…So, I did that just to cover up *that* issue, but now I have *another* issue (personal interview).

Note not only the pressure to look a certain way, but also the expectation that normal bodily functions like sweat be concealed. Nor was this dancer my only interlocutor to find that cosmetic

procedures were a vicious and expensive spiral. One Egyptian dancer I know with breast implants wants to get them removed because they are hurting, but she will have to save up money to get it done and time it carefully. Most dancers wait to do more extensive procedures during Ramadan, when they will have a month with no work to recover. Even "minimally-invasive" procedures that boast little to no recovery time — like Botox and fillers — can go wrong. Another dancer of mixed Arab heritage got fillers in her cheeks around the beginning of COVID, but she had gotten an infection and it had gone lumpy, and in 2022 she was still putting time, energy, and money into fixing it. Thus, cosmetic procedures of all levels can become a much bigger investment than initially expected. To be worthy of attention in this political economy, dancers must invest enormous resources in their appearance. On average, the foreign dancers working in Cairo discos estimate they spend approximately 1000 USD per month on costumes, hair, nails, makeup, skincare, and other beauty services and products — not including plastic surgery. At the time of research, this was equivalent to roughly 20,000 EGP — five times the figure I was given for an average monthly salary at a respectable Egyptian job.

Foreign and Egyptian dancers working in the same sectors of the Egyptian belly dance industry are subject to similar pressures regarding beauty standards and aesthetic labor. However, foreign dancers generally start out significantly ahead of Egyptians in their existing corporeal capital and ability to meet expectations. First of all, being foreign automatically marks them as beautiful, high-class, and special, and they are far more likely to have the "European" features Egyptians deem desirable. This is true even for dancers who are white-passing rather than what we might technically think of as white, e.g., many of the Latina dancers working in Egypt. Second, most foreign dancers have access to significantly more financial resources than

Egyptians to fund their routine beauty purchases as well as regular cosmetic procedures like Botox and lip-filler and (ostensibly) one-time surgeries like implants and liposuction. Third, most foreign dancers have enough passport privilege to allow them to travel to other countries, like Russia and the United Arab Emirates, where they can get higher quality plastic surgery for still relatively little money (compared to US prices). Finally, most foreign dancers have more experience with social media photo and video editing tools to further perfect their appearance.

Having explained the growing influence of global white supremacist beauty ideals on belly dance through Egyptian and Arab media and the challenges of cultivating the corporeal capital of beauty, I now want to turn specifically to social media. Beauty capital of a certain level is required to be competitive on social media, and all the advantages of foreign dancers become amplified with increased social media usage; platforms reward cosmetically and digitally enhanced bodies with more attention, leading to more work. Several foreign dancers have also become influencers, getting their cosmetic services for free or significantly reduced cost in return for promoting their use of the services in their Instagram stories. In the next section, I will explain how some Egyptian dance venues moved away from a traditional business model of discretion and became entwined with social media and the concomitant visual logics of attention capitalism.

Gohara, the Growth of Social Media, and the Commodification of Attention

In Spring 2018, a Russian belly dancer known in Egypt as Gohara was arrested, charged with 'inciting debauchery,' and nearly deported when a video of her Cairo disco performance

went viral (Al-Masry Al-Youm 2018).[10] The charges were not officially due to the video itself, but because, allegedly, she was not wearing shorts under her costume and didn't have the proper license to perform. While the first regulation is not one I have seen frequently ignored, during the time of research (2018 – 2022), foreign dancers working in Egypt without all the legally required paperwork were the norm rather than the exception, and various regulatory infractions on the part of venues and dancers (often at the behest of her employers) were rampant in the industry, as were bribes to police and government officials to turn a blind eye.

After this incident, Gohara catapulted to stardom, becoming one of the most popular professional belly dancers in Egypt and on Instagram, where her account regularly features more sexy and glamorous photos and videos of her lifestyle than of her dancing. In the Cairo belly dance scene, opinions and rumors abound; some think she shared the videos herself because she was new to Egypt and unaware of the potential consequences of attention, others say it was just a publicity stunt orchestrated by her manager, and some say that a more established dancer called the police on Gohara, jealous and fearful of being usurped in the hierarchy of fame. The point is not which, if any, of these stories is true, but how Gohara's career trajectory was understood within and illuminates the rapidly changing Cairo belly dance industry and its broader cultural context of shifting political economies.

The story of Gohara might be seen as proof of the maxim that there is no such thing as bad publicity. According to many of my interlocutors, after seeing the success of Gohara and the venue at which the viral video was taken, within six months every disco in Cairo had lifted their ban on

[10] Gohara actually appears in the first episode of Al Rāqisa, auditioning unsuccessfully using her real name, Katia, and wearing the same white lace costume in which she appeared in her viral video.

photos and videos and most audience members were taking videos to share on social media. As such, a large sector of the Egyptian belly dance industry seemed to become very suddenly subject to the visually- and visibility-based political economies of attention operating in and through global social media.

In addition to the meteoric rise of Gohara and discos, the trending preference for recorded hit songs over live music — accelerated by the pandemic suspension of live performances — is driving the growing importance of social media in the Egyptian belly dance industry. To try to protect the livelihood of musicians, the musicians' syndicate (which dancers must also pay into) requires that any belly dance performance must also include a certain of musicians (I heard five, but often only saw one or two). Almost every venue in Cairo meets this requirement by hiring two drummers (the least expensive musicians) to play along with the recorded music.[11] While cruise boats and many other belly dance venues used to feature live music, now nearly every belly dance venue in Cairo only uses recorded music, and only two cruise boats still have bands. Live bands with dancers can only be seen in cabarets and very upscale hotels. Dependence on recorded music increases ties to social media, where the recorded hits become popular.

Social media is now indispensable for fame. Dancers of earlier eras became famous, and thereby respectable, through films and work at prestigious hotels with big theatrical shows. This is no longer a viable career path, as the few remaining theatrical belly dance shows at upscale hotels are only accessible to the upper classes, and photography is prohibited. Dancers can

[11] This seems odd and subverts the true intention of the rule. However, it also has the effect of raising the level of vibration in the room exponentially, perhaps partially compensating for what is lost in using recorded music.

become famous among belly dance fans by dancing in discos and developing their social media presence; only upper-class Egyptians may see their live performances, but at least Egyptians with less money can now see their performances online. But to become a household name, the dancer must leverage the disco fame into work in music videos and movies.

In venues visible on social media, attention can be truly commodified, not just bought and sold as an interpersonal interaction. The attention of dancers to spectators becomes exchangeable; it doesn't really matter which dancer in an elite venue looked at you while lip-syncing for five seconds, it matters that you have a video of her doing so that will gain you attention and social capital online. The attention that the dancer gave to her live audience becomes replicated and shared across social media platforms, generating more attention for the poster, the dancer (if she is tagged and/or named), the venue (if it is tagged or named), and the platform. And dancers in this sector are being given little choice but to participate in this system. Social media operates on an "ontology of visibility" which "*measures a being's level of existence by the quantity and quality of its perception by others"* (Citton 2017, 53). In this context, the simple act of looking at something adds to its value. Due to the "vital need for notoriety" in media capitalism, "*we ceaselessly work to make ourselves attractive"* (Citton 2017, 53) that is, to be able to attract **attention**, as well as to be visible.

Constrained to primarily social media-based research for the duration of 2020 and first half of 2021, scrolling through Instagram and TikTok came to be an experience of overwhelming sameness. And I don't mean that all the dancers look the same or wear the same costumes exactly, but they are almost all posting the same kind of content. On Instagram, most of the

dancers based in Egypt shared clips of them dancing at weddings in fancy hotels, surrounded by clapping and dancing guests. The dancer wears a revealing and impressively sparkly costume. She claps and lip-syncs with the crowd. If she is Russian, she will throw in impressive backbends or drop straight into the splits. There is nothing particularly risqué about this; it is what Egyptians expect at a wedding. If anything, they might complain that the Russian dancers should do less tricks and focus more on the feelings of the music and dance, sharing them with the audience. The rest of the dancers' content were sexy and glamorous photos and videos, and the majority of these fell into the realm of what is referred to as "thirst traps" in internet-speak.

Thirst trap is a term that was initially used when someone posted a deliberately but usually subtly sexy picture or video of themselves on their own social media page because they were "thirsty" for attention. Often these posts would be accompanied by innocuous and seemingly unrelated captions/comments about something like how nice the weather was, an ostensible reason for the post. In theory, people post thirst traps not because they want just any attention, but because they want attention of a sexual nature; posters are trying to get friends and followers to reveal thirst (sexual desire) for them. Kim Kardashian's Instagram is full of excellent examples of thirst traps. Increasingly, thirst traps are used in social media not just by individuals seeking validation and attention, but for economic purposes. Influencers might use them to increase their following, and thus their income, or as a technique to help promote a particular product or service. Thus, belly dancers can also use thirst traps to generate an online audience of potential clients for transactions offline.

On TikTok, I found that the more videos of professional dancers in Egypt I watched and liked, the more the algorithms pushed "thirst traps" to my "For You" page. At first, the vast

majority were women dancing at home in revealing clothing, often to some form of Latin music – it clearly never occurred to the algorithms that I was interested in the dance, music, or even women of a specific country. The more of these videos I watched and saved for research, the bolder the thirst trap videos TikTok showed me, until I was watching videos from self-professed sex workers in English-speaking countries, in which they both advocated for sex worker respect and subtly solicited off-platform transactions. Changing the application language to Arabic steered me away from sex worker videos, and gave me a bit more Arabic content, but I continued to get a lot of amateur dance/thirst trap videos from around the world.

While social media platform CEOs like Mark Zuckerberg claim that their applications offer people connection, the kinds and ease of connection facilitated vary, as do the potential uses and abuses of the platform. An image-based platform like Instagram does not easily allow the same kinds of social connection as Facebook. Although there has been a recent movement towards using Instagram "more authentically" (i.e., naturally, less perfected) in the US, originally and in some cases still, users primarily offered highly curated images of themselves, often seemingly designed to provoke feelings like desire and jealousy.

This online environment naturally influences the creation and reception of belly dance content. And while traditionally, dance performances were preferred to be (and for many people only could be) in person, they have increasingly moved online. In person, it is easier for the audience to feel the vibrations of the music and physically sense the energy being expressed to them by the dancer. Thus, while her body was a product in some senses, the dancer's body was not the whole product. The product was the entire dancing experience – feeling and hearing the music, watching the dancer and feeling her emotions reverberate in your own body and affect

you, appreciating her particular interpretation of the music and sense of musicality. While this experience is not impossible online, it is much harder to achieve and much reduced given the physical and quantum remove from the event. You simply cannot feel energy and musical vibrations from a screen the same way you can at a live event, where bodies are sharing the same space and moving together.

Because of this experiential difference, as well as economic and social reasons, the product being offered in online performances tends to be different than in person, as does the audience to an extent. You may still be able to appreciate the dancer's musicality, but you cannot feel her emotions or the music to the same extent. So, the flashy tricks and constant technique spectacle common in Russian dancers becomes more popular (or did the "Russian style" develop because of the move to watching dance online?). And the viewers come to care more about the dancer's body and how sexy they think it is. They can no longer be overcome by her vibrational stage presence, so they focus on her physical attributes. Conversely, having so many dance performances available online creates an opportunity for people with varying levels of interest in Egyptian dance to watch videos for purely prurient reasons in privacy. That some internet users are looking for belly dance videos to use as soft porn is naturally combining with social and economic factors within Egypt to push dance videos in a more sexual direction.

And there is certainly proof that many people, including many Arabic-speakers, are looking at videos of Egyptian dance because they are sexy, or that the primary attribute they are seeking is erotic appeal. I sought out *raqṣ sharqī* Facebook groups in Arabic, and found that first, most of them are private, and second, the content is primarily posted by men and often is not videos of professional dancers but videos of women dancing at home in various stages of undress

– often in quite see-through lingerie. Furthermore, accounts exist on Instagram and TikTok where videos of professional and amateur dancers, only of the sexy variety, are reposted. Users are then directed that they can watch the entire video on YouTube, where the owner of the channel (never any of the dancers or women featured) can monetize the video and make money from the views. Thus, the dancer's body becomes a true commodity, separated from her, digitized, and passed around the internet, the various random men completely unconnected to her taking pleasure and profiting from the sexual appeal of her moving and scantily clad body. As has long been the case, the women who do the actual work do not profit from sexualized work nearly as much as the men who society allows and demands control the women and the industry (McClintock 1993), and this is true for foreign and Egyptian dancers of all classes.

While professional belly dancers working in Egypt are rarely the source of the videos shared in these spaces, this is the content they are forced to compete with by social media algorithms. Thus, dancers who feel a need to be successful on social media are likely to feel pushed to post increasingly sexy content. Dancers who only post performance clips and do not venture into sharing home dance clips and bikini photo shoots are likely to incur professional penalties, not gaining as much fame and work as those who do.

Conclusion: Egyptian Disadvantages

As I have shown, political, social, and economic changes in Egypt have been provoking related shifts in the dance industry. The primary result has been a migration of performances and business generation from in-person to online, where attention and certain sexualized corporeal attributes become the most important currencies. Dancers continue to have little control over

their careers and images, yet still suffer stigmatization for the actions they have to take for survival or economic success, as we will see next chapter. Foreign dancers have some unfair advantages over Egyptian dancers in these new attention and corporeal economies, and thus the new trends are accelerating the decline of dance as a viable profession for most Egyptian women.

Most of the Egyptian dancers I have seen performing in cabarets and nightarts do not have any professional social media presence. Several dancers told me they turned down offers of work in music videos because their husbands or families did not want them to be famous. Dancers trying to work in any of the more respectable circuits now feel that they must be on social media, but many are very selective about what they post and the privacy settings on their profiles. One told me "I worry about what my children will think when I have to tell them I am a belly dancer, and what they will see on social media." Regardless of any other potential consequences for drawing attention to their dancing (to be discussed next chapter), most Egyptian belly dancers still value discretion in their careers to protect the reputations of their families, and thus cannot use social media the same way foreign dancers can.

Although venues of the disco class traffic in spectacle and mass media, many can only do so because of the purchased inattention of the relevant government officials. The regulatory infractions that I commonly saw in discos included unlicensed dancers, uncovered navels, and "floorwork" (dancing while partially or entirely reclined on the floor) and can be seen all over social media. While some managers, venues, and the men running them use their wasṭa to protect dancers or organize the necessary bribes, and some are occasionally fined for their part in encouraging/permitting the violations, it is usually the dancer who will face consequences. In the more respected (upper-class) dance venues like discos, employing mostly foreign dancers,

this may include paying a bribe, being detained by authorities for a few hours, a summons to appear in a government office, and very rarely, deportation. For Egyptian dancers working in all venue classes, punishments include the above as well as jail time, violence, estrangement from their families, and other major social consequences. Meanwhile, the venues profit from any and all attention attracted to the dancer.

5. The Dark Side of Attention: Inciting Debauchery and Attention as Weapon

I have just finished a women's belly dance event at a ladies' gym in a Cairo suburb and am sitting in a café eating and smoking shisha with the two teacher-performers who led it: a foreign dancer and an Egyptian belly dance coach who I will call Naima. Outside of the women's only dance spaces, she covers her hair using the currently chicer style of wrapping a scarf around her head. Naima's phone rings, and after answering it, she quickly becomes visibly upset. It is a friend calling out of concern for her; there are videos of her belly dancing on social media.

Naima explains to us that she had recently done a photo shoot with another studio where she teaches. They took video during the shoot, which Naima requested be limited to showing her hand and arm movements and maybe some ballet dancing. No belly dancing. Yet videos of her belly dancing — moving her hips and torso — were posted on the studio's social media regardless of her request.

More friends are calling and texting Naima for the same reason; they are afraid that her fiancé will be angry with her. He supports her dancing, but on condition that it is not in public. For many Egyptian women, this is the only respectable way to make belly dance pay, and it is still frowned on and fraught with difficulties. We advise her to contact the studio and ask them to take the videos down. She does so, and they comply quickly. But damage has already been done. Her fiancé is angry, and Naima seems stressed out for the rest of the evening. She complains to us about the status of belly dance in Egypt: "I've seen lots of Egyptian women who are happy to be in sexy hip hop videos or pole dancing, and they didn't worry about the stigma at all. But belly dance? Belly dance is completely unacceptable!"

For a chapter that will focus primarily on high-profile arrests and scandals much more salacious than Naima's struggles, this might seem an odd story to begin with. But it illustrates how far-ranging consequences can be for minor incidents of behavior deemed immodest, as well as the two major aspects of offenses: publicness and Egyptianness. In Naima's view, society accepts women dancing in public (at least via social media) if the dance form is not Egyptian, but being seen dancing in a traditional Egyptian manner is shameful. Conversely, as we saw in the last chapter, *foreign* women can dance in public without the same stigma; their foreignness here outweighs the shame of dancing in public and of performing an Egyptian style. It is the foreigner complex described in the previous chapter — internalized colonization — at work against belly dance and Egyptian women.

In this chapter, I will demonstrate how the crux of the stigmatization of belly dancers — it is considered shameful for women to move their bodies in public — is about women drawing attention to themselves, thus enabling attention to be used as a weapon against them. While attention can be used as a weapon against any woman in Egypt, and especially any dancer, Egyptian dancers are differently vulnerable than foreign dancers. Usually coming from families in other countries and considered outside of Egyptian society in some ways, foreign dancers are much less likely to suffer social consequences than Egyptians, and in terms of legal repercussions, are very unlikely to spend time in prison (a definite risk for Egyptian dancers), but foreign dancers can be deported. Egyptian dancers have long felt that the police who enforce the rules about costumes and movement operate with a double standard; they arrest native dancers for dress code violations, but ignore foreign dancers (Smucker 2001). Thus, native-born dancers are held to a higher standard of morality than foreigners and are more vulnerable to police attention.

The Problem of Public Women

I argued in my master's thesis (Morley 2007) that the stigmatization of belly dancers stemmed from fear of female sexuality. Furthermore, I explained how this fear was triggered by women moving their bodies in public. Singers are considered just as bad as dancers by many people, because of their moving bodies (Van Nieuwkerk 1995). The public display of a moving female body is therefore framed as un-Egyptian. One Egyptian man says of popular Egyptian singer Ruby that she "isn't very Egyptian - she uses her body in her video clips" (Gilman 2014, 105). Thus, the use of the body in video clips is not seen as something that proper Egyptian women do. This view is part of a longstanding patriarchal idea that women should not move their bodies in public where men can see and be excited by their movement; this appears to be largely due to conceptions of women and female sexuality. Fatima Mernissi (1987) has argued that in Muslim societies, women are conceived of as omnisexual – completely and exclusively sexual – and men are helpless in the face of female sexuality, leading societies to not hold men accountable for their behavior towards women and to a particularly intense need to protect society from the dangers of uncontrolled women and the female sexual appetite. This idea is not specific to or even rooted in Islam; the idea that women have uncontrollable sexuality that is a danger to the virtue of male self-control is seen throughout Mediterranean societies from Ancient Greece to the present (cf. Shay 2014). It is also seen in present-day rape culture in the US, questioning victims about what they were wearing rather than holding rapists accountable for their crimes.

The stigmatization of dancers thus comes from their dangerous public display of their own sexual moving bodies, and by doing the opposite of what "good" women are supposed to do,

dancers inadvertently help to reinforce Egyptian gender norms (Roushdy 2013). By regulating and occasionally arresting dancers for “inciting debauchery”, the government reminds Egyptian women of the dangers of transgression. Thus, to a certain extent, Egyptian society depends on public dancers and their public transgression of norms to reinforce and perpetuate the norms dancers violate.

Even in Egyptian and Arab diaspora communities living amongst different social norms, stigma is still attached to the profession of belly dancer. As an Arab-American belly dancer explains:

> For the most part I was the only dancer I knew who was of MENAHT heritage so I was the outsider…It's weird, we all started in communities where dancing was part of every celebration, where we danced together at weddings, parties, baptisms and even just at home when we got together. Our families cheered us on, lifted us up onto table tops and encouraged us to dance our hearts out. Until one day it stopped. Now we were told to be modest, don't dance in front of people. All of a sudden now dancing was bad….
>
> The confusion continues as we move through our teenage years - she is a great dancer they would say, so fluid, watch her! But never run up to dance right away. Let them ask you 2 or 3 times before you get up. Don't dance too sexy, don't look them in the eyes…rules, rules, and more rules. “Don't think of being a dancer, no one will marry you. What will people say?"...
>
> Maybe you were lucky enough to be accepted to dance folklore in covered dresses but for many this is still haram. "How dare you get up in front of strangers and ***draw attention to yourself like that***!"(emphasis mine)…
>
> I lost friends, I was politely left out of community events and gatherings. An Egyptian female friend, who I met in a dance class and even performed in some folklore performances with us, said to me when she found out I was performing as a soloist at a local event, “You understand if I don't talk to you at the party. I can’t let people think I am friends with the dancer” (Shelaby 2023b).

So, it is very clear that the offense at the heart of being a belly dancer is drawing attention to a moving female body in the wrong social context, especially as a soloist. As has been discussed in previous chapters, for centuries the Egyptian government's way of handling the transgressiveness of belly dancers has been to regulate and tax them, occasionally banning dancers en masse or punishing individual dancers when someone seemed to feel that things were getting out of hand. But what happens when it is no longer just your job to display your moving body to strangers, but the political economy of attention in your industry no longer allows you to do so discretely? In other words, how does the economic imperative for belly dancers to attract attention to themselves at a large scale make dancers uniquely vulnerable in a social context where women are not supposed to draw attention to themselves?

Inciting Debauchery: Arrests and Attention as a Weapon Against Women

In Egypt, the answer to the above question is that you get a proliferation of charges of "inciting debauchery" and other offenses against women who have danced in public, which now includes dancing in videos which appear online. As I have already implied, these punishments are a disciplinary tool that help reinforce norms of secluded female modesty. But the charges and the attention they both bring and result from are also weapons against women. As will become clear in the cases I summarize, some legal charges are brought because someone is seeking

personal revenge, sometimes against someone connected to the dancer with repercussions for her as a side-effect.

A curvaceous young woman is sensuously eating a taco, tentatively copied by the classroom full of besotted young men who are watching her. One of them wears a hard hat, another is in a neck brace. The woman has already licked an apple and eaten some frosting and a banana, but the men have not followed suit until the tacos. In between bouts of sexy eating, she bites her lip and makes pouty and surprised faces, sometimes for no apparent reason, sometimes seeming shocked by her own body. After the tacos, she pours milk all over two unpeeled bananas. Everyone in the room looks very excited about this, and I wonder ***what*** is going on with this video.

In November 2017, Shyma Ahmad and director Mohamed Gamal were arrested (Tawfeeq and Oberoi 2018) for the video "'*Andy Zoroof*" (I Have Conditions) (Gamal 2017). The storyline of the video presents Shyma teaching a sex-education class to a room full of men. Outside of class time, Shyma is shown in the classroom, now lit in a dim red light, where she puts on lipstick, begins to take off her bra (the only clothing we can be certain she is wearing), and licking a red apple on a stick. During class with her entranced students, Shyma uses her finger to swipe some frosting off a piece of chocolate cake, then inserts the tip of her finger into her mouth and slowly licks the frosting off. She is also shown slowly sliding a banana into her mouth and biting into it and doing the same with a taco. While the male students watch in delight as Shyma eats the

frosting and banana, suggesting fellatio, they all timidly imitate her in eating the taco, suggesting it is a metaphor for cunnilingus. More distant shots are continually alternated with close ups of Shyma's lips as she licks the various foods. Finally, Shyma pours milk on two unpeeled bananas, opening her mouth and looking upward in mock ecstasy as the male students nod and grin. Bananas are established in Egyptian culture as phallic substitutes, and the Arabic word for milk, laban, is often used to mean semen. The presence of two phalluses (bananas) may suggest a threesome or other sexual encounter with a male homosexual aspect to it.

This is one of five music videos since 2014 to lead to the singer being charged with "inciting debauchery" by the Egyptian government. These are only the high-profile arrests; Dalia Abd El-Hameed, a researcher at the human rights group Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, says that Egypt's morality police have been cracking down, first charging hundreds of gay and transgender people and later dancers and dancer-prostitutes with inciting debauchery or prostitution (Fadel 2015). They counted a total of over 200 cases between El-Sisi's coup in 2013 and the quoted interview in 2015. If the police kept up the same rate, the number of arrests for inciting debauchery would now reach over one thousand.

Looking at the videos for which singers have been arrested since Abdel Fattah el-Sisi became president of Egypt in June 2014, we can see an increase in overt sexuality compared to the videos of earlier pop stars like Nancy Ajram. I read this as an intensification of the demand for sexualized corporeal capital in order to compete in the evolving attention economies. Earlier pop videos do include shots focusing on erogenous zones like breasts, buttocks, and lips; the

performers also wear tight, revealing clothing and dance in the social beledi style. However, they do not contain anything comparable to the sexuality of the newer videos for which singers are being arrested, where the close-up shots are even closer, and everything is more explicit.

When performing a cover of the old Egyptian song "Ya Wad Ya T'eel" (You Cool Man), Bardis ('Antar 2015) wears a cold weather fleece without a bra and performs chest circles filmed in slow motion, emphasizing the swinging of her large, braless breasts. She also rests a rotary telephone on her breasts while she dances and slides her closed hand up and down the handle of a squeegee in a manner reminiscent of manual stimulation of a penis. This is much more directly sexual than the sexy glances and horizontal dancing we have seen in videos to this point. The other videos include homosexuality, BDSM, and upskirting. In "El Kamoun" (The Pepper), Shakira (Mazzika - 2014 مزيكا) enjoys a whipping from a school headmistress before tying up the authority figure and taunting her with a variety of shimmies, thrusting her cleavage and buttocks in the headmistress' face. Given her facial expressions and gestures, the headmistress is clearly scandalized yet excited. Shakira also grinds pepper using a mortar and pestle, squatting with her legs wide open and holding the implements directly in front of her groin. Combined with the running of a fresh red pepper slowly across her lips, it is clear that peppers are being used as a euphemism for penises, and Shakira's desire to "buy it ground" is a euphemism for sexual intercourse. In another video, Salma El-Fouly lip-syncs "Sib Idi" (Let Go of My Hand) (ElSedeki 2015), a song about a woman being sexually harassed on public transportation, although she admits late in the song that she secretly enjoyed it. In the video, Salma El-Fouly does not really

dance so much as sway to the music in a tight and low-cut dress while the camera alternatingly focuses on her jiggling cleavage and tries to look up her skirt.

While the music videos I have described are all more explicitly sexual than the vast majority of Egyptian and Arab video clips, I don't think the sexuality level was the only problem that led to legal charges. As internet penetration in Egypt has rapidly advanced over the past two decades, a growing percentage of the public can be reasonably expected to see any given popular video online. Thus, the internet is expanding the public context in Egypt; in the early 2000s, only a small proportion of the population — wealthy and cosmopolitan — even had access to the technology to watch videos online. But now, the vast majority of Egyptians have at least some internet access, and as such, dancing in a video that appears online is dancing for a potentially massive public audience. Thus, women who appear in videos online do potentially have access to a massive amount of attention that can be used as a resource. However, drawing attention to women dancing online also puts them in danger of arrest and other legal and social consequences.

Many Egyptians seem to think that the singers arrested for these videos were deliberately trying to cause a scandal with their sexuality in order to gain attention and fame. In court, most of the singers arrested have protested that they don't understand video production and didn't know what was happening during shooting, despite their occasional knowing facial expressions in the videos. Shyma clearly wanted to be famous; she was an unsuccessful contestant on Arab Idol (El Masaiti 2017) and in her apology on Facebook, Shyma said that she had always dreamt of

being a famous singer (أحمد زهران - أحمد مهدي 2018). Furthermore, there are rumors of a video clip in which Shyma asked the video director to do anything he could to make her famous, and mentioned she had nudes to publish (شيرين الجمال 2018). Given that earlier sexy videos led to controversy and censorship, and more recently arrests, jail time, and fines, it is understandable that some read the continued production of these videos as an intentional effort to get attention, which can catapult the singers to fame and the presumably attendant financial success. However, when videos from a semi-private context are shared without the dancer's (professional or amateur) permission, attention can be used against her as a weapon.

While some rumors in the case of Gohara (the Russian dancer whose arrest and career trajectory are discussed in chapter four) say that her manager shared the video to create a scandal and attract attention, other rumors claimed that it was a result of weaponized attention. Several dancers told me they had heard that another well-known dancer, jealous of Gohara's success and fearful of being replaced in the fame hierarchy, called the police about Gohara's performance. Whether or not this is true — and Gohara denies that this other dancer was responsible — it reveals that belly dancers in the Cairo industry are well aware that attention can be weaponized against them, by others and each other.

Current Egyptian superstar Dina was the victim of a huge sex tape scandal in the early 2000s. One of her previous husbands, well-known businessman Hossam Abu el-Fotooh, secretly videotaped her while they were having sex, and the tapes were later sold at substantial profit. There is some confusion as to whether or not he sold the tapes, or they were taken during

a police raid on his house. In any case, Dina was accused of knowingly and willingly participating in these pornographic videos (Staff 2003). She made the pilgrimage to Mecca during the scandal, although she was initially forbidden by Saudi authorities to set foot in Saudi Arabia for the *Hajj*. The Saudi embassy in Cairo said that her presence in the Holy Land would be considered a "big disgrace, especially due to the big possibility of her returning to her profession after *Hajj*" (Al Bawaba Staff 2003). Dina did, in fact, return to her dancing career after completing the pilgrimage. In the long term, Dina was able to recover from this scandal, thanks probably to making the hajj, but also largely to her star status and upper-class background.

However, other dancers have not been so lucky. One rising dance star and two actresses had their careers destroyed when they were caught up in filmmaker and Egyptian Minister of Parliament Khaled Youssef's sex tape scandal (Staff 2019). The general consensus is that somebody leaked these videos to hurt/threaten Youssef because he was opposed to proposed constitutional changes that would allow el-Sisi to be president for life (MEE Staff 2019). But it was the women who participated in the videos — ostensibly either unknowingly or as a condition for Youssef's help with their careers— who really suffered. Despite not being the primary targets of the leak, the women who appeared in the videos were charged with inciting debauchery and jailed, but not Youssef.

Sometimes people deliberately weaponize attention against dancers. In April 2015, Armenian-born dancer Safinaz was found guilty of defaming the flag and sentenced to six months in jail for wearing a costume in the colors of the Egyptian flag to perform at a party at a Red Sea

resort the previous August. The report against Safinaz was filed by a businesswoman and hotel owner in Cairo (Ahram Online 2015a). She was later acquitted after an appeal; her lawyer successfully argued that the report filed was a malicious act of revenge against Safinaz after she terminated her contract with the hotel (Ahram Online 2015b).

No woman in Egypt is truly safe from the weaponization of attention, particularly with the proliferation of social media. As we have seen, recordings of lawful sexual intercourse between husband and wife are sometimes both made and distributed without the woman's knowledge. Nor are women's daily interactions safe from being recorded, posted online, and weaponized. During my time in Egypt, primary school teacher Aya Yousef's life was destroyed by a video of her dancing socially with colleagues (Al Sherbini 2022). In the video, which was made without the knowledge or consent of Yousef, she appears dancing in the baladi style — so doing belly dance as commonly done by Egyptian women in mixed gender social contexts of celebrations — along with four male colleagues. They were on a Nile picnic, along with her children and many others. Yousef is very modestly dressed, in pants, a long-sleeved tunic, and with her hair covered. But when the video gained attention online, Yousef was fired. As it turns out, those responsible were colleagues jealous that Yousef had recently been honored as an ideal employee by the local teachers' union (Al Sherbini 2022). As Yousef said in a statement,

> My life was destroyed because of the video from an unscrupulous person who tried to tarnish my reputation and brought the camera close to me only to show me in a bad manner…I really made a mistake because I was happy and played with people who weren't

> honest. People bullied and insulted me. I lost my job, my husband, my home, and my mother got sick. My family was impacted by what happened (Radebe 2022).

Fortunately, Yousef was supported by educators and organizations across Egypt, filing a wrongful dismissal complaint with the help of the Egyptian Centre for Women's Rights and eventually getting a new job in the same district (Tripathi 2022). But that does not undo the damage to her reputation and family relationships.

In a similar case from 2018, English professor Mona Prince was fired by Suez Canal University because she posted videos of herself dancing in traditional dress on her private Facebook account (Salah 2022). It is unclear who brought the videos to the attention of Prince's employer, but once the scandal hit the media, multiple people began hacking her Facebook profile and leaking personal photos of Prince in a bikini at the beach. Prince appealed, arguing that her private speech on her private social media account was protected. In 2022, Prince lost her appeal, with the court judgement stating, "it is not permissible for a university professor to dance publicly and detract her prestige in front of her students…Personal freedom does not mean violating the values and traditions of society." Thus, women in Egypt must always be wary of public attention being drawn to their moving bodies, even when they are dancing in private and semi-private contexts.

I want to finish this section by emphasizing the different outcomes for Egyptian women versus foreign women. I do not mean to imply that the foreign women did not suffer; I am sure that these were terrifying and frustrating situations. But the long-term damage is less. Russian Gohara was not deported, and four years later remains one of the most popular belly dancers in

Egypt. Armenian Safinaz went to trial and won, and also remains one of the most famous and sought-after belly dancers in Egypt. The only Egyptian dancer to survive a major scandal this century with her fame and career intact is Dina, and she had to renounce dancing and make the pilgrimage to Mecca to recover her reputation. Regular Egyptian women dancing socially have lost their jobs and their husbands for videos of their dancing ending up online.

These possible outcomes are hanging over the heads of the lower-class dancers working at heavily policed cabarets. If they refuse to cooperate with the police — by not paying the demanded bribe or resisting arrest — the police could publicize their dancing and make their lives hell. Anybody who bears them ill will could sneak a video of them dancing, put it online, and destroy their lives. And there are lawyers who spend their days combing the internet for videos that they deem obscene so they can charge the women in them with inciting debauchery (as seen in Bibette 2019). So, putting themselves on social media professionally is a huge risk, and one that is only worthwhile for dancers of a certain class status and/or with enough of the right wasṭa.

Arrests and Caesarism

The recent arrests of singers and dancers for inciting debauchery must also be read within the larger context of increasing authoritarianism in Egypt. There have been a number of other high-profile arrests for insulting the state. Although the Arab Spring saw a period of increased freedom to criticize the state, after leading a 2013 military coup which deposed the

democratically elected Muslim Brotherhood regime, General Abdel Fattah El-Sisi immediately began sending signals that such critical discourse would not be tolerated.

During the protests, Egyptian heart surgeon Bassem Youssef began making short politically satirical videos and posting them on YouTube (Paget 2018). A few months into the rule of the new Muslim Brotherhood regime under President Mohammed Morsi, Youssef was offered a show on a small Egyptian channel and began producing an Egyptian version of the American political satire news program "The Daily Show", called "El Barnameg" (The Program). The show was so popular that it transferred to a larger network. Towards the end of Morsi's tenure, Youssef was arrested for insulting the president and the state, demonstrating that the government viewed the free expression of the revolution as a temporary change. The program kept going, but soon after the coup, things got worse; the broadcast signal was jammed, and the lives of Youssef and his family were threatened. He stopped production of the program and fled the country. The fate of "El Barnameg" was not the only indicator that El-Sisi's regime would not tolerate criticism or disrespect.

El-Sisi's regime also will not tolerate disrespect of Egypt or Islam. In 2015, Amr Nohan was sentenced to three years in prison for superimposing Mickey Mouse ears on an image of President El-Sisi, and in 2016, four Christian teenagers were jailed for producing a 30-second video which mocked ISIS — a group to which the Egyptian regime is opposed (Mansour 2016). Singer Sherine Abdel-Wahab was sentenced to six months in prison for insulting the state; when a fan at a concert asked her to sing a song about drinking from the Nile, Sherine said people

would be better off drinking Evian and that you could contract diseases by drinking from the Nile (Polianskaya 2018). Clearly, the current Egyptian government will not tolerate disrespect of its leader or key cultural/national symbols.

Having ousted a democratically elected regime of Islamists — ostensibly at the demand of protesters — el-Sisi's government is in need of legitimation, and arresting dancers and others for inciting immorality and debauchery helps to provide it. Arresting women for sexy dancing and videos feeds a Caesarist (De Smet 2014; 2016) political narrative by providing a counterweight to El-Sisi's crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood. El-Sisi is balancing the opposing forces of Islamism and secularism in Egyptian society by cracking down on belly dancers, sexy singers, and the Muslim Brotherhood alike, and he is presented as the only one who can maintain this balance. These arrests are seen by many as part of the government's campaign against atheism, which it launched in parallel to its crackdown on Islamists affiliated with the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood (Kingsley 2014a). As such, the government seems to be putting itself firmly in the middle; it will tolerate neither allegedly extreme Islamists like the Muslim Brotherhood, nor atheists, nor the perceived immorality and debauchery in the performances of women.

In Caesarism, two forces oppose each other to a stalemate in which the only end seems mutual annihilation, but a third force, usually a great personality, steps forward to arbitrate and balance the opponents. First, the military intervened to mediate between Mubarak's regime and the people demanding his resignation. Later, newly-elected President Morsi's failure to transform the government or economy of Egypt, coupled with granting himself absolute

executive powers, triggered another round of protests. The army stepped in again, saying that Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood were betraying the revolution, but General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and the Egyptian army were going to protect the revolution. The irony is that the army generals have long been the true political power in Egypt and were constantly negotiating behind the scenes to maintain their privileges throughout the regime changes. Having deposed and banned the Muslim Brotherhood to protect the revolution, Sisi and his regime must be seen to be balancing the desires of the secularists and leftists who began the protests against Morsi and the Islamists who elected him. Arresting women for inciting immorality and debauchery does exactly that; belly dance is not banned, ostensibly satisfying the secularists, leftists, and more Westernized sections of Egyptian society, but the el-Sisi government is keeping a closer eye on the morality of dancing women than Morsi's did, thus satisfying the Islamists.

It is perhaps the height of irony that the allegedly more secular el-Sisi regime is responsible for the arrest and jailing of more belly dancers and performers than the Islamist Morsi regime the dancers feared (Schwartzstein 2013; Kingsley 2014a). The bodies of women who dance have long been a political and economic battleground in Egypt and elsewhere, and el-Sisi's regime will certainly not be the last to legitimize itself by circumscribing the behavior of women.

Conclusion

As I have demonstrated in this chapter, attention is not only an important resource in emerging economies of attention in Egypt, but also a potential weapon. Since social expectations

of female modesty dictate that women should not move their bodies in public, lest they tempt men, women who draw attention to themselves and their moving bodies are morally suspect. This makes dancing women fair game for punishment by drawing additional attention to them, and some do not hesitate to use this attention to as a weapon against those who have angered them. Those with enough connections, wealth, or the protection of being foreign may escape relatively unscathed, with the attention even potentially working to their long-term advantage, as it did for Gohara. But for most Egyptian women, public attention is a danger to them, and their need to avoid too much/the wrong kinds of attention seriously hampers their careers. Some may blame Egyptian dancers' unwillingness to work hard (i.e., to discipline their bodies) for the current lack of Egyptian stars in the belly dance industry, but I assert that the problem is instead the internalized colonization as discussed in previous chapters and the fact that most Egyptian women cannot afford — socially or financially — to compete in the emerging economies of attention that demand visibility and the accumulation of attention. Most Egyptian women cannot risk the consequences of drawing attention to their dancing, and so they are limited to dancing in discrete cabarets and nightarts where they can likely never gain fame or respect.

6. Conclusion (Academic Style)

In this conclusion, I will summarize the arguments put forth in the preceding pages as well as sketch some larger scale conclusions. I began by setting out to answer the question of how foreign dancers have come to seemingly dominate the belly dance industry in Egypt despite most Egyptians' negative evaluations of their skills in the essentials of Egyptian style belly dance. The answer, in broad terms: foreign dancers have come to dominate the parts of the industry visible to the general public through social and televisual media because the coloniality of power, race, and gender favor them over Egyptian dancers. But this is not a simple story of colonial domination; although Egyptian dancers are being squeezed out of the career paths that lead to fame and respect, Egyptians — including dancers — are recruiting most of these foreign dancers, often exploiting them. Nonetheless, global inequalities and local hierarchies of race, gender, and class give foreign dancers a head start in the career race and insulate them from many of the social consequences of the profession that Egyptian dancers suffer, making it easier to advance their careers. That is not to say that Egyptian dancers don't have their own advantages; their cultural knowledge, linguistic abilities, and enmeshment in local social networks can be major career assets. And as media attention capitalism proliferates in Egypt, the advantaged attributes of foreign dancers become more valued and enmeshment in local social networks is increasingly a liability unless they are those with the highest level of wealth and political power.

In explaining the hierarchies at work in the Egyptian belly dance industry, I have also theorized an aesthetic shift in the dance linked to political economies of attention. Belly dance in the traditional aesthetic style, I have argued, prioritizes senses of vibration — sound and affect — over the visual. It is also improvised, requiring the dancer to focus her attention on her

interrelationship with others and her dance environment. This concept of the traditional aesthetic style of Egyptian belly dance makes room for a wide variety of visual aesthetics and movement styles, including denigrated styles like mahraganat, to be seen as traditional because of their prioritization of vibration, improvisation, and connection. But as the belly dance industry becomes more enmeshed in the business models of social media, the political economies of attention and the aesthetic shift. In these spaces, vibration and connection are still important; they are the heart of Egyptian dance. But the visual becomes more important, and with it, bodily discipline and self-perfection. The attention the dancer gives to her spectators no longer cultivates relational value with individual customers; it is recorded and circulated online to benefit the image of the customer, the venue, and the dancer. To help her audience and employers profit from attention, the dancer is expected to invest extensive aesthetic labor to meet the global beauty standards of Instagram.

I have come to think of this transformation as a kind of aesthetic colonization in two senses. Firstly, foreign dancers are replacing local dancers because of shifting aesthetics, sparked by emerging economies of attention intertwined with social media. Second, the aesthetics of a major arts and entertainment industry are being colonized, made to align with global aesthetic priorities of the visual and Euro-American beauty standards. It is the second which is especially concerning, but within the wave of forces contributing to shifting beauty standards for women in Egypt, the belly dance industry is but one of many currents.

In this work, I have also theorized attention as both a resource and a weapon. As a resource, attention can be bought and sold, traded, used to cultivate relational value, and used as social and professional capital. However, the disciplining of modern subjects is based on the

threat of potential attention, and so attention can be used as a tool to enforce conformity to gender and other social norms. Attention can also be weaponized against the more vulnerable in society, leading to job loss, the destruction of personal relationships, and jail time when public attention is brought to their legal and moral transgressions. Surely such is the case in many societies.

As such, the primary theoretical contribution I make with this dissertation is to construct an anthropological theory of the valuing and uses of attention at various social scales. This is but one piece of a larger anthropology of attention. I have already shown how an anthropology of attention relates to existing bodies of research on political economies of attention as well as aesthetics and the senses. Future anthropological work on attention would likely also connect to the literature on surveillance, as well as engaging further with visual anthropology.

Anthropologically speaking, the situation I have described teaches us a number of things about how ongoing processes of colonization and imperialism function. This is not just about foreign dancers taking the jobs of Egyptians or making their career options harder, although those are issues. It is the variety of harmful ideas and norms spreading and taking root in the psyche of Egyptians, yoking them ever more tightly to global capitalism and all its complex systems of power and oppression that should be of real concern. By replacing Egyptian dancers in the public eye, foreign dancers are having an impact on beauty ideals, helping consumerist beauty and diet cultures to become more firmly entrenched in Egyptian society. These are, as always, inextricably intertwined with racism and patriarchy. I am not saying these are new factors in Egypt. As a country that has been colonized by multiple empires and ruled by foreigners from 332 BCE until 1954 CE, imperialism and racism have long been problems for Egyptian societies.

And patriarchy has been a dominant force in Egyptian culture for at least as long. As long as there has been patriarchy, there have likely been oppressive and unrealistic beauty standards for women, used partially to control them. But what is happening now is still new in some ways, as well as concerning.

I can see the change happening. Looking at the dancers, reklam, and prostitutes in cabarets, I see older beauty standards. There is imperial influence, certainly. There has long been a preference for white skin and European features. But the women are nearly all much heavier and curvier than current Western beauty ideals. They have lumps and rolls of fat on their stomachs, legs, and arms that they do not seem ashamed of, that they show off in ways that I can barely imagine happening in an equivalent venue in the US. And many of them favor the particular makeup look that is popular in the region, one that would be deemed far too heavy and obvious by US standards. If they have had plastic surgery, it is breast implants, maybe lip fillers or other procedures to make them look more voluptuous. But go to the more "respectable" higher-class discos and cruise boats, and you will see dancers who for the most part exemplify current global beauty standards as seen on Instagram and TikTok. Thin and toned, but with generous breasts and bottoms, they have sleek long hair, "snatched" makeup, and all appear impossibly beautiful and glamorous. And it is impossible; many of these dancers have had a variety of cosmetic procedures, from liposuction to nose jobs to breast implants to Brazilian Butt Lifts, to look this way. Not to mention the incredible expenditure of time, energy, and money on diet, exercise, skincare, hair extensions, manicures, makeup, costumes, and so forth. And that's just if you see them in person. Watching videos or looking at photos online, a whole arsenal of filters and software render the dancers inhumanly and impossibly perfect (by Euro-American

beauty standards): poreless, blemishless, smoothly curved with no fat or cellulite, pouty, with huge seductive eyes and long shiny hair. In that sense, it is much the same as the American entertainment industry and the unreal beauty of our celebrities. And again, the plastic surgery involved in looking this way seems to be an open secret.

The problems of this are two-fold. One, even though most women know on some level all the surgery, cosmetics, restrictive dieting, photo editing, and so forth that are behind the beautiful women we see, that doesn't seem to prevent the feeling that we are supposed to meet those same expectations from taking root in our psyches, partially because many men seem unaware of the unrealisticness of these standards. Many of my non-belly-dancing friends told me that they felt unable to watch the videos of belly dancers I was posting on my social media; the physical perfection of the performers I was seeing and sharing made my friends feel so bad about their own bodies that it was harmful to their mental health. Two, as these beauty standards spread through social media, through holding up these dancers as ideals of feminine beauty, more and more women are sucked into not only feeling inadequate because they don't look that way, but the global industries of beauty and "wellness", spending ever more time and money trying to "fix" themselves in an endless cycle of consumption and low self-esteem. Here, we have a case study in progress of how global capitalist hegemonies are spreading.

The processes through which foreign dancers are gaining ascendancy also provide insight into how colonization and imperialism are functioning through social media, and how social media is shaped by coloniality. Individual actors are able to use social media to gain dominance, and biases inherent in algorithms created by people in a white supremacist patriarchal capitalist society advantage people who approximate the qualities desired in that society. Furthermore,

the internalized racism/colonization of Egyptian society facilitates the favoring of white-passing bodies and bodies that more closely resemble white beauty ideals. And finally, as in settler colonialism and many other forms of colonization, the process is aided by local elites.

As anybody who has looked at my social media knows, I am friends with many of the foreign dancers working in Cairo. This dissertation is not a criticism of them personally; all the dancers I know have inspiring career stories of passion and hardship, and it is very much not my place to say who should or shouldn't be dancing in Egypt. This work is, however, an indictment of the interlocking oppressive systems that privilege foreign dancers over Egyptians: capitalism, coloniality, racism, patriarchy, and classism.

7. Epilogue and Note to the International Belly Dance Community

It is time for us to leave Egypt, and two dance events related to our departure really encapsulate the different sides of Egyptian belly dance that I came to know during my time there. These two stories alone are not anonymized, although I have fictionalized them in minor ways.

Since arriving in Cairo for the second time, I had been trying to see famous Russian dancer Oxana dance at the Fairmont Hotel. Technically her performances were at a restaurant (Bab el Nil), but it was in essence one of the few five-star hotel nightclub experiences still available in Cairo. The difficulties in seeing her were partially in scheduling — most days the hotel staff couldn't tell me if she was performing or not until afternoon of the same day — but also because I was trying to go with someone who could get a deal for me and Jeff. The standard charge was about 90 USD per person for a set menu to watch Oxana's performances at Bab el Nil, plus of course extra for alcohol, additional dishes, shisha, and tips. Despite Egyptians' perception of our wealth, this was not a charge we could really afford. Finally, in my last two weeks, I was able to go with Shahrzad — a well-known American belly dancer based in Cairo — and several visiting foreign belly dancers.

I arrived in an Uber alone and was dropped off at the pedestrian entrance, requiring me to go through a bag x-ray and metal detector twice.[1] The man at the first security checkpoint asked me in English where I was going. I told him in Arabic that I had a reservation at Bab el Nil, and he exclaimed, "*Nawārit Bab el Nil* (You light up Bab el Nil)" as I passed through the metal

[1] Jeff usually didn't accompany when I had other dancers to attend performances with, largely for financial reasons.

detector, and then handed me a single rose.[2] I thanked him, and then as I walked up the drive to the hotel entrance, texted Jeff a summary of the exchange, to which he replied, "ONLY [light up] the restaurant and not all of Egypt?! That's insulting! I should be there to defend your honor…Can you ask Shahrzad to fight them as my proxy?" It's worth noting that Jeff was rarely if ever told that he lit up Egypt, no matter how much Arabic he spoke. I thus infer that my perceived white upper-class female beauty was often responsible for the welcome.

There might be fancier hotels in Cairo, but I have not been in them. I made my way through another security checkpoint and the decadent lobby to take the elevator up to the restaurant, which was protected by heavy double doors and several men in suits at the entrance. After ascertaining that I was the first in our party to arrive, one of the men led me to our reserved table, which sat in the junction between the main stage and the short runway. A live band with a singer had a performance in progress on the stage. I sat down and noticed the owner, sitting at the table at the foot of the runway, eyeing me curiously. A waiter and a shisha guy came to check in on me, both addressing me as "princess." As I waited for my companions, I observed the rest of the customers: almost entirely upper-class Arabs and Egyptians. The décor was classic Arab, with rich carving and gold everywhere. Each table bore a small gold tent sign marked "no photography" with a drawing of a camera in a red crossed circle. The staff are very attentive to this; I noticed them enforcing the policy a few times. Shortly after my friends arrived, our table was filled with drinks and food, and tall water pipes sat on the floor in between our padded velvet chairs.

[2] As explained in chapter one, "nawārit Misr (~you light up Egypt)" is a formulaic phrase used to offer (Arabic-speaking) people from other countries an especially warm welcome to Egypt. And no, he did not have a stack of roses he was handing out and I don't know where he got the one he gave me.

Eventually, the singer announced Oxana, and as the music started, she made her way through the restaurant and onto the stage from one side. After the first song, she waved at us on her way down the runway to greet the owner. She asked him what song she should dance to next, and he pointed to our table, saying she should ask Shahrzad, who yelled “ṭarab!” This exchange was repeated several times in both sets, with our table being consulted on the song choice after the owner demurred. Oxana’s performance was stellar, and she danced to ṭarab classics as well as beledī, sh‘abī , and even a mahraganat cover by the live band. Her musical interpretation nearly always feels flawless to me, and she has incredibly precise technique without being tense and robotic. Many Egyptians I’ve spoken with do appreciate her dancing — she was one of the favorites on al Raqisa — but most also say that it’s not quite Egyptian; it’s something different.

In any case, this experience was the upper-class ideal of artistic belly dance performance in Egypt. There was a large live band using a mix of acoustic and electronic instruments, capable of covering an astoundingly broad body of musical genres from around the Middle East and North Africa. The dancer was beautiful in a way deemed high-class, meeting the global cosmopolitan ideal; her dancing was excellent musically, technically, and expressively. The environment was elegant and discrete, and the servers were very attentive, treating customers with deference. Very few Egyptians today are able to have this experience with belly dance.

About a week before our flight back to the US, Jeff and I threw ourselves a leaving party at our apartment in M‘ādī. Our building being affiliated with the American University in Cairo, there was a gated entrance with security. The men working at the security desk were unfailingly kind and helpful, but as all security workers in Cairo have been trained to be suspicious of lower-

class Egyptians, I felt the need to warn them that some of our guests would be Egyptians from a sh'abī background. Slowly, a small group of the friends we had made in Egypt trickled into our apartment — dancers and musicians both foreign and Egyptian and a few other scholars. Once everyone was gathered, Zara — an English-Egyptian dancer friend without whom I could not have done this research — announced that she had a surprise for us and beckoned for Mohamed Mshakel,[3] our mahragan rapping friend, to join her. As he connected his phone to our speaker, Zara tied a scarf around her hips.

ZARA COMMISIONED MSHAKEL TO WRITE A MAHRAGAN SONG FOR US. The recorded track that he was playing on his phone contained the voice of a friend singing about how much he loves us and will miss us, and Zara began dancing along. Then Mshakel rap-sang along to his own voice, saying we would always be in his heart. They do mention that we light up Egypt. And the chorus of our song is "Meg wa Jeff" (Meg and Jeff). This is the most amazing present I could ever receive and an excellent symbol of our time in Egypt. I definitely encourage watching video clips of their performance on my Instagram account. This is the unclassed core of Egyptian belly dance: created together in the moment by musician, dancer, and spectator; personal and from the heart.

As the party wound down, Zara and I sat on the couch chatting about our frustrations with the state of the dance industry, as we had done so many times during my time in Cairo. We once again bemoaned the many ways that interlocking systems of oppression privilege foreign dancers and stack the market against Egyptian dancers. "The industry in Egypt is being colonized," I exclaimed. Zara paused for a few seconds before nodding and saying, "yeah, you're right." For

[3] "Mshakel" is Arabic for "problems."

several years, Zara has been giving talks in the belly dance community about the disadvantages Egyptian dancers must work against, so it is not at all surprising that she agreed with my comment. It is only surprising that it took nearly all of my time in Egypt for our conversations to lead to the conclusion that the Egyptian belly dance industry was undergoing a form of colonization.

Of course, the dance form is going to change over time. This is not about taking Egyptian belly dance back to how it used to be. Professional dance as art and entertainment is bound to change and to incorporate influences from other cultures, but there is a difference between differences led by Egyptians and differences led by foreigners. Nor am I attempting to "save" Egyptian belly dance. Egyptians are the ones who should decide what to do. But for my fellow belly dancers of non-Egyptian and non-Arab heritage, it is important to realize the impact that our community is having on others, and for dancers working in Egypt or planning to work in Egypt to understand the socioeconomic and political fields they are involved in.

I hope this dissertation has been informative and thought-provoking for my readers from the international belly dance community. I hope it made you want to go (back) to Egypt and enjoy the full spectrum of belly dance it has to offer, to learn from not just Egyptian stars but also from Egyptian belly dance coaches and belly dance enthusiasts in gyms, to support the industry in Egypt in multiple ways, and to hear the perspectives of Egyptians not involved in the belly dance industry. Above all, I hope it makes you want to learn from Egyptians about their culture and how they see our cultural impact, the light and the dark sides of both.

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Widdows, Heather. 2020. *Perfect Me: Beauty as an Ethical Ideal*. Princeton University Press.

Winegar, Jessica and Ganzeer. 2023. “Sights of Freedom and the Aesthetics of Politics.” Hagop Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies at NYU, March 8.

Wynn, L. L. 2007. *Pyramids & Nightclubs: A Travel Ethnography of Arab and Western Imaginations of Egypt, from King Tut and a Colony of Atlantis to Rumors of Sex Orgies, Urban Legends about a Marauding Prince, and Blonde Belly Dancers*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

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أحمد زهران - أحمد مهدي. 2018. “شيما «عندي ظروف» في «سجن النسا» .. حلم «الشهرة» يتحول لكابوس «البرش»”, May.

شيرين الجمال. 2018. “تسريب مقطع صوتي لبطلة كليب ‘عندي ظروف’: طلعني عريانة.” *إرم سيداء البلد*, May.

Arabic-English Glossary

ʻālmah (plural ʻawālim) — the more respected of the public dancers in nineteenth century Egypt, educated in poetry and the arts of conversation and singing as well as dancing

beledī — local; of the country. Has positive implications of Egyptian authenticity as well as negative connotations of unsophistication

beta — Egyptian colloquial slang for poor, low-class Egyptian people and things

dallʻa — often translated as coquettishness; flirtation in a manner that is not overtly sexual, but rather "a teasing appeal through femininity"

fath — a practice in which cabaret dancers were expected to sit, drink, and flirt with customers, encouraging spending

hadoor — chemistry, often stated as charisma

hukumah — government; within belly dance contexts in Egypt this may refer to:

- ʻadeb (morality police)
- niqaba (musician's syndicate)
- musannafat (licensing officials)

ihsas — feelings

Khalīgī — Gulf Arabs; of or related to Gulf Arabs

kīt — money rented to customers to throw for tipping

mahragan or mahraganat — festival(s)

maqāmāt — Arabic melodic modes akin to scales

rā'aṣa — Egyptian Arabic "dancer"; a synonym for prostitute

reklam — attractive young Egyptian women hired by cabarets to serve as eye candy and dance to keep the party going between professional dance acts

shʻabī — similar to beledi, with shʻab meaning people and shʻabī, its adjective derivative, meaning popular. Shʻabī refers more to the urban lower classes than the rural, and has similar connotations of poverty and unsophistication, but less of the positive connotations of beledī. It also refers to a popular musical genre.

shay — tea; bribes

tafaal — interaction

taḥaya (plural taḥayāt) — greetings; function to draw the attention of the dancer, reklam, and other customers to the guest or table singled out

ṭarab — an interrelational experience of aesthetic bliss, often translated as enchantment or rapture.

Wasṭa — connections or nepotism

zagharīt — high, ululating cries

Margaret L. Morley
Curriculum Vitae

EDUCATION

PhD	**Indiana University** Anthropology Minor: Global Studies	2023
MA	**Indiana University** Anthropology	2020
MA with Distinction	**School of Oriental and African Studies** University of London Near and Middle Eastern Studies	2007
BA	**Oberlin College** German Studies and Theater (Production/Design) Minor: Art History	2003

PUBLICATIONS

Refereed Journal Articles

Revised and Resubmitted (initial abstract accepted for special economic-themed issue). "Social Media and the Commodification of Attention/Inattention in the Changing Egyptian Belly Dance Industry." *Anthropology of the Middle East* 18, (2023).

Book Chapters

In Press. "Egyptian Belly Dance IS Feeling: Intersubjectivity, Tarab, and Cross-Cultural Performance" in *The Routledge Companion to the Anthropology of Performance,* edited by Lauren Griffith and David Syring. Routledge Press, New York City, 2023.

Public Scholarship, Interviews, and Reviews

2023 "Views from Cairo: Why the Foreign Dancer Scene Isn't the Whole Story." *Belly Dance Quickies* Lecture. June 4, 2023.

2022 "Belly Dance in Islamic Worlds." *Muslim Voices Blog. Indiana University Hamilton Lugar School of Global and International Studies Center for the Study of Global Change.* May 27, 2022. https://blogs.iu.edu/muslimvoices/2022/05/27/belly-dance-in-islamic-worlds-by-meg-morley/

2022 "Chihab El Khachab on his book, *Making Film in Egypt: How Labor, Technology, And Mediation Shape The Industry."* American University in Cairo. Interview by Meg Morley. https://campanthropology.org/author-interviews/

2019 "Love, Sex, and Desire in Modern Egypt: Navigating the Margins of Respectability," Review of *Love, Sex, and Desire in Modern Egypt: Navigating the Margins of Respectability* by L.L. Wynn, Association for Feminist Anthropology (April 4, 2019).

AWARDS AND HONORS

External

2022 American Dissertation Fellowship, American Association of University Women
2021 Fulbright Fellow, US Student Program – Egypt (deferred from 2020 due to COVID)
2021 Critical Language Enhancement Grant, Fulbright - Egypt
2017 Critical Language Scholarship – Arabic in Tangier, Morocco
2016 Distinguished Doctoral Fellowship, University of Arkansas (declined)
2003 James Stanton McLaughlin Prize for Excellence in Student Theater, Oberlin College

Internal Indiana University Awards

2022 College of Arts and Sciences Graduate Conference Travel Award
2022 College Arts & Humanities Institute Graduate Conference Travel Award
2022 Skomp Conference Travel Award, Department of Anthropology
2022 Future Faculty Teaching Fellowship (Declined)
2021 College Arts & Humanities Institute Graduate Award in Support of Research and Creativity
2021 Anthropology Graduate Student Association Service Award
2021 Pre-Doctoral Research Fellowship, Platform Arts & Humanities Laboratory
2020 Skomp Opportunity Fellowship, Department of Anthropology
2018 Office of the Vice President for International Affairs Summer Pre-Dissertation Travel Grant
2018 Skomp Pre-Dissertation Research Award, Department of Anthropology
2018 Skomp Conference Travel Award, Department of Anthropology
2016 Skomp Conference Travel Award, Department of Anthropology
2016 College of Arts and Sciences Graduate Fellowship
2016 University Recruitment Fellowship

CONFERENCE AND SEMINAR ACTIVITY

Conferences/Symposia Organized

2018 Indiana University Anthropology Graduate Student Association Symposium
2017 "Directing the Gaze" Series for Indiana University Themester: Diversity, Difference, Otherness

Panels Organized or Chaired

2022 "Unsettling the Landscape of MENA Anthropology through Performance." Middle East Section Invited Session at the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Seattle, WA, November 9-13, 2022.

2020 Chair, "The Politics of Music and National Identity Formation." Panel at the Annual Meeting of the Middle Eastern Studies Association, Online, October 5 – 17, 2020.

Papers Presented

2023 "Beauty, Media, and Attention in the Contemporary Egyptian Dance Industry." Paper presentation at MENACA 2023 – First Symposium on Middle Eastern, North African, and Central Asian Dances: New Paradigms, New Directions. Pomona College, Claremont, CA, April 13-16, 2023.

2022 "New Attention Economies in Egyptian Dance." Paper Presentation at the Annual Meeting of the Middle East Studies Association, Denver, CO, December 1-4, 2022.

2022 "Changing Attention Economies and Respectability Politics in Egyptian Dance." Paper presentation at the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Seattle, WA, November 9-13, 2022.

2022 "Inciting Debauchery: Attention and Corporeal Economies in Egyptian Dance." Politics of the Middle East Seminar, Online, February 21, 2022.

2021 "Inciting Debauchery: Attention and Corporeal Economies in Egyptian Dance." Paper presentation at the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Hybrid (online), November 17-21, 2021.

2021 "Inciting Debauchery: Attention and Corporeal Economies in Egyptian Dance." Seminar Session at the Annual Meeting of the Central States Anthropological Society, Online, April 24-25, 2021.

2019 "Different Worlds: Foreign Belly Dancers in Egypt." Paper presentation at the Indiana University Anthropology Graduate Student Association Symposium, "Public Anthropology," Bloomington, Indiana, March 1, 2019.

2018 "Dialectical Orientalism? Belly Dance Tourism in Egypt." Paper presentation at the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, San Jose, CA, November 13-18, 2018.

2018 "Dancers Inciting Debauchery: Policing Raqṣ Sharqī to Legitimize the Egyptian Regime." Paper presentation at the Dance Studies Association Conference, "Contra: Dance and Conflict," Valletta, Malta, July 5-8, 2018.

2018 "Fighting Orientalist Stereotypes in American Belly Dance." Paper presentation at the Indiana University Anthropology Graduate Student Association Symposium, "Activist Anthropology," Bloomington, Indiana, February 16-17, 2018.

2017 "Can We Stand White Belly Dancers? A Question of Cultural Appropriation." Paper presentation at the Indiana University/Ohio State University Student Folklore Conference: Dialogues, Bloomington, Indiana, April 7-8, 2017.

2016 "Can We Stand White Belly Dancers? A Question of Cultural Appropriation." Paper presentation at the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Minneapolis, MN, November 16-20, 2016.

CAMPUS TALKS

2022 "Professionalization Workshop: Applying for Research Grants." Department of Anthropology, Indiana University, October 7, 2022.

2022 "Globalization, Attention Economies, and Belly Dance in Egypt Today." School of Humanities and Social Sciences, American University in Cairo, Cairo, Egypt, March 14, 2022.
2021 "Thirst Traps: Attention and Corporeal Economies in Egyptian Dance." Platform Research Laboratory Global Popular Music Group, May 7, 2021.
2021 "Pandemic! Pivoting to Digital/Virtual Research." Global Studies Graduate Group, Indiana University, April 2, 2021.
2020 "Professionalization Workshop: Conferences and Networking During COVID and Beyond." Department of Anthropology, Indiana University, December 4, 2020.

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Indiana University
Middle East Misrepresentation [online] (Instructor of Record Fall 2020)
A Cultural Approach to Interpersonal Communication ((Sole) Associate Instructor for 2 sections each semester — Fall 2017, Spring 2018, Fall 2018, Spring 2019, Summer 2023)
Sex, Drugs, and Rock n Roll (Grader Fall 2019, Spring 2020, Fall 2020)
Beginning Arabic (Tutor Summer 2019, Spring 2021)
Intermediate Arabic (Tutor Summer 2019, Summer 2020)

Capital High School
US History (Summer 2015)
World History (2014 - 2015, 2015 - 2016)

Santa Fe Juvenile Detention Center/The Academy at Larragoite
US History (Spring 2014)
World Area Studies (Fall 2013)

Malvern House College London
Upper Intermediate General English (Summer 2008, Fall 2008, Fall 2009)
Intermediate General English (Spring 2009, Fall 2009)
Lower Intermediate General English (Summer 2009)
Upper Intermediate Writing (Fall 2008, Spring 2009, Fall 2009)
Upper Intermediate Speaking (Spring 2009, Summer 2009)

Embassy CES Summer – University College London
Advanced General English (Summer 2007)

SERVICE

Student Seat, Members' Programmatic, Advisory, and Advocacy Committee, American Anthropological Association, 2022-2024
AI/Curriculum Chair, Indiana University Anthropology Grad Student Association, 2020-2021
Director, Indiana University Arabic Flagship Program Dance Club, 2017-2021

Social Chair, Indiana University Anthropology Graduate Student Association, 2018-2019
Vice President, Indiana University Anthropology Graduate Student Association 2017-2018
Co-Chair, Oberlin Student Theater Association, Oberlin College, 2001-2003
Theater Student Representative, Theater and Dance Department, Oberlin College, 2001-2002

TEACHER TRAINING AND CERTIFICATION

2022	Belly Dance Coaching Course Samia Allouba Academy, Maadi, Cairo, Egypt
2013-2016	Level 1 Intern License in Secondary Education (Social Studies, Performing Arts) Santa Fe Community College
2005	CertTESOL (Certificate of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) Trinity College London/Atlantic S.E.A.L.

OTHER PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

2021 (Summer) Coder, NIH Autism Study, Indiana University Department of Sociology (online)

2014 – 2016	Scoring Leader, TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) Educational Testing Services (online)
2013 – 2015	Testing and Data Coordinator, Academy at Larragoite and Capital High School (Santa Fe, NM)
2011 – 2016	TOEIC Speaking Rater, Educational Testing Services (online)
2007 – 2008	Temporary Administrator, Huntress Search (London, UK)
2005 - 2006	Office Manager and Technical Director, Pomegranate Studios (Santa Fe, NM)
2004 – 2005	Stage Management Intern, BoarsHead Theatre (Lansing, MI)
2003 – 2014	Freelance Theatrical Stage Manager (Santa Fe, NM)

LANGUAGES

Modern Standard Arabic – Advanced (per Oral Proficiency Interview in August 2017)
Egyptian Arabic – Advanced High (per Oral Proficiency Interview in December 2021)
German – Advanced
Spanish – Elementary

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

2014 – Present	American Anthropological Association
	Association for Feminist Anthropology
	Middle East Section
	Society for Cultural Anthropology
	Society for Economic Anthropology
2016 – Present	Middle Eastern Studies Association
	Association for Middle East Women's Studies
	Anthropology of the Middle East