

University of Alberta

The Use of Nostalgia in Genre Formation in Tribal Fusion Dance

by

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my husband Justin, for his support and patience.

Abstract

Contemporary Oriental dance practitioners that explicitly tie their artworks to the East often validate their involvement by crafting their dances and aesthetic to ever-shifting definitions of authenticity and ethnicity. However, practitioners of the youngest belly dance style have increasingly turned away from the East as a reference point, blending modern electronica and urban dance forms with historically Western aesthetics such as Victorian fashion and vaudeville theatre. Through the use of temporally marked elements of the Occident's historical fascination with the Orient, Vaudevillian Tribal Fusion performers draw attention to the role of the West in the intercultural evolution of modern belly dance which allows dancers to escape issues of authenticity and cultural appropriation. More than mere aesthetic play, this highlighting of a long history of North American belly dance suggests Tribal Fusion dancers' own validation strategies in a transnational dance subculture which is fraught with romanticization of the exotic Other.

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I: Introduction

“But when holding the scene up to the light of history, it is its ‘Americanness’ that most fascinates me...”

Mirjana Lausevic (2007: 12)

Various mobilities have facilitated the becoming in the West of what is known as *belly dance*, which made its first entry into modernity through its presence at various turn of the century world exhibitions such as the 1893 Chicago World Fair. Dancers, many in fact young French women, crafted their dances and image to delight spectators and increase ticket sales rather than to accurately represent the cultures of the colonies. The newly created dances’ popularity with the public soon spread through the recently-invented cinema and by way of carnivals, circuses, and other traveling road shows. These early dancers created spaces of play, creolizing and creating various intercultural forms of performance to adapt to audiences as they spread throughout North America and Europe.

Conversely, contemporary belly dance practitioners that explicitly tie their artworks to North Africa and the Middle East often validate their involvement by crafting their dances and aesthetic to ever-shifting definitions of authenticity and cultural integrity. Middle Eastern-inspired dances performed by Euro-Canadians and Americans are framed by the dancers as a form of cultural expression and/or a

classical and codified high art. However, practitioners of the youngest belly dance style, known as Tribal Fusion, have increasingly turned away from the Middle East as a reference point, incorporating overtly non-Middle Eastern aesthetics, music, and practices such as circus theatrics, fire-spinning, American street dance, and hula hooping.

Tribal Fusion first emerged from the North American West Coast cities of Portland, Oregon and San Francisco, California in the early 2000s and is described as the belly dance genre with the least amount of rules, boundaries, and concerns for authenticity. Dancers are increasingly playing with historically Western aesthetics such as 19th century colonial representations of the Orient, Victorian fashion, the sensual femininity of Art Nouveau, the 1920s-1930s Jazz Era, as well as performance genres such as the early traveling circus¹ and Victorian burlesque and vaudeville theatre. My main focus in this study of Western belly dance will center on how the threads of nostalgia that seem inherent in twenty-first century Tribal Fusion allow the newly emerging genre both differentiation and inclusion in the belly dance culture, a global movement wherein practitioners oscillate between embracing dynamism and traditionalism. Far from a simple excursion into Orientalism (Said 1979), dancers create spaces of play, which, as anthropologist Richard Schechner reminds us, are transitional spaces of the suggestive (1985: 113).

¹ While the circus aesthetic has been largely taken up by Tribal Fusion dancers, there do exist some notable *Raqs Sharqi*-style circus belly dancers such as Melina, who performs with her family's belly dance company Daughters of Rhea, produces Cirque Passion, and directs Moody Street Circus along with her circus star husband. <http://daughtersofrhea.com/melina.htm>.

The highlighting of a long history of North American belly dance suggests a way to validate both their inclusion and innovation within a transnational subculture which is fraught with romanticization of the exotic Other. While the young cosmopolitan women who are drawn to the Tribal Fusion belly dance genre are seeking out and creating their own embodied cultural histories and identities, could Tribal Fusion itself be considered an authentic form of cultural expression, as a folk, ethnic, or multicultural dance of primarily urban, middle-class, Euro-Canadian/American women? The dizzying transnational reality of the 20th and 21st centuries has allowed for an incredible movement of people, cultural forms, and ideas, and the modern city indeed encourages hybridization of culture (Appadurai 1990, McLuhan 1964).

In line with Appadurai's notion of *ethnoscapes*, who moves to the city or visits to perform and give workshops has a profound effect on a community's dance scene. Likewise, those who can travel to workshops out of country bring back new influences to the dances. Egypt, the most significant and geographically specific reference point for this dance, has long held value as a resource location (Karayanni 2008: 161). Increasingly fast *mediascapes* also shape local dance communities, allowing access to other dance cultures through print, photos, and video as they craft their own costumes, movements and music (Appadurai 1990: 9). What draws women (and some men) from various backgrounds towards belly dance, and more specifically, to the style dubbed Vaudevillian/Vintage/Tribal Burlesque Fusion? Most people are born into a family and community with a

particular set of customs, but urbanity and modernization allow the individual some degree of cultural choice. While some point to belly dances long history as a female dance, others critique notions of cultural continuity with the past, and what Eric Hobsbawm defines as “invented tradition” (1983: 1). However, emerging forms of belly dance act as “an embodied form of cultural production,” re-evaluating demarcations between tradition and modernity while addressing social needs of dancers that may be lacking in the larger society (Shay 2008: 13).

In reflecting on both the growth of and the current state of this dance form, it becomes apparent that increasingly fast *mediascapes* facilitate what McLuhan calls an ever smaller *global village* (1964: 6). With the convenience of online communities and low cost media-sharing, dance culture participants are able to communicate with and influence those with similar interests regardless of place. An expansive network of relationships spreads out over a contracted globe; a subjective space of the imaginary exists (intra)culturally in local communities, and (inter)culturally between global sub-cultural groups. These mobilities also allow us to return to our pasts with increasing speed and ease. Why when we have all of these avenues for expansion, do we contract and return to our beginnings? It is my hope that a focus on Tribal Fusion will aid outsiders of the belly dance tribe to better understand the whole of the Oriental dance phenomenon, as well as to glean insight into the emergence of new genres in a subculture fraught with issues of cultural appropriation.

Field of Study

In this study, I will introduce the history of belly dance in North America before exploring the characteristics of Western belly dance genres as observed in my primary research site of Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.² Like most cultures, the global belly dance culture and individual communities within it are stratified, plural, and at times internally divided. While understandings of community refer to both a demarcation of physical space and clusters of interaction, global belly dance culture does not represent any one culture (Arabic culture), people (Arabic people) or place (Saudi Arabia). Always transnational, belly dance culture has never occupied solid, commonsensical, and agreed-upon boundaries such as those of classic ethnographic maps. Rather they are contested, uncertain, and most important to this study, in flux, increasingly inhabiting what Jameson refers to as a “postmodern hyperspace” (1984). Hopefully, when reading this study the reader will ask themselves, “where, and to whom, do the hybrid cultures of post-modernity belong?”

The primary ethnographic field for this study consists of Edmonton, the capital and cultural and educational center of the Canadian Prairie province of Alberta. With a city population of approximately 812,201 (2011) and a metropolitan population of over one million, Edmonton is understood nationally as a gateway to northern Canada and its oil and diamond industries.³ The title of

² While my primary research site is in Canada, I will frequently use the term ‘American belly dance’ to acknowledge the roots of a subculture which has spread throughout the world.

³ City of Edmonton. *2011 Census*. www.edmonton.ca/business_economy/.../2011_Census-FINAL.pdf

Festival City is well-deserved as Edmonton hosts year-round international festivals, such as the International Street Performers Festival, The Folk Music Festival, and the Fringe Theater Festival.⁴ Of particular interest to this study is three day-long Heritage Festival. Begun in 1976, this cultural festival showcases the art, music, dances, and foods of over 75 cultural communities within Edmonton, receives over 300,000 visitors annually.⁵ Some local belly dancers have performed more traditional-looking styles of belly dance and various folkloric dance styles for the pavilions of various Eastern countries such as Turkey, Azerbaijan, Iran, India, and the pan- Arabic pavilion. Of interest to this study is that modern forms such as American Tribal Style and Tribal Fusion have also been performed at the Africa pavilion rather than the recently designated Canada pavilion, highlighting the ongoing confusion of genres and manufacturing of ethnicity and tradition common amongst 21st century Western belly dancers, individuals who have varying degrees of knowledge about the history of Oriental dance and the emergence of post-modern ethnic dances.⁶

Historian Marjerie Franken has stated that belly dance is “one of the least analyzed and investigated aspects of dance scholarship” (Franken 2003: 111). Similarly, dance Scholar Jane Desmond reminds that overall dance scholarship continues to be marginalized, under theorized, and generally undervalued in academia, and that existing anthropology of dance scholarship has largely focused on folk dance clearly linked to ethnicity, or native dances performed by non-

⁴ Edmonton Festival City. <http://www.festivalcity.ca/>

⁵ Edmonton Heritage Festival. *Festival History*. <http://www.heritage-festival.com/the-festival-history/>

⁶ Personal Field Notes, August 2011.

whites. Such an investigation is important as the omission of modern, female urban dance shows “the continuing rhetorical association of bodily expressivity with non-dominant groups” (Desmond 1994: 34-35).

Similarly, in her 1970 article “An Anthropologist Looks at Ballet as a Form of Ethnic Dance,” Joann Kealiinohomoku describes the generally accepted anthropological view that “ethnic means a group which holds in common genetic, linguistic, and cultural ties, with special emphasis on cultural tradition” (Kealiinohomoku 1970: 39). She asserts that all dance forms are therefore ethnic dance forms, and critiques Western dance scholars for not using the term *ethnic dance* in this objective definition but as a euphemism for outdated terms such as primitive, savage, pagan, exotic, etc. (Kealiinohomoku 1970: 41). Much like the false binary of classic anthropology which assumed that its practitioners employed objective *methods* to study natives who embodied an inherent, timeless *culture*, many charges of cultural appropriation from non-dancers and purist elitism between belly dancers would become irrelevant if more Tribal Style dancers realized that what they are involved in creating and performing is ethnic culture as well as art and if more traditional-looking dancers admitted that they are themselves creating dynamic, interpretive art in an ever-evolving global culture.

Methodology & The Researcher’s Background

The research involved consisted primarily of a review of existing material on twentieth and twenty-first century Oriental dance in North America (Sellers-

Young 2005, Jarmakani 2008, Karayanni 2008, Shay 2008, Haynes-Clark 2010, Viale 2010. etc.). As only a few short scholarly articles have been written on the modern Tribal Fusion dance form itself (Fruhauf 2009), I have also been engaging in internet research, informal qualitative interviews/conversation, and ethnographic research in the form of photography, sound and video recording of public performances, and participant-observation of the local belly dance community.

My interactions ranged from those with beginner dance students to professional dancers of diverse backgrounds and professional occupations, as well as non-dancer audience members; I chose participants by judgment sampling based on my own network and snowball sampling based on participants' suggestions for other participants. I interacted with informants across a number of dispersed sites, performed fieldwork by telephone, e-mail, and by participating in online belly dance forum discussions. I also collected data by attending carefully to popular culture such as magazines, poster advertisements, DVD instructionals and performance compilations, and YouTube videos uploaded by professionals and amateurs alike.

As the saying goes, “anthropologists value studying what they like and liking what they study” (Nader 1972: 303). A sociocultural anthropology student, I began taking belly dance classes at a local gym during my third year of an anthropology undergraduate degree after hearing the exotic microtonal music and

jingling of coin belts float over repetitive and relatively dull cardio and weight machines. After the slow pace of the previous summer's archaeological field school crushed my childhood dreams of being an Indiana-Jones-like Egyptologist, the dance offered an avenue for strenuous exercise with the added appeal of Culture. Looking back on my anthropological innocence, I recall wanting to find the 'true dances' of the Eastern natives, free of any tainted Western influence, asking my Persian instructor questions such as "what do you dance over there?", "where does this move come from?" and being disappointed when she offered an unromantic explanation such as "we don't actually wear these hip scarves in Iraq. They are made in India to be exported to Westerners." Similarly, in his experience in Balkan and Middle Eastern folk dance groups, dance scholar Anthony Shay noted that very often it is other Americans, especially folklorists and anthropologists, that themselves most vehemently oppose the participation of non-ethnics to a certain so-designated ethnic dance, perhaps seeing racial or ethnic purity as necessary components for inclusion (Shay 2008: 34). It did not even occur to me at the time that what I was participating in, in this ladies gym in suburban St. Albert, Alberta, was itself part of a larger North American cultural phenomenon.

Over the years I have attended and participated in local and international workshops, weekly dance classes, and dozens of performances such as *haflas* (Arabic for 'party'), restaurant shows, theatre shows, electronica dance parties and rock shows with belly dancers throughout North & Central America. This

Master's thesis builds on research completed for my undergraduate Honours thesis in cultural anthropology entitled "Prairie Orientalisms," during which time I was employed with Isis Middle Eastern Dance Productions as a costuming and studio assistant, allowing for ample exploration of the material culture as well as networking with both students and instructors.⁷ Over the past few years, I have also had opportunities to perform as a dancer, percussionist (*sagat, tabla*), and vocalist with the University of Alberta's Middle Eastern and North African Music Ensemble (MENAME).⁸ These community groups have allowed for ample networking with Edmonton's Arabic community and those interested in its related art forms. However, the availability of a community of dancers and appropriate performance venues varies greatly across the transnational Western belly dance subculture.

Overview of Chapters

While it is impossible to address all aspects of an ever-evolving subculture in absolute terms it is my hope that this study will bring to the reader's attention some reoccurring themes. The following chapter, "Early History of American Belly Dance," briefly touches on French and British colonialism in the Near East, now more commonly known as the Middle East, before exploring American belly dance history beginning with the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. Similar to the above mentioned Heritage Days of Edmonton albeit on a much grander scale, this world exhibition contained ethnological exhibits which influenced popular forms of entertainment from the low-class burlesque and vaudeville theatres to the high

⁷ <http://www.isisdance.com/>

⁸ <http://www.music.ualberta.ca/Ensembles/MENAME.aspx>

class ballets and operas on both sides of the Atlantic. The popular embodiment of the Biblical character of Salomé also inspired the exotic Vamp and femme fatale characters of the early silent film era.

The third chapter, “20th Century American Belly Dance,” chronicles the early Nightclub Era in the US, modeled after Egyptian Cabaret venues which were themselves modeled after European Cabarets. Exotic dances offered American women avenues to explore body awareness, alternative feminism, and identity construction outside of the home. The fourth chapter is entitled “North American Oriental Dance Genres” and introduces the orthodox genre of American belly dance, the one which seems to many observers and dancers alike to be most faithful to the cultures of the Middle East. Also discussed are American forms of belly dance such as Tribal Style and American Tribal Style, the latter form itself a structured, codified, and intentional fusion of other dance forms. The fifth chapter, “Tribal Fusion: an Emergent Genre,” discusses the many faces of Tribal Fusion which is itself in the process of solidifying its own generic boundaries and drawing followers from around the globe who themselves look West for inspiration, approval, and authenticity. The sixth chapter is entitled “The Vaudevillian Aesthetic” and discusses how the Vaudevillian style references a uniquely Western pastness and I use Bateson’s play frame to understand the introduction of storylines and graceful mistakes. The final chapter, “Further Research and Conclusions,” summarizes the thesis’ overall arguments and suggests avenues for future research.

II: Early History of American Belly Dance

The current folklore or discourse surrounding belly dance is fraught with issues of (mis) appropriation and concerns for authenticity, and so an overview of accepted histories and legends is necessary to understand current belly dance forms in the West. While the term Oriental comes from the Latin *oriens*, meaning East of or Eastern, dance scholar Julia R. Zay suggests that the term *Oriental* is used not as a literal geographic point but rather a colloquialism for taboo cultural forms, a usage that stretches back to the ancient Romans (Zay 2011: 21-22). She defines Oriental Dance as an umbrella term for a group of dance forms that originated along the North African coast and within the Ottoman Empire (1299-1923) sharing a number of physical characteristics such as focus on muscular control of the abdomen and hips as well as an emphasis on fantasy and mysticism (2011: 20).

Although commonly called *Middle Eastern Dance* in order to distance the dance forms from what some dancers deem the derogatory term *belly dance*, dancers and scholars continually debate just what the terms *Oriental* and *Middle Eastern* encapsulate. When used in belly dance culture, the Middle East stretches to include North Africa and Central Asia. The term *Middle East* is itself contentious, as Edward Said elaborated in his famous work *Orientalism* (1978) where he claimed that for much of Western history, the Orient has existed only as an *imaginative geography* (Said 1978: 52). Other modern scholars have agreed that any mapped (and so possessed) area is not a real and coherent subject but

rather “an anachronistic artificial rubric, offering analytical and ideological convenience” (Wolff 1994: 370).

It is also worth acknowledging that all Western knowledge of the Orient is tinged with the histories and ideologies of various European colonial powers who have held political and economic power in these regions, and what information the West has received and circulated has undoubtedly been crafted by imperial interests (Said: 1999). France (from 1830-1956) and Britain (from 1882-1952) have dominated the region from the 17th century onwards, and travel writers, explorers, and artists have long brought back fantastic images of the East. During the mid-1800s travelogues from the Holy Land became increasingly popular with the American public, paradoxically describing a Biblical Paradise inhabited with a degenerate population (Rosenblatt 2009: 55). Through journal records, paintings (many of which were not painted while in the East), retelling, and remembering, these outsider’s reflections were transformed in Europe into ethnological artifacts of an unfamiliar world, often seen through the frame of an evolutionism which placed European civilization at the forefront of human progress (Karayanni 2008: 102). Britain cited examples of their backwardness as justification for their 19th century rule in Egypt with women especially acting as signifiers and markers of civilization; failure to educate girls, the use of the veil, and female genital mutilation continue to place women’s bodies in the middle of a semiotic war in order to justify foreign domination (Jarmakani 2008: 98, Moallem 2005: 2).

At the end of the 1800s, as Western European and North American societies underwent rapid social change due to increased industrialization and consumerism, women increasingly moved outside of their home to attend high school and college and to take jobs as factory workers, domestics, teachers, and nurses (Jarmakani 2008: 65, Adams et al 2012: 6). Women also increasingly engaged in both religious and social activism, forming clubs which worked for suffrage and to secure better schools and social services (Adams et al 2012: 8). Also of interest is that in 1869 the cross country railroad was completed, connecting eastern and western US and facilitating mail service to rural areas. The circulation of periodicals such as newspapers and journals allowed Americans to follow international political events such as England's assumption of Egypt in 1882, and increasing amounts of dark-skinned immigrants began settling throughout the country (Adams et al 2012: 134).

As new media flooded the American landscape, audiences were shown depictions of newly explored or conquered nations; formed in 1888, National Geographic Magazine presented the reader with native women on scientific display in various states of undress. Images of women also graced colonial postcards, such as those of 'dancers' of the North African and Middle Eastern colonies, although many of them were themselves crafted in Europe (Karayanni: 179).



Figure 1. Antique French cartes de visites. Purchased by author in Paris, France.

In her 2008 study *Imagining Arab Womanhood: The Cultural Mythology of Veils, Harems, and Belly Dancers in the U.S.*, Amira Jarmakani describes how *commodity racism* flourished as turn-of-the-century British and American entrepreneurs crafted images of exotic leisure and opulence by featuring their products (such as tobacco, perfume, and textiles) in advertisements taking place in over-sexualized harems. Orientalist imagery was pervasive in marketing towards a newly urban culture unfamiliar with copious spending, particularly the newly liberated yet still largely domestic women, linking the feminist ideal of the New Woman with the acquisition of newly affordable mass-produced and luxury consumer goods (Jarmakani 2008: 122, Studlar 1997: 106). Similarly, import firms allowed Americans to dress their homes with hints of exoticism without themselves having to visit the Orient (Edwards 2000: 37).

1893 Chicago World's Fair

Many of these manufacturing and technological developments were showcased to the public in events known as world exhibitions. In 1876 the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibit hosted America's first Oriental dancers, but most scholars cite the 1893 World's Fair: Columbian Exposition (also known as the World's Columbian Exposition or colloquially as The Chicago World's Fair) as being America's first major introduction to belly dance. Modeled after the Crystal Palace exhibition in London in 1851, the fair was intended to exalt the young country's status to that of the European powers, to introduce Americans citizens to both global culture and the latest technological innovations of the day, and to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus's arrival in the New World (Jarmakani 2008: 71). Scientific breakthroughs such as diesel engines and escalators were not far from quaint pavilions filled with exotic others from the colonies, some showcasing the corsetless *danse du ventre* of the mythical, expansive east (Sterner 1982: 42).

Harvard anthropologist Frederick Ward Putnam and his assistant Franz Boas headed the Ethnography and Archeology Department of the Fair which was intended to display various world dances in order to educate and familiarize Americans with other cultures. At one end of the fairgrounds stood the White City which symbolized civilization and progress as a coming-of-age for the arts and neoclassical architecture of the American Renaissance, filled with exhibitions concerning agriculture, liberal arts, medicine, education, religion, and finance

(AlZayer 2004: 15). Conversely, leading up the White City was the chaotic and colourful Midway Plaisance, a sort of living museum presenting various model villages such as “The Street in Cairo” with full-time natives crafting wares and performing for spectators (Allen 1991: 226, AlZayer 2004: 15). Jarmakani describes these performers as inhabiting an *anachronistic space*; a faraway region, distant in time (Jarmakani 2008: 94). Both the White City and the Midway Plaisance were mutually dependent on one another for existence and the stark contrast of the two spaces inadvertently suggested a binary between the civilized, modern Americans and the primitive, traditional ethnicities on display (Jarmakani 2008: 68, Shay 2008: 8).

At many such world exhibitions, The Street of Cairo was a staple attraction where spectators were introduced to the dancing girls of the Orient who equally attracted and repulsed them. Initial low attendance to the year-long fair led developers to think of how they could use dance for publicity; in order to stimulate controversy and increase ticket sales, fair organizers asked a Chicago minister to condemn the dance in the newspapers and to stimulate debates (AlZayer: 18). Fair developer and theatrical producer Sol Bloom is credited with being the first to coin these hybrid American dances *belly dance*, translating literally from *danse du ventre*, the French term for the dances of the colonies (Desmond 1991: 36; Jarmakani 2008: 96; Shay 2008: 9). Many of the ethnic pavilions hired both Eastern and Western female dancers to attract visitors to the fair, and Bloom later admitted that “...the crowds poured in. I had a gold mine”

(Allen: 227). While Putnam and Boas had aspirations of cultivating a culturally aware and tolerant American populace, Bloom instead provided ethnography as entertainment, with the dance's fabricated authenticity guaranteeing its exhibition at the fair (Jarmakani 2008: 81).

At the fair inventor Thomas Edison recorded famous dancer Little Egypt with his newly invented kinetoscope (Sterner 1982: 65). In the earliest years of publicly shown movies, films of dancers were for a time one of the most popular genres as early cinema was inherently entranced with movement for its own sake. Film recordings and photographs show us that the original World Fair dancers were not as suggestive as the legends would have us believe; dancers left only their ankles uncovered and their waists uncorseted. Yet even this showed a marked contrast to the ideal Victorian woman; Oriental dancers sharply contrasted with the White City's classical female sculptures who were conversely unmoving and chaste (Celik and Kinney 1990: 39, Jarmakani 2008: 74). Virginia Keft-Kennedy uses Bhaktin's notion of the grotesque to explore historical perceptions of belly dance in the West as bodies which, through twisting, undulating and writhing, deviate from the ideal by transgressing culturally accepted physical limits (2005: 283-284). As women without corsets who moved freely in front of men not their husbands, these performers embodied social transgressions through public dancing which challenged appropriate female behaviour by alluding to both self-sufficiency and sensuality (Keft-Kennedy 2005: 288).

After the fair closed the dances that were originally introduced as part of a cultural exhibit found a place with performers in the many traveling circuses and carnivals as the *hootchie-kootchie* or *cootch* dance. By 1905 there were forty-six carnivals traveling the rails and over forty larger three-ring circuses, ensuring that the dispersed American public had access to big city entertainment (Bogdan 1988: 59). These were further transformed into a standard in popular turn-of-the-century burlesque theaters, where men also often comically performed the ‘Little Egypt’ persona in drag (Sellers-Young 1992). As female public performance was still taboo, most dancers came from the lowest rungs of American society and amplified the erotic aspects to gain employment as the exotic persona gained popularity with the American public (Immerso 2002: 74). These performances reinforced the popular perception of a link between striptease and belly dance (Sellers-young 1992: 142, Shay 2008: 140-144).



Figure 2. Antique Arcade Machines at San Francisco's Musée Mécanique. Property of author.⁹

⁹ <http://www.museemechanique.org/>

While popular to observe, most Americans who viewed the early dances on the midway from afar did not display a desire to themselves learn and perform the authentic dances themselves. Rather, the Westernized versions of exotic dances widely performed throughout Europe and the United States by American pioneers of modern dance more easily resonated culturally and aesthetically with audiences, as supported by the high culture domains of ballet, opera, and haute-couture fashion (Shay 2008: 9).

High Culture: Ballet, Opera, and Early Modern Dance

While *cootch* and burlesque dancers often incorporated elements of the movement vocabulary of the original fair dancers, the higher-class European ballet and opera began layering the aesthetics and storylines of various real and imagined Oriental cultures over their own movement vocabularies (Windmuller 2011). Sergei Diaghilev's *Ballet Russes* performed six Oriental ballets in Paris between 1909-1912, and first toured America in 1916. Costumes designed by Russian painter and designer Leon Bakst influenced the costuming of future *Raqs Sharqi* belly dancers, both Western and Eastern (Windmuller 2011: 12; Edwards 2000: 227). Orientalized fashion as depicted by highly streamlined and athletic ballet dancers blurred gender boundaries in contrast to rigid Victorian fashions which concealed the body and emphasized the differences between male and female; on the ballet stage "men in fancy dress draped themselves in pearl necklaces; women in harem pants revealed that they had two legs" (Edwards 2000: 228). This theatrical aesthetic overlapped with Orientalist fashion already popular amongst elite Westerners. The Orient has, after all, symbolized opulence

to the West for millennia. Luxury items such as pearls, silk, gold, inlaid metal work, carpet weaving, perfumes, and spices have long come from the expansive East.

In the early 1900s French haute couture fashion designers such as Paul Poiret and Jeanne Hallée supplied women of means with fashion inspired by the East: beaded bags with fringe and tassels, knee-length dresses worn over flowing harem pants gathered at the ankles (styled after Turkish trousers and called bloomers after suffragist Amelia Bloomer) with metallic threads and jewel-toned fabrics which hung light and loose on the body (Edwards 2000: 227).¹⁰ Creative (and wealthy) women might add a small feminine turban to their outfit and drape it with strings of pearls and glass beads, to wear to fashionable Orientalist parties (Shay 2008: 8, Kendall 1979: 83; Bentley 2003: 41-42; Monty 1986: 91-124). This looser, uncorseted form of Orientalist dress became popular with both the New Woman and later went on to influence 1920s Flapper fashions.

Another figure that became quite popular as a representation of the exotic feminine was the biblical character of Salomé; in 1896 Oscar Wilde produced a popular play about Salomé and her lovers, as did Richard Strauss in his 1905 opera (Karayanni 2008: 117). Whereas the Bible portrays Salomé as a docile girl, Wilde's portrayal of this Middle Eastern woman is one that challenges Victorian era gender norms by exhibiting excess, power, exotic and erotic movement, and

¹⁰ These styles would go on to influence 21st century Vaudevillian Tribal Fusion wear.

ruthlessness. Here and in turn of the century films such as 1903's *The Vision Salomé* she dances the hypnotic and unveiling *Dance of the Seven Veils* (which Wilde was believed to have invented himself) and has St. John the Baptist decapitated on a whim (Karayanni 2008: 105). These productions spurred a cultural phenomenon that came to be known as *Salomania* in Great Britain and the United States as the figure became especially popular with young women experimenting with changing gender identity and social norms (Shay 2008: 8, Studlar 1997: 15).

Along with the American ethnic-inspired *art dance* performances of the 1910s, this craze was led by pioneers such as Dutch circus performer and dancer Margaretha Zelle also known as Mata Hari (1876 – 1917), Canadian Maud Allan (1873-1956), and Americans Isadora Duncan (1878-1927) and Ruth St. Denis (1879-1968). Most of these performers never formally studied dance and relied on orientalist images and writings for their dance inspirations (Desmond 1991: 30-32). They were not cultural anthropologists concerned with accuracy but rather performers with artistic and theatrical skills who interpreted the Orient according to certain mystical themes to delight their audiences in order to make a living (Buonaventura 1983: 86, Shay 2008: 14). St. Denis herself got her start in the lower class vaudeville circuit alongside magicians and trained animals before her dances made their way into higher class theatres (Haynes-Clark 2005: 36).

La Meri (1898-1988) was one of the few such dancers noted for her involvement in researching and recreating existing Eastern dance cultures (Shay 2008: 10, Karayanni 2008: 209). However, like others La Meri used Western music in place of authentic Eastern music, as “this has proven to be good theatre, for the average audience is not conditioned to the sound of Oriental music and often resent it to the point of staying away from the theatre” (Shay 2008: 72). Also beginning as a vaudeville entertainer before performing in upper class theaters, she described herself as a performer of ethnological or ethnic dance which she differentiated from folk dance as being a form of art dance for the Western stage. Along with tying their art to questionable notions of ethnicity, early modern dancers often spiritualized their performances so as not to be seen as prostitutes but rather as artists (Shay 2008: 14).

Low Culture: Burlesque & Vaudeville

Dance historian Toni Bentley notes that the Salomé character’s famous *Dance of the Seven Veils* manipulates more than just veils; her dance also highlighted the modern woman’s power to reveal and to conceal, to both create desire and to control her availability (Bentley 2002: 31):

In such a world of oriental chaos, women might imagine themselves to be more than harem dancing girls. They might become the *Eternal Salomé* acting out all the forbidden adjectives associated with antique exoticism, but also with the New Women in search for meaningful transformation in the modern world. (Studlar 1997: 125)

While the Little Egypt character had immediately gained favour with the lower classes, as *Salomania* grew in the upper classes the burlesque and vaudeville revues began staging their own Salomé performances which centered on interpretations of Oscar Wilde's famous play. Some burlesque dancers such as Millie DeLeon (1873-1922) even made a mockery of other dancer's artistic aspirations and claims of uniqueness, as well as the press's distinctions between low and high Salomé performances. After repeatedly being arrested for public indecency for performances which exaggerated and ridiculed the cultural fad of displaying an exotic female Other, she ironically chided her multiplying contemporaries by claiming that they were unjustly imitating her pure, artistic Salomé dance (Munro-Miller 2010: 125).

While burlesque's transgressive power can be used to challenge normative female roles and behaviours, burlesque is essentially a cultural phenomenon wherein the low mass culture makes fun of the pretensions of the high culture and in doing so inverts the class hierarchy (Allen 1991). It is defined as "that species of literary composition, or of dramatic representation, which aims at exciting laughter by caricature of the manner or spirit of serious works or by ludicrous treatment of their subjects" (Oxford English Dictionary Online). Nineteenth century American burlesque theatre was derived from the British form which appealed to the working-class as it exaggerated and mocked respected and well-known high cultural forms in brief comic bits that relied on kitschy costumes,

puns, double entendre, cross-dressing, and racial, gender, and ethnic stereotypes (Munro-Miller 2010:30).

The burlesque show was a sequence of bits without any narrative structure which became increasingly associated with popular culture and a working-class male audience. While it did act as a site for partially nude females in exotic costumes teeming with artifice, the striptease did not become commonplace in American burlesque until the 1930s as the public display of the female body became increasingly commonplace both on and off the stage (Munro-Miller 2010: 153). American vaudeville on the other hand appealed to an audience in between the upper and lower class, and tried to appeal to women and children of all ages as well as men. This performance genre included acts from elite forms as well as popular forms such as musicians, dancers, comedians, trained animals, magicians, female and male impersonators, acrobats, and jugglers. When a focused display of the female body did occur in vaudeville it was often tied to high culture aspirations as they tended to downplay the erotic aspects in order to appeal to a more sophisticated audience (Munro-Miller 2010: 112).

As early twentieth century America urbanity evolved into a culture of display, American artists and film-makers strove to represent the emerging consumer culture and spectacle of urban life. In drawing inspiration from the vaudeville stage and early motion picture houses, they captured many images of the Salomé dancer (Munro-Miller 2010: 14). The exotic archetype of a changing

woman in an increasingly public culture, Salomé was the prototype for the veiled and beaded sexually aggressive Vamp (sexual vampire) of early 20th century theatre and film. The Vamp was often portrayed by American actress Theodosia Goodman, who cultivated a mysterious persona both on and off screen as Theda Bara (an anagram of the words Arab Death) who sported kohl-rimmed eyes and Oriental fashions in films such as *Cleopatra* (1917) and *Salomé* (1918) (Studlar 1997: 115-116). So common were Orientalist films at the time that rebellious flapper girls called themselves *shebas* and their boyfriends *sheiks* after the 1921 films *Queen of Sheba* and *The Sheik* (Studlar 1997: 102).

In retracing the early steps of belly dance in America, an understanding of present-day belly dance culture will be better informed. Modern Vaudevillian Tribal Fusion belly dancers explicitly reference this *chronotope* or time-story of a mythological moment of contact between East and West from which a new cultural form emerged. As new public roles and depictions of women gained frequency in circuses, ethnological museums, theatre, and film, belly dance evolved due to the supply and demand of show business and consumer tastes (Adams et al 2012: 9). Early performers crafted entertainment through exoticism while speaking to and at times against the values of their own society all while winning the dancers money and fame through spectacle. However, at a deeper level, women aspiring to both sexual and social freedom identified with the exotic female Other who came to represent the feminist ideals of the New Woman.

III: 20th Century American Belly Dance

Unlike many groups of public professional dancers of the past, modern belly dancers are not typically social deviants. Mothers, lawyers, professors¹¹, architects, kindergarten teachers, students, and others enjoy the spectacle. There are also many different reasons why people choose to engage in this specific form of dance aside from the obvious elements of romantic exoticism in fantastical images of wild gypsy women and leisurely Turkish harems. As opposed to Eastern belly dance, Western belly dance is further removed from both religious and secular stigmas associated with female public performance and satisfies desires for both simple athleticism and for play as a “liminal territory of escape from here and now, an escape both into oneself and beyond one’s time and space” (Dox 2005: 305).

From the 1950s through to the 1970s musicians, dancers, and owners of Mediterranean restaurants and nightclubs in American centers such as New York and San Francisco began hiring dancers from the bustling cabaret scenes in Cairo and Beirut (2005). While Egyptian street performers sang, danced, acted, and performed acrobatic feats as such as balancing water jars and other objects, early twentieth-century Eastern belly dancers were primarily dancers; Badi’a Masabni, Tahia Carioca, and Samia Gamal created a new genre of dance by blending elements of Egyptian dance with cultural forms introduced to them through

¹¹ Orientale dancer Melina “went on to teach at Boston College as an adjunct professor of French before rededicating herself full-time to her childhood arts of belly dance and circus.”
<http://daughtersofrhea.com/melina.htm>.

Hollywood ‘Arabian Nights’ films,¹² dances such as ballet and flamenco, as well as staging and choreographic techniques, costuming style, and lighting from Western theatre (Mourat 2010, Shay 2008: 130). This conceptual break with tradition wherein public performers performed a variety of skills along with dance created a new genre to respond to new performing conditions. The growth of an elite and prosperous transnational middle class and changing aesthetic values and tastes created by the rapid spread of cinema and both Hollywood and Egyptian films continues to impel dancers to internationalize their performances and aesthetics (Shay 2008: 136-137).

Newly immigrated dancers performed in venues where owners presented a condensed and caricatured version of Arab-American culture that blended foods, music, and cultures such as Arab, Jewish, Greek, and Armenian (Shay 2008: 139). They created a cultural form both exotic and accessible enough for their American audiences rather than an impossible authentic reproduction, a business strategy described by Oriental dance scholars as *self-exoticism* (Rasmussen 2005: 176-193; Savigliano 1995: 2; Shay and Sellers-Young 2003: 18). American dancers such as Jamila Salimpour and Carolina Varga-Dinicu (known by her stage name Morocco) learned from watching these eastern dancers, as well as by drawing inspiration from various media such as 19th century Orientalist paintings and postcards, National Geographic magazines, LP covers, Egyptian and Western cinema, and colonial photography. For these reasons, while some Arab-Americans enjoy

¹² Arabian Nights films were a specific brand of Hollywood cinema popular in the early twentieth century, including titles such as *The Sheik* (1921), *The Thief of Bagdad* (1940), *Arabian Nights* (1942), *A Thousand and One Nights* (1945), and *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962).

Western belly dance, others may react negatively to the public performance of Western forms as a *representation of Arabic culture*, with charges that American belly dancers misrepresent Arabic culture through Orientalist images of sexuality. Similarly, Jennifer Haynes-Clark cites America's famous 'melting pot' mythology, part of the national narrative of an imagined national community (Anderson 1983), as contributing to the long-held practice by the modern American belly dancer of fusing various inspirations (Haynes-Clark 2011: 9). Thus, American dancers face possible charges of misrepresentation when they claim to perform the Arab Other through belly dance (Shay 2008: 146).

While these early restaurant dancers began informally teaching other women, increasingly codified dance instruction and repertoires began to be taught at dance studios, YMCA's, gyms, and college campuses. Various cultural factors affected women's participation in recreational dance; increased freedom and mobility after introduction to the work force during the Second World War and increased leisure time due to modern household conveniences introduced in the 1950s allowed women to engage in activities and further craft identities outside of their roles as housewife and mother (Sellers-Young 1992: 142).

Expressing the Feminine and Experiencing Community

Dance scholar Barbara Sellers-Young describes American belly dance not as "a relocation of the form in the Middle East" but rather "a romanticization of the Near East and... a general movement of increased awareness and acceptance of the female body" (Sellers-Young 1992: 142). The dance's tropes

of female empowerment resonated with the North America's women's rights movement of the 1960s and 70s, allowing a relatively safe leisure space for women to explore their identities as well as the possibility of being "active rather than passive sexual objects" (Gioseffi 1980: 73). This sentiment continues to validate women's involvement in this practice; the most commonly cited reason for participation expressed to me by dancers during my time in the ethnographic field is that belly dance is one of few activities that many women feel they can engage in that honors and glorifies the female body. Informants emphasized that the dance community fosters a positive self-image and attracts a diverse range of women who are attracted to it at different stages of their lives, drawing attention to women's use of the body as a medium for sensuality (Jarmakani 2008: 80). Most students are not young, thin, or of Middle Eastern descent, but rather of European background and over the age of thirty.¹³ Students are often well-educated middle-class women able to afford the leisure time and disposable income necessary for class instruction, costuming, media, and performance props.

Depending on the intensity that the dancer wishes to work at, belly dance can be a gentle, stretching dance or an intense cardiovascular workout as muscle groups all over the body can be trained to isolate at a moment's notice, all the while gracefully traveling across the performance space. The belly dance repertoire centers on muscle isolations and undulations which involve moving

¹³ When I began belly dancing, it was one of the few arenas where I felt I was able to interact with older adult women in an equal power dynamic, as opposed to the unbalanced relationship between mother-child, professor-student, employer-employee, etc.

several muscles in a smooth wave, and unlike many Western forms which tend to focus on the movement of the arms and legs (such as ballet and step dancing), belly dance focuses instead on the movement of the torso; arms and legs are both used to frame and augment the torso movements. However, the student can also choose to remain at the beginner level, where the movements can compose a very gentle, stretching form of exercise which is manageable for those who are older, out of shape, in rehabilitative therapy, or even for those who do not feel comfortable in a traditional gymnasium workout setting.

Within all styles of belly dance there are endless costuming variations which allow dancers many opportunities to dress up in an increasingly casual world. The general sentiment concerning this issue is that costuming is very individual and it is personality and body comfort, not the shape or age, that most affects costume choice. Some instructors believe that younger dancers tend to have more body issues and this can hamper their ability to be comfortable in learning the dance, which may not conform to the strict ideal of a young and hard body found in most of Western society. In an effort to assuage any body image issues, instructors often mention the familiar anecdote that in Egypt, many professional dancers continue to perform well into their 60s and that a bit of body fat helps to better see the results of fast hip work which reverberates throughout the body (AlZayer 2004: 74).

The belly dance community fosters an improved body image by emphasizing the public exhibition of the female body (Haynes-Clark 2011: 108). Beginner students may first perform in events restricted to fellow dancers, family and friends, and then choose to progressively move outwards to more public venues. Most studios will put on student recitals taking place in a theatre or restaurant rented out for the occasion. A *hafla* (Arabic for party) thrown by a belly dancer, dance troupe, or more often a dance studio usually involves dancers taking turns performing for each other Middle Eastern music (sometimes to live musicians, but most often taped), and open-floor dancing for everyone. Most attendees are not Middle Eastern but (overwhelmingly female) friends and family of the performers, and men in attendance tend to be partners, friends, or family members of dancers. Repeatedly attending dance classes and performing for loved ones and other dancers allows for the potential of *communitas*, or a strong sense of community (Durkheim 1915).

Most dancers are not interested in dancing professionally, and while most students perform at the recitals, many claim to dance primarily for health and fitness reasons. One is considered a professional dancer if they receive monetary compensation for their dance performance. Very few dancers in fact make their living from the dance, tending to have other jobs or to rely on a partner's income. Dance troupes are generally formed by a peer group of local belly dance instructors, professionals, or advanced students who meet regularly to create choreographies and share their love of the dance outside of a class setting, and are

commonly hired to dance at folkloric and multicultural events. Solo and troupe dancers are also hired to perform at birthdays, bachelorettes / stagettes banquets, fashion shows, conferences, staff parties, wedding receptions, and other corporate and private functions. While many younger dancers prefer dancing to various forms of Tribal Fusion, dancers admit that they are not hired for this style of performance as much as the more conventional Oriental styles. North American forms such as American Tribal Style or Tribal Fusion are not commercially performed in the traditional American belly dance venue of Mediterranean or Middle Eastern restaurants.

A Space of Play

What makes a belly dancer well-respected by her audience and peers is not only contingent on how well she plays with movement across space and time, but also on how she plays with the audience and various exoticizing tropes such as timelessness, spirituality, and the femme fatale. Dance scholar Andrea Deagon posits that rather than accurately reproducing any Orient, the belly dancer identity is itself an intercultural creation existing in a liminal space between the East and the West (Deagon 2006: 46). While historically the East has been perceived by the West as a sensual, exotic, and leisurely place, the dance itself is also viewed as a reaction to any lack of substance or excitement in day to day life; in an increasingly casual culture, how often do women get to dress in jewels and velvet? Belly dance culture itself is so much about desire; not from the male gaze but rather coming from the dancers themselves – to wear jewels and luxurious fabrics, to attain a level of skill which confuses and delights the audience, and to

exist in some fantastic, magical anachronistic space of spices, pyramids and veils. The dancer creates a space of play which as anthropologist Richard Schechner reminds us is a transitional space of the suggestive:

The field is precarious because it is subjunctive, liminal, and transitional; it rests not on how things are but on how things are not; its existence depends on agreements kept among all participants, including the audience. The field is the embodiment of potential, of the virtual, the imaginative, the fictive, the negative, the not not. (Schechner 1985: 113)

Dancers seek to alter both their own and the viewer's reality for a short time through the use of dancer names, make-up, and costuming. Dancers often create characters they consistently enact in performance, a method often suggested to new dancers as a way of overcoming stage-fright. Arabic-sounding dance names are commonly adopted by professional performers in Europe and North America and can serve as an important rite of passage into the professional performer identity, either bestowed by others as an acknowledgement of their skill or chosen by themselves as a more public showing of their dedication to the art (Karayanni 2008: 165). This practice lends to the manufacture of an Other identity in performance which Deagon suggests allows the dancer a liminal space to act contrary to cultural norms (Deagon 2006: 46). Ayperi, director of Ashar Dance Company of Wisconsin, explains:

Dancing is theatre. The audience and dancer need to engage in a sort of group fantasy where the dancer inhabits another time and place. I am a very character-driven choreographer and costumer. I like to envision a world where my character lived and danced in the costume I am wearing. When I start work on a new costume or concept, I listen to the music over and over again while I try to imagine the world and the motivations of the dancer I'm taking on. (Kurtz 2011b: 22)

Manufacturing Tradition and Authenticity for Identity Construction

While many dancers acknowledge the theatrical and playful side of the dance there also exist deep-seated concerns to validate, to both insiders and outsiders, involvement in a still relatively niche and at times taboo past-time. Sellers-Young suggests that many Oriental dancers connect their dance practice to a mythical past in order to validate the sensuality of and public exhibition of the female body (Sellers-Young 2005: 298). Articles such as “Belly Dancing and Childbirth” (1965) by early dancer and dance scholar Carolina Varga-Dinicu (stage name Morocco), and “Belly Dancing: The Serpent and the Sphinx” (1983) by Wendy Buonaventura mythologize the dance by suggesting that these movements helped Arabic women prepare for childbirth. These folklores continue to be transmitted and act as a very important form of validation for the Western dance community. As explained by Sellers-Young:

Until belly dancing became popular in the 1960s and 1970s, there were no forms historically rooted in western theatre that expressed the cyclical process of the female's natural reproductive powers. *Raks el Sharki*, with its association with fertility and childbirth, allowed women to explore the erotic/sensual side of themselves by participating in a form that was legitimate and safe because of its association with childbirth. They explored a dimension of their sensuality within the confines of a culturally selected gender model. (Sellers-Young 1992: 150)

Also mentioned frequently in belly dance literature are tropes of spirituality and the dance's supposed ritual connections to ancient goddess religions of various cultures (Buonaventura 1983; Copeland 2000: 72; Donalee 2005; Hobin 2003: 41-42; Mourat 2000: 42-45; Stewart 2000: 112-113). Popular writings on belly dance describe it as the world's oldest dance and cite apparent dance movements on ancient Egyptian tomb paintings and pottery as evidence (AlZayer 2004; Aradoon 1979, Buonaventura 1983, Djoumahna 2000: 10, Mourat 2000: 42, Salimpour 1979). While dance scholar Anthony Shay agrees that modern belly dance forms are almost completely different from earlier forms, the similarity being "the rolling articulations of the abdomen and gyrating movements of the hips" (2008: 137), Oriental dance fallacies such as creation myths which assign religious or social beliefs show deep emotional attachment and a desire to associate them with important events, times, and people in history (Zay 2011: 29). In belly dance culture, dressing in objects coded with ethnicity and pastness acts

as a form of validation, as sociologist Paul Connerton and others remind us that “images of the past commonly legitimate a present social order” (Connerton 1989: 3, Lowenthal 1985: 369).

Purifying the Dance: Ethnic Rather than Sexual

Although belly dance has ebbed and flowed in popularity over the decades, there exist many misconceptions by outsiders surrounding the dancers and their intentions, the most often cited being that the dance is incorrectly lumped in with striptease. While they assert that some movements can be perceived as sensual, dancers are not primarily concerned with the male gaze. Dancers stress how much practice and diligence is necessary to even call oneself a belly dancer; a commonly stated length of time is 5 years. Some dancers, such as Cassandra Shore, will even go so far as to say that “it takes at least 10 years of intensive study and performance to make a dancer in any style” (Kurtz 2011a: 13). Standardizing movement vocabulary and proper venues for performance further sanitizes the dance; it is common to hear instructors joke when describing movements that may be deemed too erotic for belly dance, such as a forward hip circle with knees apart: “this is not a fertility dance!,” “that is a stripper move,” etc. (Potuoglu-Cook 2006: 634-643). This over-compensative purity ignores the acknowledgement of belly dance as a woman’s dance, as historically “the cooch as erotic dance and the Oriental dance of the 1970s feminism are actually two sides of the same coin” (Jarmakani 2006: 155).

While serious belly dancers distance themselves from these images by describing it as a cultural form and/or a classical art, the negative stereotype in popular culture of belly dancers as strippers or erotic dancers persists. Tying movements and costuming back to certain geographic places lends them an air of authenticity and exoticism rather than sexuality. Space and geography have long been used to authenticate, as evidenced by the proliferation of terms such as *Raqs Sharqi* (dance of the east), *danse orientale*, *ciftetelli*, and *karsilama*: “Nowadays it is more often called Oriental dance, a label apparently designed to lend modesty by shifting the point of reference from anatomy to geography” (Berger 1996: 43). While many belly dancers reject the long-held notion that it is essential for a belly dance performance to contain a Middle Eastern component, the reigning sentiment in the global community is echoed in the following statement by Asharah, who describes her style as Modern Belly Dance: “If you’re going to call yourself a belly dancer, then you need to have a connection to the Middle East” (Kurtz 2011a: 13).

Dance Scholar Anthony Shay has posited that the uniqueness of American life and culture, where an individual’s identity can be quite fluid and context-bound, allows many to seek exotic or alternate identities (2008). In his study on the American fascination with exotic dance forms, Shay cites cheap air travel and newly affordable universities with expanding anthropology and musicology departments for bringing Americans into contact with the songs and dances of others. In Edmonton, as elsewhere in Euro-American culture, dance is very often

removed from everyday experience: relegated to formal classes, entertainment performed by specialists, and special occasions such as weddings. Rural folk dances have largely disappeared, often now relics for our cultural fairs, and social dancing is acceptable primarily amongst young adults or at special occasions such as weddings. Shay contends that identification with the dances, music, and aesthetics of other ethnic groups continues to fill the needs of multi-generational Americans who may have come to believe that they are in contrast leading less meaningful lives with no ethnic roots of their own (Shay 2008: 7).

Ironically, in the Middle East belly dancing is largely perceived as a lower-class and disreputable form of entertainment while acknowledged as a paradoxically necessary component of weddings and celebrations throughout the Arab world (Shay 2008: 145). While dancers may be considered by the public as comparable to or actual prostitutes and run the risk of being disowned by their families and deemed unmarriageable, the American belly dancer instead tends to describe herself in narratives evoking the dances role in female empowerment. Although at times considered taboo and lower-class, public belly dance has flourished in the West while it has conversely been condemned in many of its countries of origin. Edmonton belly dancer Farahnaz Raboudan fled Iran in 1989 with her family 10 years after the Islamic revolution, and while she has been able to pursue both a university education and a career as a professional belly dancer, the increasing encroachment of fundamentalist religious organizations throughout

the East restricts women's modes of expression and further stigmatizes belly dance in many regions:

Among other rules, women had to wear much more conservative clothing after the revolution and there has been no public belly dancing since then...It's sad. I fear Egypt will go the way of Iran. Fortunately, there are many Muslims in Edmonton who understand and enjoy belly dancing.

(Lees 2012)

Contemporary Transnational Belly Dance

As the global belly dance community continues to grow, new performance venues have been created such as international workshops and retreats, dance festivals, and conferences. These *kinetic elite*- those who have the capital, social status, and leisure time to travel in and out of country - have a profound effect on their city's dance culture (Sheller & Urry 2004). A particular draw is Egypt, which has long held value the most geographically specific reference point for this dance (Karayanni 2008: 161). Similarly, touring dance companies also inspire local dance communities; in 2002 entertainment executive Miles Copeland formed The Bellydance Superstars, who perform in theatres and concert venues throughout the United States and internationally (Bellydance Superstars 2011). Syrian percussionist Issam Houshan, credits the troupe for elevating the art of belly dance:

In the old days I used to play for belly dancers in the restaurants (in front of) fifty people. Now I perform with them in (an) opera house or an art center for thousands. (Gativa 2011a: 11)

However with the convenience of online communities and low cost media-sharing, participants are also able to communicate with and influence those with similar interests regardless of place. Increasingly fast mediascapes create an ever smaller *global village*, allowing participants to refer to other dance cultures as they craft their own costumes, movements and music. Through various print and online magazines (such as *Arabesque*, *Middle Eastern Dancer*, *Habibi*, *Fuse*, *Shimmy*) videos and DVDs, the internet, and even photographs, this transnational dance form is transmitted and largely influenced by circulating media images. While live instruction is best, students can also learn the dance forms via the media body rather than by an instructor's lived body (Sellers-Young 2005: 299). This use of technology allows the dance form to both evolve and standardize not based on geography but on mobility and social networking. For example, while San Francisco designer Lee Kobus's Tribal Fusion costumes are worn by dancers all over the world, most of them have a connection to the Bay Area and have themselves traveled and inspired other dancers. And with Facebook and YouTube and Internet websites, word of mouth has become electrified: "Things have sped up, globally, within the culture of our dance community. I think it has put a greater expectation on professional performers to have new costumes, choreography, etc." (Rubin 2011: 6).

This 'virtual' or 'imaginative' travel has allowed for the 'cosmopolitanisation of taste' in the Global North (Sheller and Urry 2004). Whether Canadian, Polish or Japanese, almost identical costume styles and

movement vocabularies can exist through an expansive network of relationships spread out over a contracted globe. A subjective space of the imaginary exists (intra)culturally in local communities, and (inter)culturally between global sub-cultural groups, inhabited by women (and some men) of varying cultural, ethnic, sexual, religious, and political affiliations (Sellers-Young 2005: 299).

IV: North American Oriental Dance Genres

While the initial focus of this study was directed towards the Vaudevillian style of the Tribal Fusion genre, for the reader to understand the Tribal Fusion genre and its relationship to other belly dance genres a study of its parent dance forms is necessary. While the concept of a genre strikes some as too vague or broad to accurately reflect the many different possible artistic expressions of an art as well as the art's evolution over time, in practice contemporary belly dancers do generally employ genres as a way of classifying their dances. As a non-classical art form with no central school or organizational body, practitioners themselves are delineating these categorizations. While Eastern-style belly dances are generally categorized by geography (as expressed by the terms Oriental, Turkish-style, Egyptian-style, *Khaleegi*, *Saidi*, *Beledi*, etc.) Western belly dance is often categorized by stylistic elements such as movement vocabulary, costuming, musical accompaniment, and group or solo structure (such as ATS, ITS, Tribaret, Urban Tribal, and Dark Fusion).

Tribal Fusion is generally accepted as being a relatively new genre of belly dance and one that could not exist without its continual interplay with other previously established and recognized genres. In both the global and local belly dance cultures there exists strong Othering or marking of differences necessary for the formation of a system of classification or culture (Munro-Miller 2010: 147). Similarly, deconstructionist philosopher Jacques Derrida suggested that

identity is not essentialist but rather constructed; identity can only be constructed and so given meaning through the interplay of differences inside a “system of distinct signs” (Royle 2004: 62–63). Derrida was highly influenced by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure’s concept that all terms get their meaning according to their interactions and contrasts with other terms in a language (Saussure 1916: 121–22). Similarly, in the Oriental family of dance genres there exists increasing recursive differentiation of subgenres, all of which are fluid and context bound. While it is impossible to objectively demarcate where one genre ends and another begins, this study aims to describe both the genres themselves and how belly dancers understand their own genres; as in the study of any culture, understanding a group’s folklore is crucial. Alan Dundes described this practice as *metafolklore*, which is studying the folk’s statements about and evaluation of their own folklore (Dundes 1966: 509).

By its very existence Tribal Fusion comments on all other belly dance genres. According to Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of *dialogism*, texts (in this case, dances) do not simply exist in a vacuum but rather are generated in relation to other texts (dances). All carry on dialogues with other works and authors, continually influencing and being influenced by other works and the overall cultural context (Bakhtin 1981). To explain Bakhtin’s concept of the text (dance) as an intersection of textual surfaces rather than a point with a fixed meaning, poststructuralist Julia Kristeva coined the term *intertextuality* (Kristeva 1980: 64-65). Anthropologists Charles L. Briggs and folklorist Richard

Bauman go further to assert that generic intertextuality is not an inherent property of the relation between a text and a genre but rather the active construction of the relationship (Briggs and Bauman 1992: 163).

The ongoing process of viewing and constructing individual dances produces both the structure, form, and meaning of a genre, shaping individual dancer's movements and aesthetic choices into a specific 'type' of dance. However, in order to do this, this process must engage with at least one other discourse (dance genre) (Briggs and Bauman 1992: 163). Invoking any genre involves creating indexical connections that extend far beyond the present setting of production and reception to link a particular performance to other times, places, and persons. Distinctions in music and costuming act as meta-messages "which classif(y) actions or other messages" (Bateson 1955: 170), signaling to the audience the genre of belly dance to be performed. The presence of these characteristics establish a frame for action and the audience's response to the performances act as a recursive feedback loop, at times reinforcing and encouraging further performance of purity or play. When context markers are misidentified, for example when a dance form is presented as a cultural artifact rather than escapist entertainment, hostility can occur.

While amateurs and hobbyists tend to dance for fun and exercise, some professional dancers who make part or all of their living off of performing openly criticize and denounce other professionals who do not adhere to ever-shifting

concepts of authenticity and purity of genre. In the current transnational belly dance culture, there exist tensions of sexuality, sensuality, authenticity, appropriation, and Orientalism, and so authentication and preservation strategies often allow members of the belly dance scene to explain and validate their own involvement in the dance scene to both outsiders and insiders (Lausevic 2007: 64). Anthony Shay contends that while early Oriental dancers were not concerned with accurately representing other cultures, he finds in his professional life and studies that the majority of late 20th century dancers exhibit “a deep-seated concern to exactly reproduce, in the most authentic way possible the dance or music genres they perform...or at least they claim authenticity in the program notes that accompany their performances (Shay 2008: 13-15).” Conversely, the purist is also derided by fusionists in various genres, as described by dancer Zorba:

Another troupe prided themselves on their precision and authenticity. Unfortunately, their dancing was not particularly engaging as they danced with no joy whatsoever. But they were authentic as could be and their director never lost an opportunity to tell any and all of this fact. In Belly Dance, these killjoys are often referred to the “Belly Dance Police.” They are found backstage at any Belly Dance festival, on-line on Belly Dance discussion boards, personal ‘blogs, social networking sites such as Facebook or MySpace, and professional Belly Dancing websites worldwide (Zorba 2011).

It goes without saying that there exists a great range of tendencies within this local and global community. For example, some belly dancers only study one form while others study many, some will freely fuse with other dance forms while others adhere to strict concepts of generic or ethnic purity, while still others will find themselves continually oscillating between the two extremes of conservative tradition and dynamic fusion. While most dancers are not the dreaded *ethnic police* of belly dance folklore, the presence of such a character sheds light on existing cultural ideals and tensions. While for decades all manifestations of the dance were lumped into the general term *belly dance*, there slowly occurred a distinction between ethnic or traditional-looking forms and fantasy or fusion belly dance, as expressed in the title of the largest American belly dance festival *Rakkasah - Middle Eastern Folk Festival and Fantasy Bazaar*, which has been running annually since 1980.¹⁴ In the late 1970s and early 1980s, two new terms for forms of belly dance gradually emerged in the West: *Raqs Sharqi* and *Tribal Style*.

During the 1980s middle-class Americans increasingly had the means to travel to Egypt, long believed to be the geographical origin of the dance, and so Egyptian aesthetics overran Western belly dance culture.¹⁵ Easy access to modern technology such as photography and handheld recording devices allowed dancers to easily bring back recordings and photographs of perceived *authentic* belly dancers, who danced in styles which little resembled the melting pot of American

¹⁴ <http://www.rakkasah.com/>.

¹⁵ This may have contributed to the decline of cymbal playing in American belly dance, as in Egypt cymbal playing is related to the low-class street performers known as the Ghawazee (gypsies) (Zay 2011:33).

belly dance, leading some to speak about American regional belly dance forms with disdain. As described by dancer Shira:

There is a faction among U.S. dancers that dismisses everything outside of Egyptian/Lebanese dance as “nonsense.” This faction disapproves of American Restaurant style, U.S. Tribal style, and any other approach that doesn't stay close to how dancers in the Middle East present the art. These dancers don't understand why Americans think we need to “fix” Oriental dance by adding our own moves, props, music, show-biz stylizations, attitudes, and other elements to it. They feel that the original dance, as created in its countries of origin, is exciting and vibrant enough, without Americanized embellishments (Shira 2011).

Modern French social theorists Jean Baudrillard and Jean-François Lyotard assert that radical improvements in modern technology have allowed for the increased capacity of humans to share information, which significantly alters our post-modern understanding of reality, or the ‘perceived real’ (Lyotard 1984, Baudrillard 1994). Our everyday life is increasingly mediated by images, whether road signs, magazines, cinema, or the internet; images which simulate the real to varying degrees: “The effects of reality, or if one prefers, the fantasies of realism, multiply (Lyotard 1984: 74). The concern over authenticity in belly dance culture may have been facilitated by the progression of improved recording technology, the multiculturalism movement, and scholarly attention paid to Middle Eastern

Studies, such as Said's monumentally important study *Orientalism* (1978). While belly dance is very much an intercultural creation between East and West, many dancers tend to downplay the role of the West in the dance family's evolution, often highlighting an artificial construction of a time before contact with European culture, a habit known in the anthropological discipline as the creation of an *ethnographic present*.

Oriente/ Cabaret / Raqs Sharqi

The most popular belly dance genre globally remains the one most easily recognizable to non-belly dancers and which appears to outsiders to be the most Middle Eastern-looking. Translating from the Arabic language as “dance of the East/Orient,” *Raqs (al) Sharqi* is alternately known as (*Vintage*) *Oriente*¹⁶ or *Cabaret Style* and harkens back to the popular early to mid-twentieth century Golden Age of Egyptian cinema and cabaret nightclub scene of Cairo (AlZayer 2004: 105). These cabarets were themselves styled after European cabaret music halls of the time such as the French Moulin Rouge and Folies Bergère; Egyptian halls such as Badia Masabni's Casino Badia and Casino Opera employed both European and Egyptian artists to appeal to both European and upper-class Egyptian audiences (Chamas 2009). While various dancers and dance scholars have tried to delineate the terms *Oriente*, *Cabaret*, and *Raqs Sharqi*, they are often used interchangeably by most dancers¹⁷:

¹⁶ The *Vintage* in (*Vintage*) *Oriente* I only hear amongst academics and so put it in parenthesis.

¹⁷ As the majority of informants in my primary field of study of Edmonton, Alberta, tend to refer to the form as *Raqs Sharqi*, so too will I refer to it by that term in this study.

When I did my dissertation research in 2010 and interviewed several Egyptian dancers, while *raqs sharqi*, belly dance, and Oriental dance were used interchangeably, the most common term used by the Egyptian dancers themselves (including Aida Nour, Randa Kamel, Dina, Fifi Abdo, Lubna Emam, and Nagwa Fouad) was undoubtedly Oriental Dance. This led me to change my dissertation title, as I had previously decided on the terms *raqs sharqi*, thinking the Arabic term lent a more academic sound to my work. I think many in the belly dance community, especially those researching and writing about the dance form and its many aliases, began to drop the term belly dance in favor of *raqs sharqi* because it lent a more “authentic” and more serious sound. “Average” people--meaning, non-dancers, in Egypt also used the term Oriental dance.¹⁸

Zay suggests that the dance is called Oriental or Eastern even in its supposed region of origin because early Egyptian public performers were catering their performances to European audiences who wanted to see the dances of French Orientalist paintings and travel lore (2011: 19). While many Western dancers claim fidelity to Oriental dance as performed in the Middle East, *Raqs Sharqi* does not represent the traditional dance of any particular tribe or group. Rather, it is a relatively modern practice which facilitates an increased awareness and acceptance of the female body in movement through combining Eastern aesthetics and movements, and Western modern dance, ballet, and theatrical use

¹⁸ Candace Bordelon, personal communication on January 8th, 2012, when speaking on her 2011 Phd dissertation Finding "the Feeling" Through Movement and Music: An Exploration of Tarab in Oriental Dance. Texas Woman's University.

of space (Sellers-Young 1992: 141). In her article “Raks El Sharki: Transculturation of a Folk Form,” Barbara Sellers-Young describes *transculturation* as the merging and converging of cultures which creates new cultural phenomena (Sellers-Young 1992). Jennifer Haynes-Clark has even gone as far as to say that “Oriental dance is Occidental dance” (2011: 127) due in part to the continuing role of Western fantasy in the dance form’s development; for example, early to mid-20th century Hollywood movies such as *The Sheik* (1921), *The Thief of Bagdad* (1940), *Arabian Nights* (1942), and *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) have long influenced dancers on both sides of the Atlantic. Egyptian performers such as Badia Masabni, Tahia Carioca, and Samia Gamal mixed these American movements and costumes into their performances, participating in the evolution of a new dance genre (Shay 2008: 31).

In comparison to younger forms of belly dance, *Raqs Sharqi* is considered the most stereotypically feminine as a well-respected dancer’s movements are described as light, graceful, and soft, and the dancer is almost always smiling. Dancers typically perform alone and on *relevé*¹⁹ suggesting lightness and grace. The *Raqs Sharqi* costume’s main template is a coin bra and skirt, a combination first crafted in classic early 20th century Hollywood films. It tends to be tight, flashy, and revealing, and stereotypically feminine: bright colors are used, and sequins and crystal patterns adorn the handmade outfits. Long hair is also idealized and so some performers wear wigs. However, this glitzy style with its

¹⁹ Relevé is a French ballet term, literally meaning “lifted up”.

fine detail and expensive fabric can be unaffordable for a lot of students, as hand-stitched velvet costumes adorned with Swarovski crystals can easily cost \$900. It is usually only professional dancers who can afford these costumes and not all dancers feel comfortable in such costumes. Nonetheless it is still the most recognizable style to non-dancers and those who professionally dance *Raqs Sharqi* and have appropriate costuming are those who tend to receive the most paid dance work.

Most belly dance studios I have visited tend to keep their music repertoires strictly from or influenced by Arabic sources, whether classical or modern Arabic orchestral compositions or pop music; popular artists to perform to include Lebanese composer Marcel Khalife and the Egyptian artist Hossam Ramzy. However, some belly dance studios are quite open to mixing movements and music from many cultures, and offer classes and costuming in various genres. Staple props of contemporary belly dance include a mix of Eastern and Western elements: finger cymbals, known by the Turkish term *zills*, the Egyptian cane (*Raqs Assaya*), veils (from Wilde's *Dance of The Seven Veils*), wings of Isis (a pair of large veils on long sticks, used only by advanced dancers in theatre and based off of Las Vegas showgirls props), the candelabra (danced in a traditional Egyptian wedding ceremony), and candles held in wine-glasses. Included in the *Raqs Sharqi* repertoire are also Eastern group and solo folk dances. Many of such dances incorporate the balancing of objects such as swords, canes or jars on the heads, shoulders, or hips, invoking ideas of everyday rural life. *Khaleeji* dances

(Arabic for ‘gulf’) are inspired by dances and aesthetics from the Persian Gulf/Arabian peninsula area. *Debke* is also a popular traditional line dance of the Levant (Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Palestine), as are Persian classical dances, Azerbaijani folk dances, and *Zar* trance dances, practiced throughout North Africa and the Middle East (Karayanni 2008: 174, AlZayer: 104-105).

One informant acknowledged the simultaneous homogenizing of the Middle East and concern for specificity by suggesting that even *Raqs Sharqi*/Cabaret belly dance styles are cyclical: there may be an infusion of flamenco or Roma movements and aesthetics for a few years, and then the pendulum swings back to more Middle Eastern-looking forms. This confusion of boundaries in the purity-fusion spectrum is further exemplified by *Raqs Sharqi* dancer Amara’s hosting of E-MED or “An Evening of Experimental Middle Eastern Dance”²⁰ since 2000, which allows innovative belly dancers to perform pieces that touch on taboo topics such as politics, religion, gender bias, and nudity, which are deemed inappropriate in normal professional Middle Eastern Dance contexts. This event gives voice to growing interest in what has come to be called *Theatrical Bellydance*, a style described as the practice of modifying any genre of belly dance in order to make it suitable for stage presentation, including giving it a plotline and using props, pantomime, prosthetics, and original musical scores (Zay 2011: 40).²¹ Whereas a dance style is an aesthetic only, a true dance form or genre

²⁰ <http://www.eemed.com/index.html>.

²¹ While I was initially overwhelmed with my first encounter of Theatrical and Fantasy Belly Dance, thinking it discredited my entire typology, it has rather added depth and redefined my hypotheses. William Bateson, father of anthropologist and cyberneticist Gregory Bateson, reportedly advised his students to

possess a distinct vocabulary of movements and is discernible from other forms. For example the Goth aesthetic, replete with black lace, spiked collars, and leather boots, can be applied to any movement vocabulary: Goth + *Raqs Sharqi* movements is known as *Raqs Gothique*, whereas Goth + Tribal Fusion movements is known as Dark Fusion. Of course, many practitioners would lump all non-Middle Eastern-looking belly dances into the Tribal Fusion genre, which is itself in the process of solidifying its own generic boundaries.

“Treasure your exceptions!...like the rough brickwork of a growing building which tells that there is more to come and shows where the next construction is to be” (quoted in Lipset 1980: 54).

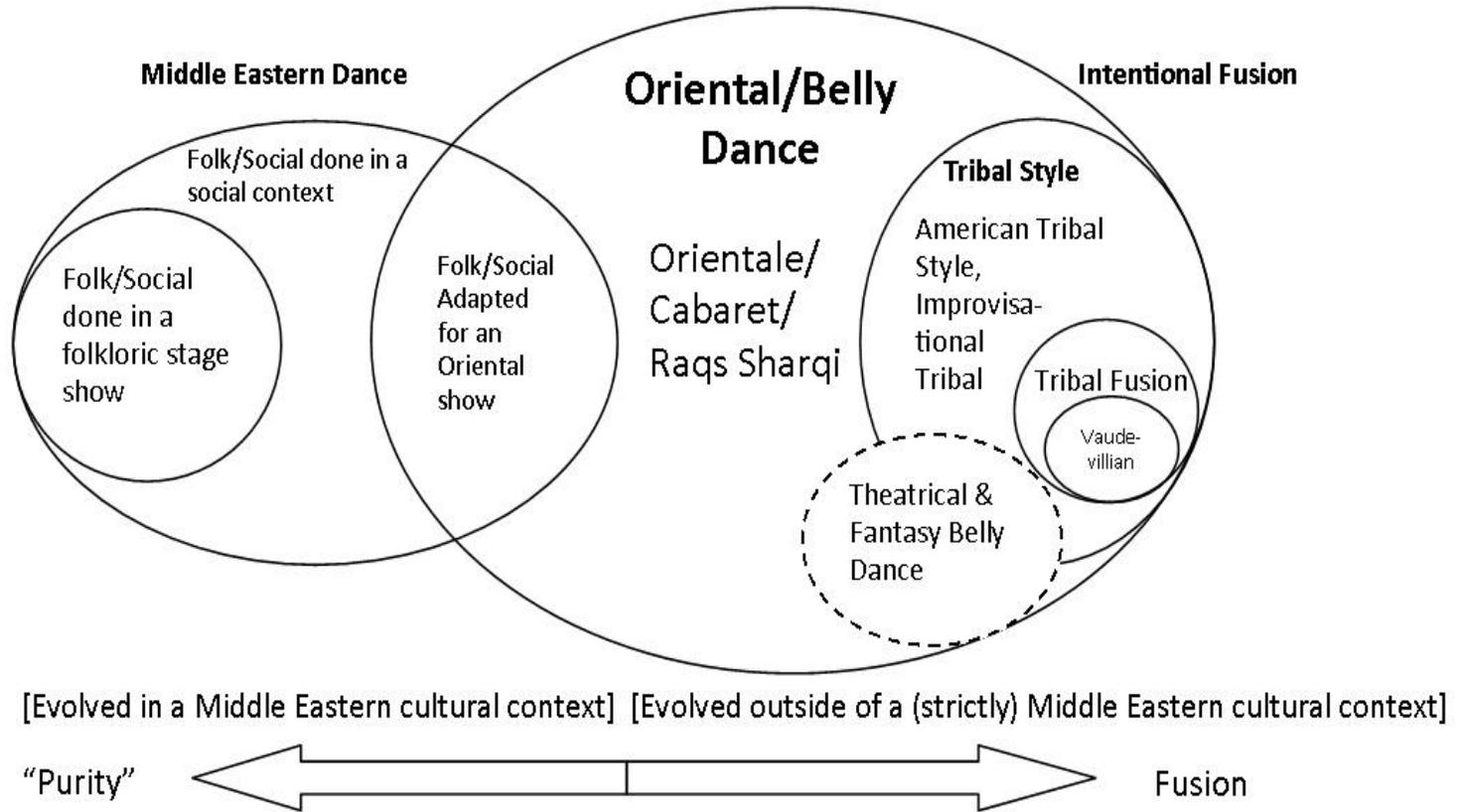


Figure 3. A Synchronic Look at Current American Belly Dance Genres.²²

²² This Venn Diagram was adapted from that of Nadira Jamal, which can be found at www.nadirajamal.com/Assets/VennDiagram.doc.

Intertextuality

In focusing attention on where transgressions and sanctions occur in a culture, interesting underlying values can become apparent. While the Oriental dance scene only directly involves a certain number of individuals, these individuals participate fully in the greater American culture. Looking at this dance culture may therefore act as a diagnostic tool for concerns in the greater culture. In his work “The Authenticity Hoax: How We Get Lost Finding Ourselves,” Andrew Potter discusses the greater American culture’s modern fetish for the *authentic* in everyday secular life, which he posits attracts individuals seeking a sense of unique identity but instead serves to culturally stratify and alienate individuals, based on adherence to patronage of, for example, vintage clothing, bicycle use, yoga, performance art, organic produce, etc. Similarly, on a fractal level within American belly dance culture, there exists a binary of concern for purity and fusion. In practice this binary does not operate in absolutes but rather as a gradient across genres, and also exists on a fractal level within all belly dance genres. For example, in the overarching Tribal Style category, the ATS genre is closer to the purity pole and the Tribal Fusion genre is closer to the fusion pole, whereas in the Tribal Fusion genre movement and aesthetic stylized after the pioneers of the genre are most readily accepted as TF as opposed to, for example, a dance which mostly incorporates American burlesque movement and aesthetic. In North America, the two most popular genres are the contrasting *Raqs Sharqi* and Tribal Fusion.

Within belly dance culture dancers express their social behavior by respecting established rules on what should and should not be mixed, while they express their individual desires by combining various elements to create a new art interpretation. In other words, they balance the general structure of the dance with their own individual texture. While this fusion can cause tension between dancers with differing notions of the role of belly dance, whether ethnographic or artistic, anthropology of performance scholar Richard Schechner suggests that this playful deviation from the norm can be used “to introduce flexibility into otherwise rigid social structures” (Schechner 2003: 102). What is acceptable overall in the Tribal Fusion genre is very flowing, relational, and dynamic in contrast to the fixity of the *Raqs Sharqi* repertoire which tends to be more static in terms of acceptable dress, music, and behavior. Charles L. Briggs and Richard Baumann describe how genre relates to identity and power, as by suggesting a certain genre, the performer explicitly or implicitly asserts that they have the authority to take the genre out of its earlier context and recontextualize it in the present setting. By traditionalizing discourse in creating similarities between their own performances and genres understood by members of the community as traditional, performers create textual authority for themselves. However, the process is never complete, producing varying degrees of *intertextual gap*:

...whose relative suppression or foregrounding has important effects. On the one hand, texts framed in some genres attempt to achieve generic transparency by *minimizing* the distance between texts and genres, thus

rendering the discourse maximally interpretable through the use of generic precedents. This approach sustains highly conservative, traditionalizing modes of creating textual authority. On the other hand, *maximizing* and highlighting these intertextual gaps underlies strategies for building authority through claims of individual creativity and innovation, resistance and distancing (Briggs and Baumann 1992: 148-149).

These strategies relate to ongoing discussions in both popular and academic belly dance literature concerning the construction of authenticity and identity. In *Raqs Sharqi* performers tend to decrease the distance between their dance forbearers and their personal interpretations by way of wearing certain clothing and dancing to certain music. This serves to symbolically strip away elements that contextualize them within the historical parameters of contemporary society. Tribal Fusion dancers on the other hand tend to be more comfortable intentionally challenging genre boundaries by introducing both new elements and indexing explicitly dated objects and performance genres. By juxtaposing the new with the old in order to highlight intertextual gaps, performers explore and alter the formal, interpretive, and ideological power of existing genres and their relationship (Briggs and Baumann 1992: 150). This reflects the phenomena described by Bateson as *schismogenesis*, or growing by means of conflict and schism (Bateson 1955: 171-197).

All dance genres generally struggle against generic constraints and both global and local Oriental dance cultures continually shift in varying degrees to include elements of forms such as burlesque, flamenco, jazz, and ballet; even famous 1940s Egyptian cinema dancer Tahia Carioca fused local dances with ballet and Latin forms. Dance forms that were once avant-garde or experimental, that is, going beyond boundaries of the accepted genre, can over time be incorporated into mainstream belly dance culture as practitioners learn to contextualize the piece in regard to its previous works and as boundaries of the greater genre shift to include elements of once avant-garde pieces. As dance researcher Julia Zay notes, “the standard state of Oriental dance is transformation” (2011: 16). However, acceptance of these intrusions is not uniform, static or unilinear, as writer Sausan laments in her article “The Ballet-ification of Belly Dance” (Sausan 2011). Some suggest that the dance itself is understood in fundamentally different ways in different dance genres; for example, belly dance is often described as a cultural art worthy of preservation (most common in *Raqs Sharqi* styles) while dancers of Tribal Style and its recent offshoots are more inclined to describe the dance as an individual art, open to varying degrees of creative re-fashioning (Haynes-Clark 2011: 106).

Tribal Style & American Tribal Style

Tribal Style is traced back to Jamila Salimpour’s 1967 creation of the Bal-Anat troupe. While it does not attempt or claim to mimic the dance of any particular group, it does blend movements, music, and costuming from a variety of Eastern cultures to create an exotic femininity. Dancers do not craft their image

to portray an Orientalist femme fatale, but rather this group dance seeks out a more unified female spirit. Words such as *folkloric*, *earthy*, and *tribal* act as signifiers of exoticism and antiquity to signify the dance as a post-modern pastiche which combines dance, music, and aesthetics from cultures along the Silk Road, the Mediterranean, and from across the United States. A Mediterranean restaurant and nightclub dancer, Salimpour built on her background as an acrobatic dancer in the Ringling Brothers Circus when she formed the Bal-Anat troupe as a more authentic-looking stage performance for ethnic festivals, San Francisco's Renaissance Pleasure Faire, events put on by the Society of Creative Anachronism, and college campus demonstrations (Sellers-Young 2005: 284). The dancers that performed in these early Tribal troupes also often danced the more authentic-looking genre in cabaret-style nightclubs and restaurants. One of Salimpour's students, Masha Archer, completely broke away from performing in the competitive nightclub and restaurant venues and went on to teach Carolena Nericcio, who herself created the formatted dance known as American Tribal Style in 1987 (Sellers-Young 2005: 285).

The term Tribal Style comes from both the aesthetics and the structure of the dance; as these are group or tribal dance forms, the point of Tribal Style is to develop movements and innovations within your own tribe, and so each tribe has its own Tribal Style format that is then taught in classes, workshops, and on film. After learning the dance forms structural language, dancers continually move in and out of formation in response to an appointed leader's cues. Common

movements and costuming subsume the individual dancer to the group, and the focus is on creating a sense of community rather than performing for outsiders (Sellers – Young 2005: 291). ATS relies heavily on modern North African-based music, often incorporating East Indian, Spanish, or African influences. Aesthetics and troupe names often reference gypsies, such as Gypsy Caravan, Gypsy Moon, Gypsy Trail Tribe, and Ultra Gypsy. In belly dance culture the term *gypsy* is used to suggest the blending of many different dance movements and styles from across Eurasia. While in historical context a derogatory term, here it suggests a nomadic, free way of life.

The ATS costuming style is complex, colourful, heavy, and said to evoke a sense of strength and power. Dancers use colorful foreign textiles and heavy ethnic jewelry from places such as India and Morocco, giving an overall effect of looking very old while in fact being very modern, suggesting an allure of primitivism in identity formation (Karayanni 2008: 166). The staple piece is large Spanish flamenco-style skirt using from 10 to 25 yards of fabric with large bright woolen tassels to emphasize hip movements, topped off with an East Indian choli-style top and wrapped fabric head turban. This costuming is believed to be more flattering to larger bodies and allows the dancer to dress more modestly. Few props are used in ATS but may include the tambourine, swords, or zills. According to one informant who strictly teaches and performs *Raqs Sharqi*, the Arabic community does not enjoy ATS or recognize it as a form of belly dance but rather

sees it as “American hippy belly dance”! When speaking on the development of the dance style, Nericcio states:

I faced a lot of criticism from the traditionalists who feared that the public would regard Tribal as more authentic than Oriental Style. I stood my ground in that I wasn't trying to steal anyone's market share, I just had a new idea that I knew would add to the growing population of students interested in belly dance. People like me that loved the music and culture, but felt a resonance to the romantic idea of a more folkloric looking dance. The music we chose was more from the countryside than the city and we also experimented with sounds from other cultures, as well as modern fusions that were emerging in San Francisco and other progressive cities. (Nericcio 2010)

Even within the once avant-garde Tribal Style, the concern for purity pops up. In 2007, Nericcio attempted to tighten the definition of the genre; only steps taught by her troupe FCBD could be legitimately called ATS and only FCBD-designated studios could add movements to the genre's official vocabulary. Many Tribal dancers thus dropped ATS label, instead opting for ITS or the more general Tribal Style label; as dancer Katrina McCoy felt, “there was no room for growth” (Lancette 2011: 23). Nericcio soon retracted her statements on her troupe's website and instead designated her FCBD vocab as Classic ATS and allowed for others to describe their additional movements as Modern ATS. This formal tactic

addresses both the need for tradition and innovation in an art as dynamic as dance. Valizan of Shades of Araby Studio in Toronto, Canada believes that supposed dilution of dance forms is unavoidable:

People seem to think this will ruin the universality of the ATS vocab, but really, we are all separate little communities spread out and regional variations are going to happen. How often do people get to dance with ATS folks outside of their area? If you do, stick to Core ATS and don't use *your* variations. Or...show people your variations if they don't catch on. That was the original, organic way of spreading regional dances. I come to your village, learn your dances, add them to mine. (Lancette 2011: 22)

This sentiment is echoed by many Tribal Style dancers, as this belly dance genre is primarily described as one that allows modern women a sense of community or Tribe in the midst of urban life: participants idealize a scenario where you can experience group cohesion while at the same time retain a degree of individuality through dress and adornment. In his 1903 essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life," German sociologist Georg Simmel posited that due to the richness of stimuli in modern city life, citizens protect themselves sensorally by developing a reserve and insensitivity to feeling in their daily interactions with strangers (Simmel 1903: 14). Amongst ATS and ITS dancers we see a striving for the opposite: one of controlled stimulation and connection, through sound, sight, and sensing others.

V: Tribal Fusion: an Emergent Genre

In a sub culture fraught with romanticism of the other, belly dancers of non-Middle Eastern descent are increasingly drawing inspiration from their own cultural climates. Since belly dance became especially popular in North America during the 1960s and 1970s there has been increased scholarly output by academics who are themselves belly dancers, although a small fraction of Oriental dance studies are devoted to the Tribal Style forms (Fruhauf 2009, Hayes-Clark 2010, Sellers-Young 2005). As belly dancers seek to legitimize their dance form in the greater culture, this academic trend may contribute to the community's search for origins by creating new concerns for authenticity in the wake of accusations of invented tradition (Hobsbawm: 1983). While all (belly dance) tradition can be considered as invented in one way or another, Tribal Fusion continues to gradually emerge as an overtly twenty-first century belly dance form still in the process of defining its own generic boundaries, often by reacting against the constraints of parent belly dance genres.

A number of writers have argued that individual genres are hierarchically ordered and often tied to social hierarchies (Bourdieu 1991; Kuipers 1990; Leitch 1992). In the Oriental dance family, being able to pinpoint exactly when ATS and Tribal Fusion were formed makes the dance forms appear to some as contrived in comparison to the vague, mysterious, ancient, yet therefore more legitimate-seeming *Raqs Sharqi*, commonly referred to as the world's 'oldest

dance' (Aradoon 1979, Mourat 2000). In her 2010 Master's thesis "American Belly Dance and the Invention of the New Exotic: Orientalism, Feminism, and Popular Culture," Jennifer Haynes-Clark uses Bourdieu's concepts of *orthodoxy* (which encapsulates a society's current accepted norms) and *heterodoxy* (beliefs which challenge the accepted norms) to highlight how some adherents of the *Raqs Sharqi* belly dance genre, still the most popular form of the dance, demand respect for the genre as *originators* due to the forms widely accepted folkloric roots (2010: 43). These forms may be viewed as *orthodoxy* while more recent branches of the Oriental dance family tree more overtly challenge the acceptable boundaries of belly dance, suggesting *heterodoxy*. While belly dance has long represented subversive and feminist desires in the West, Haynes-Clark further argues that "the invented tradition of belly dance must be renewed and revised if it is to remain relevant to American women" (Haynes-Clark 2011: 43). Tribal Fusion belly dance is often described as the genre which allows for the most experimentation, as explained by Japanese dancer Mishaal:

With Tribal, there are no rules...it's not rigid or dogmatic; it's about being innovative and creative, putting together a fusion from all the different cultures you love... It's in sync with the consciousness of young urban women today. (Fazio 2005)

However, in the global belly dance community predominantly composed of *Raqs Sharqi* dancers this flexibility renders Tribal Fusion to be categorized as

the least genuine form, derided by purists as both derivative and degenerate with little folkloric influence left to be seen. These sentiments are echoed in the following statement by dancer Asharah:

This is where I get into trouble and make enemies. I think many newer dancers perform under the moniker of “fusion” because they don’t want to put in the work to learn traditional belly dance... I feel like dancers also use “fusion” as an excuse to do whatever they want without any sort of technical, cultural, or historical foundations under the guise of artistic expression. (Kurtz 2011a: 13)

In practice the most highly regarded Tribal Fusion dancers are acknowledged as those that can perform both old and new belly dance forms well – having undertaken years of extensive training in various *Raqs Sharqi* styles before becoming involved with Tribal Style and emerging as innovators in Tribal Fusion. Dancers such as Rachel Brice²³ and Zoe Jakes²⁴ overwhelmingly acknowledge the dedication required to study the parent Oriental dance forms before embarking on the innovative playfulness of Tribal Fusion. While Tribal Fusion began as testing the boundaries of Tribal Style, a form which itself revolted against the dominance of American *Raqs Sharqi*, Tribal Fusion is itself evolving from simple novelty and ‘play’, where as Stephen Nachmanovitch reminds us “definitions slip, slide, perish, decay with imprecision”

²³ <http://www.rachelbrice.com/>

²⁴ http://www.beatsantique.com/ba_profile/zoe-jakes/

(Nachmanovitch 2009: 15). In its short life Tribal Fusion has grown some of its own recognizable and reproducible generic boundaries, as evidenced by the 2009 DVD instructional *Tribal Fusion Fundamentals*.²⁵ Many self-described Fusionistas such as performer and teacher Deb Rubin credit the unique culture of the American West Coast city of San Francisco for engendering the creation and continuing evolution of Tribal Fusion belly dance, which now acts as a center point for Tribal Style belly dancers worldwide who look West for authenticity, inspiration, and acknowledgement (Zuza 2011: 21).

“Origins help articulate identities”²⁶

The beginnings of Tribal Fusion (hereafter known as TF)²⁷ can be traced back to Jill Parker’s founding of the Ultra Gypsy dance troupe in 1996 in the San Francisco Bay area. Ultra Gypsy was heavily based on American Tribal Style as Parker herself was an original member of Carolina Nericcio’s Fat Chance Belly Dance company. Many credit her as TF’s creator while others attribute the beginnings of Tribal Fusion to Bay area dancer Frederique Johnston, who in the late 1990s began experimenting with the ATS repertoire to then underground electronica music (Zay 2011: 25). In the late 1990s inspirational deviation from the ever shifting imaginative geography of the Middle East was still considered taboo. Even within the once avant-garde ATS genre, music from or echoing North Africa and Central Asia (romantically described as the Silk Road Route) remains

²⁵ Belly Dance Superstars, <http://store.copelandstore.com/tribalfusionfundamentals.aspx>.

²⁶ Zerubavel 2003: 101.

²⁷ Unlike the acronyms ATS and ITS (American and International Tribal Style), the term TF is not in common usage, rather for simplicity’s sake I will use this shorthand throughout the remainder of this essay.

the norm. While various forms of Silk Road and Arabic music are used in TF, electronica music is the most favoured, varying from world fusion to dark industrial. This may be one of the reasons that TF is most popular with younger dancers, as they are the demographic most familiar with the culture that spawned electronica music and have grown up with its myriad of aesthetic possibilities. Dance scholar Julia R. Zay suggests that a true change in dance form doesn't occur without a change in music as the introduction of new music allows for new rhythms and accents "causing some movements to become more prominent and others to fade into the background" (Zay 2011: 25). Emphasis is placed on the exaggerated contrast between quick upper body and torso isolations known as locks and serpentine arm and torso movements rather than light, graceful movements. The often-used term *muscular belly dance* signals the importance of muscular strength and control, and perhaps partly because of this reason the TF aesthetic gravitates towards thinner dancers.

In 2001 Johnston's troupe *Romani* performed at the first Tribal Fest,²⁸ the largest festival of Tribal/Alternative belly dance in the world, where other troupes were influenced by their idiosyncratic stylization. While various names for the new style floated around such as *Electronica Orientale* and *Urban Tribal Style*, it wasn't until around 2003 that the term Tribal Fusion became common, which nods to its ancestors in American Tribal Style while acknowledging innovation. Professional Tribal Fusion dancers do not simply describe their dance as Tribal

²⁸ <http://www.blacksheepbellydance.com/tf11/>

Fusion but rather are apt to describe their dance style as a fusion of Oriental and non-Oriental dances such as North Indian Kathak, tango, flamenco, jazz, hip-hop, modern dance, and pop and locking (from the funk and breakdance dance street styles of 1960s and 1970s California). Known for infusing the style with intense muscular isolations cultivated through yoga training, Rachel Brice has been credited as the first Tribal Style soloist, spreading the style in major international Bellydance Superstars performance tours from 2003-2004.²⁹

Along with combining movements from various forms of ethnic and popular dance, dancer Jasmine June notes that:

...new sounds appeal to the eclecticism of fusion in the dance, and this new combination is both American and global, allowing it to be adopted in a similar spirit of rebellion that spurred Tribal Belly dancing as a movement in the first place. (June 2011)

Professional TF belly dancers have been inspired by and regularly collaborate with experimental American electronica artists such as Beats Antique and Pentaphobe who pepper their dubstep, breakbeat, and DnB (Drum and Bass) music with Arabic and Indian rhythms. And while Balkan music has long been used by belly dancers when performing Roma or 'gypsy' dances, in TF performances it blends with glitchy electronica, the contrast making elements of

²⁹ <http://www.bellydancesuperstars.com/>

both modernity and nostalgia all the more dramatic. In the last few years elements of the American Jazz Age have popped up; Brice recently performed a sinuous Jazz Age solo at 2011's Tribal Fest,³⁰ which also saw dancers performing the Charleston to ragtime piano pieces and a few numbers of what has recently been dubbed Flapper Fusion, or dancers performing to vintage jazz music while wearing flapper costumes. As described earlier in this thesis, 1920s Western fashion was heavily influenced by Oriental motifs as evidenced in the popular headdresses, Egyptian-inspired patterns, and copious use of silks, beading and fringe. These signifiers of a Western past easily resonate with modern TF dancers and may also serve to inspire dancers to learn more about American dance history:

Obviously, Tribal Fusion is not a traditional Middle Eastern Belly dance form; yet performing to Jazz music is attractive to Tribal Fusion dancers because it comes from the same country as Tribal Fusion itself—America. For some dancers, it can be easier to relate to music from one's own culture than it is to music from halfway around the world...Performing to Jazz allows a Tribal Fusion dancer to embrace the fashion traditions of her own culture. (June 2011)

³⁰ She stated that attending this festival was like “taking the temperature of the current Tribal scene”. Personal communication, January 25, 2012.

(Dis) orienting Oriental Dance

Haynes-Clark suggests that American belly dancers could dismantle the rampant Orientalism that permeates their dance forms by acknowledging many Oriental dance forms as unique, modern, and American (Haynes-Clark 2011; 125). Marta Savigliano noted a similar phenomenon when studying the fascination of North Americans with the Latin dance form tango; that dances can only truly be decolonized when practitioners move beyond the search for origins and authenticity and instead enjoy the dance form as an evolving cultural entity rather than an unchanging artifact of an ethnographic present (Savigliano 1995: 9). In describing Gothic Belly Dance and also applicable to Tribal Fusion is Tina Fruhauf's assertion that modern forms are "unburdened of a debt owed to ethnic dance... [answering] the demand for a mode of expression that addresses the complexity of the postmodern woman's life (Fruhauf 2009:122). While she admits that "more traditional belly dancers reject GBD," the ongoing transformation of belly dance introduces new concepts of authenticity (Fruhauf 2009: 135-136).

Far from being rife with concerns over cultural accuracy and impeccable representation of foreign cultures, Tribal Fusion dancers increasingly reference overtly European and American aesthetics. The most striking difference between *Raqs Sharqi* and Tribal Fusion is the latter's much darker aesthetic, a look based on Tribal Style but which often draws heavily on gothic, vintage, or vaudevillian inspirations. Very few dancers of the Tribal Style(s) engage in the common Western belly dance practice of adopting an Arabic persona often evidenced by an

exotic stage name, and while *Raqs Sharqi* dancers often foster a hyper feminine look with long hair and tanned skin, Tribal dancers usually style their hair up in elaborate head-dresses (inspired by Art Nouveau artist Alfons Mucha and the Art Deco Flapper style) and cultivate a paler aesthetic reminiscent of the Expressionist film era, often punctuated with tattoos and facial piercings. Costume designer Lee Kobus belongs to Salomé's Suitcase, a collective of San Francisco Bay Area designers and craftswomen, and dresses many of the top TF dancers in her "rusty bottle cap" aesthetic which she describes as distinctly American:

I was trying to understand my relationship to this dance form from my own cultural perspective. A rusted thing like a bottle cap, for me personally as an American craftswoman, was the ideal symbol to interpret the perfect "found object" to bring into my interpretation of costuming. Number one, I've always been a scavenger, and collect things along the way...Number two, Cleveland, Ohio, where I'm from, the industry that is there, and the climate made an indelible impression on me. The process of decay in that environment is swift and inescapable. In those winters anything metal is going to rust. That's why it's named the "rust belt"! The third important point is the concept of mass production and the visual aesthetic of "multiples" – which is a major design aspect of Tribal adornment designs – as a craftswoman, it just blows my mind! Take that concept of abundance/mass production/the Industrial

Revolution...everything is disposable. People dispose of bottle caps like they are trash. And it is trash! I mean, I am basically picking up trash and going, “Look! This is beautiful”, and trying to make people see what I see. (Rubin 2011: 5)

Repurposed and recycled materials, as well as movements and music, combine in novel ways to highlight the American cultural value of the never-ending ability to be remade. In her study *Consuming Traditions* on the marketing of authenticity in turn-of-the-century Britain, Elizabeth Outka describes the *originary authentic* as a form of authenticity defined by innovation (2009: 10). This authenticity reflects the aura of an original prototype representing the avant-garde; when understood in this way Tribal Fusion’s multitextual aesthetic and movement vocabulary allows the dancers access to a form of authenticity while also acknowledging the potentiality for change.

However as dance scholar Tina Fruhauf notes, Tribal dancers are not generally accepted in the traditional American performance venue for belly dance, the Arabic-style restaurant or nightclub (Fruhauf 2009: 133). As little stereotypically Arabic influence remains, professional TF dancers have had to seek out new performance venues that more closely resonate with their aesthetic, such as electronica dance parties (commonly called raves) and nightclubs, counter-cultural festivals such as Burning Man, opening for rock bands, or performing with travelling road shows, allowing belly dancers opportunities to

collaborate and perform on the same stage with other circus performers. While the circus *hootchie-cootchie* dancer evolved from the belly dancer, modern circuses tend to contrast themselves from violent and hypersexualized modern entertainment, doing away with the historically accurate adult-only *cootch* tent to offer a sanitized and traditional-seeming form of family entertainment.

Tribal Fusion has found home within a larger twenty-first century aesthetic movement recently labelled the Vaudevillians (Basye 2010). In the North American entertainment industry, there has been a general increase in traveling road shows, no longer found in canvas circus tents but rather in venues such as rock clubs, music festivals, and old theatres, filled with sideshow acts such as aerial and fire acts, magicians, contortionists, pop and lockers, jugglers, stilt walkers, poi and hula hoopers, theatrical skits, and clowning. The Yard Dogs Road Show formed in 1997, featuring belly dancers and burlesque dancers often performing call and response routines with the band.³¹ Steven Raspa, Special Events producer for the Burning Man art and performance festival, asserts that “in hard economic times, the bold colors, rebellious stripes, the sense of fantasy, rebellion and humor [of road shows] are particularly attractive” (Bayse 2010: 3). The Burning Man Project brings in the theatrics of San Francisco to transform Black Rock Desert, Nevada into a festival which espouses the liberal tropes of democratic participation, freedom of speech, and openness to difference,

³¹ <http://www.yarddogsroadshow.com/>

suggesting a relationship between performance and civic-mindedness.³² Many Tribal Style belly dancers attend and perform at Burning Man and other such festivals, such as Zoe Jakes, both as a belly dancer and a burlesque dancer. These innovators challenge how a respectable belly dancer (and woman) may express herself, both in the belly dance tribe and out in the greater culture.

³² <http://www.burningman.com/>

VI: The Vaudevillian Aesthetic

Practitioners of the Tribal Fusion belly dance genre make few claims to spirituality or classical art as do *Raqs Sharqi* dancers, their aesthetics instead often drawing attention to the sensual, sexual, and working class history of Oriental dance. Most contemporary Oriental dancers distance themselves from these origins in aspiring to have belly dance recognized by outsiders as either a classical, codified art form and/or an authentic cultural artifact. Still, both within the Oriental dance movement and within the greater Western culture, burlesque performance has been gaining in popularity in recent years, acting as a signifier for female empowerment by subverting both patriarchy and mainstream feminism through playing with acceptable boundaries of public female behaviour (Haynes-Clark 2011: 118). At the same time, “the celebration of burlesque within the Tribal Fusion movement is contained within historical signifiers, perhaps in an effort to distinguish this erotic form of belly dance from other modern erotic dances (Haynes-Clark 2010: 67). This phenomenon echoes a larger trend amongst Tribal Fusion dancers of incorporating aesthetics historically associated with 20th century Western Orientalism, such as the Vamp, the Salomé dancer, and The 1893 World Fair’s Little Egypt character.

Within Tribal Fusion there is an aesthetic known by various names such as Tribal Burlesque, Vintage Tribal Fusion, and Vaudevillian Tribal Fusion. Like other forms under the Tribal Style umbrella, practitioners are moving even further

away from the Middle East for aesthetic inspiration to what Jennifer Haynes-Clark describes as ‘the exotic Occident’ (Haynes-Clark 2010: 130). She suggests that:

The modern Middle East has become too “real” for it to be confused with the exotic Orient of the Western imagination. The interest in vaudeville and burlesque evoke a time in American history when the Orientalist fantasy seemed less cluttered” (2010: 67).

This performance genre’s structure and aesthetics are strongly coded to recall past times, but the resulting form “does not refer to a lived reality or even a fictive one, but to a set of previously existing and highly identifiable images” (Dika 2003: 13). There exists a dialogue between concepts of tradition and modernity as the realization of the Americanness of Oriental dance reminds non-eastern belly dancers of fragments of their own cultural histories through generally lower-class American entertainment genres. In addition, in not claiming to reference the modern Middle East this style escapes charges of cultural appropriation and inauthenticity while still referencing historical Orientalism and so allowing Tribal Fusion to stay relevant to the greater Western belly dance culture.

The abovementioned terms have been used to describe almost any TF dance performance or aesthetic incorporating elements from the late 1800s to

1930s. VTF³³ costuming and performance styles index the familiar-yet-unfamiliar Victorian (1837 to 1901), Edwardian (1901 to 1910), and the Roaring Twenties or American Jazz Age (1920s), all eras wherein Orientalist imagery was in vogue throughout the domains of art, dance, film, consumer advertising, home décor, and fashion (Adams et al. 2011, Studlar 1997). While this range admittedly covers a broad range of potential histories, they are similar in that the use of aesthetics from these time periods indexes an obviously Western pastness.

Much of the popular entertainment of these eras such as silent films and music hall performances both suggested and reinforced the popular view of an expansive, mythical Orient as a liminal space of leisure, luxury, and sensuality. Most interestingly, VTF belly dancers exploit the imagery of European colonialist art and the costuming of early Salomé's and sideshow *cooch* dancers alike. With little concern for historical accuracy, a play of references occurs when dancers combine feathers, flowers, lace, pearls, ruffles, brass buttons, stockings, pinstripes, vintage leather boots, bloomers, flapper dresses, art nouveau and art deco clothing, parasols, and burlesque fans. Dancers will often perform to vintage or simulated vintage music and design artificially aged, faded, and damaged sepia poster advertisements, photographs, and videos to circulate within a dance subculture rife with "the desire for desire in which objects are the means of generation and not the ends" (Stewart 1991: 74).

³³ This style will be referred to as VTF for shorthand in this essay, although I have not heard the acronym pop up in common usage.

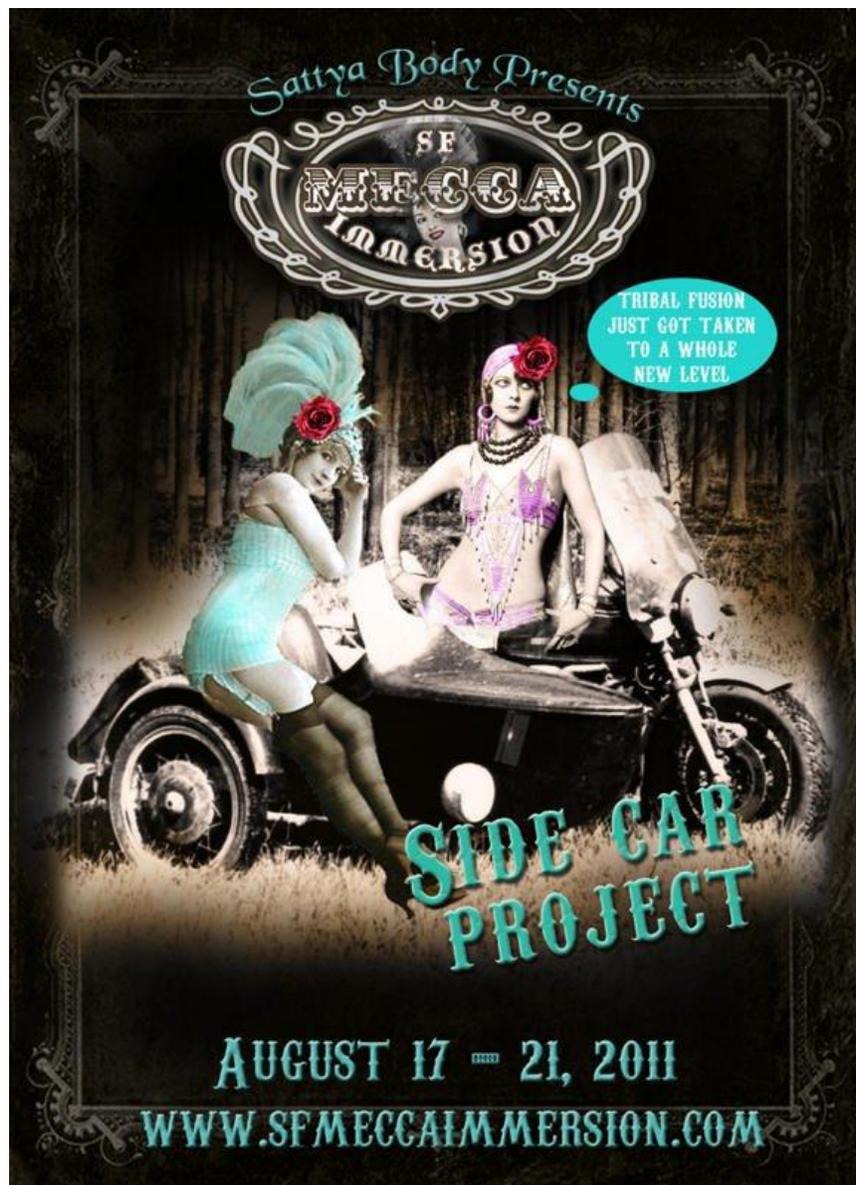


Figure 4. San Francisco Mecca Immersion, 2011 poster advertisement. Photo credit: Jenny Littrell. Used with permission of dancer Deb Rubin, creator of the event.

Much like earlier American burlesque and vaudeville performers, VTF dancers also freely combine gendered symbols such as top hats and bustles. Sociologist Paul Connerton describes the 19th century Victorian clothing these dancers covet as highly gendered: women wore clothing suggesting frivolity and childishness (such as light colours/pastels, ribbons, lace, and bows), which

inhibited movement (such as corsets, bustles, and petticoats) rendering the wearer inactive and submissive; these clothes served as both decodable messages and to mold ideal female behaviour (Connerton 1989: 33). However, in keeping with American belly dance's histories of alternative feminism (Haynes-Clark 2011), modern belly dancers subvert the messages that these ultra-feminine clothes signify by using them as props in their public performance of female sensuality and freedom. Dancers can create a mysterious aura by disrupting time, allowing them access to bodily knowledge of different realities; the aesthetics of Victoriana can be felt through wearing lace, bustles, and corsets, without the historically apropos level of oppression of women. And in referencing forms of Western pastness rather than attempting to adhere to impossible representations of foreign culture, new understandings of cultural authenticity are possible, as explained by British performer and instructor Rebecca Priest:

We have Steampunk style which, with our background in the Victorian era, is performed with authenticity and quite quirky costuming. Given that the UK is the birthplace of [the] gothic subculture, we have a real affinity with the darker side of dance. (Gativa 2011b: 31)

In her study of turn of the century Britain and the proliferation of objects she describes as the *commodified authentic*, Elizabeth Outka describes

...the late nineteenth century fascination with new ways to construct illusions, and with the corresponding possibilities for reinventing the self. Over the course of the next century, dramatic changes in advertising, marketing, and shopping would encourage consumers not simply to live a life but to select among lifestyles; not to stay within the given circumstances and time of their birth but to live in multiple pasts; not to remain fixed in one identity but to perform within many. (Outka 2009: 3)

Similarly, combining various indexes of the past, while seeming paradoxical, allows a modern Tribal dancer to embody certain values in their performance. Instead of having to choose between values associated with the past (such as authenticity, purity and tradition) and the present (such as modernity, accessibility, and continual self-fashioning), they can unite all of these desires and values into one ever-evolving identity through access to previously elite goods. The modern dancer can access both lower and upper class, both the gypsy and the jewels, or “the distilled essences of other classes” (Outka 2009: 15). While in more traditional-looking belly dance forms dancers play at being gypsies, village dancers, or peasants, in VTF dancers reference historically lower class American forms of public (and often nomadic) performance such as burlesque, vaudeville, and the circus sideshow.

While widely considered the lowest genre in the hierarchy of belly dance genres, these Tribal Fusion dancers engage in what can be considered a lower

class habit of mixing elements that the high class (*Raqs Sharqi* dancers) would consider unmixable. However, these polluting actions can also be seen as even higher class behavior, as by playfully mixing these elements the VTF dancers suggest that they are outside of such class distinctions or frameworks and so have the freedom to mix as they please. In not claiming to represent any one time or place (other than the ever changing present), Tribal Fusionistas acknowledge and celebrate the ability to weave temporal fragments together, temporarily satisfying desires for both an appealing aura of tradition and modernity by participating in a cutting edge and novel production of cultural phenomena. And to be able to sustain all of these contradictory impulses which flow between authenticity and artifice, performers must on some level acknowledge that all of these embodiments are constructions; these *transgressive performances* suggest that class position itself is a constructed and unstable performance (Outka 2009: 16-17).

Pastiche of the Past Performed: Introducing Graceful Mistakes

Not only is there a growing trend in TF towards VTF costuming and musical accompaniment, but also indexed are past performance genres integral to the early history of American belly dance.³⁴ As one informant explained, this theatrical trend is not so much new or cutting edge but rather a return to the roots of belly dance in the West.³⁵ In a sense the dance comes full circle in referencing the public performers of yesteryear who were not only dancers (artists) but

³⁴ As mentioned previously, while there exist occasional instances of theatrical belly dance, Oriental dancers tend to separate and delegate these to the fantasy-fusion end of the purity continuum.

³⁵ Saskia Aarts, www.lunadancefusion.com, personal communication, November 12th 2011.

dancer-actor-acrobats (entertainers) who played out stories to their audiences. Individual VTF belly dance performances often exhibit narrative structure complete with campy characters, and it is also becoming more common for whole belly dance theatre shows to evolve (from a night of separate dance performances in secession one after the other) into musical-narrative theatre (with a single cohesive storyline).³⁶ With more dance troupes labelling themselves as *belly dance theatre*,³⁷ the spaces in between the actual dancing grow to highlight the vague boundary between dancing and acting in American belly dance history.

Anthropology of performance scholar Richard Schechner suggests that theatre often acts as a model of and reflection on taboo subjects within a culture such as violence or sexuality (Schechner 2003: 243). Theatre is also useful in commenting on social hierarchy. While the historically Western “belly dancing body can be read as a subversive body” (Keft-Kennedy 2005: 295), in the larger Oriental dance culture unabashedly and unapologetically mixing styles and confusing origins is largely discouraged, at best written off as fantasy and at worst openly criticized. Likewise, the use of various past narrative elements which historically included Oriental dance such as vaudeville, burlesque, and ballet bring to light the adaptive and escapist history of belly dance.

³⁶ As observed at the local Edmonton dance studio Bedouin Beats, their 2011 presentations “One Night in Cairo”, and “Bellies of the Caribbean” are described on their websites and in poster advertisements not as dance recitals but as theatre productions <http://www.bedouinbeats.com/>.

³⁷ Ultra Gypsy.: <http://www.fusion-bellydance.com/Ultra-gypsy.php>, as well as Desert Sin: <http://www.desertsin.com/>

The emergence and growing popularity of VTF performance can be partially attributed to two West Coast phenomena: Silent Sirens Theatre and The Indigo's *Le Serpent Rouge* production. Headed by dancer Frédérique (The Lady Fred) and based in Oakland, California, Silent Sirens Theatre is described on its website as:

a unique blend of the Curio, Avant-Garde Theatre, and Belly Dance. It has a story and pulls inspiration from the Grand Guignol & the Silent Film Era ... Silent Sirens Theatre stays true to the silver screen and vintage style which time-warps spectators into a surreal experience. It is replete with professional vamps well established in personal style and talent.³⁸



Figure 5. Portrait of dancer and Silent Sirens Theatre creator Frédérique (The Lady Fred). Reprinted with permission of the artist.

³⁸ <http://silentsirenstheatre.wordpress.com/>

Also integral to the trend is Rachel Brice's dance troupe The Indigo and their semi-theatrical show *Le Serpent Rouge*, put on with Bellydance Superstars founder Miles Copeland. This production began touring throughout the United States and Europe in 2007 and incorporates various dances and comedic performances set to electronica, jazz, Balkan, and Middle Eastern sounding music:

If Queen Victoria, Edward Gorey, Django Reinhardt and Little Egypt got together for a tea party, who would entertain them? Vintage Cabaret with ragged edges in a strange brew of Belly Dance, Ragtime, Vaudevillian, Middle-Eastern and Gypsy music. Sometimes enchanting, sometimes mischievous, often raucous, but always delightful, these performers breathe new life into the movement and spectacle of a bygone era.³⁹

The performers use recognizable schematic elements to communicate their concept to the audience such as antique and Art Deco costumes and ample use of props and musical gags. Body language and facial expressions also signal pastness as exaggerated pantomime acting was the style of early twentieth century popular performance both in popular theatre and silent films. When performing within the VTF style dancers will often sport campy, exaggerated expressions and movements and parody serious belly dance performances by pretending to be drunk, tired, to fall or trip, or to not be able to execute the movements properly.

³⁹ <http://www.theindigo.net/>

When an audience member first encounters such a performance, they may not realize that the dancer's foibles are intentional; they may laugh awkwardly or experience that empathetic dread in the pit of their stomach that arises when watching someone embarrass themselves. To pull this parody off effectively then, a dancer must have excellent control in order to layer and contrast her skill with comedy to ensure that the audience is able to differentiate between sloppy technique and taboo acts as a way of making fun of the established hierarchy and boundaries of belly dance genres.

In his essay "Style, Grace, and Information in Primitive Art," Bateson suggests that the extent to which the artist does not have to consciously control their movements suggests a mastery of the art through repetitive practice or habit formation (1972: 120). The movements have been practiced so much that they become second-nature and so the artist can then layer on top of them. Therefore by pretending to dance horribly or comedically VTF dancers are actually highlighting just the opposite: how well they have mastered the art of belly dance. While many in the audience may view these performances as simple entertainment, this type of VTF performance is most often performed in venues where other audience members are likely to be other dancers who are familiar with the degree of difficulty of mastery of movements as well as the various genres of Oriental dance and its degrees of concern over purity.

Performance scholar Annemarie Matzke states that “to articulate or embody doubt in performance is a mode of creating a sense of trust and evoking authenticity (Matzke 2005)”. VTF dancers will often display the preparation and process of theatre by performing warm-ups on stage or intentional mistakes such as pretending to forget choreographies, as well as engage in interventions such as motioning to the audience, highlighting what Bauman considers the gap between the narrated event (the script of the dance) and the storytelling event (the dance itself) (Bauman 1986). These gaps allow dancers to slip in and out of their performance frames and in doing so illuminate to the audience the constructed nature of the performance. These transgressive acts highlight the story of the performances construction alongside the aesthetic that the performance would more ordinarily communicate. Through paradoxical juxtaposition of indexed pastness and overtly modern elements, VTF dancers highlight that they are not accurately recreating past or Eastern forms. Much like the theoretical perspective of reflexivity and self-critical awareness in ethnography wherein the researcher describes a study’s limits, problems, and failures, the practice of questioning the material lends the author/performer credibility in contexts where it is acknowledged that truth is impossible to define or represent (Franko 1993: 135). The very existence of these performances calls into question the authenticity of Oriental dances which claim historical or cultural accuracy by instead highlighting the fact that performers create culture in the present.

A discussion of frames may be helpful in further understanding just how VTF dancers challenge rules, orthodoxy and tradition in the Oriental dance subculture through play and thus create a cultural form wholly their own (Nachmanovitch 2009: 11). Sociologist Erving Goffman understood frames as basic cognitive structures which guide the perception and representation of reality; by defining a situation it is rendered meaningful to the viewer or participant (1974: 10). These frames are not consciously manufactured but rather unconsciously emerge in interaction, and this unconscious selection of a frame structures the viewer's perception of occurrences. While it is continually subject to reassessment and renegotiation, successful *frame alignment* between the audience and the performer occurs when the audience's expectations about what is appropriate and expected from the performance overlap with what the performer delivers, producing resonance (Snow et al 1986: 464). When proposed frames do not resonate with the understandings and values of conventional frames the *frame transformation* process occurs, wherein in order to secure participants and support, new values, meanings and understandings are required (Snow et al., 1986: 473, Goffman 1974: 43–44). The frame of *cultural artifact* did not resonate with audience members when watching early Fusionistas and so a new (or old, depending on who you ask, as these trends are cyclical) belly dance frame emerged, that of play and fantasy. Vaudevillian Tribal Fusion's habit of engaging the audience through the *play frame* rather than the *cultural artifact frame* serves to de-essentialize modern belly dance from the long assertion that the dance needs to have an overtly Eastern influence.



Figure 6. Burlesque and belly dancer Zoe Jakes. Reprinted with permission of photographer Sequoia Emmanuelle.

The Emergence of Genres

Rather than being concerned with cultural accuracy towards temporally or spatially distant cultures and their dances, VTF dancers call attention to Western belly dance's tendency towards fantasy entertainment much like the early burlesque and vaudeville performers who embraced turn of the century

Salomania. Through mixing these elements in their performance the dancer/entertainer inadvertently communicates to the audience that the subject of discourse in VTF performance is not only the story that is being told by the dancers, but also reflects upon the entire structure of Oriental dance through highlighting the way a single performance is linked to other performances in the Oriental dance family.

While audience members will not mistake a dancer performing to electronica music while dressed in costuming referencing Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* for an authentic reproduction of the original 1896 play, audience members may recognize historical elements of American Orientalism and find delight in the temporal paradox and lack of seriousness. They may then perceive *Raqs Sharqi* performances to follow with a similar critical awareness, noting similarities and differences between the performed genres as displayed through costuming; for example, both performances may reference Las Vegas showgirls through different ways, one through the use of the Wings of Isis prop and the other through large ostrich feather fans, also commonly used in burlesque theatre. In the most extreme sense VTF performances are meta-dances: belly dance performances about belly dancing, as they bring up the question: "What is belly dance? Culture or fantasy, or both?"

As David Lowenthal suggests, "only an immemorial and unknowable past can confirm tradition to current usage and thus deny the newness of the present"

(1995: 370). However, it is not shocking to disclose that there is no single originary point for any of the Oriental dance genres, including *Raqs Sharqi*, as culture is continually in process of becoming, and static concepts of being, substance, subject, and object are reifications. Participants often disagree as to just what elements are integral to an actual belly dance genre and what is instead considered individual stylization, which can be applauded and emulated or alternatively be written off as ignorance or laziness. While they may have begun as playful improvisations, these actions which were initially considered digressions or mistakes may gradually become recognized as viable options in the genre themselves. Belly dancers will often compliment other dancers by describing them as authentic or innovative, or both; while innovative during their time, they now encapsulate, for example, authentic 1970s American Nightclub belly dance!

In all belly dance genres the opposing drives of purity and fusion (or danger) are both necessary; art history is not a forward pointing line but rather a pendulum wherein progression occurs by emerging cultural forms reacting to and against existing forms, serving the role of challenging artistic growth and for new trends to define themselves by and grow. Echoing this is dancer Tempest, who believes that

“Innovation and tradition coexist and need each other to survive. What is most dangerous to belly dance are poor-quality performances

masquerading as either tradition or innovation. Bad belly dance is bad belly dance, whether it's presented as 100% authentic or fusion. (Kurtz 2011a: 13)

This balancing of innovation and tradition is similar to the concept of play, which gives both structure and allows for improvisation, as playing without any sort of structure or 'rules' is often meaningless. However, in terms of the emergence of genres we are no longer strictly playing when we deliberately seek a specific end result, as it has become a form to be reproduced as well (Nachmanovitch 2009: 18).

After the initial joy of breaking boundaries play now becomes increasingly balanced with defining and refining as the forms become codified and transmittable, adhering to a number of formal constraints for ease of mobility. In American belly dance a style becomes its own genre when an ideal form is sought after and when more and more practitioners can tell you what it should *not* be, as the very act of mentioning the following habits means that they are very common:

Tribal Fusion as a term should not be used in lieu of proper labeling or as an excuse for laziness. Tribal Fusion is a specific style of dance with certain characteristics, and we mustn't forget that it is in its essence still belly dance. Tribal Fusion is not another term for popping and locking, nor is it a justification for dancing to non-Middle Eastern music or not

learning more traditional Middle Eastern dance styles. It is also not a catch-all term for a dancer to use to label herself because she isn't sure what else to call her dance. (Keyes 2011: 42)

While Tribal Fusion began as the fusion pole of Tribal Style, Tribal Style itself was the Fusion pole of *Orientele/Cabaret/Raqs Sharqi* when it evolved out of a desire to expand belly dance to performance venues outside of the Mediterranean nightclub or restaurant, such as ethnic festivals and Renaissance Fairs. Tribal Fusion is now beginning to be widely accepted as being classified as its own genre and has the beginnings of its own purity pole (ideal form). While VTF is not yet considered its own dance form but rather a style/aesthetic of Tribal Fusion it is possible that belly dance forms start out as styles, whose movement vocabulary adapts to the inspiration of its objects, music, and performance venues. For instance when writing on the proliferation of Fusion dancers incorporating elements of the Steampunk⁴⁰ subculture into their costuming, a style which indexes the Victorian Britain and Wild West American eras, dancer Afsana relates:

Right or wrong, I created some movements that have the aesthetic of what I think Steampunk is. Regular mechanization, with rigid movements, and sometimes awkward, but consistent motion. I thought it was something

⁴⁰ While belly dance labelled 'steampunk' certainly looks similar to what I have described as Vaudevillian Tribal Fusion, the steampunk subculture evolved outside of the Oriental dance family and so its aesthetics are non-Orientalist Victoriana.

between popping and locking and Tribal Fusion. Sort of doll-like, but not cutesy (Afsana 2011: 40).

Many dancers know that they are not accurately representing anyone else's culture or even their own historically accurate cultural history, but rather are continually creating something in the here and now through referencing a multitude of forms and combining them in (sometimes) novel ways. The resulting aesthetic is not representational of any actual single past reality but is instead simulacral, "a copy of copies whose original has been lost" (Dika 2003: 3). The historically signifying aesthetics are so obviously juxtaposed that they could not possibly adhere to Raqs Sharqi notions of authenticity which can occur when "the American imagination demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake" (Eco 1986: 7-8).

As the greater American belly dance culture generally did away with the magical performances that evoked overtly Orientalist depictions of sultan's harems, the *Raqs Sharqi* genre strove to engage in simulation of a *real* thing, that is, the culture of the (usually Egyptian) Other. Conversely VTF performers often index phenomena once understood as reality and now realized as real fantasy. Through weaving together various histories of Western Orientalism depicted in transnational media such as Hollywood cinema and antique French postcards, VTF performances bring to light Western dancer's own cultural histories which are just as valid as those of any anachronistic Egyptian village dancers; Ayperi,

director of Ashar Dance Company, feels that “we need to continue to tap into the creative potential of this dance’s legacy “(Kurtz 2011b: 22).

By juxtaposing flapper-inspired costuming with Balkan-infused electronica music, other dancers (insiders to the tribe) will know that the VTF performance they are watching is not authentic in the sense that they are genuinely representing another time and place. However, at the same time the performance is *authentically modern and American* in that it is itself its own cultural form which speaks to the history of the transnational belly dance community and its evolution through various forms of popular media, as well as the contemporary belly dance community’s present concerns for authenticity in post-modernity. Tribal Fusion and the Vaudevillian aesthetic have become their own truths and their own forms with both general structures to be replicated and individual overlying textures to be idiosyncratically adjusted, all the while indexing various temporal threads of Western belly dance phenomena.

Belly dance in any style is not completely re-enacting the past but rather engaging in a completely modern pastiche. The investing of some sense of playfulness into the performance lets both the performer and the audience suspend a bit of their concern for cultural accuracy and simply enjoy the movement and light. At the same time however, the VTF aesthetic allows TF to remain relevant to the Oriental family tree rather than completely split off to become a separate dance form. Initially breaking from *Raqs Sharqi* and American Tribal Style

generic boundaries through playful exploration, Tribal Fusion now evokes a cluster of historical Orientalism through the VTF aesthetic, speaking to the overall phenomena of transnational belly dance in America. In doing so, Tribal Fusion and its VTF aesthetic interact in a meaningful discursive space with other belly dance genres.

As outlined in the following diagrams, all American belly dance forms discussed in this study (*Raqs Sharqi*, ATS/ITS, Tribal Fusion, and Vaudevillian Tribal Fusion) heavily reference both Eastern and Western cultural contexts and histories, and all costuming has the ability to objectify a dense and enduring network of past and present relationships and histories. In his work *Art and Agency*, Gell discusses how the artist (intentionally or unintentionally) always uses his previous works to inspire his later works (1998: 237). These earlier versions, even if considered complete and ideal by the artist, always act as a preparatory sketch for further works. Similarly, this occurs in any form of art or communication. In terms of Western belly dance, in looking back at the Little Egypt dancer, she appears as a fixed character in belly dance history along with Salome and the flapper. Upon closer inspection it becomes apparent that all personas and performances are both (unintentional) preparations for future works, and retrospective to previous works. In hindsight and at the macro-level, we may erase the gradation between ideal types; the more micro-level and detail oriented the researcher becomes, the more they see the processual rather than fixed nature of any history.

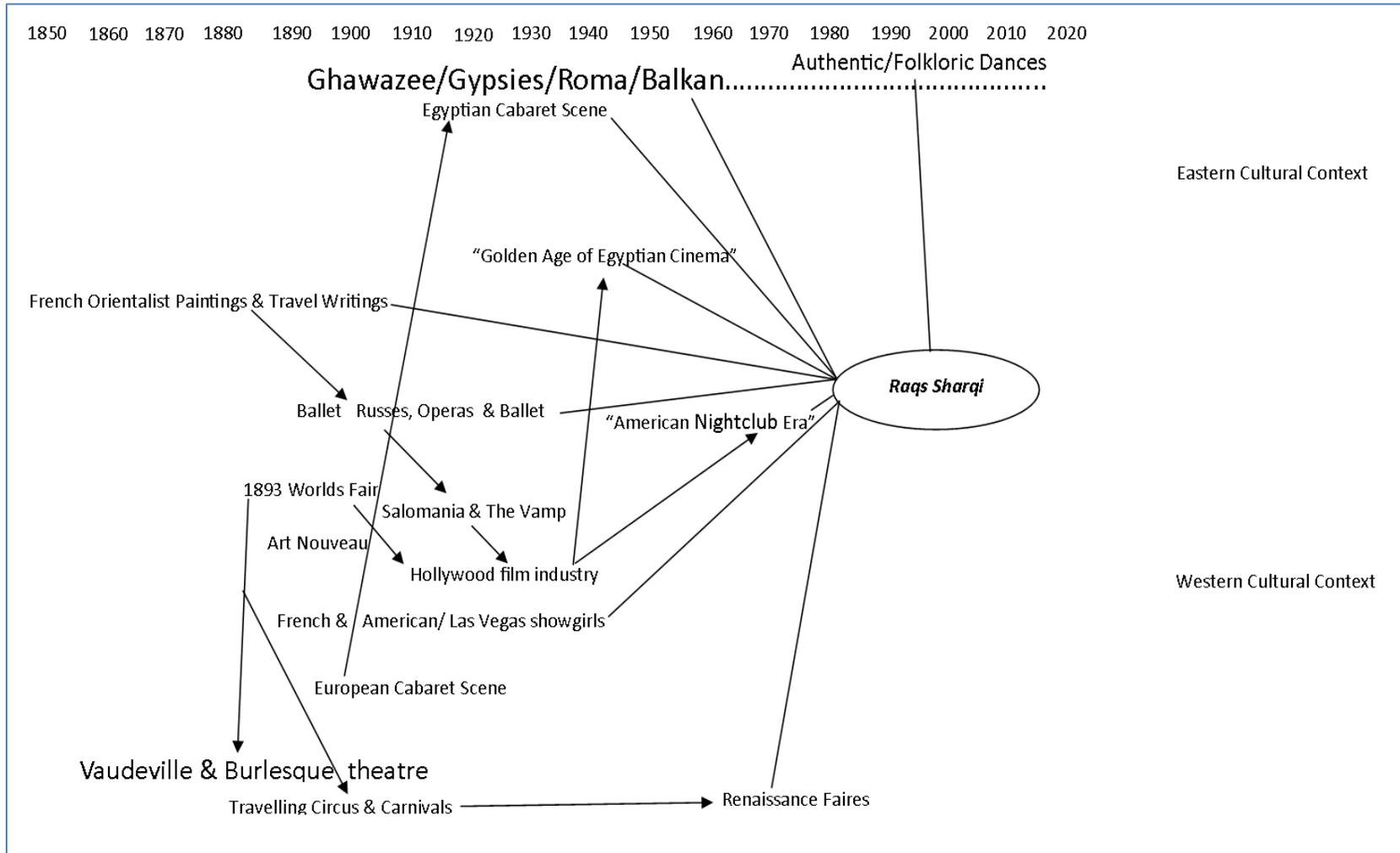


Figure 7. American Raqs Sharqi Genre and its Influences. Created by author.

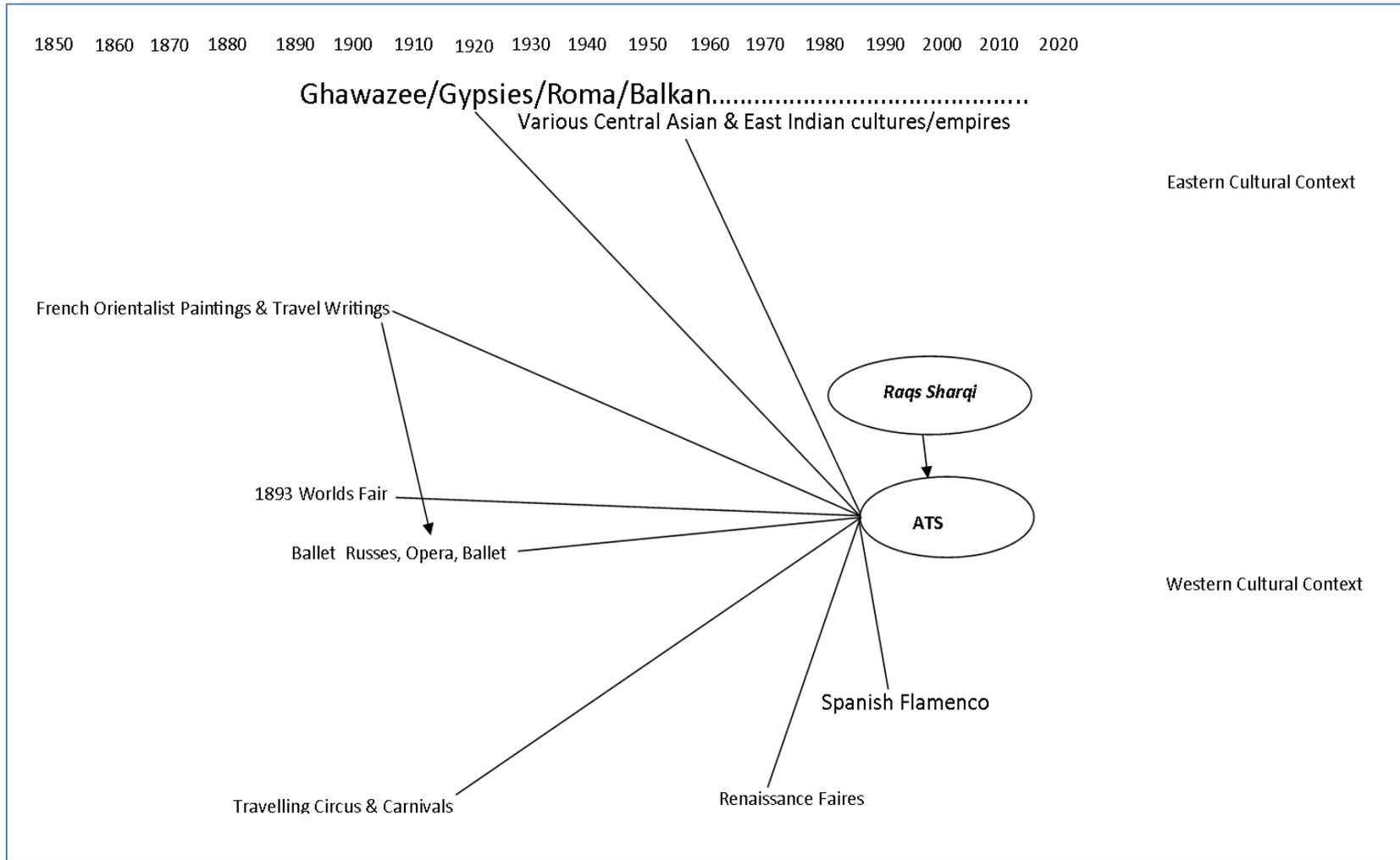


Figure 8. American Tribal Style Genre and its Influences. Created by author.

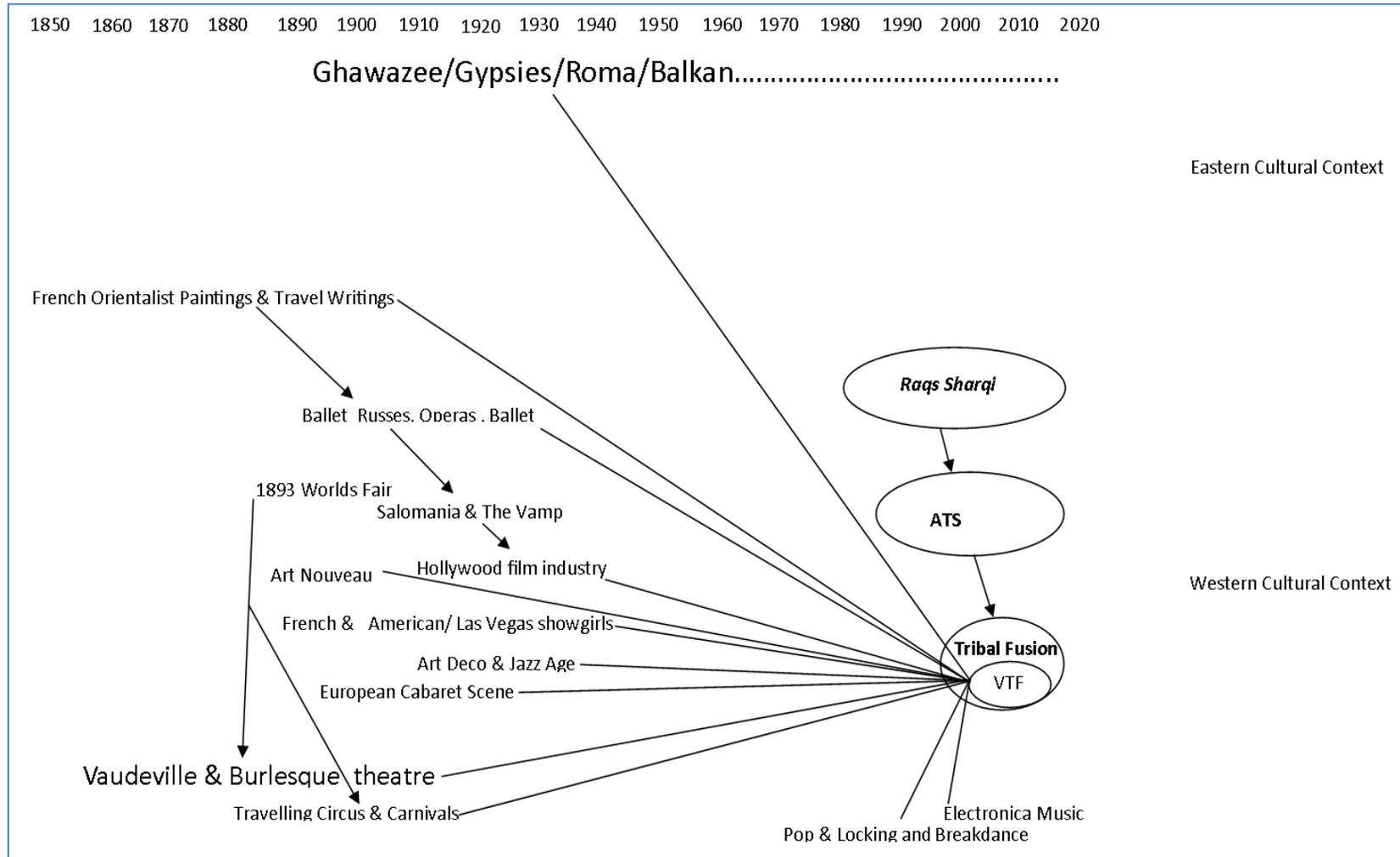


Figure 9. Tribal Fusion Genre and its Influences. Created by author.

For example, while Little Egypt may have seemed to be an ideal type after arising at the 1893 World's Fair, threads of its persona can be seen in the Salomania of ten years later, which then influenced the Oriental Hollywood Vamp and Arabian Nights films of the 1920s, which influenced both Eastern and Western Cabaret music halls, all of which funneled into the greater 20th century transnational belly dance culture. Similarly, while *Raqs Sharqi/Orientale/Cabaret*, Tribal Style, Tribal Fusion, and all genres, subgenres and styles in between may seem as fixed, they rather all exist on a non-linear gradient. And as new research on belly dance comes to light previous accepted histories are subject to revision; while the past leads into the present, so do present actions loop back into and alter our constructed pasts.

While nostalgia has been academically referred to as “an individual’s longing for the past, a yearning for yesterday, or a fondness for possessions and activities associated with days of yore” (Holbrook 1993: 245; Davis, 1979, Stern 1992), nostalgia is also understood as a reaction to the present. In his sociological study of nostalgia entitled “Yearning for Yesterday”, sociologist Fred Davis suggests that nostalgia can be used as an attempt to manufacture authenticity and tradition as well as contributing toward identity preservation (Davis 1979: 86-88). Tribal Fusion allows for ample aesthetic exploration and has incorporated movements and elements from a variety of non-Oriental dance and performance styles, such as hip-hop and West African dance. However, in repeatedly referencing the ur-moment or *chronotope* in time (1880-1920) when belly dance

first coalesced as an escapist art form that allowed for the liminality of identity of American women, current belly dancers are able to glean interesting insights into the overall structure of American belly dance; philosopher Alfred Whitehead suggests that “*how* an actual entity (an experience or event) *becomes* constitutes *what* the actual entity is...It’s ‘being’ is constituted by its ‘becoming’”.

While belly dance culture may seem overwhelmingly complex in its never ending delineations and terminologies, in looking back at its beginnings in America dancers can reveal and acknowledge a certainty of Oriental dance; that it is a transnational intercultural creation not wholly Eastern or Western, as well as a fluid and dynamic form of escapist entertainment that ever-shifts according to the tastes of the dancers and the audience. And as TF dance has been around for about a decade now, increasing numbers of TF dancers have put in the time and dedication to become masters of this art. While adherents of other belly dance genres may prefer their versions of belly dance, they may at the same time recognize the grace and skill necessary to properly execute the Tribal Fusion movement vocabulary.

VII: Conclusions and Further Research

“Authenticity” is in the eye of the beholder”

Tempest (Kurtz 2011a: 13).

The preceding centuries have seen an incredible movement of people, music, and ideas across the globe, and life in the modern city indeed encourages hybridization of culture (Appadurai 1990: 517). The twentieth century saw increasing amounts of immigrants entering North America alongside the relative ease and ability for citizens to travel and to attend post-secondary institutions with their expanding anthropology, folklore, Middle Eastern Studies, and ethnomusicology departments. These phenomena have contributed to a more culturally aware and heterogeneous American culture; mobilities of people, ideas, and technologies continue to incite awareness of and a concern for authentic movements which respect other cultures, even while belly dancing is largely seen as immoral in the East. Modern communication technology such as the internet and improved recording technology allow for more accurate documentation of belly dance as performed in the Middle East. Expanded performance venues such as international festivals, conferences, and workshops have spurred both dance and costuming innovation; as suggested by dancer and designer Lee Kobus: “as things have sped up, globally, within the culture of our dance community, I think it has put a greater expectation on professional performers to have new costumes, choreography, etc.” (Rubin 2011: 6).

This comment further hints at the possibility that humans are not the only active agents of history; rather, objects and the role of chance also exert influence on human choices and embodied dispositions. Variables such as recording and communication technologies, new performance venues, costuming (which may limit or emphasize certain movements), and new music and rhythms (which highlight some movements while causing others to fade into the background), are important aspects in the evolution of belly dance genres.

While Tribal Fusion may have begun as wild play, bursting out of the seams of *Raqs Sharqi* and Tribal Style, the increasing popularity of Vaudevillian aesthetics in the community suggests that it is no longer completely random. Rather, TF has begun to have recognizable boundaries and become a replicable genre itself. At the same time, it has to have something important to say about the parent dance forms in order to stick with the community and so remain relevant to the greater subculture instead of breaking off into a separate dance culture. So what is VTF saying about Oriental dance? It is highlighting a long history of belly dance in the West, one which has always been undergoing a process of change. While traditional-looking belly dance forms have tried to resist this change by adhering to flexible definitions of authenticity, belly dance is inherently processual. The most skilled VTF performers seem to be keenly aware of this and through their temporal juxtapositions, they lift the veil so to speak on Oriental dance's history of metamorphosis.

Part of the captivation of the VTF style is that it does not merely speak to any one identifiable element, rather its meaning arises due to the relationship amongst its many enchanting cultural fragments. Through the performers' use of temporally marked elements of the Occident's fascination with the Orient, VTF serves to

1. draw attention to the role of the West in the intercultural evolution of modern belly dance
2. allow dancers to escape the issues of authenticity and cultural appropriation, as VTF dancers are not trying to simulate a 'real' cultural artifact of the Other
3. highlight the dance's theatrical history and its dependence on the entertainment industry's need to adapt to consumer tastes and performance venues
4. assist in individual identity formation and differentiation in both the belly dance subculture and the greater culture

While the *commodified authentic* is a "powerful cultural strategy" of self-preservation (Outka 2009: 14), North American belly dance has predominantly been about pushing boundaries. Early Oriental dancers pushed against the constraints of the Victorian woman's public role and individual identity by continually challenging acceptable dress and behaviour, as did a larger segment of the population in the women's liberation movement of the mid-twentieth century. Despite the fact that public female performance has in certain times and places caused entranced or disgusted onlookers to question the dancer's morals and public standing, the act may also add depth to the individual woman's sense of

self apart from her culturally defined roles as mother, caregiver, or domestic worker.

Similarly, VTF performances can be understood as a reminder of how performances which seem to threaten the belly dance subculture can actually be used to rejuvenate the form. What was once risqué in the greater Western culture- such as burlesque theatre, public exhibition of the female body, the jazz music and dance movement, the women's lib movement - and belly dance's roles in those histories- is referenced in order to invigorate the current global belly dance subculture. While not striving to accurately reflect any single past, VTF aesthetics send the viewer off searching for the reasoning behind the seemingly non-sensical post-modern pastiche that somehow works, to an overtly Orientalist history that more conservative *Raqs Sharqi* dancers tend to overlook when presenting their dances as authentic cultural artifacts.

As belly dance further evolved in North America, a concern for histories and increased awareness of a need to classify grew. While for decades, all manifestations of the dance were lumped into the general term 'belly dance', there slowly occurred a distinction between ethnic or traditional forms and fantasy or fusion belly dance. Is it possible that the increase in both popular attention paid to multiculturalism, and scholarly attention paid to Middle Eastern Studies (such as Said's monumentally important 1978 study *Orientalism*) facilitated this? Bateson suggests that the characteristics of an art object (in this case, a dance performance)

of a culture may reflect characteristics of the larger psychological or cultural system to which the art form belongs (1972). While the belly dance subculture comprises a small minority of those in America (as well as in countries with relatively similar cultures such as the UK, Canada, and Australia), do its concerns point to similar concerns over authenticity within the greater cultural climate? And while this study focused on Oriental dance in the West, how is authenticity balanced with innovation in Eastern belly dance contexts?

Also of interest is that this trend is not unique to the belly dance subculture. There has emerged a greater twenty-first century aesthetic movement recently labelled *the Vaudevillians* (Basye 2010) which harkens back to turn of the century forms of popular entertainment and aesthetics. In the North American entertainment industry, there has been a general increase in traveling road shows, no longer found in canvas circus tents but rather in venues such as rock clubs, music festivals, and old theatres, filled with musicians and sideshow acts. Current youth fashion and wedding trends frequently incorporate vintage or antique elements, and television shows referencing the 1880s to 1930s abound, such as *Boardwalk Empire* (on 1920s Prohibition-era Atlantic City) and *Carnivale* (1930s traveling carnival) alongside books and movies like *Water for Elephants* (another early traveling carnival) and *Devil in the White City* (about a serial killer at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair).

Some scholars point out that nostalgia is emblematic of modernity as it is only through a fracturing of tradition that allows for this interpretation of loss (Davis 1979, Maurey 2009, Middleton 2006:57). Nostalgia for generations past is largely possible due to modernity's easy access to images of pastness, whether through print magazines, cinema, or the internet. In future research, I would be interested to explore in greater detail just how the belly dance subculture has reflected concerns or interests of the greater transnational American culture, whether it be a spurred interest in early twentieth century European Cabaret music halls and vintage burlesque, or a heightened concern for accurate cultural presentation in the midst of current global politics.

Glossary of Terms

ATS: acronym used by belly dancers for the American Tribal Style genre.

American Tribal Style: this dance form was created in 1987 by Carolena Nericcio in San Francisco, California. For a time in the mid-2000s, Nericcio's Fat Chance Belly Dance troupe's codified format was the only form permitted to be called ATS, while all other Tribal Style troupes were known as ITS or World Fusion. While strict designations have loosened, their troupe's format remains the template for ATS.

Cabaret Style: this term is largely interchangeable with the term *Orientale*, and often *Raqs Sharqi* as well; a belly dance genre which harkens back to the popular early to mid-twentieth century cabaret and nightclub scene of Cairo, which itself was heavily modeled after popular European music halls.

Gothic Bellydance: is an aesthetic or style incorporating elements such as horror, fantasy, vampires, witches, etc. When Goth style is applied to *Raqs Sharqi*, the resulting form is known as *Raqs Gothique*, and when applied to Tribal Fusion it is known as *Dark Fusion*.

ITS (International or Improvisational Tribal Style): As the originary ATS troupe Fat Chance Belly Dance's codified format was for a time the only permitted to be called ATS, while all other Tribal Style troupes are known as ITS or World Fusion. This term is commonly used to describe improvisational group belly dance with a more modern-looking aesthetic and musical accompaniment than the Silk Road look of ATS.

Muscular belly dance: signals the emphasis on muscular strength and control; can be used to describe any genre of belly dance although I have personally only heard this describing the Tribal Fusion style, as innovators in the genre tend to practice and teach yoga as well.

Oriental Dance: An umbrella term for a group of dance forms that originated at different points along the North African coast and within the Ottoman Empire, sharing a number of physical characteristics and shared penchant for fantasy and mysticism.

Raqs (al) Sharqi: also spelt *Raks (el) Sharki*, is Arabic for "dance of the East", and is commonly used to describe Mediterranean-looking belly dance forms. It is often used interchangeably with *Cabaret Style* and *Orientale*. The *Raqs Sharqi* term was not common before the 1980s, as the overall American belly dance aesthetic and movement vocabulary became more specifically influenced by both early twentieth century Egyptian films and by many dancers traveling to Egypt in the 1980s.

Tribal Folkloric: In 1967, American dancer Jamila Salimpour created a form of group belly dance as a more authentic looking stage performance for Renaissance Fairs, ethnic festivals, and college campus demonstrations. The dancers that performed in these troupes also often danced in cabaret-style nightclubs and restaurants.

Tribal Style: An umbrella term which comprises American-born forms ATS, ITS, and Tribal Fusion, and understood as separate from dance forms viewed as more faithful to the cultures of the Middle East. These dances combining dance, music, and aesthetics from cultures across the Mediterranean, Middle East, and Central Asia, and America.

Theatrical Bellydance: is a style or aesthetic of dance rather than a true genre, as a dance genre possesses a distinct vocabulary of movements. This style can used with any genre to make it suitable for stage presentation, such as use of a plotline, theatrical props, and pantomime acting.

Tribal Fusion: the youngest belly dance genre, which grew out of Tribal Style. Its current movement vocabulary emphasizes pop and locks and slow, sinuous upper body and torso movements, and is commonly danced to electronica music.

TF: Authors' acronym for Tribal Fusion dance genre; not in common usage.

Vaudevillian/Vintage Fusion/Tribal Burlesque: a Tribal Fusion dance style incorporating traditionally Western aesthetics, from Victoriana to the American Roaring Twenties.

VTF: Author's acronym for Vaudevillian Tribal Fusion dance style; not in common usage.

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