Representing the belly-dancing body: feminism, orientalism, and the grotesque

Virginia Keft-Kennedy

University of Wollongong

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VIRGINIA KEFT-KENNEDY BCA/BA (HONS)

Faculty of Arts

School of English Literatures, Philosophy, and Languages

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I, Virginia C. Keft-Kennedy, declare that this thesis, submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the School of English Literatures, Philosophy, and Languages, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Virginia C. Keft-Kennedy

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# Contents

List of Plates .................................................. v
Abstract ............................................................ ix
Acknowledgements .............................................. x

**Introduction: Dance and Representation** ........................................ 1

- Dance Studies, Feminism, and High Art/Low Bodies ................................. 8
- Situating Orientalism and the Grotesque ............................................. 20
- Historical and Discursive Perspectives ............................................... 32

1 **The Oriental Grotesque and Nineteenth-Century Dancing Bodies** .......... 48

- Travel Writing and Imperialism ......................................................... 56

- Grant Allen’s *What’s Bred in the Bone*: ‘Oriental’ Dance as a Symptom of Racial Degeneracy .................................................. 75

2 **‘Salomania’: Imagining the Danse du Ventre and the Metamorphosis of a Literary Figure** ......................................................... 99

- The Transfiguration of Belly Dance to the West .................................... 104

- Feminist Orientalism ........................................................................ 141

3 **The Great American Belly Dance: Ecofeminism, Fitness, and the ‘How-to’ Phenomenon** .......................................................... 155

- Ecofeminism, Goddess Religion, and Daniela Gioseffi’s *The Great American Belly Dance* ...................................................... 161

- Feminism, Fitness Discourse, and the 1970s ‘How-to’ Books ................. 179
4 Controlling the Unruly (Soft) Body: The Grotesque and the Politics of Appearance in Young Adult Literature

Merrill Joan Gerber’s Also known as Sadzia! The Belly Dancer! Discourses of Empowerment and Identity 228

Karen Mueller Coombs’s Samantha Gill, Belly Dancer: Representing Incestuous Desire and the Belly-Dancing Body 238

Karen McCombie’s Boys, Brothers and Jelly-Belly Dancing: Body Image, Appetite, and the Grotesque 261

5 Beheading the Belly Dancer: (Dis)articulating the Female Body, Consumption, and the ‘Postcolonial Exotic’

Reading the Headless Belly Dancer 278

Loubna Haikal’s Seducing Mr Maclean: The Fetishisation of Cultural Authenticity 312

Conclusions 333

Bibliography 337

Appendix 364
List of Plates


Plate 2  “Conquerors of a Wilderness” *The Shrine Magazine*, September 1926.

Plate 3  Gerome, Jean-Leon. *Dance of the Almeh*. 1863. Oil on wood panel, 84.3 x 63cm. Dayton Art Institute, Ohio, USA


Plate 6  Moreau, Gustave. *Salome*. 1876. Oil on canvas, 54 x 44cm. The Armand Hammer Collection, Los Angeles, California.


Plate 8  Gertrude Hoffmann *Salome Dance No. 1*. 1908. Photograph. F. C. Bangs.


Plate 11  “Ruth St. Denis in Costume” c. 1910


Plate 26 Mekjian, Eddie & Ensemble. *Belly Dance Music from the Middle East Vol. 2*. Fiesta Records, FLPS-1742, Date Unknown.


Plate 55 El-Bakkar, Mohammed & His Oriental Ensemble *Navel Maneuvers* AudioFidelity AF-2415, 2 record set, 1974


Abstract

This thesis traces the genealogy of the discursive construction of belly dance in literature and culture in the West from the late nineteenth century to 2005. Drawing on theoretical perspectives from literary studies, cultural studies, and dance studies it takes an interdisciplinary approach to the analysis of representations of belly dance. It explores how this dance has been shaped by major socio-cultural shifts in ideologies of race, gender, and embodiment. The solo improvised Middle Eastern dance, also known as belly dance, is a highly recognisable and strikingly pervasive dance form in Western popular culture, yet the topic of belly dance has remained significantly under-analysed in any academic field. This study brings the belly-dancing body into focus as a legitimate object of analysis that exposes how social meanings are produced through performance, and how dancing bodies are inscribed with, and read through, markers of race, sexuality, and gender. In examining the politics of gender and race in the representation of belly dance, this study brings to bear three key theoretical formations: feminism, Orientalism, and the grotesque. It is concerned with the complex ways in which belly dance has been mythologised, represented, and constructed in a range of texts such as colonial travel writing, fiction, and images from popular culture. In addition, this thesis also explores the intersections of (neo)colonialism, commodification, consumer culture, sexuality, and notions of female embodiment in representations of belly dance.
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