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The Africanist Presence in Belly Dance

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Abstract

The cultural identity and perception of Belly Dance, an Arab-African performance live art, has shifted considerably in post-20th century Britain. Earlier, Belly Dance had been predominantly American Cabaret Belly Dance in styling and codification. Today, the athleticism, choreography and Orientalist pastiche of previous eras are giving way to polycentric movement, an aesthetic of the "cool" and ephebic. Belly Dance's African heritage is an overlooked and rarely discussed reality in the British Belly Dance classroom, due to the dominance of middle class white women embodying and transmitting an imagined cultural otherness. This article examines earlier practitioners' legacies and attributing "narratives of authenticity", which current practitioners inherit from and resist, subsequently creating their own newer "narratives of authenticity". The resultant effect has been a move away from the emphasis on the "art", towards a reconfiguration of the use of female high camp humour, sexuality in performance and audience interactive play.

Article: "The Africanist [1] Presence in Belly Dance[2]"

Belly Dance is not just hip work; it is not just sequins and drum rolls. To give just a few examples of the various levels of complexity of this popular performance genre, there are also the use of movement isolation and layering, of improvisation over choreography, the search for "soulfulness"[3] and a playful interaction with audience members. However, the numerous interviews I have conducted worldwide in the Belly Dance community suggest there is a frustration concerning others' lack of understanding of the effort, skill and components that contribute to a Belly Dance performance. A Belly Dancer in the UK notes: "People just don't

take Belly Dance seriously; I rarely mention it as my job" (Belly Dancer in Leicester[4], 2008). Artists in the field[5] also highlight the lack of appreciation of a mature female solo artist in performance and the persistent Orientalist fantasy that many audiences and cultures attach to Belly Dance. It could be the Orientalist fantasy supresses, masks and removes the Africanist presence and complexity for the audience. My search in this article is to explore the reasons why and how the Africanist presence in Belly Dance continues to be ignored, erased and elided by practitioners in the UK and further afield. A reason for this search is to describe and name the complexities of Belly Dance in performance that seem to always disappear when presented in either a western or Arab context. The Africanist presence in Belly Dance, to my mind, is the missing link in understanding the rich components and the importance of Belly Dance as a culturally significant female-led performance art.

I use the term "Africanist presence" in counterpoint to "the Orientalist paradigm", the later term used by some commentators to refer to Middle Eastern and Asian alterity (Said, 1978, Yegenoglu 1998, Lewis 2004, Spivak 1999). Orientalism, arguably, impacts on sub-Saharan colonial politics and specifically research in the arts (Stearns 1979, Thompson 1973, De Frantz 2002, Dixon-Gottschild 1996, Asante 2002). However, it remains a rarely discussed topic that Egypt and the North African (Maghrebi) countries are geographically part of the larger continent of Africa. My aim is not to homogenise a culturally diverse and large continent, but to address the Africanist influences and contribution to the Belly Dance genre.

An aspect of my doctorate field research was to ask teachers to demonstrate on film and in words the movement content of their workshops and performances. It became clear that there were commonalities – though differently articulated and executed – which in turn produced a recognisable Belly Dance movement lexicon. My own training in West African dance styles lent itself to understanding the various levels of "isolations" used in Belly Dance, the rhythmic changes and the use of asymmetry across the body and in performance to produce humour, satire and contrariety. Although the Orientalist *mythos* is a dominating paradigm of a Belly Dance in performance in the non-Arab/non-African contexts, within that the Africanist aesthetic is still used to execute movement and create a performance piece too.

Travelling extensively across Egypt over many years (1998-2006), I have danced alongside Egyptians at various social occasions and formal performance events. Audience members would approach me and ask me where I had learnt to move like "that". Some commentators found my Upper Egyptian style reminiscent of what they "used" to dance before

television and the arrival of the big Cairo stars. A teacher in Cairo found my style "raw, unrefined and gravity laden" (Hassan, 2003). She[6] showed me methods of raising my centre of gravity, raised me on to the balls of my feet and placed a lot of value on arm work and fast hip work. Reviewing her teaching and that of several other dance teachers and folklore groups across the Arab world, it was clear she was in fact teaching a form of ballet and balletic lines to produce a "refined" dance line and choreography (Shay, 2002, Ali, 1997). I will discuss further the syncretic nature of Belly Dance later in this article. What concerned me was the excessive emphasis placed upon speed, strength, athleticism and fast shimmying hip work at the expense of a low centre of gravity, a variety of hip movement, flat-footed steps and the expression of humour, emotion and pleasure. It was also clear from the multitude of skin whiteners and the preference of fair skinned performers at hotels, that the whiter the dancer the more work and appreciation she gained[7]. The "Africanist" presence in movement, performance styling and appearance was being erased wholesale.

Most research papers, books, articles and even performances usually begin with a brief "definition" and description of the roots and origins of Belly Dance. I would suggest that these anecdotes, descriptors and attempts to find an originating narrative to the "dance" in the form erase the significant Africanist presence therein. However, Belly Dance seen through the lens of performance studies[8] and theory offers an alternative and compelling understanding. In particular, I reference Dixon-Gottschild's[9] (1996: 11-21) description of the first premises of an Africanist aesthetic. In particular she describes four main components that constitute the "Africanist" presence in American theatre. According to Dixon-Gottschild the result is a form of contrariety when presenting dance. She states:

> …Africanist art forms deal with paradox as a matter of course, with irony following close behind. Contrariety is expressed in African dilemma tales, in music or vocal work that sounds cacophonous or grating to the untrained ear, and in dance that seems unsophisticated to eyes schooled in a different aesthetic. (ibid, 13)

She describes performance devices as high-affect juxtaposition[10], the aesthetic of the "cool"[11], the use of polycentrism[12] in movement vocabulary and a greater value placed on the ephebic[13] in performance (soulfulness) - all of which I will describe as being present in Belly Dance. By contrast, existing western Belly Dance research papers, texts and performances omit the Africanist presence in preference for an "imagined"[14]

past. Dixon-Gottschild goes on to analyse the Africanist presence in Balachine's classical ballets in order to demonstrate that on the western proscenium theatre stage, where the display of the body for the enjoyment of seated audience is required, the Africanist presence cannot easily "fit" western codes and conventions in the theatre but it still remains present in modern American dance theatre. In the same way, Belly Dance meaning is lost in translation.

As highlighted by Dox[15] (2006), the "Orientalist mythos" surrounds, is embedded and – in the case of many performers' experience – precedes and supersedes the actual act of performing in a western performing context. Maira (2008) and Jarmakani (2008) would go further than Dox and state that the Orientalist fantasy underpinning all western representations of Eastern alterity in a Belly Dance performance are in effect a continuation of the imperialist project of undermining and dominating the Middle East through Western (specifically, recent North American anti-Muslim) foreign policy. Shay and Seller-Young's[16] (2003) article offers a dual perspective in which they suggest that this mechanism of "self-exoticisation" is not only confined to non-Egyptian performers (Western performers and perspective), but is also found in Belly Dance performances located in Egypt. Roushdy's work in the field (2010, 2013) and Lorius (1996) confirm Shay and Sellers-Young's identification of self-exoticisation by Egyptian Belly Dancers.

The complexity of what is constructed in a Belly Dance performance is rarely researched and valued in western academic work (Cooper 2012, 2013). Roushdy's recent thesis and publications (2010, 2013) represent a changing perspective from within Cairo, where her field research describes a more complex role for professional female performers, and the tensions which are a part of the Egyptian audience response to Belly Dance. McDonald's (2010, 2012, 2013) work exploring the social paradigms in Egypt and around the world through the global exchange of Belly Dance brings our attention to the international dimensions of Belly Dance as a form of cultural exchange in which people create new identities and cross-cultural connections. Yet still, it remains that non-Egyptian researchers, searching for an "original and authentic" Egyptian form of Belly Dance, dominate the academic landscape. This, therefore, is an example of how the "Africanist" presence has been elided by the competing, dominant and dominating narratives of authenticity presented by European and Anglo-American practitioners.

It is important to stress that Belly Dance is a catch-all term, one that incorporates various styles and categories of dance and performance found in North Africa, Egypt, the Gulf states, Persia, Iraq, Turkey and the Levant region. During the 1980s and 1990s a Belly Dance student in the

UK would have entered the classroom and learnt a generic style of Belly Dance with a selection of hip movements, arm movements, torso undulations to be learnt by rote (Hobin, 1982, Buonaventura 1989, 2010, Hilal, 2001, Wood, 1980, Waldie, 2006). These movements were then arranged into choreography and "stories" to be performed for local theatres and events. In some cases, teachers would "collect" music from various regions across the Arab world according to their taste and performance proclivities, with little regard to its cultural and aesthetic specificity. This extensive cross-fertilisation and hybridisation process altered the dance to suit the aesthetic and ideological proclivities of the teachers outside Egypt and the Middle East, in effect, dislodging Belly Dance from any association with the Africanist presence therein.

However, a "cultural turn" (Cooper, 2012, McDonald, 2010) towards re-connecting the dance with Egypt on the African continent, and the Africanist presence therein, has taken place over the last decade. This "cultural turn" came about, in part, due to low air fares to Egypt, and with it a new Belly Dance enterprise emerged – Belly Dance tourism[17] (Farida Egypt Dance Tours etc). With the rise in dance tourism to Egypt, and to other Arab countries, practitioners were learning from teachers, entrepreneurs and Belly Dance stars based in Cairo. The change has been noted by various commentators (Dox, 2006; Sellers-Young, 2013; Afifi, 2009; White, 2010; Bounaventura, 2009; 2010 and Farouk, 2010), and with it came an upsurge in interest in the cultural and contextual identity politics and aesthetics of the dance. Yasmina of Cairo (Francesca Wright, originally from London) comments on her first experience of learning in Cairo compared with the years training in London: "The dancing in Cairo was so different to what I had to learn in London. In fact, I had to start again from the beginning. It is hard to explain, the music, the audiences and the atmosphere in Cairo is so different to England. It was an amazing time in my life. I started to perform professionally at a hotel and it grew from there" (2011). Nevertheless, it is important to point out that this activity is generally the exception, not the norm. Yasmina was describing aspects of the dance, the movement and the relationship to the music and audience that are/were not easily framed by Western dance training. She was in fact describing the Africanist presence in Belly Dance training and performance. It comes as no surprise that it felt like she was starting to learn from the beginning.

An example of how this information is transmitted in the classroom would be to describe my approach in my own Belly Dance classes (2001-2011). I introduce students to various styles of movement and music from different regions and groups of people in Egypt. For instance, the Saaid region has a distinct musical and dance heritage. In class, I present

examples of my travels and experiences of the Saaid culture, the dancing found in social and commercial contexts and the famous Saaidi people. In Cairo there are a range of forms of public and social dancing – in particular, there is the ubiquitous Modern Cairo style formulated in the 1990s and still found in five star tourist hotels. There is also a history of other styles of Belly Dance – from the present day Modern Cairo style (which is in fact in the process of being eclipsed by a new strand of urban Shaabi Belly Dance) to earlier styles formulated by yesteryear Belly Dance stars including 1970s Fifi Abdou, 1980s Sohier Zaki, Nagwa Fouad and Lucy. These stars were influenced and taught by earlier stars, including Tahia Carioca, Samia Gamal and Namia Akef from the 1940s onwards. While it is important to contextualise the Belly Dance taught through cultural and national identity, it is equally important to recognise the historical and female perspective given in performance by the female performers of former times and today in Egypt.

The most recent is the urban Shaabi styles coming from Egyptian nightclubs post the Arab Spring (Cooper, 2012). This is a style commonly associated with popular songs and music. It is high octane music and song with humorous lyrics and a forceful beat. The movement and dance content itself includes a loose gait, with relaxed limbs, and an emphasis on humorous content, gestural patterning and verbal exchange with the audience. As Morocco and Afifi point out, the urban Shaabi style came from the Egyptian nightclubs, not the tourist nightclubs. There is a difference in Belly Dance style evolving from venue – the tourist nightclub style has seen performers including Dina, Rhanda, Camellia, Mona and Soraya, while the Egyptian nightclub style has numerous Egyptian practitioners who gain little or no fame and fortune beyond the Egyptian nightclub circuit (Afifi, 2009). It also demonstrates the inherent class, economic and social delineations of dance style, content and music, which again affects the notion of what style and which Belly Dancer can perform for specific classes and social groups of paying audiences.

The above example reveals the efforts to narrate specific historical, geographical, cultural, social, gender and even economic specificities embodied in the dancing. What is not presented here, are the specifics of the movement itself. I describe and initially teach the basics by assisting students with isolations and I refer directly to Dixon-Gottschild's notion of polycentrism. This in effect brings to the students' attention how rhythm and melody can be held in the body, in different areas of the body, simultaneously. For example, the feet and legs can be stepping on the beat, the hips off the beat or in triplets, whilst the upper body is held (stillness) or sways lyrically to the melody. It is a really complex action to embody, one that provokes a lot of hilarity and exasperation. Students then learn to

move their hips in provocative or unusual manner. They are asked to enjoy it, or not notice it, and to play with it. All of this feeds into their Orientalist fantasy, but in fact I am teaching the hyper-real juxtaposition as described by Dixon-Gottschild (1996). Most students enjoy the lyrical and melodic sections of learning, the rhythms are less demanding and the movement work is done mostly when stood in one position for beginners. Students learn to feel the mood of the haunting call of the *nay* flute or the shimmering tones of the *quanoon* (a zither-like instrument). Nine times out of ten, students express their "love" of this work. They feel connected emotionally to the music and their bodies. Again polycentrism is used to great effect, and the soulfulness or ephebism, a kind of ageless virtuosity and playfulness, takes priority over complex choreographic form. For advanced students I teach the aesthetic of the "cool", a method of performing the ephebic that requires a variety of mood changes and dynamics that alternately underplay and overplay the emotional content of the dancing. It is a performance technique designed to draw the audience into the emotions of the dancer, the music and the feeling. It is a form of connection between three actors – musician, dancer and audience – commonly referred to as *tarab* in Arabic.

It remains a salient point that even though there has been a significant "cultural turn" towards appreciating the Arab cultural situatedness of Belly Dance, it still remains a rare classroom experience. Anne White points out in interview:

> Too often I see students who have done one or two classes, even a term of classes and then decide to start up a class. You would never see that in another profession, especially in dance professions like Ballet. These dancers take years and years of practice, exams and knowledge before they teach. It is not the same in the Belly Dance community. It's a big problem, we need to change this otherwise we will not be taken seriously. (2010)

White points out the need for, both a recognition of the work and the skill needed to perform Belly Dance, with a concern for the lack of regulation and control of the Belly Dance market. The above might suggest a significant "cultural turn" in the UK Belly Dance classroom and market, but the underlying enterprise forces do not allow for quality control. Again the Orientalist perspective of Belly Dancing as hip rolls, shakes and harem fantasy remains the steadfast marketing tool for any practitioner seeking fame and fortune. It avoids the issue of the complexities of teaching, knowing and articulating the Africanist presence therein.

Even though Belly Dance has expanded across the globe as a regular fitness and dance class activity, it still remains that the Africanist presence is not being reasserted. Over the last two decades Belly Dance interest has expanded to countries and continents outside Anglo-American and European boundaries, to South America, South Africa, Australia and the Far East (Tofik-Karam, 2010; Keft-Kennedy, 2005; Mishra, 2013). It also continues to be found at weddings, nightclubs and local social gatherings across North Africa, the Middle East, Levant region, Central Asia and the Arab Gulf states (Roushdy, 2013; McDonald, 2012). It is important to note that all the new territories have a rising middle class population, and still the practitioners of note from these new regions, in general, remain ethnically white. Interestingly, reports of Belly Dance popularity in sub-Saharan Africa are not in evidence, the exceptions being European and American blonde Belly Dancers hired to cater for New Year's Eve revellers in the Gambia, and the only country to report regular classes and events on the African continent, beyond the northern territories, is South Africa. Even though research in the field indicates that the ubiquitous Belly Dancer at Egyptian weddings is declining in popularity due to fashions and trends towards new forms of nuptial entertainment[18] (Cooper, 2012), Belly Dance remains a significant business and pastime in Egypt. A significant change occurring in post-Arab Spring Egypt has been the decline and destruction of tourist nightclubs, with only the transient Egyptian nightclubs and dancers continuing their regular performance programmes. Roushdy's (2010, 2013) recent research and discussion in the field with young Egyptians on the subject of the role and value of al-raqs al-baladi[19] in Egypt describes a liminal (Turner, 1987) position and social value of the dance and the women performing it in Egyptian society. Roushdy states: "As an array of baladi practices and ideals, it continues to offer Egyptians a betwixt and between experience of their subjectivity; betwixt and between the boundaries of what is local and what is global, what is fixed and what is changing" (2013: 29-30). Therefore, the Africanist presence is further erased.

Belly Dance ownership and the notion of "authenticity" within groups and communities in different geographical locations have produced a battleground of competing Belly Dance ethnoscapes (Appadurai, 1996). The dominance of the Euro-American Belly Dance claims over the Egyptian form has guaranteed the side-lining and undervaluing of the "Africanist" presence. The issues of authenticity and ownership are a central and perennial concern found in the British community of shared Belly Dance practice, and on the global scene. Authenticity is a regularly debated subject on internet forums and at national and regional events, and

upheld by practitioners who declare in their advertising copy their particular "narratives of authenticity."

My use of "narratives" and in this case "narratives of authenticity" describes the use of enunciating and re-enunciating the authority, knowledge and expertise of a given Belly Dance practitioner. Specifically, I am referring to the common usage and attributing cultural value and capital (Bourdieu, 1986) "authenticity" maintains in the field. It is a value that continues to be narrated and re-narrated by experts, students of these experts, and students of the students of these experts, each offering complementary narratives and also competing forms of the nominally "same" live performance art. "Narratives of authenticity" are functional exponents of the identities and cultural capital of competing practitioners. They are a mechanism by which practitioners can transmit their Belly Dance identities, knowledge and understanding in the classroom, on stage, on website copy and even in research papers.

The function of these narratives is to illustrate an inherited Belly Dance lineage back to previous practitioners, not necessarily Egyptian Belly Dancers. The transmission of knowledge and experience, directly or not, with a "bona fide" Egyptian practitioner, ensures each Belly Dance practitioner's legacy and the continuation of their "performance" project through their inheriting student's practice. Therefore, these narratives of authenticity are essential in reinforcing the authority, know-how and value of the practice found in western contexts.

It should be noted that "narratives of authenticity" is a methodology developed during my doctorate research (Cooper, 2012), in which I presented five narrative case studies of past and present Belly Dancers in England. The aim of this study was to understand how each practitioner created a so-called "authentic" Belly Dance performance. None of the five practitioners were Egyptian, or had indirect natal or familial links with Egypt. Where there was no direct cultural referent in performance, I found that these Belly Dance practitioners had found a mechanism of transmitting their narratives of authenticity to serve the purpose of building meaning and relevancy for their practice, in exchange with other competing practitioners, and gaining students and audiences alike. Narratives of authenticity offer arts and other cross-cultural practice researchers a method of examining various narrated enunciations and actions, the sum total of which represents a performer's "authority" and "ownership" of an inherited cultural tradition. Narratives of authenticity emerged from culturalist and constructivist social theory in education and identity formation (Holland *et al*, 2001, Gee 1999, and Bruner 1996). It is based on the understanding that excavating a person's motive, actions, words and dialogue – in this case with their audience – and cross-

referencing the performance work with interview data lead us to specific narratives relating to themes including blood-line narrative, self-in-practice narrative, training narrative, and so on. This new methodology and theoretical work offers researchers in cross-cultural arts a process through which they can scrutinize artistic output in respect to both an inherited past and "newly" formulated present.

With the above in mind, narratives of authenticity offer a new method of examining the cross-cultural politics, social, educational and economic value invested in this popular live performance art around the globe. For example, a specific narrative of authenticity relating to the "inception" of Belly Dance in Egypt references a particular social and cultural era in Anglo-Egyptian colonial history and the entrepreneurial efforts of a particular actress/nightclub owner. The narratives surrounding this specific episode in Egyptian Belly Dance history describe a successful fusing of Egyptian social dance forms with European salon theatre device and spectacle. In fact, Badia Masabni's Casino Opera employed several dancers performing numerous forms of "exotic" dance, specifically Latino dance forms, with veils for extra mystery (Franken 2003, Nieuwkerke 1996, Varga Dinicu 2011, Buonaventura 1989). This era of British rule in Egypt during the1920s and into the depression of the 1930s witnessed a rise in cultural activity, with musical collaborations between British and Egyptian artists, and the advent of film. Badia's exclusive nightclub catered for British expatriates and wealthy Egyptians. She was influenced by European social and cultural events and began to provide similarly themed evening entertainment for mixed social groups and classes. These events included the masked balls of Paris and Covent Garden London, and in their heyday presented extravagant *dioramas* of the Orient, with costuming, elephants and decoration (Buckland, 2010). Badia's intention was to stage a variety of performances, including exotic dancing, to newly wealthy Egyptians and to British expatriates. The solo performance of Egyptian *al-raqs al-baladi* dance (Neuwkerke, 1996, Franken, 2003), found in an evening's programme of drink, socialising, smoking, comedy acts, acrobats and other artists, was minimal. The attraction for Egyptian audiences was the Latin[20] dancers, and for the British audiences the Egyptian dancers. Later incarnations of *al-raqs al-baladi* saw the incorporation of the Latin veil, and specific movements from Latin, Indian and other dance forms, with more exaggerated elements of humour, joke-telling, audience interaction and improvisation with musical accompaniment.

Later incarnations found in film and television programmes (there are various films with dancers, including Namia Akef, Tahia Carioca, Samia Gamal, the latter became so popular she won a film contract in Hollywood in the 1950s) saw the incorporation of choreographic practice

to use the allotted time on screen effectively, and by the late 1930s there was the introduction of western musical instrumentation and composition (Om Kalsoum, Farida Al Atrache and Halim Al Hafiz are examples of singers and song writers who worked with large orchestrations of this period and are still heard today in coffee shops and in Belly Dance performances across the Arab world). In fact, Belly Dance is now the ultimate cross-cultural hybrid live performance art.

Roushdy (2013) suggests that by its very syncretic (Dox, 2006) character Belly Dance has been able to survive and thrive through different social and cultural changes in Egypt and abroad. Other researchers have shown that the introduction of film and television appearances of Belly Dancers ensured longevity and popular interest in the dance form in Egypt (Franken 2003; Dougherty, 2005). Belly Dance's hybrid nature enabled the morphing, subtraction and addition of new influences, fashions, movement forms and musical interpretation. These days worldwide Belly Dance continues to transform and modify, dependent on both the proclivities of any given social and cultural performance context and the performer's choices and decisions. It is the very Africanist nature of Belly Dance (the improvisation, the performative and lengthy durational aesthetics) that has enabled this survival, and reveals the dominance of the proscenium arch, more choreographic practices and shorter durational performance to be a Western preference and sensibility.

Of late, the tendency in Belly Dance discourse is to describe specific national "interpretations" (and "narratives of authenticity"[21]) and categories of Belly Dance: New Zealand styles of Belly Dance (Kelly, 2013), English styles (Cooper, 2012, 2013), Brazilian styles (Tofik-Karam, 2010), American styles (Shay & Woods, 1976; Sellers-Young, 2005; Monty 1986; Carlton, 1996; Maira, 2008; and Jarmakani, 2010), Indian styles (Mishra, 2013) and Australian styles of Belly Dance and identity (Keft-Kennedy, 2005). This new discourse can serve to suppress the Africanist presence; in effect, the bloodline narrative of authenticity is successfully appropriated by new hybrid international identities, thus circumventing the Africanist presence in Belly Dance.

The various research papers and projects found in America have attempted to make a direct correlation between late 19th century shows, exhibitions and displays of "Belly Dance" and the founding of modern abstract expressionist dance (Monty, 1986). A key theme in all of this research is the presentation of selective, anecdotal and in some case anachronistic accounts that perpetuate the-then scandalous "Danse du Ventre" (Dox, 2006) of the turn of the 20th century. Belly Dance is an appellation I have capitalised throughout this article because of its contested identity and the western "interpretation" that the use of the words Belly and

Dance represent. The misnomer of both Belly and Dance to describe what western audience's interpret underpin the Orientalist *mythos* of "not knowing the Eastern other" (Dox, 2006) and illustrate the ongoing fashion and Victorian project to fetishise (Carlton, 1994; Monty 1986; Franken, 2003) what is not understood. Morocco (also known as Carolina Varga Dinicu) gives an interesting analysis of the situation when the dance was first seen and "misinterpreted". She states:

> Some Westerners assumed or were misinformed that a "belly" dancer at a wedding is a fertility symbol, a holdover from a prior religion. Especially during the colonialist period, Westerners thought all dances of the "other" were sensuous and provocative, even when that wasn't the intent, because torso movements were involved, at a time when proper Western women wouldn't be caught dead without their corsets and the waltz was thought too racy for polite society. (2011:162)

The torso and pelvic movements, as Morocco analyses, were "misinterpreted" and led to more fantasy and speculation on the part of the spectator, which says more about the codes and conventions of the constrictions and shame of the body in western society than the joy of movement and use of the pelvis in North African and Middle Eastern movement, dance and performance. Morocco adds: "Raqs Sharqi is for expressing joy of the occasion. Especially in rural areas, the mother of the bride is almost required to dance, to express her joy that her daughter is now married – where or not there might be hired dancers or the guests choose to dance the night away" (ibid, 162).

Variously, practitioners and researchers have attempted to describe (Saleh, 1979; Kent, 2004; Franken 2003; and Bacon 2003), categorise and develop a lexicon for the movement vocabulary of Belly Dance. The global ethno-scape of practitioners continues to produce teaching and training material and thus indirectly attempts to share a language. Most notably the American Belly Dance market is a dominant player when presenting teaching material and globe-trotting experts[22]. In competition and through the increasing access to youtube.com, performance and teaching material of the Modern Cairo Style, exported by Egyptian practitioners, challenges the American dominance and knowledge transfer. There remains contention within and outside of the different communities as to with whom and where the knowledge of Belly Dance resides. Like other dance movements and genres, the codification and structuring of a dance genre tends to result in a specific school or approach to a genre with its contributing omissions and protection of knowledge (O'Shea 2006; Desmond 1997; Buckland 1999; Cooper-Albright 1997), rather than the full

explanation and structuring of the live performance art form in its entirety. Furthermore, the movement units, like the syncretic status of Belly Dance itself (Dox, 2006; Cooper, 2012), change over time, which can destabilize the fixed Orientalist paradigm.

Still, Belly Dance's syncretic character, the Africanist presence in movement units and performative framing continue to trouble researchers and practitioners alike. In fact, the cultural identity and perception of this Arab-African live performance art has shifted considerably post-20th century. Over the last decade, British Belly Dancers have encountered an expansion in the definition of the Middle East and its African territories. The result includes a closer examination of what and how movement is incorporated into a performance. The challenge is not to present a "hermetically sealed" performance, as in fact the emphasis is on spilling out and disrupting the audience's comfort with their Orientalist perception of the show. Earlier practitioners in the UK of the 1980s and 1990s, one Yemeni/Egyptian Suraya Hilal and the other Sicilian/Libyan Wendy Buonaventura, renamed, structured and codified their own versions of the dance in classrooms and on dance theatre stages (Cooper, 2012, 2013). They reacted to the 1970s Arab-American importation of the dance as a form of "adult-only" late night dance display. Their ambition was to present the "art" in the dance beyond the "erotic". However, critics demonstrate[23] that the search for the "art" indirectly subtracted specific Arab-Africanist elements in performance framing, movement styling and "performative" intention. In effect, they distorted the cultural reference point, relied on an imagined history and inadvertently reinforced the Orientalist *mythos* (Dox, 2006; Said, 1978; Yengulou 1998). Today, the current trend in Britain is for practitioners to reconfigure the Africanist heritage in training and performance in favour of what I would describe as live performance art.

In previous eras members of the Arab-African and North African Diaspora were reticent to engage, learn, teach and perform with the British Belly Dancing community. Today second and third generation Anglo-Arab artists are rekindling an interest and exploring ownership. They are highlighting the Africanist presence in performance[24]. They are demonstrating the significance of emotional transmission over choreographic intent. Earlier, Belly Dance had been predominantly American Cabaret Belly Dance in styling and codification. Today, the athleticism, choreography and Orientalist pastiche of previous eras are giving way to the ephebic[25], but not without a struggle[26].

Houda Amrani, stage name Nawarra, performs various urban and rural Morroccan social and theatre dance forms in the UK. In interview, she suggests that what she understands to be Belly Dance does not

necessarily correlate with what is being produced in Britain. She states, "I wonder sometimes what students here have been learning. There is a lot of fusion styles, more gothic styles, lots of American tribal and the real Belly Dance, the Oriental dancing, is dying out. I think people have forgotten where this dance comes from, the culture and its people" (2010). Houda continues by describing the various components of her dancing by mentioning the audience interaction, the teasing, the humour and the "feeling" transmitted through her movement styling and communication on stage. She places extra emphasis on the soulfulness of the dancer: "An Arab audience want more and more, they want you to take it higher and higher, they want you to give them a piece of our personality, otherwise they will not feel it, there is nothing for them to enjoy!" (2010). Mid-interview, she stands up to demonstrate physically the differences in movement vocabulary. Wearing jeans and a t-shirt she demonstrates several key movements on the spot and suggests that the movement is initiated and travels through the navel and solar plexus area propelled by the knees and oblique muscles. Her arms remain held aloft at shoulder height, with little embellishment through wrist undulation and twisting, whilst she deftly executes one hip movement after another, and with each movement she repeats variations on the theme, with incremental differences, phrasing and emphasis. She notes that rather than a sentence of different movements placed next to each other in quick succession, the dancer takes her time to enjoy the physical execution of the movement and catches the eye of the audience member to see if they can see/enjoy what she is already taking pleasure in doing. Houda's example demonstrates the Africanist presence that dictates the central role of performer-audience interaction and the emotional content of the movement and the display. The transmission of the emotional loading of the movement, beyond technical prowess and aesthetics, takes priority.

Belly Dance's African heritage is an overlooked and rarely discussed reality in the British Belly Dance classroom. The western appellation Belly Dance conveniently conceals many important features of this unusual female solo performance art form. Granted that the socio-religious and cultural map of Saharan Africa differs from sub-Saharan Africa, but it remains that Belly Dance, La Danse du Ventre, al-raqs al-baladi, is the fusion of Arab-African social and popular dance forms with European dance theatre and vaudeville traditions. The dominance of middle class white women embodying and transmitting an imagined cultural otherness in a western cultural context remains a key concern for funders, institutions and the Anglo-Arab Diaspora. In Britain, the resultant effect has been a move away from the Hilal and Bounaventura emphasis on the "art", towards a reconfiguration of the display of sex/sexuality in

performance, the use of female high camp humour, and the emphasis on audience interactive play to generate moments of shared "communitas" (Turner 1987) in Belly Dance performance.

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Notes

1 I'm referring to Brenda Dixon-Gottschild's definition and description found in chapter two in her text, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts,* (1996, 11-21)

2 I use and capitalise the term "Belly Dance" throughout the text because it is the most commonly used, although problematic, idiom applied to this solo live performance art. It is the term which participants in all global communities of practice and their audience members commonly use even when presented with alternative terms like al-raqs al-sharqi, Oriental dance, Arabic dance etc. In effect, it is a default setting used by both western and eastern practitioners to name a specific form of dance that indeed has a troubled Anglo-Egyptian past. Via the capitalisation I am drawing the reader's attention to this constantly troubled and embattled term. The capitals "nag" at the reader.

[3] Soulfulness, described by Dixon-Gottschild as "ephebism", is one of the four main components of the Africanist aesthetic she details in chapter two of her text (1996, 11-21). Other components include polycentrism, high-affect juxtaposition in improvisation and the aesthetic of the cool. I argue it is also an aesthetic that underpins the Arab-African live performance art commonly referred to as Belly Dance.

[4] I have conducted interviews across the UK, and several participant-informers preferred to stay anonymous, including this Belly Dancer from Leicester. The question in the structured interview is "What do you say to people at a social event when asked what your occupation is?" Invariably the answer nine times out of ten came back with either giving a bogus occupation, using the term "contemporary dancer" or "entertainment industry" or saying nothing at all (interviews conducted in UK 2005-2010, North America 2005 and Egypt 2003-2006).

[5] Interviews conducted in North America, Europe, UK and Egypt (2005-2010) have also highlighted the issue of gender, and in particular the presence of older women performing. Sara Farouk, in Egypt, suggests that this is the only live performance art, with dance elements, available for women of all ages and backgrounds.

[6] Raqia Hassan is a well-known Belly Dance teacher in Cairo. She teaches Modern Cairo Style, which she claims she created alongside Dina for the modern Belly Dance market. She lives in Dokki, Cairo and students enter her family home to work in a purposely built studio next to her living room. She runs the international *Ahlan Wa Sahlan* Belly Dance festival in Cairo, but it still remains a unique occupation, one without training or recognition from other arts bodies and groups.

[7] Mona el Said was a popular and talented Belly Dancer from the late 1970s and 1980s. She was destined to be a big star but her darker skin colour, it has been said, hindered her climb to the top. Egyptian women value a lighter skin colour. Even today, huge tabloid ads can be seen all over Cairo promising better fortune and a good marriage if a woman lightens her skin.

[8] I'm referencing several texts on performance studies and intercultural performance theory including the work of Schechner (1995, 2006), Turner (1969, 1987), Pavis (1996), Murray and Keefe (2007), Carson (1996) and Govan, Nicholson & Normington (2007).

[9] Dixon-Gottschild's text describes the Africanist aesthetic outlined in that text's second chapter as just a first or initial premise, which suggests there are more detailed and layered readings of the dance, but these initial components begin the process of understanding what methods and values are involved in creating these non-western dance forms. I also refer to the Stearns's (1979) definition of key elements to the Africanist aesthetic in dance and also R, K Thompson's (1973, 1979) initial identification of the aesthetic of the "cool" prior to Dixon-Gottschild's text.

[10] "High-affect juxtaposition" describes two or more moods or attitudes at play at the same moment, unlike the western compositional tool of transitions and links from one to the next. Dixon-Gottschild suggests that the result produces surprise, irony, comedy and innuendo (1996, 14).

[11] The "aesthetic of the "cool"" is a term coined by R. K. Thompson (1973) and referred to by Dixon-Gottschild as a specific attidude "that combines composure with validity". It can also be described as "an attitude of carelessness cultivated with a calculated aesthetic clarity" (1996, 16). Dixon-Gottschild suggests that the "cool" aesthetic needs asymmetry and juxtapositions, described above, in order to "manifest[s] its luminosity or brilliance" (ibid, 17) and describes an "indirectness of approach" above western preoccupations with control, transparency, readability, and aloofness.

[12] The term "polycentrism" describes movements emanating from different bodily regions and planes in which different, opposing rhythms, directions and alignments are taking place simultaneously (ibid, 14).

[13] The term "ephebism" comes from the Greek "ephebe", meaning youth and "encompasses attributes such as power, vitality, flexibility, drive and attack" (Ibid, 15). It is also a "feeling as sensation", rather than emotion, "a sense of swing, suppleness and flexibility" (ibid, 16). I also consider it to be a transmission of "sensation" that can easily be read as a transmission of "feeling" and "emotion".

[14] The majority of research in the Belly Dance field debates and analyses the "imagined history" of Belly Dance and leads most researchers to deconstruct an Orientalist mythos and fantasy. It is rarely found that researchers make the connection between Belly Dance practice found in any given geographical location and the "narratives of authenticity" produced by a given practitioner

which usually incorporate elements of what is imagined, found, constructed and performed physically in real-time.

[15] Dox, D, L. (2006), "Dancing Around Orientalism", *Theatre and Drama Review* Vol. 50, No.4. (Winter):52-71.

[16] Shay, A & B. Sellers-Young (2003) "Belly Dance: Orientalism – Exoticism – Self-Exoticism." *Dance Research Journal* Vol 35, No. 1 (Summer):13-37.

[17] Kay Taylor, a Belly Dancer and entrepreneur based in Newcastle, is an example of this new Belly Dance tourism enterprise emerging at the turn of the 21st century (see www.faridadance.co.uk). Her tours Farida Tours has developed from once a year trips to Egypt by 10 or more students to biannual tours, with 3 or 4 tours back to back catering for over 50 students in a year, alongside a week of workshops and study in Luxor with artists in September for a further 15 or more attendees. Other tours are available through local and regional dancers, although this enterprise has slowed down and ceased in some cases due to the Arab Spring and changes to travel in Egypt since 2011.

[18] In interview Caroline Afifi (2010), a regular visitor to Egypt, notes that there has been a sharp decline in Belly Dancers attending weddings. She suggests that this is due, in part, to the popularity of western dance and music, especially through the media and television channels, transmitting popular dance and music videos of American pop stars and hip-hop artists.

[19] al-raqs al-baladi is a term used to describe Belly Dance. In particular Roushdy is referencing a specific form of dance performed alongside live music in which the musicians take their cue from the dancer, where the soloist describes sonic elements of individual instruments played and the movement is flat footed, soft, undulating and humourous.

[20] I am referring to South American dance forms when I use the term Latin. It is again a catch-all term, but used here to illustrate the various South American dance and music influences found at Masabni's nightclub. The cultural specificity and contextual understanding of the different dances found in South America did not precedence over the desire to showcase "exotic" South America embodied by female dancers with veils and feathers to the unusual and interesting rhythms of South America. Most notably the South American

dancers were usually Egyptian; Tahia Carioca gained her surname from expertly performing South America dances.

21 I am using the term "Narratives of Authenticity". This is not used by the researchers quoted in this passage, I am the only researcher using this term. It does, however, encapsulate the cultural turn in Belly Dance research in which researchers are attempting to reconcile the "authority" and "ownership" issues of Belly Dancers in their own country, rather than observe and write on the subject of Egyptian Belly Dancers.

22 In particular, there are various American practitioners travelling all around the world, including Morocco from New York, Ranya Renee from New York, Suhalia Salimpour from Los Angeles, Carolina Nerricco from San Francisco and more. These artists present various styles and interpretations of the dance including folkloric styles by North African Berber people, Theatrical Belly Dance (Renee), American Cabaret Style (Salimpour) and American Tribal Belly Dance (Nerricco).

23 Critics of Hilal and Buonaventura include various key practitioners in the UK and abroad. Hilal's work has been described as contemporary dance with little or no reference to the dance found in Egypt and Buonaventura's work has been criticised for the reliance on Orientalist imagery, text and reference in most of her books and dance theatre shows.

24 Houda Amrani, Shafeek Ibrahim, Khalid Mahmoud, Venus Saleh and Leila Moleai to name but a few practitioners are members of the Anglo-Arab Diaspora who have built dance careers in the UK in which they describe their various national identities through dance and their dance expertise. In the majority, each practitioner describes elements of the dance they find lacking in the UK field through teaching cultural, musical and dance knowledge.

25 The term soulfulness appears regularly in written texts, on internet forums and in the classroom. It is translated as "Tarab" in Egyptian, and many students alternatively describe it as soulfulness or Egyptian-ness in performance.

26 Currently, there is a demand for and high profile of Tribal Belly Dance, a form of dance fusion which emerged in the USA during the 1980s and which has become a very popular "form" of Belly Dance. Some critics suggest there

is a divide in the field, not unlike the previous Hilal and Buonaventura split in the community, between Tribal and Oriental Belly Dancers.