

An East-Meets-West Approach To Transforming Dance as a Medium

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When I initially received the opportunity to attend Trans-Montréal as a local correspondent, I had every intention of approaching the material presented exclusively as an art historian. Though I have been a performer for years, this conference opened my mind to the myriad ways that I could combine my critical apparatus as an art historian with my expressive drive as a dancer. All of the presentations at this conference have given me exciting food for thought in terms how I can be thinking about my own performance practices and how these practices can fuel my research interests and scholarly objectives.

Though I have studied many styles of dance throughout my life, my practice as a performer is primarily in Raqs Sharqi, or what is more commonly known as “belly dance”. This style of dance has a complex history and its origins are not fully documented. However, the dance style currently known as Raqs Sharqi (or ‘dance of the East’ as it translates in Arabic) is based on a combination of Middle Eastern and North African folkloric dances. In recent years, due to the rise in Islamic fundamentalism, this dance has increasingly moved Westward with the majority of famous practitioners now hailing from Eastern Europe and the United States as opposed to the Middle East. With this transition, many questions have arisen around cultural appropriation and defining authenticity as it relates to this practice, especially with the development of fusion styles as Raqs Sharqi has gained popularity. Furthermore, as this dance style is often perceived as highly sexualized, the problematics of the male gaze and gender binary are particularly prominent.

In my own practice as a dancer, I perform a version of fusion-style dance that combines a basis in Raqs Sharqi with elements of Western Contemporary dance. I primarily devised this practice as a way of both utilizing my varied dance background and being true to myself as a performer since as a Western, white woman I cannot claim to be an authentic practitioner of Raqs Sharqi. A point of tension in combining these Eastern and Western styles, however, is in the approach to choreography. In



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Western dance, the dancer acts as a body to animated by a separately-devised choreography. In Middle Eastern dance, the movements are almost exclusively improvised. However, the theory of this improvisation is that the dancer's role is to animate the music thereby translating an aural and linguistic medium into a visual one. This relates heavily to the poetic traditions that have influenced the Arabic language and, in turn, the music such that a combination of media (music and dance) is thought to be the most effective in articulating meaning to the audience.

Following Trans-Montréal, I have devised the following questions to explore:

1. Regarding the assumption of the white female body as the standard vehicle for dance, there is significant post-colonial baggage as it relates to Raqs Sharqi in the West. However, in relation to what Anne Bénichou discussed regarding re-enactment/re-performance as a means of empowerment, could the performance of an often sexualized, highly gendered Arabic dance style on white female bodies be considered subversive in light of the West's dominant view of Arab culture as oppressive to women?
2. Can the combination of the improvisational basis of Raqs Sharqi with the choreographic basis of Western contemporary dance (although seemingly at odds) transform dance as a performative medium by making the dancer as a body (both in the Arab sense of being a vehicle for the music and the Western sense as being a body to be animated by a disembodied choreography) and the dancer as an author an inextricable whole?
3. Furthermore, can this idea of re-performance/re-enactment coupled with the gendered nature of Raqs Sharqi be used to re-negotiate the performance female/femme identity such that it exists independently of the male gaze/gender binary while also becoming inclusive of queer/trans identities?



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-Middle Eastern dance in a nutshell (background)

-Origins are unclear, although what we currently refer to as “belly dance” is essentially a very sparkly combination of a variety of Middle Eastern and North African folkloric dances most notably Raqs Assaya and Raqs Shaabi. In Arabic, this dance form is generally referred to as “Raqs Sharqi” or ‘dance of the East’. This name was given by Western colonizers in Egypt primarily as a means of fetishizing this dance form and the Arab women who performed it.

-Prior to Western colonization in the Middle East, this dance form was almost exclusively performed by women for women. But as the concept of ‘the harem’ gradually crept into the Western popular imagination, Arabs capitalized on it by playing to this specific fantasy. So, belly dance emerged into the public eye and with this emergence came the skimpy, glittery costumes.

-Based on the idea of the dancer as embodying the music (usually as played by live musicians). The dancer is said to be “danced” by the music and thus does not have specific artistic agency in the sense of being a “choreographer”. This ties in closely to the very old (pre-Islamic old) poetic traditions that are an essential component of Arabic music and the Arabic language itself. Dance is thus translating a concept from the written/aural medium of language into an ephemeral, improvisational, visual medium.

-The dance form itself is highly linguistic in that it is meant to correspond in specific ways to the music. Drum solos, for example, follow a set pattern that allows both the musician and the dancer to improvise in tandem (nothing like that Jazz disaster that is certain to cause the next World War). (my fave example here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YdznQHmsRYw>). Many traditional Arabic songs also contain a musical bridge called a ‘taqsim’ that is meant to articulate strong emotions which are then rendered visual (and thus, in theory, more richly comprehensible to the audience) by the dancer. (Example - Dina, a totes legendary Egyptian dancer <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tJG2eWLuUGU>)

-How this relates to my own practice

-In the last 20-30 years, a lot of Middle Eastern dance has moved West in response to the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. Most of the world’s famous belly dancers now come from Eastern Europe and the United States as opposed to the Middle East. From a post-colonial perspective, there is a lot to un-pack here in terms of how Western culture is willing to “rescue” this one specific element of Arab culture by transplanting it onto our own soil while engaging in all kinds of violent, racist nonsense regarding the Middle East itself and all other aspects of its cultures.

-However, in many ways, “Western” variations of belly dance have emerged and evolved organically (most notably all of the many iterations of “tribal fusion” belly dance that largely have their origins in hip-hop and vaudeville dances).

-I practice a version of fusion style belly dance that combines the interpretive structures and movement vocabulary of Raqs Sharqi with elements of hip-hop,



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modern and contemporary dance. The basis of this type of fusion is that it is the most true to “me” as an artist/individual in that I am a Western white lady and can thus in no way claim to be an “authentic” practitioner of Middle Eastern dance.

-Since belly dance is also a highly gendered art form and, in recent times at least, largely performed in a way that very much directed at the heterosexual male gaze, I try to find ways to “queer” this inherent sexualization of ‘the dancer’ as both a body and a performed identity/character.

-Sometimes the dancer literally embodies this ‘hetero male gaze’.

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9n668hRbG0>)

-In this video, the refrain of the song (‘Habibi Ya Eini’) translates to ‘my darling, my eyes, my nights, my eyes that find that find no rest at night’ in reference to a romantic infatuation (although this song is pretty old, ironically, it was popularized recently by Egyptian pop singer Nourhane and Lebanese pop singer Nancy Ajram, both women). The dancer is embodying the romantic/sexual fantasy of the singer that is ‘keeping him up at night’.

-Outside my own practice, this idea of “queering” the relationship between the dancer and the hetero male gaze can be seen in the following vid (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RrPxig4ijcc>) in which the dancer is embodying her own desire coupled with the symbolic weight of being “an object”. (Also, this is my favorite dance teacher ;)).

How this Relates to my 10 Billion Thoughts from Trans-Montreal/Questions I want to explore

-The white woman as the ‘standard vehicle’ for dance: On one hand, this has a lot of post-colonial baggage in terms of cultural appropriation as it relates to Raqs Sharqi in the West. However, in relationship to what Anne Bénichou talked about with re-enactment/re-performance as a means of empowerment, could the performance of an often sexualized, highly gendered Arabic dance style on white female bodies (especially queer white female bodies) be considered subversive? (especially in light of the fact that Arab culture is often considered by the West as oppressive to women)

-Here I could cite as possible examples Kathryn’s and my re-imaginings of the “virgin” and “whore” archetypes to highlight their false dichotomy.

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rc3BXuZrHMU>
, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oXyWWSDL_Yg)

-Can the combination of the improvisational basis of Raqs Sharqi with the choreographic basis of Western contemporary dance (although seemingly at odds) transform dance as a performative medium by making the dancer as a body (both in the Arab sense of being a vehicle for the music and the Western sense as being a body to be animated by a disembodied choreography) and the dancer as an author an inextricable whole?

-In a similar vein, can this idea of re-performance/re-enactment coupled with the gendered nature of Raqs Sharqi be used to re-negotiate the performance

female/femme identity such that it exists independently of the male gaze/gender binary while also becoming inclusive of queer/trans identities?

- (Also thought of this when that one lady brought up the “eco location” of hip-hop. It’s a dance battle between two Egyptian lady rappers.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zMtl-UNI6J0>)

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