

# DANCING THE NUMINOUS: SACRED AND SPIRITUAL TECHNIQUES OF CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN BELLY DANCERS

JEANA JORGENSEN  
PhD, Instructor of Folklore  
Department of Anthropology  
Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis  
425 University Blvd., Cavanaugh Hall 410  
Indianapolis, IN 46202, USA  
e-mail: jeanaj@gmail.com

## ABSTRACT

In this paper, I explore how contemporary American practitioners of belly dance (as Middle Eastern dance and its many varieties are often called in the English-speaking world) conceptualise not only the spiritual dimensions of their dance, but also how the very notion of performance affects sacred and spiritual dance practices. Drawing on interviews with members of this community, I describe the techniques of sacred and spiritual belly dancers, how these dancers theorise performance, and how the conflicts inherent to patriarchal mind-body dualism are resolved in these practices. My purpose here is twofold: to document an emergent dance tradition and to analyse its meanings in the relevant social context.

KEYWORDS: dance • belly dance • spirituality • sacred dance • feminism

What is the connection between mind and body, soul and flesh? Different cultures observe differing relationships between these elements and express such relationships in myriad ways, which folklorists and anthropologists have documented in the ethnographic study of bodylore and folk medicine, among other genres, traditions, and forms (Desjarlais 1992; Young 1993). In this paper, I explore how contemporary American practitioners of belly dance (as Middle Eastern dance and its many varieties are often called in the English-speaking world) conceptualise not only the spiritual dimensions of their dance, but also how the very notion of performance affects sacred and spiritual dance practices. Drawing on interviews with members of this community, I describe the techniques of sacred and spiritual belly dancers, how these dancers theorise performance, and how the conflicts inherent to patriarchal mind-body dualism are resolved in these practices. Like Patricia Sawin, I shall argue that “esthetic performance is a central arena in which gender identities and differential social power based on gender are engaged” (2002: 48). My purpose here is twofold: to document an emergent dance tradition and to analyse its meanings in the relevant social context.

Belly dance instruction, performances, and merchandise are widely available in North America as well as all over the world, both physically in terms of dance studios and venues, and conceptually due to how the Internet has made belly dance content accessible: websites for belly dance music, costumes, histories, and ruminations abound, in addition to the hundreds of belly dance performances that can be found on YouTube for free and DVDs that can be purchased. However, I believe it is important

to study belly dance for many reasons, not simply because it has become a ubiquitous fixture in many cultural landscapes. Belly dance carries serious implications for gender identity, as it is a dance mostly done by women but is also highly sexualised in the perceptions of many outsiders – wrongly so, for the most part. Most of the belly dancers who discuss their views in print and online agree that while belly dance *can* be sexy, it is not, in most cases, a seduction or invitation. Additionally, since belly dance has roots in dances from the Middle East, North Africa, the Mediterranean, and India, it raises problematic questions of authenticity and appropriation. Belly dance is still practiced in many parts of the Middle East, selectively depending upon local Islamic laws, and there continues to be discussion of what makes a particular belly dance style, performer, or performance ‘authentic’. There are many sub-styles of belly dance in America, and each is authentic in its own right as an expression of individual and sub-cultural identity.<sup>1</sup> Further, any form of dance, social or solo virtuosic, is capable of giving insights into both individual and cultural beliefs.

My search for numinous body techniques is inspired in part by Marcel Mauss’s (1979: 93) comment in his essay “Body Techniques” that he believes there are biological means of entering into communication with God. Whether one believes one is communicating with God, or invoking an elemental essence, or honouring some other aspect of the divine, I have observed common body techniques within the belly dance community. Belly dance has a history of connection with women’s spirituality and goddess religions (see Stewart 2000). Janice Crosby’s article “The Goddess Dances: Spirituality and American Women’s Interpretations of Middle Eastern Dance” describes some of the links between contemporary American goddess religions and belly dance. Crosby estimates that “one-third or more [belly] dancers associate the idea of a Goddess with Middle Eastern dance in some way” (2000: 180). Crosby’s study, based on fieldwork and participant-observation, documents the connections between women’s experiences of spirituality and belly dance. Yet not every belly dancer worships a/the Goddess. This is seen in Donnalee Dox’s categories of spiritual belly dance: goddess dancing, priestess dancing, birth dancing, and dance meditation. In Dox’s (2005) “Spirit from the Body: Belly Dance as a Spiritual Practice”, she explores how belly dance is constructed spiritually, and how the four categories inform and reflect women’s experiences of the dance. There are varying opinions on whether belly dance has always been constructed as spiritual or sacred, though dance scholar Andrea Deagon notes how “the idea that belly dance has sacred origins, and that it engenders and represents spiritual experience, finds expression in the Western discourse of the dance from the beginnings of its boom period in the late 1960s and early 1970s” (2005: 255). Both Crosby’s and Dox’s articles provide a frame for my own investigation. I am interested in how, religiously or not, belly dancers interact with spiritual, mysterious, or even simply non-physical elements. What roles do these elements play in performative and performance modes? And what do they accomplish?

Linking belly dance with the numinous, I must also discuss embodiment. Anya Royce writes in her paper “Embodying Conscience” of the “potential of dance to speak to or reveal matters that reflect deeply held values” (2007: 1). Yet it is not only dance that can lead to insights about a culture, but also the bodies that perform the dances. Specifically:

The danced body carries within itself the power to comment on, persuade, confront, declare, suggest, present, remind, and resist society's most deeply cherished notions of appropriateness and moral value. This power resides in the shape of the body and of its elaborated movements in dance and in the meanings, implicit and explicit, we assign those forms. (Ibid.: 2)

Belly dance is an especially intriguing dance form to discuss in relation to embodiment, as belly dancers are so often perceived as akin to strippers, due to the dance's connections to Orientalist harem fantasies and to the fact that many belly dance costumes reveal the dancer's midriff in order to show off her muscle control. Belly dancers resist objectification using a number of strategies, some of which include taking a spiritual approach to the dance, or performing for restricted audiences. Sheila Bock's master's thesis "From Harem Fantasy to Female Empowerment: Rhetorical Strategies and Dynamics of Style in American Belly Dance" (2005) discusses many of these methods of managing stigma and achieving subjectivity. There is agency within this dance form, but dancers still face obstacles in expressing visions that do not conform to mainstream ideas about belly dance, women, and gender roles.

#### DISCOURSES OF DANCE: PERFORMANCE, PERFORMATIVITY, AND BODIES

As Sheila Bock and Katherine Borland demonstrate in their ethnographic exploration of belly dance and salsa in contemporary America: "Dance studies provide valuable theoretical models for thinking about how the experience of the body mediates the complex dynamics between representation and identity" (2011: 29). Dance, especially dance on a stage before an audience, is a cultural performance, and all performances involve identities, ideologies, and risks. According to Richard Bauman in *Verbal Art as Performance*, performance is "responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative competence" (1977: 11). Deborah Kapchan defines performances as "aesthetic practices – patterns of behavior, ways of speaking, manners of bodily comportment – whose repetitions situate actors in time and space, structuring individual and group identities" (1995: 479). Belly dance fits both definitions of performance, with the added dimensions of concerns about embodiment, gender identity, and authenticity. As an aesthetic practice, a display event, artistic communication, and a genre that trains bodies to move in certain ways, belly dance is a site of highly charged individual and cultural tensions.

Because belly dance has the potential to represent or embody the numinous and to engage the dancer in a numinous state of flow, belly dance is thus a performative art in addition to being a performance art: it makes things real. Belly dancers perform strength and beauty, often breaking taboos regarding women's (and sometimes men's) ideal body images, and reclaiming spaces for celebration and worship. As Barbara Sellers-Young points out: "For many women during the second phase of the feminist movement, belly dance became an erotic site of power and transcendence" (2005: 289). The multiplicity of variations found within belly dancing – different styles are prominent in different countries and regions – ensures that many potential meanings can be performed and performatively enacted.

Dance performances are also performative in the sense that they construct and articulate realities, as do the Kaluli seances that Edward Schieffelin studied, naming those performances “emergent social constructions” (1985: 721). Belly dance performances that engage with the numinous are constructions, in that they are grounded in particular worldviews, and they are also emergent, evanescent, creating meaning in the moment. Focusing on performance and performativity provides a useful framework for exploring these issues because these concepts foreground experience: as we shall see, the dancers interviewed talk about the transformative potential of spiritual belly dance as well as how dance experiences feel in their bodies. Here, I follow Bock and Borland in paying special attention to the narrated experiences of dancers in addition to their self-conscious representations while practicing and performing. While issues of cultural representation cannot be ignored, the focus on conscious self-fashioning led Bock and Borland to discover that “the experience of dancing provides a release from restrictive notions of the female body derived from contemporary American popular culture” (2011: 3).

The context in which belly dancers make meaningful choices about their bodies and their art is an oppressive one, as the West is still largely patriarchal (meaning that men hold more power than women do; discussed in Bowden, Mummery 2009: 75). An important feature of most patriarchal societies is dualism, or “the assumption that there are two distinct, mutually exclusive and mutually exhaustive substances, mind and body, each of which inhabits its own self-contained sphere” (Grosz 1994: 6). Dualism is also gendered, aligning women with the body, nature, and emotions/irrationality, while men are aligned with the mind, culture, and reason/rationality (Grosz 1994; Bordo 2003; Lorber, Moore 2007; Bowden, Mummery 2009). Because of the gendering of dualism, it is especially transgressive for women to dance in ways that bring them closer to the immaterial world of spirit and religion.

Further, the history of belly dance in the United States has led to many incorrect assumptions about the sexualisation of the dance. As Andrea Kitta (2009: 46–47) points out:

The crossing of the traditional gender barrier and its exportation led to consideration of belly dance as a disreputable art; it was accorded little prestige in its original countries. In the United States, Victorian mores ruling women’s bodies combined with racist attitudes regarding Western Asian and North African cultures in general essentially condemned belly dancing’s forms and costumes to the vaudeville and burlesque traditions.

These historical factors still figure largely in the experiences of belly dancers who are equated with strippers or asked to perform strip teases for male audiences. Paradoxically, the sentiment that belly dancers should wear less (i.e. act like strippers) is often paired with disgust toward belly dancers who are fleshier than the skinny idealised female body. Belly dancers contest these disrespectful judgments in a couple of ways. Dancing in women-only spaces is one strategy. As for another, Sheila Bock and Katherine Borland (2011: 24) write,

[L]earned movement vocabularies work to challenge disciplinary ideals of femininity produced and circulated within contemporary Western culture. Dancers self-consciously invoke “exotic” cultures in order to create alternative ideals through the experience of dancing, which in turn open up opportunities for alternate embodied forms of self-expression.

Cultural borrowings and embodied experiences are thus one way to defy oppressive norms. Privileging the spiritual is another way. Donnalee Dox (2005: 333) writes:

The concept of femininity constructed in spiritual belly dance reverses western conventions of beauty by engaging the very movements that would otherwise code the female body as a sexual object, privatizing them and giving them new meaning.

Analysing dancers' strategies at the level of their bodies' movement and technique is thus one of the methods I adopt for studying spiritual belly dance in its social context.

## METHODOLOGY AND IDENTITIES

In order to gather data for this study, I contacted belly dancers I know in Bloomington, Indiana (where I lived from 2004 until 2011) and posted to online forums to recruit interviewees from around the country. I conducted face-to-face interviews with local dancers and e-mail interviews with dancers who are not local. Most of these interviews were conducted in 2007 and 2008 with some follow-up in 2012. My questions aimed first of all to get a sense of why my collaborators dance and how they identify as dancers, including their training and favoured styles. I then inquired about whether my collaborators experience their dancing as spiritual, and if so, how these experiences connect to the rest of their lives. I asked about specific movements, costumes, and music in these contexts. Where possible, I asked my collaborators to show me movements that they use in their dancing so that I could try to move with them. Additionally, I asked about the role of embodiment, symbols, and audiences, as well as about how the dancers conceive of the messages they express while dancing. I encouraged each dancer to tell me which information to include in their biographical statements, and where possible, I got feedback on the paper in various stages, thus practicing a low-key form of reciprocal ethnography (Lawless 1991).

While I bring in theories from folkloristics, performance studies, and dance anthropology, I prefer to let my collaborators speak for themselves where possible. I respect their requests for confidentiality, so some statements cannot have identifiers attached. Other dancers prefer to be identified by their stage names and partial contextual information, so I will include this information where possible. It is not my intent to make generalising statements about the entire American belly dance population, or all those dancers who engage in numinous phenomena, even if such a thing were possible. Rather, I explore how performing and embodying the numinous allows individual dancers to engage with corporeality, spirituality, and artistry in their lives. The importance of individuals within this study is part of what makes it both important and enjoyable – I find, as have other scholars, that there is a definite pleasure in interacting with performers and artists, as they are so self-aware and energetic. In my other work with belly dancers I observed that they are intelligent and creative people who are more than capable of articulating why they make certain aesthetic choices (Jorgensen 2006: 86). The same is true here.

It must be briefly mentioned that I myself belly dance, and thus my fieldwork is informed by my experiences within this community as well as the analytical frames I bring with me as a scholar. Identifying as an insider certainly helped me gain access

to these people, and with over 15 years of belly dance experience (at the time of publication), I definitely count as an insider. While I do not primarily explore sacred and spiritual themes in my dancing (either in my solo work or group collaborations), I am agnostic enough to be open to the idea that sacred and spiritual dance does something for its practitioners, which has helped me find common ground during our discussions.

A general overview of my collaborators will give a sense of their perspectives. I have conducted interviews over e-mail with nine dancers, and interviews in person with three dancers. The dancers occupy a broad range of professions and positions across the United States. Most fall between the ages of twenty and fifty years old (at the time of interviewing). Some of these dancers are beginners and do not perform the dance in public often or at all, while other dancers are professionals in the sense that they are paid to teach and perform, and in some cases they financially support themselves partially or primarily from dancing. I refer them to by first name or stage name, and in some instances permit a greater degree of anonymity by referring to the dancer only by an initial.

First, I ought to note that belly dance is not spiritual for everyone. Plenty of individuals engage in belly dance for other reasons: to enhance their physical fitness, to express themselves creatively, to connect with other cultures, because they are drawn to the music or costumes, and so on. One of my collaborators, Cheri, is an example of someone who belly dances for “earthier” reasons, as she terms them. At the time of the interview, Cheri had been belly dancing for around five years, and has studied Egyptian and Fusion styles. She characterises her dancing as inspired by great music, a party-like atmosphere, and a desire to have a great time. Cheri is a computer-assisted designer in Florida, and she identifies as a Southern Christian but one who strongly identifies with the Christian Left. She contacted me by e-mail, interested in participating in my study, but wrote that her engagement with belly dance was for

Earthier reasons, [...] (as opposed to loftier, more spiritual reasons, [...]) I think belly dance is beautiful, and asks for precision and control of your body. And sexeh. And it’s about the girliest thing I do with my girlfriends, besides henna (which I also do because it’s fun!). It also makes me a better horseback rider, as it makes for a more flexible and stronger trunk. Plus, it’s pretty unusual, and I like strange. While everyone else was learning to Tango, I wanted to learn belly dance.

For her, belly dance is expressive of “the exuberance of being alive” and she enjoys watching many different kinds of belly dancing. She and her friends sew costumes together and do henna, thus illustrating the community-building appeal that belly dance holds for many of its practitioners.

Margaret is the troupe director of Different Drummer Belly Dancers in Bloomington. She is a college lecturer and webmaster, and she identifies as Unitarian Universalist with a pagan bent. Margaret has belly danced steadily for over 13 years, having been introduced to belly dance as a youngster in the Society for Creative Anachronism (a recreational hobby group in which participants reenact the Middle Ages). She has studied many styles and currently performs a mix of traditional, American Tribal Style,<sup>2</sup> and tribal fusion belly dance. She dances primarily to “the music of her people”: rock and roll. She characterises herself as a lyrical dancer even as she is drawn to sharper isolations and shimmies. Her troupe combines cabaret, American Tribal Style, and fusion techniques. The other troupe members at the time of the interview were Teri (discussed below) and myself. Margaret believes that belly dance is above all accessible, because it

can be done by anyone, to any music, in any setting. During the course of our conversation on belly dance and the numinous, she stated:

When I say that belly dance is not necessarily strange and mysterious, it's not like it's this bizarre thing that you have to study for twenty years and sit on a mountain, it's not like being a Zen Buddhist monk or anything like that. If you want to dance something that's mysterious and strange and different, well, that's your performance goal, that's what you want to do in your performance, that's what you're thinking and feeling, then that's what you should do.

When I asked her whether belly dance was spiritual for her, she answered: "Sometimes, but not always. It's very Unitarian, well, it can be, or not... whatever you want it to be, okay." She then went on to describe a few dances she had performed that were more oriented toward spirituality, which her audience may or may not have perceived. At the same time, Margaret believes that she has belly danced in past lives, and so belly dance is a temple dance to her, a sacred dance:

To me it is divine, it's divine sensuality, and there's sacredness. It's sensual without being dirty or derogatory or using or degrading. It's very much liberating and joyous. I think some of the most hardcore feminists I know belly dance. It's reclaiming and empowering, and it's really fun to do.

Margaret's views on belly dance and its potential for spirituality are thus flexible and grounded in her personal beliefs.

Ann is another belly dancer for whom the dance is sometimes sacred. At the time of the interview, Ann was a graduate student who was also residing in Bloomington (she has since moved out of Indiana), so I was also able to interview her in person. Ann studies neo-druidry, and has been dancing for eleven years. She started studying cabaret and folkloric styles, and was drawn to American Tribal Style ten years ago. She helped found the troupe Dark Side Tribal and she also does tribal fusion and gothic belly dance. When I asked her whether belly dance was spiritual for her, she answered:

Yes. Just because I think, when it goes well, I, whether I am dancing with other people or solo, when it goes well, we're tapping into something that is bigger than us and that connects us to our audience and helps convey whatever it is we're trying to express. And it just feels good.

In contrast to the dancers whose beliefs I've already discussed, I interviewed a couple of dancers who view belly dance as spiritual, but not necessarily religious. Mahsati Janan is a professional belly dancer in North Carolina. At the time of the interview, Mahsati had been dancing for 11 or 12 years, and she has studied Classical and Modern Egyptian, Turkish, Lebanese, Middle East and North African folkloric styles. She characterises her dancing as graceful, classical, and passionate. She responded to the e-mailed question "Is belly dance spiritual for you?" with:

Not in a religious way. Dance helps me calm my thoughts and integrate into the moment, but I do not feel it is spiritual in a religious way. That could be simply because I am not religious. Dance helps me remove distractions and connect the inner and outer world.

Additionally, when I asked whether she incorporated spiritual, divine, or otherworldly elements into her dancing, she replied:

I don't believe that anything is outside of the natural world, so I don't see it as a connection to anything otherworldly or divine in the traditional sense, but I do see everything as interconnected and all part of the same flowing cycles – in that way I do see it as helping me realize my connection with everything by removing some of the intellectual filters on reality. For me, the mysteries of the universe are all parts of the natural order, so it is all a matter of perception and perspective. Dance helps shift that perspective for me.

Dance is thus spiritual more in the holistic sense than in a hierarchical, religious sense for Mahsati, as it is for Teri, a trained musician, scholar, and performer whom I interviewed here in Indiana. Teri first took a belly dance class in 2000 with Donna Carlton, who teaches folkloric and cabaret belly dance in Bloomington. Because she was working full-time and completing her doctoral coursework, Teri did not return to belly dance until late 2003 or early 2004 when she started taking Margaret's "Belly Dance for Every Body" class at the Ivy Tech John Waldron Arts Center. Teri does standard cabaret, American Tribal Style, and tribal fusion styles. She is a seasonal member of Different Drummer Belly Dancers and runs her own belly dance performance business, T-Kitty Belly Dance. She also has extensive ballroom dance and Latin background. Teri also drew upon holistic language when discussing why dance is spiritual for her:

It is, because you can't reach that Zen space unless you've accepted yourself, and it is very cathartic to reach that Zen space because you get past all of your worldly trappings to get there. And it seems so silly, but sometimes when I'm finished singing or dancing and it's gone really well, I want to say, this is nirvana! And you just don't want to leave it, you don't want to leave that space, it feels so good, and you're so free and comfortable and unjudged. It's so wonderful to be there that you can't get there, you can't get there if you're missing pieces of your spirit.

Interestingly, Teri identifies as Danish Lutheran, and sees no conflicts between her dance spirituality and her religious identity.

Molly is a textile artist who has not disclosed her religious views and she sees dance as spiritual:

The practice of dance often feels akin to a spiritual practice, in that it requires a certain level of devotion and daily discipline in practice to master the movements. I feel like that effort and attention allows me to connect to something outside myself that is larger than me.

Molly had been dancing for over eleven years at the time of the interview, and she describes her training as:

I began with American Cabaret style – my teacher just called it Middle Eastern Dance and taught a mix of movements from around the Middle East, including some folkloric dances. I moved on to American Tribal Style (largely FatChance format), which I still study today.

She studied dark tribal fusion with Ariellah and has since helped found the Standfire Collective, an improvisational dance company. The divine energy that Molly taps into



while dancing feels similar to Reiki, she notes (she wrote to me that she is attuned in Reiki up to the second level).

The remainder of my interviewees view belly dance as spiritual, and connect it to their religious identities. Jenevieve in Northern California is an amateur belly dancer who feels that dance is spiritual and wants to explore more archetypal images in her dancing. At the time of the interview, Jenevieve had been belly dancing for two years, and has studied both cabaret and American Tribal Style, though she noted that she hopes to move more toward tribal fusion. She enjoys watching polished and unique performances, and finds belly dancing to be very expressive. She states:

Religiously, belly dance synchronizes with the 'sacred feminine' for me. I loosely consider myself Pagan for lack of a better term, I like to think of myself as a spiritual person, I draw my beliefs from many traditions as many other Pagans now do.

Though she has yet to experience the numinous through dance, she looks forward to a time when she is prepared to "bring this energy to the forefront of my life".

Isabella is a dancer who identifies as "agnostic pagan" and who views belly dance as sacred. She lives in Indiana as well, though due to the logistics of coordinating an initial meeting, I interviewed her by e-mail and then discussed some points in person (at intercultural dance-oriented events, appropriately enough). At the time of the interview, Isabella had studied belly dance for under one year. She has taken lessons in cabaret and American Tribal Style, and she believes she will continue these lessons while also beginning to explore tribal fusion and Raks Gothique (another name for gothic belly dance). However, she has a much longer dance history. She states: "unbeknown to me, I have been executing various belly dance moves since I was sixteen. The technique for these moves was not correct, but the essence of the move was there all the same." She started dancing as a child and continued for reasons relating to self expression:

From ages two through eight I took a series of tap, jazz and ballet classes. I enjoyed dance from an early age because it took the awkwardness out of being a tall skinny little girl. It gave me grace and helped me become aware of my body. At age eighteen I became an adult entertainer in the form of a stripper. I was inspired to do such a thing because at the time there was no venue, where I lived, for a young woman to go where she could dance. I was an adult entertainer for eight years.

She asserts: "When I dance, it is to either project the essence of my patron deity, Kali or it is to allow my inner fae to show herself to the rest of the world." Dancing connects Isabella to her inner faery soul and to the terrible beauty of Kali, thus aligning her metaphysical life with her dancing body.

K. is a pagan in the San Francisco Bay Area who uses belly dance solely in personal ritual practices, and does not perform it publicly. At the time of the interview, K. had studied belly dance for a year and a half, on and off. While K. never performs in public, "dance on a small scale has become important to my day to day spiritual practice". K. has mainly studied American Tribal Style, noting a preference for belly dance "that is technically sound, but also experimental. My favorite performers are ones who manage through their dancing to create an environment of mystery and glamor. I'm fascinated by those dancers who create a feeling of ritual when they perform." Further: "Dancing is intensely spiritual for me. First of all, I don't often dance in social settings, being a fairly private person." When I asked in an e-mail why, K. responded:

I don't perform in public because I'm self-conscious about both my body image (being overweight) but also because I do tend to view myself as uncoordinated. I've heavily considered being more public with my dancing (taking organised classes, attending workshops, etc.) but in the end, I'm still extraordinarily self-conscious.

K.'s awareness of "the issue of self-image" demonstrates how deeply-rooted body image issues are in contemporary American culture, and thus it is interesting to see how these matters are addressed in dance practices that are explicitly spiritual.

Melissa, also known as Mylitta, is a dancer, choreographer, and owner of the Mystic Lotus Center for the Healing and Performing Arts in Michigan. Mylitta had been belly dancing for 13 years at the time of the interview. The styles she had studied are: "All types, Arabic, Turkish, (Roma), Egyptian Raqs Sharki, Spiritual Belly Dance, American Tribal Style [...]. You name it, I've tried it." We corresponded by e-mail, and she enthusiastically responded to my question about belly dance being spiritual:

My dancing connects so much with the spiritual aspect of my life. I am a second generation witch and practice with my mom and my sister along with other women whom I also dance with. My spiritual work as a priestess evolves around a core of movement meditation, drumming and chanting, all of which I feel are fed by the dance.

Mylitta was able to describe many specific techniques for integrating spirituality and dancing, which I will discuss below.

Anaar is a belly dancer in the San Francisco Bay Area who is also a witch in the Feri tradition. Anaar has been belly dancing for fifteen years, with one year off for back surgery. She has studied American Tribal Style with FatChanceBellyDance and Tribal with Jill Parker. She notes: "Since I started to perform myself I have concentrated on taking numerous workshops that focus on sacred and folkloric styles". She writes that belly dance is very expressive for her: "Of the numinous, of mystery, of the dark matter which lies between the stars. I wish I could describe it to you without the cheesy adjectives, but if I could, I guess I would be a writer instead." We corresponded by e-mail multiple times, as I wished to clarify many of the spiritual concepts central to Anaar's dancing. When asked if belly dance is spiritual for her, Anaar wrote:

I'm Feri and everything I do is fundamentally informed by that. I can't seem to disconnect that with any other aspect of my life [...] I really consider myself a sacred dancer. It's just that my mysticism appears dark, perhaps even morbid to others.

Anaar ritualises her movements, and sometimes enters trance states. Among other pieces, she has performed a dance inspired by Japanese ghost legends, Obake Odori, which can also be found on YouTube.

Tempest collaborated with Anaar on various projects when she lived in California, but at the time of the interview she lived on the East Coast, where she continued to dance professionally. Tempest has been belly dancing since the year 2000, and she describes her training thus:

My first main teacher taught Cabaret – American Cabaret, Folkloric, and Egyptian. At this time, American Tribal Style was becoming visible, and I was very drawn in by the look, feel, and costuming, so when we moved from Rhode Island to California, I began to study Tribal. But I found that the movement quality that really

spoke to me was Cabaret, so I resumed studying that as well, adding Turkish, Modern and Classic Egyptian, Lebanese, and more Folkloric styles.

She is also known for being the “goth-mutha” of the Gothic Belly Dance movement. She writes: “I consider my dancing to be metaphysical – earthy, yet elegant, sensual [...]. Now, as for my performances, sometimes the intent is a spiritual nature, and sometimes it’s more about a physical concept or idea.” She is very aware of how her multiple identities inform her dancing: “I really don’t seem to have separate compartments of my life – being an artist, designer, dancer, wife, Witch – all of these things intertwine, whether I intend them to or not”. Since the original interview, she has immersed herself in North African dance and has led the Tapestry dance retreat, which was focused on sacred dance.

The perspectives presented here help articulate the interactions between religion, spirituality, and belly dance. For some dancers, these things overlap substantially and are integral to the belly dance experience, while for other dancers, the overlap between spirituality and dancing is neither essential nor continuously present. However, all dancers were at least aware of the *possibility* of viewing and performing belly dance in a sacred context or in order to explore spiritual themes, which is significant as it demonstrates the ubiquity of these connections in the belly dance community. Further, the dancers interviewed tend to see connections between their personal lives and larger communities: the belly dance community, their religious or spiritual communities, and the global community. Dance is one of the ways of expressing this feeling of connectivity. However, how they choose to embody and express spiritual principles in their dancing varies, and it is these variations that pique my interest as a folklorist. Further, describing these variations in dance provides me with data to illustrate the theoretical claims I make about the connections between embodiment, performance/performativity, and gender in modern America.

## TECHNIQUES OF THE NUMINOUS

I love to see a woman with a powerful presence. (Anaar, e-mail interview)

In this section, I discuss some of the techniques belly dancers use to connect with the numinous. Anaar’s use of the term “powerful presence” brings to my mind Robert Plant Armstrong’s distinction between the powers of invocation and the powers of virtuosity in works of affecting presence, that is, “special kinds of things (‘works’) which have significances not primarily conceptual (they are ‘affecting’), and which own certain characteristics that cause them to be treated more like persons than like things (‘presence’)” (1981: 5). Translating this notion from art objects to performance, I believe that dances that approach or engage the numinous are performances of affecting presence. As belly dance is a performance form, it relies upon an aesthetics of virtuosity, yet in dealing with the numinous, these performances must be treated as something other than mere actions, something with the power to connect with and change things, something with power in general (corresponding to Armstrong’s aesthetics of invocation).

Belly dance is constructed as spiritual, Dox writes, using symbol systems that privilege the transformative experience it offers, which, “often described as a process of unveiling truth, recoups this [past, matriarchal] idealized orientation toward valuing women’s bodies and wisdom” (2005: 304). Spiritual belly dance, however it is conceived, has the potential to override Cartesian mind-body dualism by upsetting hierarchies of experience, especially those that attempt to dominate female bodies. Yet belly dance is not the only dance form that holds the potential for participants to interact with the numinous; other examples include spirit possession and trance dances such as those practiced in voodoo. Yvonne Daniel discusses these religious forms of dancing in her book *Dancing Wisdom*, noting that in the communities she studied: “Drumming, singing, and dancing are prayerful acts that feed into a reciprocal relationship between humans and categories of spiritual beings” (2005: 28). Daniel’s close attention to the sensory experiences and practices of ritual dance testifies to the importance of bodily techniques that contribute to – and even cause – numinous experiences while dancing.

I start with one of the most visually recognised aspects of belly dance, the costumes. Costumes can inspire a sense of connection with something greater than oneself, for performers as well as audience members.<sup>3</sup> Anaar writes: “Something incredible happens when you put on the right costume. It really awakens that inner self, you *become*.” Mahsati Janan uses costumes, in particular those related to peacocks, to express her holistic sense of connection with all things while dancing: “I have a number of costumes and personal adornments that follow a peacock theme. In my life, the peacock represents the moment of synthesis – the change from multiple states into a new cohesive whole.” Costumes can thus symbolise or effect a transformation for dancers. In her fieldwork with belly dancers, Erin Kenny (2007: 309–310) also found that many of them referred to the costuming process as a transformative one, and some even referenced Goddess religion as an influence on their adornment choices.

Music is another technique of accessing the numinous. Anaar writes that music is her main inspiration to dance, and it triggers her responses to archetypes, folklore, mythology, and personal lore that then inspire her to dance. She studies the music endlessly, meditating on every sound, and finally embodies the music while dancing: “By the time I get to the stage, I simply know what to do, because my *body* has learned the music. I can ‘forget’ and let the music guide my passions.” Margaret told me that she has dedicated at least three dances to the Virgin Mary, whom she views as a manifestation of the Goddess. In each case, the song grabbed Margaret’s attention and inspired her to dance to it, and only later did she realise that the songs seemed to honour the Virgin Mary.

The types of movement that dancers use to be in touch with the numinous can be very general, involving whole sections of the body.<sup>4</sup> I’ve noticed that general modes of movement tend to suggest the numinous through fluidity or its opposite, abruptness. Cheri, the one dancer in this study who does not dance spiritually, writes:

If I were going to do something more spiritual, I would probably use a lot more hand and head movement [...] a soft arm and a pretty hand seems more ethereal, the tilt of a head or chin more subtle and graceful.

Isabella writes:

When I am drawing on the essence of Kali, I usually try to constantly keep my arms

moving in a fluid manner to represent the beautiful and deadly dance she performed after ridding the world of the demon Raktabija and his hordes of demons.

Both of these statements contrast earthiness and lightness.

In contrast, Ann mentioned some types of movements that she did in an otherworldly duet that I will discuss in greater detail below, such as movements “just to suggest a sort of creepiness or an unearthliness were a lot of broken movements, like broken snake arms, some head slides, some sort of creepy undulations”. The “broken” movements referred to generally look like a movement that has begun, then suddenly stopped, and begun again; it is as though a dancer is freezing in the middle of a movement, which can look very precise or eerie depending on the context. Found less in traditional Middle Eastern dances, the broken mode of moving was likely borrowed from contemporary American dances such as hip hop, breakdance, and modern dance, which have influenced fusion belly dancers in terms of music and costumes as well as movement style. In Ann’s case, the point of moving in a broken mode was to call attention to the unnaturalness of the movements, suggesting an unnatural or perhaps supernatural energy.

Movements are learned through repetition, and repetition is also a key element in ritual, another of the tools facilitating numinous dancing. Yvonne Daniel, analysing ritual structure, notes: “Repetition is critical” (2005: 249).<sup>5</sup> In the descriptions of rituals that follow, repetition is apparent in the practices for and movements within the rituals. Mylitta describes a ritual dance and its uses to access a trance state: “Women have gone into trance like states through rhythmic movements for centuries”. In cases like this, ritual and trance are inseparable.<sup>6</sup> Ritual can be a means to access a trance state, but both are tools in the engagement with the numinous.

Trance is an important method that some belly dancers use to access the numinous. The techniques to access trance are culturally specific; from his work with the Yolmo people of Nepal, Robert Desjarlais experienced trance images as “crystallized embodied forms of knowledge” (1992: 26). A few of my collaborators drew on trance techniques from North African rituals like the Guedra and Zar,<sup>7</sup> while others drew on their own spiritual practices while dancing. Anaar describes her trance experiences thus:

After all the practice, the musical study, drills and technique, when I can let go I find myself in a state akin to possession. In Feri, we call it self possession. I am present, my personality is aware, but I am being moved by some greater being. When it’s good, when I’m what we call ‘on it’, then I enter a truly ecstatic state, a great passion. I feel terribly close to the Divine at this point.<sup>8</sup>

Trance can be seen as both a tool (to reach ecstasy or flow) and a goal in itself; either way, the numinous is directly involved.

Breathing is another tools dancers use to get in touch with the numinous. Specific techniques may be borrowed from Eastern practices like yoga, or from Western practices like opera training. Mylitta writes:

The breath is always at the core for me. From teaching a beginning belly dancer to the more advanced yogic-bellydancing techniques my troupe does, it is all about connecting to the breath. The breath is our connection to the present moment.

For Teri (a trained operatic vocalist), breathing “is the first step for me for getting to that

place, the spiritual place, where I can let go of things and start to express [...] as I channel my energies I get further and further into it”.

The manipulation of “energy” is another technique that emerged in interviews. Many of the dancers I worked with mentioned energy, so I asked some of them to clarify how it fits in with dancing.<sup>9</sup> Being able to perceive and direct energy is a common theme among dancers who engage with the numinous, and it is usually portrayed as something desirable.<sup>10</sup> These ideas about energy have some grounding in Eastern philosophy and neopagan beliefs; Sabina Magliocco in her book *Witching Culture* defines energy as “a life force [...] that is present in all things in the universe, animate and inanimate alike” (2004: 104). Being able to manipulate energy is a skill that puts dancers and audiences in touch with the numinous by connecting them to each other and to all things.

It is important to note that not every dancer experiences these components of dance in the same way; rather, these are resources that individual dancers can draw upon as they construct dances (both in home practices and in performances) that reflect their relationship to the numinous. As Ray Cashman, Tom Mould, and Pravina Shukla have argued, tradition is both a doing and a thing: “If tradition is a process not unlike recycling, tradition as resource comprises those things available for recycling” (2011: 3). In this sense, the techniques of sacred and spiritual belly dance are resources, elements of tradition, available to individuals as guiding principles of meaning-making. All of these elements of belly dance – costume, music, movements, ritual, trance, breath, and energy – contribute to the “powers of affecting presence” that can create numinous experiences while belly dancing. These experiences can then be discussed in terms of representation, embodiment, and flow, and understanding them is essential to my argument about the interweaving of power and performativity in dance.

#### TYPES OF NUMINOUS DANCE: REPRESENTATION, EMBODIMENT, AND FLOW

The connections between belly dance and spirituality, which are complicated and numerous, contribute to complex relationships between mimetic and abstract texts, embodied experiences and altered consciousness. In this section, I propose some categories for understanding how belly dancers “dance the numinous”, with emphasis on representation, embodiment, and flow.

Dancing in a representative mode, whether referencing literal or abstract texts, is one way of engaging with the numinous in belly dance. This corresponds with Dox’s discussion of the types of spiritual belly dance she refers to as goddess dancing and priestess dancing, wherein dancers utilise goddess imagery as transformative and drawing on archetypes. An example of belly dancing in a representative mode that uses goddess imagery is Mylitta’s use of cowrie shells and other Goddess symbols in her dancing. In Dox’s category of priestess dancing, instead of belly dancers imitating or embodying deities, they “conceive of themselves as priestesses of and conduits for this universal female spirit, who transmit archetypal femininity into the modern world” (2005: 318).<sup>11</sup> One instance of this phenomenon, though not goddess-oriented, is a Cthulhu dance choreographed by Ann and Molly.<sup>12</sup> As Ann describes this dance, which was performed at GenCon (a gaming convention that also includes geek and science fiction culture, which happens annually in Indianapolis) in 2005:

I know of other people that have done things where they're trying to draw down a deity into themselves while they dance [...] but with [this] piece, I think the idea was that it was sort of a summoning of Cthulhu, so it was sort of a ritual dance, but more the idea that maybe we were priestesses or avatars, and not that we were necessarily embodying Cthulhu [...] but there's a moment where that energy sort of possesses us in that choreography.

This description touches on embodiment and ritual, demonstrating how interrelated these categories are. I believe, based on my fieldwork, that representation of the numinous can happen without using the technique of ritual or having the experience of embodiment; however, embodiment and ritual both imply representation to some degree.



Photo 1. Molly and Ann dressed up for the Cthulhu performance. Photo by Lynn.

Embodying the numinous is another way of interacting with it through belly dance. My collaborators tended to discuss embodiment as a positive thing. Isabella strives to embody strength and sensuality in her dancing, while Anaar writes: "I want that experience, to embody some small part of the sacred nature of the world". One can choose to embody entities and connections, among other things. As K. writes, ritualised dancing provides a sense of embodiment, and moreover, "through performing and embodying a sympathetic connection [with spirits], you can attempt to bring out in yourself those traits you most admire or need that you consider the entity in question to possess". In *Sensuous Scholarship*, Paul Stoller (1997: 48–73) discusses the relationship between

Songhay spirit possession as embodiment, and cultural memories. He pays close attention to sensuously incorporated – rather than textually inscribed – performances, and how they produce and reproduce power relations. When embodying the numinous, a person literally incorporates that essence, which can be a powerful transformative tool in the case of belly dancing to experience a connection with the sacred or with spirits.

Flow is a concept that I have imposed upon my data; Victor Turner (1982: 56–58) summarises it as the experience of merging action and awareness, ego-loss balanced with control of activities and environment, with clear demands and rewards for one's attention.<sup>13</sup> In other words, flow is "that moment when self-consciousness disappears [...] and the actor is wholly absorbed, wholly focused on the doing" (Sawin 2002: 36). The term "flow" was not used by my interviewees in describing this state of heightened awareness and engagement, to the point of feeling "in the moment", "Zen", "letting go", "being present", or "soaring", but I believe that all these terms describe the same phenomenon. It came out most in my in-person interviews with Ann and Teri, and in my e-mail interviews with Anaar and Mylitta. Experiencing the numinous through a state of flow, with its disembodied terms, seems at first to be opposed to experiencing the numinous through embodiment; however, as I argue, embodiment is required for flow. The ways each of these dancers described the process of getting to the flow state followed the same basic patterns: practice, internalising the music and movements, and letting go, allowing the dancer to experience a sense of freedom while dancing. I argue that embodying the numinous in belly dance is necessary to experience the numinous through flow in belly dance, as one cannot dance "in the moment" until one is holistically aligned with one's body, mind, and spirit. To do that, the body cannot be neglected. Perhaps it can in other disciplines, but in dance, the body is always engaged, even in stillness.

In the experiential model that emerged in the interviews, representing, embodying, and flowing with/through/into the numinous were the most important ways of modelling how the dancers conceptualised their experiences of dancing the numinous. I found while processing the data, however, that another important concept emerged, though not explicitly: reflexivity. In this addition to the experiential model, flow is at odds with reflexivity. To be a truly good dancer, one must be reflexive some of the time – when honing one's technique and planning for a performance, for example – but not all of the time. Teri describes learning to silence her "inner critic" by reaching for the "Zen space" where she acknowledges that she may not attain perfection, but she gets closer every time. As Ann describes her experience of flow, "opening to the dance", being present is the most important thing,

[B]ecause the second you start worrying about, oh, shoot, I just messed up, or, I don't know if this looks good, or I'm not really sure I know this dance well enough and I don't think I should be on stage – the second you start being distracted by any of that, you're no longer present.

Being present is thus an important, perhaps essential, element in performing.<sup>14</sup>

My reason for venturing into the dancers' relationships with representation, flow, reflexivity, and embodiment is that these are the categories that create the numinous experience for the dancers. The elements or techniques discussed in the previous section are like the building blocks of numinous dance, and these experiential categories are the strategies for assembling them into a meaningful and artistic mode of interact-



ing with or portraying the sacred. As will be seen below, this is actually a powerfully political and sometimes transgressive practice.

#### PERFORMING AND PERFORMATIVE MODES

Based on my fieldwork, I believe that belly dance, especially when dancing the numinous, is both performance and performative. What constitutes a performance varies according to who you ask (among scholars as well as laypeople). I asked my collaborators what they consider a performance to be, and these are some of answers:

For me, “performance” refers to a dance done for the public, with a certain amount of planning/preparation beforehand. (Molly)

A performance is a dance performed for an audience – generally with a set stage area, timeframe, music, etc. – and the presentation is complete in concept. (Tempest)

I think it is a performance when we get dressed up in a ‘costume’ suitable for the mainstream audience (say at a down town middle America art and craft show) and get paid (hopefully) for a set of dances. I say this is a performance because it is *putting it on* in a way. The performance is the outside of what is going on. (Mylitta)

For me a performance is specifically for the purpose of sharing and communicating with others. When I dance for myself away from others I don’t consider it a performance. I am only performing when I am sharing that dance and my connection with an audience. (Mahsati Janan)

I consider a performance to be a form of entertainment presented in front of spectators. Even if the spectators are pets, fae, or any other manner of being! (Isabella)

There’s the traditional sense of performance, where you have an audience and a set number and you perform, and that is a performance. There is also the performing we do for one another, when we’re working through and showing each other stuff, and that’s also a performance. And then there are the things that I do when I’m teaching belly dance, and that is also a performance [...] And then, there’s the performance that I do for myself [...] when I’m dancing because I’m enjoying it and I don’t give a damn if anybody’s watching, because I’m dancing for me. And then it’s a performance, but it’s for me. (Teri)

Synthesising these answers, I would say they are very close to the Bauman and Kapchan definitions of performance mentioned above. Due to the nature of these performances, which incorporate the numinous, these performances require a broader meaning than simply taking responsibility for a body of tradition.<sup>15</sup>

Teri’s answer, however, approaches the notion of performances of the everyday, the idea that we are all always performing. In this sense, too, dancing is performative, regardless of whether it is happening in a traditional performance context. Several of my collaborators also expressed the idea that performance is the external aspect of what is happening when they are putting on a show. The other elements of what is happening at that moment, for the individual dancer and for the interaction between



Photo 2. *Tempest and Anaar*. Photo by Michael Baxter, 2006.

bringing in ritual elements, for example, that rely upon a broader conception of audience. Discussing the ritualistic aspects of her dance performances, Anaar states: "Truly there is no audience in a ritual. All are in some fashion participants." This notion is similar to Edward Schieffelin's theorisation of the audience as crucial participants in Kaluli rituals rather than as passive recipients of the performer's artistic creation (1985; 1996; see also Barber 1997). In a further similarity to the Kaluli *séances* Schieffelin describes, in which the participants view the spirits rather than the human mediums as the performers, numinous and ritualistic belly dance performances have the potential to perform the sacred for human audiences and for non-human audiences alike. An example of the former is Mylitta's statement: "The most magical times dancing for an audience are when I can see the Divinity in people open up while I am dancing". Speaking to the latter, K. explains:

I view ritual in and of itself to be a performance, whether its ritual that is designed to be viewed by an outside audience or ritual that is designed to invoke/evoke certain emotional states in the performer and create a certain type of space. Also, from a spiritual point of view, to say that there is no 'audience' when dancing alone in a sacred context, undercuts the aspect of communion with the divine.

Earlier, while discussing Ann and Molly's Cthulhu dance, which was ritualistic yet not a ritual intended to actually raise Cthulhu, I mentioned the indirect relationship

dancers, point to both the different layers of identity involved in performance, and to the potential of dancing to be performative regardless of the audience's presence or involvement.

It is important to note that my collaborators' definitions of performance depart from the definitions of performances used in folklore and anthropology scholarship in respect to audience. Since many of my interviewees define themselves as performers, they do take audience into account when planning a piece. Anaar exemplifies this attitude well:

I do try to respect the audience [...] However, I must keep reminding myself to remain authentic. The pull to please and be liked as a performer is intensely strong. I try to maintain a balance between complete authenticity and mutual respect.

At least two layers of identity – authentic self and performer self – are evident in this statement.

At the same time, some of my collaborators expand the notion of performance,

between embodiment, ritual, and representation. In this section, I want to discuss an example of embodiment and ritual that is not a representation of those things – or, at least not to everyone in the audience. This is an instance of keying, which is a strategy some belly dancers use when utilising personally meaningful symbols or associations. Recognising these symbols is not crucial for audience enjoyment of the piece, though familiarity with them can enhance one’s experience of the performance. In our interview, Margaret told me about a performance she did at the Fourth Street Festival of the Arts in Bloomington to “The Mummer’s Dance” by Loreena McKennitt, explaining to me that it is a pagan song with personal meaning to her. Margaret explained: “I really wanted that to be my salute to the pagan religion, and some people noticed it, and some people didn’t, and that’s okay.” She honoured the four elements in her dance, again saying that it did not matter to her whether audience members caught on to this representation of ritual elements. She chose to honour the four elements by doing dance movements that embodied each one for her: “the earth is kinda rolling down, and then water is the hips with the waves, and then fire I did some circles with the chest, and air was with the head, so I moved it all up”. I asked Margaret to demonstrate each of these movements so I could do them with her, and as we danced during our interview, I felt as though I understood the pleasure that can come from embodying meaningful aspects using movements from a familiar dance vocabulary – and because this dance vocabulary is meant to be aesthetically pleasing for the viewer as well, these movements translated so easily into performance that it was not, in this case, essential for the audience to understand the ritualistic significance of the movements.

#### THE POLITICS OF PERFORMANCE AND PERFORMATIVITY

Given that numinous belly dance is both a performing and a performative act, its implications within larger cultural structures of power and identity must be considered. As Katharine Young writes: “Culture apprentices the body to its style” (2011: 56). The aesthetic systems imposed on bodies are not neutral, and carry many meanings for those who inhabit certain kinds of bodies within these social realms.

Discussing a Christmas cycle ritual dance from a Mexican indigenous community, Joyce M. Bishop suggests that “rituals in certain kinds of small communities are at some level about the very people who enact them” (2009: 400). While the community of her study differs from the larger and more loose-knit community of American belly dancers I describe here, it seems likely that the focus of ritual movements that have become more or less codified will eventually point back to the concerns and needs of the people enacting the ritual movements. Recall that even though not every dancer in my interview sample adhered to a pagan or spiritual belief system (Cheri noted that she did not practice spiritual belly dance at all, but is acquainted with the notion of it), every dancer shares ideas about how such spirituality and belly dance intersect. The interview material demonstrated considerable overlap between their conception of this type of dancing, too, in both themes and techniques. And while I have chosen to focus in-depth on the rich personal data I collected, I can say with certainty based on my involvement with the belly dance community for over a decade that sacred and spiritual themes are a consistent and compelling part of the community as a whole; there are frequently workshops being advertised around the U.S. and there are always at least a handful of

pieces at major performances that address these themes.<sup>16</sup> This overall coherence is why I feel comfortable asserting that ritual and spiritual elements in belly dance are in part a way for the dancers to artistically reframe concerns about themselves.

As discussed above, belly dancers operate within a patriarchal context in which male is privileged over female, mind over body, reason over emotion. These abstract concepts are incorporated into lived reality through a variety of cultural norms and precepts. Patricia Sawin (2002: 37) writes:

The cornerstone of Western patriarchal hegemony, the way it is brought into being in everyday life, is that women are raised to know that they must continually, necessarily, self-consciously perform themselves prior to and simultaneous with any other kind of esthetic performance they undertake.

Due to this constantly performed self-surveillance, Sawin notes, it is especially transgressive when women access flow states while performing, as they transcend the shackles of this double-consciousness.<sup>17</sup> Since belly dance offers avenues by which to access flow, whether it is called a Zen state or thought of a heightened awareness due to ritual means or a simple performer's high, the art form thus can aid in subverting patriarchal norms.

Other scholars of belly dance have, of course, suggested that through the dance, women are able to reject patriarchal constraints on acceptable body images and movement types (Bock 2005). Erin Kenny notes that the women she studied who practice American Tribal Style (ATS) belly dance are engaged in creating an alternative to oppressive structures: "Forging woman-centered community comprises a set of political choices for ATS dancers: like alternative religion it is not a purely self-indulgent avocation to be partitioned off from their 'real' political work" (2007: 318). The ways in which belly dancers contest and construct alternatives to patriarchal and hierarchical domination are myriad, and happen on both conscious and unconscious levels. Sometimes, an act as simple as a woman taking pleasure in the movement of her body can be subversive and liberating, whether or not she mentally frames it that way.

However, I am suggesting that practitioners of sacred and spiritual belly dance in particular challenge patriarchal norms by foregrounding the relationship between body and mind. The mind/body dualism has historically extended to spirit/body, as in Christian formulations of the identity as residing in the immortal soul rather than the mortal (and thus impure) body (Meynell 2009: 2). Additionally, as Sawin points out, it is threatening when "the female performer might take on a role or perform a genre conventionally reserved for men, thus claiming for a woman a role that confers prestige and controls ritual knowledge" (2002: 41). As men have fulfilled many of the important religious and ritual roles in the West, at least on an institutional level, it could be seen as dangerous for women to creatively access traditionally masculine roles, as when Ann and Molly portrayed ritual specialists summoning a spiritual power, or when Margaret did a dance saluting the four elements in her pagan belief system. Women who do sacred and spiritual belly dance can, through their performing and their performativity, demonstrate that they do not require either inaccessible masculine roles or the men who fill them.

Further, by engaging with spiritual themes and representations while simultaneously entering a flow state, the belly dancers I interviewed are participating in discourse that asserts their right to be both a mind and a body: in short, a whole human being who connects with the earth and the universe and possibly also the divine. Erin

Kenny (2007: 319) suggests that along with practices such as yoga and other

[T]ransnationally relevant strategies for attempting to transcend western dichotomies of mind/body and spirituality/materialism, so too do some communities of ATS bellydancers endeavor to creatively work through their critiques of western culture, while ironically seizing upon the material markers of those less powerful in contemporary global political-economies.

Many of my collaborators focused on how the movements, music, and adornment from Middle Eastern cultures gave them a creative space in which to get in touch with the numinous elements they wished to explore in their dance. This borrowing from other cultures is not unproblematic. Borland and Bock (2011: 27) admit:

As folklorists and feminists, we understand that the liberatory intentions of those performing racial or ethnic identities other than their own does not exonerate them or us from acknowledging histories of oppression that have shaped and given meaning to those performances.

Yet as they found, borrowing from other cultures can actually aid in exploring new kinds of embodiment: "Dancers self-consciously invoke 'exotic' cultures in order to create alternative ideals through the experience of dancing, which in turn open up opportunities for alternate embodied forms of self-expression" (ibid.: 24). The need for these alternate conceptions and expressions of self stems from the unequal distribution of power in society, and the attempt to have the power to transform one's bodily identity as desired is itself an exercise in power.

There is an additional dimension of power that is specific to numinous dance and other expressions of religion and spirituality, however. These dances are, literally, an expression of power, whether that power is understood as the ability to manipulate energy or magic, the expression of a connection with the sacred universe or the divine, or simply the power to put on a compelling performance that touches or moves people – starting, of course, with the dancer herself. The rewards of dancing numinously were clear from my interviews, as many of the dancers treated their experiences as positive, desirable, and something to be integrated into their lives as much as possible. Because these types of belief systems regarding energy, trance, and the divine tend to be treated as subcultural and viewed as suspicious in mainstream America, however, most dancers are cautious with context and framing when they dance. This is one reason why I believe that my insider status as a belly dancer helped me gain access to information that might otherwise be a little more protected in order to avoid misunderstandings or negative judgments.

In practicing a dance form that allows them to touch the numinous either representationally (as when portraying a deity or someone worshipping a deity) or implicitly (as when accessing a trance or flow state), my collaborators subverted expressions of mind/body dualism in favour of synthesis and transcendence. As Tempest told me, "Dancing in itself is a very spiritual, metaphysical experience for me. I'm connecting with my body and my spirit at the same time." I believe that representational dances need not even focus on the divine feminine in order to create numinous (and possibly liberating) experiences for the dancers; the Cthulhu dance described by Ann and Molly was not specifically feminine, and Anaar and Tempest performed a ritual duet that was

intended to convey the essence of the Horned God. Rather, I assert that the very act of intertwining spirit and body gives dancers in a culture with oppressive mind/body and gender dualism a sense of freedom, contentment, and interconnection that is otherwise difficult to find and pursue. By performing rituals and ritualising performances, these dancers call into question another boundary – that which exists between religion and art, the sacred and the secular – and manifest their ideals and dreams in reality.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have described a phenomenon in contemporary American belly dance beliefs and practices: engaging with and performing the numinous, whether that is interpreted as representing, embodying, or otherwise engaging with the divine, spiritual, sacred, or a holistic and transcendent state of being. While other scholars have touched on this topic (Crosby 2000; Deagon 2007; Dox 2007), my focus on the experiences of individuals within their social contexts has helped elaborate the lived realities of spiritual belly dance. Thanks to the dancers who generously shared their time and experiences, I was able to assemble enough data on this phenomenon to discuss the techniques available to express and access the numinous. In addition to the concrete categories and tools used to portray or access the numinous while dancing, I found that the dancers very eloquently and ably discussed the role of ritual and performance in their dancing. Many of them spoke with great joy about what they get out of spiritual dancing, and dancing in general.

Based on what the dancers shared with me, I elaborated upon some differences between the representation and embodiment of the numinous, and the ability to enter a flow or trance-like state, which most often happens through the use of repetitive movement, embodied practice, and ritual meanings. I asserted that belly dancing the numinous is both performance and performative, and that belly dancers who engage with the numinous also engage with complex notions of audience, ranging from audience as divine entities to audience as ritual participants. Finally, I explained why these performances are so complex and powerful: they place performers in the un-feminine position of displaying transformative power on stage in a way that flaunts patriarchal norms and challenges mind/body dualism. The complex relationships between performing traditions, spirituality, gender roles, and aestheticised bodies deserve further investigation, ideally a combination of ethnographic methods with theoretical analysis. As I have demonstrated, placing the voices of individual practitioners in dialogue with larger cultural elements is an effective and rewarding way of exploring how and why folklore forms are practiced and performed.

## NOTES

1 One of the sub-cultures that many belly dancers interact with is Gothic sub-culture. Of my collaborators, Anaar and Isabella each listed Gothic influences upon their movement vocabularies, and Tempest promotes the Gothic-belly dance fusion in her dancing and costuming.

2 As of 2011, the term American Tribal Style® (and its abbreviation, ATS®) became a registered trademark of FatChanceBellyDance, the troupe that created ATS. I have chosen to omit the ®

symbol because my research was conducted before this occurred, though I note it here in order to acknowledge the troupe's claim to their intellectual property. For more on this, see Legal Policy.

3 Iris Stewart (2000) devotes a chapter of *Sacred Woman, Sacred Dance* to describing the symbolism and power of women's garments, focusing especially on belly dance attire. Sheer and shimmering fabrics are among the costume components recognised to contribute to a numinous feel; one example is the popularity of the Dance of the Seven Veils, which over time has utilised veils physically as fabric props and metaphorically as layers of identity or gates of initiation (see Deagon 2005 for a discussion of Orientalist and feminist constructions of the Dance of the Seven Veils).

4 At times, dancers employ specific movements to key into numinous engagement. Mylitta, speaking for her troupe, says: "We do specific moves to build up our individual and group energy and then we send it out like a wave in a wave pool. We do a lot of work with the chakras and balancing our energy as we dance." Teri relates how she has a "default move" – snake arms or arm undulations – which she uses in choreographies because it feels good and it looks good. Additionally, she uses her default move to get closer to her spiritual space because it is such a part of her muscle memory that her mind is free to think of other movements to do. When movements begin to come more easily, she gets excited, and closer to her "Zen space" where she is invigorated by the energy of the performance.

5 In fact, the entire paragraph from which I drew that quote could be describing a numinous belly dance rather than a dance for Oyá:

Repetition is critical. It is necessary to build and intensify each body part's involvement. It is through repetition that dancing worshipers harness and display all the energy possible in a given set of movements. At first the pattern is consciously discernable, but with maximum repetition, the dancing worshiper is fully confident, engrossed in the muscular movement, articulating every nuance in every part of the body. The mind is submerged in the dancing and the music, discerning mysteries. Both the body and the mind transcend. (Daniel 2005: 249)

6 Similarly, Anaar intertwines ritual and trance in her dancing, stating: "I like to ritualize my movement. In fact, I love to create small 5-7 min. rituals for the stage. I have a few movements I use regularly and I think it's working. What I mean by that is I believe I am creating triggers for myself. Triggers that allow me to enter that small trance state."

7 See Shira in Richards 2000 for information on these rituals written by belly dancers for belly dancers.

8 I asked Anaar for clarification of the terms trance and possession, and she sent me an excerpt of her 2004 book, titled *The White Wand: Toward a Feri Aesthetic*. In it, she describes how Feri traditions utilise ritual and trance as ecstatic tools. Some quotes that caught my eye, and that seem relevant to pursuits in performance studies and dance anthropology, include:

Ritual is not theater but a dynamic source of power. There is no passive audience, all members of the ritual circle actively participate. The lending of mana to a working is the primary motivation. Ritual is never done to you, it is done with you. That inclusiveness is extended to create and sustain mana in a dramatic and indissoluble way. In public ritual, the achievement of shared meanings and shared emotions is the goal, not private individual goals [...]. A full ritual working is not complete without trance. Repetition is vital to trance. One of the keys to magic is the ability to entrance as well as become entranced. True trance states are founded upon a profound state of relaxation, no matter how vigorous the rhythm. It is the long (this often takes hours in many cultures) repetition of that rhythm that produces the relaxed state.

9 My clarification question to Mylitta was: "Is this related to chi or aura-like concepts of energy, or do you mean energy as in what you're communicating to the audience?" She responded:

Yes and yes. The yogi's refer to it as Prana, further East it is referred to as Chi or Ki. This energy, Universal Energy, flows through the dancer (more so if she is conscious of her breath). The energy of the dance, the music and the individual dancer add a level of emotion, a flavor,

if you will. We try to be conscious of our connection to all of these energies as they play out in our dance. We then utilize this energy and direct it with our intention.

10 Anaar writes: "I enjoy dancers who obviously work energetically, those who can raise and move energy." Teri refers to energy as a tangible thing passing between her and the audience:

When I'm performing, I'm not just putting energy out, I'm getting energy back. And the more it bounces back from people, the more they watch, the more they get excited about it, the more they feed me, the higher I go. And the higher I go, the closer I am to that space... You get high, it's so euphoric.

11 Mylitta provides a good example of a priestess-dancing attitude when she writes of performing for an audience: "I know that I am there to be of service. The gift of the dance will be received by those in the audience open to receiving it and those not interested will at least have a good time 'watching the show'."

12 Cthulhu is an Elder God in the mythology of H. P. Lovecraft's work in the horror genre. Cthulhu enjoys much prominence in contemporary American subcultures, such as geeks and gamers, and hence was deemed appropriate for a performance at GenCon, a gaming convention that occurs annually in Indianapolis. The troupe Different Drummer Belly Dancers, of which both Ann and Molly were once a part, has danced at GenCon since 2004 as the pre-show to the costume contest.

13 While on the subject of Victor Turner's *From Ritual to Theatre*, I might add that he distinguishes between liminal and liminoid phenomena, characterising the former as prevalent in tribal and agrarian societies to promote wholeness and solidarity, and the latter as common in contractual and industrial societies to fulfill functions of leisure. Turner (1982: 43) states: "Optation pervades the liminoid phenomena, obligation the liminal. One is all play and choice, an entertainment, the other is a matter of deep seriousness, even dread, it is demanding, compulsory, thorough." Belly dance might appear to be liminoid rather than liminal, but I argue that especially for the dancers who approach it as sacred and/or ritualistic, dancing is a necessary form of expression and reintegration with the universe. More than one interviewee expressed to me the importance of dancing in her life – dancing does not simply pervade one's life, it invades it, unbalancing everything if not given enough attention!

14 I asked Ann specifically about whether performance and flow are mutually exclusive, and she replied:

I think they can both happen, and I think you can sort of tap into a trance state with that too, and that can still be performance [...] this is one of the reasons we practice, right, so all the technique, and even things like the projection of stage presence, you practice that, so that all goes on autopilot, and you're not having to consciously worry about every little detail. And that way, you can do the dance, you can go through the physical motions, and you can do whatever gestures you're trying to do to get stage presence, but you're also deeply connected to the music and to the audience and to that moment of expression without having to worry about it all. That's why we practice – If you've got it all physically internalised, then you can open up to other things.

As Ann says (and in my experience), that "opening up to other things" part is unique about belly dancing the numinous and informs its relationships to performing power.

15 Which is not to imply that any performance is simple!

16 The fact that spiritual belly dance has already been the topic of three academic essays (Crosby 2000; Deagon 2007; Dox 2007) also indicates that it is a fairly widespread phenomenon.

17 As Sawin (2002: 147) phrases it:

The woman who slips into the flow state and transcends self-consciousness, forgetting that she is being evaluated both for the skill and effectiveness of her display of esthetic competence and for her performance of self, is supremely dangerous. She potentially wields the power of persuasion and erotic allure and receives reinforcing approbation, uncontrolled by hegemonic forces that insist she employ these capacities to reconstitute her own subordination.



## SOURCES

Face-to-face and e-mail interviews with belly dancers in Bloomington, Indiana, conducted in 2007 and 2008 with some follow-up in 2012. Of the interviews I conducted in person, I maintain the tapes and transcripts in my personal files (I transcribed the interviews myself). I also keep files of the interviews that were conducted via e-mail. These files have not yet been archived.

## REFERENCES

- Armstrong, Robert Plant 1981. The Powers of Invocation, the Powers of Virtuosity. – *The Powers of Presence: Consciousness, Myth, and Affecting Presence*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 3–20.
- Barber, Karin 1997. Preliminary Notes on Audiences in Africa. – *Africa*. Vol. 67, No. 3: 347–362.
- Bauman, Richard 1977. *Verbal Art as Performance*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.
- Bishop, Joyce M. 2009. “Those Who Gather In”: An Indigenous Ritual Dance in the Context of Contemporary Mexican Transnationalism. – *Journal of American Folklore*. Vol. 122, No. 486: 391–413.
- Bock, Sheila 2005. From Harem Fantasy to Female Empowerment: Rhetorical Strategies and Dynamics of Style in American Belly Dance. M.A. Thesis, Comparative Studies, Ohio State University, Columbus.
- Bock, Sheila; Katherine Borland 2011. Exotic Identities: Dance, Difference, and Self-fashioning. – *Journal of Folklore Research*. Vol. 48, No. 1: 1–36.
- Bordo, Susan 2003. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bowden, Peta; Jane Mummery 2009. *Understanding Feminism*. Stocksfield: Acumen.
- Cashman, Ray; Tom Mould, Pravina Shukla 2011. Introduction: The Individual and Tradition. Ray Cashman, Tom Mould, Pravina Shukla (eds.). *The Individual and Tradition: Folkloristic Perspectives*. (Special Publications of the Folklore Institute, No. 8.) Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1–26.
- Crosby, Janice C. 2000. The Goddess Dances: Spirituality and American Women’s Interpretation of Middle Eastern Dance. – Wendy Griffin (ed.). *Daughters of the Goddess: Studies of Healing, Identity, and Empowerment*. Walnut Creek, CA; Lanham, MD; New York; Oxford: Altamira Press, 166–182.
- Daniel, Yvonne 2005. *Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Bahian Candomblé*. Urbana; Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Deagon, Andrea 2005. The Dance of the Seven Veils: The Revision of Revelation in the Oriental Dance Community. – Anthony Shay, Barbara Sellers-Young (eds.). *Belly Dance: Orientalism, Transnationalism, and Harem Fantasy*. Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 243–275.
- Desjarlais, Robert 1992. *Body and Emotion: The Aesthetics of Illness and Healing in the Nepal Himalayas*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Dox, DonnaLee 2005. Spirit from the Body: Belly Dance as a Spiritual Practice. – Anthony Shay, Barbara Sellers-Young (eds.). *Belly Dance: Orientalism, Transnationalism, and Harem Fantasy*. Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 303–340.
- Grosz, Elizabeth 1994. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Jorgensen, Jeana 2006. “Whether it’s coins, or fringe, or just stuff that’s sparkly:” Aesthetics and Utility in the Costumes of a Tribal Belly Dance Troupe. – *Midwestern Folklore*. Vol. 32, Nos. 1–2: 83–97.

- Kapchan, Deborah A. 1995. Performance. – *Journal of American Folklore*. Vol. 108, No. 430: 479–508.
- Kenny, Erin 2007. Bellydance in the Town Square: Leaking Peace through Tribal Style Identity. – *Western Folklore*. Vol. 66, No. 3/4: 301–327.
- Kitta, Andrea 2009. Belly Dance. – Liz Locke, Theresa A. Vaughan, Pauline Greenhill (eds.). *Encyclopedia of Women's Folklore and Folklife*. Westport, CT; London: Greenwood Press, 46–48.
- Lawless, Elaine J. 1991. Women's Life Stories and Reciprocal Ethnography as Feminist and Emergent. – *Journal of Folklore Research*. Vol. 28, No. 1: 35–60.
- Legal Policy. – FatChanceBellyDance, Inc. <http://www.fcbd.com/about/legal.shtml> (accessed September 6, 2012).
- Lorber, Judith; Lisa Jean Moore 2007. *Gendered Bodies: Feminist Perspectives*. Los Angeles: Roxbury Publishing Company.
- Magliocco, Sabina 2004. *Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Mauss, Marcel 1979 [1934]. Body Techniques. – Nathan Schlanger (ed.). *Marcel Mauss: Techniques, Technology, Civilization*. New York; Oxford: Durkheim Press/Berghahn Books, 77–95.
- Meynell, Letitia 2009. Introduction: Minding Bodies. – Sue Campbell, Letitia Meynell, Susan Sherwin (eds.). *Embodiment and Agency*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1–21.
- Richards, Tazz (ed.) 2000. *The Belly Dance Book: Rediscovering the Oldest Dance*. Concord, CA: Backbeat Press.
- Royce, Anya Peterson 2007. Embodying Conscience: The Choreographies of Bill T. Jones and Pilobolus Dance Theater. Paper read at the annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association, American Anthropological Association, November 18–21, at Washington, D.C.
- Sawin, Patricia E. 2002. Performance at the Nexus of Gender, Power, and Desire: Reconsidering Bauman's *Verbal Art* from the Perspective of Gendered Subjectivity as Performance. – *Journal of American Folklore*. Vol. 115, No. 455: 28–61.
- Schieffelin, Edward L. 1985. Performance and the Cultural Construction of Reality. – *American Ethnologist*. Vol. 12, No. 4: 707–724.
- Schieffelin, Edward 1996. On Failure and Performance: Throwing the Medium Out of the Seance. – Carol Laderman, Marina Roseman (eds.). *The Performance of Healing*. New York: Routledge, 59–89.
- Sellers-Young, Barbara 2005. Body, Image, Identity: American Tribal Belly Dance. – Anthony Shay, Barbara Sellers-Young (eds.). *Belly Dance: Orientalism, Transnationalism, and Harem Fantasy*. Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 276–302.
- Shira 2000. The Spiritual Connection. – Tazz Richards (ed.). *The Belly Dance Book: Rediscovering the Oldest Dance*. Concord, CA: Backbeat Press, 68–70.
- Stewart, Iris J. 2000. *Sacred Woman, Sacred Dance: Awakening Spirituality through Movement and Ritual*. Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions.
- Stoller, Paul 1997. *Sensuous Scholarship*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Turner, Victor 1982. *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*. New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications.
- Young, Katharine Galloway (ed.) 1993. *Bodylore*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.
- Young, Katharine [Galloway] 2001. Gestures, Intercorporeity, and the Fate of Phenomenology in Folklore. – *Journal of American Folklore*. Vol. 124, No. 492: 55–87.