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

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Representing the Belly-Dancing Body:

Feminism, Orientalism, and the Grotesque

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the
requirements for the award of the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

from

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

VIRGINIA KEFT-KENNEDY BCA/BA (HONS)

Faculty of Arts

School of English Literatures, Philosophy, and Languages

2005

Thesis Certification

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

(16th, December 2005)

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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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