Belly Dancing Mommas: Challenging Cultural Discourses of Maternity

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Embodied Resistance

Challenging the Norms,
Breaking the Rules

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I'm waiting backstage. The last minute checks—Shoes? I can't bend down far enough to reach them. Hip scarf? I can't reach far enough across myself to adjust it. Veil? If I turn around to ensure it's draped correctly, I'll bump into and move the stage curtains. Warm-up hip shimmy? No need. I'm always warm nowadays. My time is close, in more ways than one. The music, and the flutter in my belly, serve as reminders... I'm twenty-six weeks along and I'm still dancing. I'm proud of myself. I enter the stage feeling voluptuous and ripe. What an odd and unexpected empowerment. It takes just a few seconds for her to join in. "I can feel you, Baby!" She wiggles. "Are you dancing too?" This is our duet. Nothing else matters.

These were my thoughts during my last public performance before delivering my daughter. I had been belly dancing semiprofessionally for more than six years at the time I learned I was pregnant. It was the one form of exercise-recreation I maintained throughout my pregnancy, and it was the first such activity I resumed postpartum. While belly dance is a highly expressive and creative genre (Shay and Sellers-Young 2003, 2005), the public typically views it as a form of erotic entertainment, on par with striptease, burlesque, and cabaret (Carlton 1994; Dougherty 2005). It may thus seem inappropriate for a pregnant woman or new mother to be engaging in belly dance—an unsuitable display of the body and contrary to the asexualized, selfless qualities of maternity.

Indeed, pregnancy and early motherhood in the United States are subject to dominant cultural discourses that position them as central to normative femininity, a cultural rite of passage (Letherby 1994). As such, women face a host of gendered expectations about selfless devotion to (impending) motherhood. The pregnant and postpartum body becomes a subject of distinct patriarchal critique, with a range of activities and behaviors related to diet, exercise, and appearance deemed necessary for healthy pregnancy, birth, and postpartum recovery (Bailey 1999). In this chapter I examine the ways in which the act of belly dancing subverts dominant discourses surrounding pregnancy and motherhood.
Discourses of Maternity

A central premise of feminist theories is that women's bodies are perceived as a mystery, the Other, as de Beauvoir (1952) asserted several decades ago. Thus, they are abstract, unpredictable, suspect, and possibly threatening things that must be regulated and controlled. Through time and the evolution of various social, political, and religious institutions, women's bodies have become a "direct locus of social control" (Bordo 1990, 13). Activities associated with or performed on female bodies have become a "medium of culture" (Bordo 1990, 13), and the various means through which culture is displayed through and on women's bodies has been widely discussed by various feminist theorists (see Bartky 1988; Dumen 1989). As products and practitioners of culture, then, women are socialized throughout their lives to "do gender" (West and Zimmerman 1987).

Dominant discourses about what is and is not deemed appropriate regarding women's activities and displays of physicality arise from this rubric. These discourses place various and sometimes contradictory expectations on women's gendered performances (Bordo 1993; Burder 1990; Dyer 1992). Such paradoxical expectations become particularly salient during pregnancy and shortly after childbirth. For example, women may be expected to suspend certain normative practices related to their non-motherhood identities (e.g., being thin, acting sexually alluring) and prioritize, even if only temporarily, others (e.g., gaining weight, honing one's "maternal instinct," becoming asexual) (Bailey 1999; Dworkin and Wachs 2004; Marshall 1991). Thus, while the pregnant woman symbolizes maternal potential, she also becomes aesthetically problematic. She is both an admired subject and a physically unappealing object, according to contemporary standards of beauty. As such, the postpartum torso is to be modestly clothed or masked according to culturally appropriate standards. So while women may find pride and strength in their bodies during and after pregnancy, these same bodies may also become sources of discomfort and shame (Dworkin and Wachs 2004). Dancing in ways that emphasize and reveal the torso may provide a space for overt resistance and physical reclamation.

History and Social Context of Belly Dance

Belly dance, as it has come to be known in the West, is an eclectic genre with ancient origins throughout the Middle and Near East. To be more specific, it encompasses "a matrix of dances including those that originate in North Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia as well as related hybrid forms created in the United States and elsewhere that are currently part of private and public performances in villages, towns, suburbs, and urban communities across the globe in cafes, concert stages, community centers, and on the internet" (Shay and Sellers-Young 2005, 11). While examining the history of the dance can help one appreciate how and why contemporary women are drawn to it, its exact origin is difficult to determine because of the vast geographical area of the Middle and Near East and the lack of complete historical records throughout this region (Deagon 1998). The historical records and scholarly writings that do exist indicate, however, that belly dance is often considered a derivative of the oldest documented dances (Djoumahna 2000). Archaeological evidence dating to at least 3400
Embodied Resistance

BCE (Knapp 1981) from lands on the southeastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea suggest that many of the movements associated with contemporary belly dance may have been incorporated into various rituals, celebrations, and community activities throughout the past several millennia (Stewart 2000).

The way in which belly dance has evolved to its contemporary, often misunderstood, state involves myriad social, economic, and political forces related to tourism, Orientalism (the portrayal, usually through negative or misleading stereotypes, of Eastern culture by outsiders, generally associated with the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries), and European colonialism over the past several hundred years. Such forces have formed a juxtaposition between the East, as it was originally perceived (hence references to the Orient), and the West. In the writings and paintings that emerged during the 1700s and 1800s, for example, women were often depicted as well-endowed, partially nude performers (MacMaster and Lewis 1998). Such images provided colorful sexual fodder about a seemingly exotic foreign land that was heightened by the strict propriety and social regulation often associated with that period (Carlton 1994; MacMaster and Lewis 1998).

Despite such negative portrayals, belly dance has become extremely popular in the past few decades, particularly among non-Middle Eastern women from various parts of the world (Wright and Dreyfus 1998). One negative effect of such widespread involvement is that dancers have been accused of appropriation (see, e.g., Maira 2008). While a full discussion of this issue would require more space than available here, it is worth noting two factors that complicate claims of appropriation. First, for an activity to be borrowed or stolen (as arguments of appropriation often claim), it must be possible to clearly determine a time and place from which the activity was taken. However, it is impossible to claim with any certainty that belly dance began at a specific place and at a specific time or even to reach agreement on what exactly constitutes belly dance. It has always been and remains a constantly evolving dance form with few universally accepted rules about technique (in contrast to more codified forms of dance, such as ballet, jazz, and tap) (Shay and Sellers-Young 2003).

Second, contemporary belly dancers, including those located in the United States, are not necessarily twenty-first-century Orientalists, knowingly adhering to and supporting exploitive and misinformed images of the dance and the Middle East. Quite the opposite, in fact; many struggle to improve understanding and appreciation of the art form and to enhance its legitimacy (Dox 2006). They do so knowing that their efforts may be in vain, because audiences are likely to retain their misconceptions about the dance despite a performer’s efforts to correct them. Nonetheless, the constant challenge of altering stereotypes and improving public perceptions of the dance drive the efforts of these dancers. On the other end of the spectrum, however, are dancers who seem to purposefully play into stereotypes by incorporating elements of the Orientalist aesthetic into their performances (e.g., wearing “harem” outfits, veiling the lower face, working snakes and swords into choreography). To complicate matters, sometimes the same dancers draw from both ends of the spectrum, depending on the circumstances of their performances and the composition of audiences (e.g., a restaurant venue dictates a much different aesthetic than a stage production). Such is the reality of many professional belly dancers, past and present—negotiating the line between earning a living and correcting misconceptions.
Methods and Sample

This analysis is based on an ethnographic project on belly dance in the United States (Moe 2008) that aimed to understand contemporary women’s reasons for and experiences with the dance. As a semiprofessional belly dancer, I have long been interested in why women participate in this genre of movement. As a new mother, I have also become intrigued with how this dance fits into the lives of pregnant and postpartum women. Thus, I conducted twenty-four semi-structured interviews with women who had belly danced or were belly dancing while pregnant or postpartum, focusing on (1) why pregnant and postpartum women belly dance; (2) the extent and ways belly dance affects women’s views of their bodies; and (3) how the voices and experiences of pregnant and postpartum belly dancers might challenge the cultural discourse surrounding pregnancy and motherhood.

The interviewed women were between the ages of twenty-four and fifty-eight (average of thirty-six). Their belly dance experience ranged from one-and-a-half to thirty-five years, with 46 percent (eleven) identifying as amateur or hobbyists and 54 percent (thirteen) identifying as semiprofessionals, professionals, or retired profession-
als. All identified as heterosexual, with the majority currently married or partnered (79 percent, nineteen). The majority (88 percent, twenty-one) were also currently living in the midwestern states of Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, and Missouri, which likely contributed to the relatively homogeneous racial and ethnic composition of the sample, with 96 percent (twenty-three) identifying as white. The sample was well educated as well, with 8 percent (two) having only a high school diploma, while 33 percent (eight) had completed some college or obtained college degrees, 46 percent (eleven) had completed some graduate work or obtained master’s degrees, and 13 percent (three) had completed doctoral degrees. In addition to being busy mothers (averaging two children each), most retained paid employment (79 percent, nineteen). Five (21 percent) of the women were pregnant at the time of the interviews. They shared many thoughts, perceptions, and experiences that suggested their awareness of the dominant discourse surrounding pregnancy and motherhood. Indeed, they identified two elements of the discourse in particular, appearance and behavior, and then challenged each with regard to belly dance.

Appearance: Masking versus Revealing

As noted earlier, the pregnant and postpartum body, while socially admired for what it has accomplished by producing and sustaining a child, is also not typically seen as physically or sexually appealing in our society. Though this attitude is changing in some ways (e.g., the current trend among pregnant women to wear formfitting maternity clothes), pregnant and postpartum bodies continue to be subject to scrutiny. Indeed, a pregnant woman who remains proportionately thin throughout her pregnancy (e.g., being “all belly”) or who is able to lose weight quickly after giving birth may escape some of this criticism and even receive praise for showing her body. The majority of women, however, whose bodies are not representative of societal beauty ideals about weight and firmness before pregnancy may face scrutiny. Such criticisms may intensify during and after pregnancy, when their bodies are even larger and less toned.

The women were well aware of the possibility that they would be judged negatively, recognizing that certain social expectations drive the ways in which they are to appear physically as pregnant women and as new mothers. These expectations were targeted at the torso, as a part of the body that ought to be covered in the name of modesty and social appropriateness. As Jaiye (belly dance hobbyist, mother of four) explained, “I think people want you to try to keep that belly covered. I think it embarrasses people who see your bare stomach when you are so long into your pregnancy as far as actually showing.” Echoing such sentiments, Jordana (professional belly dancer, mother of an infant) commented, “You should not dress provocatively . . . You’re pregnant! You’re off the market.” Be very conservative.” Julia (hobbyist, mother of two) indicated that this expectation to mask the torso extends into the postpartum period as well: “You have to stay covered. That’s a big thing. It’s forever. I wasn’t wearing those little belly shirts or anything, but my clothes weren’t to my knees either. I had shorter shirts and now it’s like if my shirt slides up and my stomach shows, people are talking down to me. Even my son will go, ‘Mom!’”

While aware of such expectations, the women were very frank about explaining how belly dancing provided them a direct means of subverting expectations of hid-
ing their pregnant and postpartum torsos. In particular, there was a strong sense that exposing their bodies on their own terms in this way was liberating, regardless of the reactions by others. For example, Naia (semi-professional, mother of a toddler) described her experience of having maternity photos taken in a belly dance costume: “Somebody asked me, ‘Did you show your belly?’ Like that would be an awful thing to do! I was like, ‘Oh yeah, I showed more than my belly!’

Such emboldened resistance extended to the postpartum period as well. During this time the women dealt with social expectations to hide the physical consequences of pregnancy, particularly weight gain and stretch marks. Dana (hobbyist, pregnant with fifth child) asserted, “It’s like you’re supposed to be dissatisfied with your [postpartum] belly pooch. You’re supposed to want to get rid of it. As a belly dancer you embrace that part of your body. You embrace all of it, however it is.”

Indeed, embracing their bodies engendered a sense of greater self-acceptance for many women. This point is important, because during the postpartum period women face extreme social pressure to reconfigure to the social standards of beauty to which they were subjected before pregnancy. Thus, many struggled with losing their “baby weight” quickly, the connotation being that carrying any “extra” weight is unacceptable and unattractive. However, through belly dance the women were able to accept and appreciate their bodies just as they were. Bella (professional, mother of two) vividly recalled her experience of viewing her dancing body soon after birth:

I went down to my studio by myself, I turned the music on and I stood there and looked at my body. I watched that movement and I watched that belly roll. It was one of the most beautiful things I have ever seen in my life, absolutely beautiful, and I was thirty to thirty-five pounds heavier. . . . I just stood there and I took it all in and I said, “This is what the female body is. This is what we should be praising.”

The same held true for the women’s handling of stretch marks, which are often a source of embarrassment and shame. With this issue, belly dancing again proved a means through which women could reclaim their physicality, in all of its manifestations, and resist social scripts that would have them mask their midsections. Sarah (professional, mother of two) recalled, “It was tough. I can’t count the times that people have made comments about my stretch marks, especially photographers. It’s just been obnoxious. . . . Occasionally there would be that self-consciousness that crept in, but for the most part I’ve been able to suppress that.” In fact, such experiences actually prompted Sarah to take her dance business in a new direction, one that celebrated the totality of women’s shapes, sizes, and markings. As she explained, “I decided to form my own troupe and all of my women were mothers and they all had stretch marks. . . . I will definitely challenge the status quo when it comes to the perception of what a beautiful female should be . . . should look like.”

In short, the women’s recognition of and resistance to social standards regarding the appearance of the pregnant and postpartum body informed their consciousness about how and why they belly danced. The ways in which this particular genre of movement challenged public perceptions of how women’s bodies are supposed to be presented during and after pregnancy fueled their commitment to the dance and enhanced the benefits they derived from it. The contrast between the behavior deemed
appropriate for pregnant and postpartum women and the behavior allowed under the guise of belly dancing had the same effect on the women's commitment and the benefits they derived.

Behavior: Modesty versus Reclamation

The women's recognition and subversion of the cultural discourse surrounding pregnancy and motherhood extended logically from discussions surrounding physical appearance to actual behavior. In this vein, belly dancing provided an avenue through which to balance their identities as both mothers who were dedicated to their families and autonomous women who yearned to reconnect to their individuality. For example, Baiye commented, “Everyone wants you to be this sweet new mom, docile and temperate woman, not making any waves. They think you should just kind of waddle around with your hands at the small of your back and just sit down and take it easy until you have that baby.” In explaining how such expectations continue well into motherhood, Genevieve (professional, mother of three) also highlighted the suspension of autonomy: “New moms are expected to do certain things, behave certain ways... It seems like everything is censored. You're talking about the children most of the time, so there is this feeling of you disappearing.”

As both Baiye and Genevieve suggest, there is a strong gendered component to this discourse, in that pregnant and postpartum women are expected to epitomize subservience and vulnerability through their maternal status. Allie (hobbyist, mother of two) echoed these sentiments and hinted at an aspect of infantilization: “People treat you differently when you're pregnant. They'll act like you can't do things for yourself. Everyone thinks you're fragile.” Finally, as suggested earlier, pregnant and postpartum women are often not thought of as being sensual or sexual beings. Naia candidly made this point: “Nobody ever wants to think about... pregnant women doing anything sexual.”

The opportunity to do something sensually or sexually provocative, however, was often what the women found attractive about belly dance during and after pregnancy. That aspect elicited predictable responses by others. As Dana noted, “I had people who kind of gave me looks, like, ‘Wow, that's a little risqué for you to be doing as a mommy. Do you want to expose your kids to that?’ They really didn't have an idea of what it is besides the American mistaken idea of what belly dancing is—that it's just a step away from stripping. To be a mom of an infant and to be sensual and appreciate your body is not allowed.” But unlike common stereotypes about the dance, which suggest that women are drawn to it for titillating and seductive purposes, the women in this study yearned for the opportunity to reconnect with their physicality through a form of movement that honors a woman's body and life course. Their experiences in this regard were tied more to their need to reconnect to their bodies in self-affirming ways, which encompassed empowering aspects of sensuality and sexuality, than to any desire to please or meet others’ expectations. As Lynne (pregnant with first child) noted, “The freedom, just being able to go and just move. I really appreciate being able to do that. Recognizing that it's probably not as elegant or fluid as it could be, but I can still move... It's not a prerequisite to look good per se. It's not the about the aesthetic. It's what feels good for you.” Jeela (professional, mother of one) echoed
these sentiments: “The body takes all sorts of different shapes and sizes throughout its lifetime. It functions in different ways for you, as an adolescent, as a young woman, as a pregnant woman, as an older woman. Pregnancy is just like a natural part of that whole timeline. . . . Belly dance gives you a beautiful vocabulary to express it.”

In particular, women who viewed themselves as heavy before pregnancy, and who maintained such physiques after pregnancy, found a particular sense of physical acceptance through belly dance that remained salient throughout their pregnancies. As Jordan explained:

Society tells you what beautiful is and what attractive is. . . . You try to tell yourself, “Maybe I’m an exception to the rule.” . . . The community of belly dance says, “It doesn’t matter how big or how small you are.”. . . . When I first started dancing and I was heavy, I used to wear fabric that would cover my belly. And then I started to dance more and become more confident with my body and then I completely took the cover away. The entire time I was pregnant I never wore a belly cover.

Belly dancing provided a way for the women in this study to challenge the status quo regarding the activities of expectant and new mothers. Indeed, for them, part of the draw of belly dance was that it uniquely subverted the social scripts that manage women’s behavior during pregnancy and early motherhood, allowing them a means through which to reclaim and balance their public behavior in lieu of social standards that dictate otherwise. Janice (professional, pregnant with first child) defended her right to belly dance in light of others’ expectations that she modify her behavior:

The reactions I get when people find out I’m pregnant, they’re like, “Oh my God! You’re just out there dancing around and everything?” I just have the attitude of, “Screw it, I’ll do what I want.” . . . I went shopping with my in-laws this weekend and I bent down with a scanner to scan something and they’re like, “Oh be careful!” I’m like, “I can squat! You know, I belly dance. You think this is bad? Don’t come watch me at a show!”

Finally, the women also found that through the dance they were able to balance their old (prepregnant) and new (pregnant-motherhood) identities, an issue that was central to their reconnecting to their bodies. Julia commented on the responses she received for taking one night a week away from her family to belly dance. She, and the other women in this study, directly countered the social expectation that women suspend their pre-pregnancy activities in lieu of their family responsibilities: “Tuesday nights are ‘mom’s on strike’ night. I get some horrified looks sometimes. ‘You do what?’ Maybe I’m a little nontraditional, but I have to do something for myself. People don’t understand that. It’s just, ‘You actually leave them?’ And I’m like, ‘Yeah, I leave them with their father!’” While belly dancing is not unique in this way, as various activities may be used by women as an outlet for individual expression and exercise, the fact that the women in this study chose an activity that challenges the discourses surrounding their maternal-familial status was intriguing. As Gail (professional, mother of two) noted, “Seeing pregnant woman dance is a whole kind of a mind-altering thing. Oriental dance is sexy.” It’s very sensual and very pretty and
Conclusion

Women who belly dance are subject to stereotyping and prejudice. Dancing during pregnancy and early motherhood challenges the dominant cultural discourses about what are and are not acceptable activities and displays of the female body. The women in this study were well aware of these discourses and referenced them when expressing their own embodied experiences. That they continue to engage in and defend belly dance, despite its contradictory positioning within socially acceptable behavior, speaks to the lure of this genre of movement. The findings here offer some insights about why belly dance is so appealing during pregnancy and early motherhood.

First, women may struggle with accepting their changing physical shape during and after pregnancy. Such struggles are complicated by the ways in which our culture enforces somewhat contradictory messages about the appearance and behavior of (expectant) mothers (Bailey 1999; Dworkin and Wachs 2004; Marshall 1991). For example, while it is acceptable for women to gain weight (to a certain extent) during pregnancy, it is incumbent on them to lose this baby weight as quickly as possible afterward. We often see this imperative presented under the guise of “getting your body back” (Dworkin and Wachs 2004, 610), as if one’s true body is somewhere else, certainly not part of one’s postpartum physique. Belly dance, as it was experienced by the women in this study, allows creative space for women of all shapes and sizes. Although individual women’s reasons for belly dancing vary, and it would be inappropriate to assume that a purely aesthetic rationale (i.e., to prevent excessive weight gain during pregnancy and to more quickly lose weight afterward) is not at play, the point made by the women in this study is that the dance helps them to feel good about their bodies, in whatever shape or form they are in. While some of them were probably hoping to lose weight by belly dancing, this motive was not as salient in their rationales. What was salient were the means through which belly dance allowed them to view their fuller, maternal bodies as something powerful and admirable. Belly dancing seemed to provide a space in which to suspend social expectations of the body. As such, it offered women an avenue through which to appreciate, accept, and honor their bodies within different stages of their lives.

Second, women seem to be confronted with a disjunction between identities during pregnancy and early motherhood that, again, is related to the dominant discourses surrounding these life events (Bailey 1999; Dworkin and Wachs 2004; Marshall 1991). As the women attest, being and acting sensual or sexual during and after pregnancy is not readily accepted by our culture. They reported ways in which belly dancing helped them to challenge, overcome, and otherwise disregard such social messages. Through belly dance, women may find a safe and creative outlet for exploring and reconnecting with their sensual and sexual selves. Such (re)discovery, and the (re)balancing of identity, can be central to a healthy personal state. It is indeed interesting that a dance so often dismissed as being overly and inappropriately erotic actually holds value to women on these same grounds. Part of the draw to the dance seems to be the permission their own terms seems to provide aspects of them certain activities a opinions are so easily overall, it sees of the dance, while women who practice it states and various forms art form lives. As is seen here, the ways in which dance is integral to and important to listen to dancers. Certainly, the changing of pregnancy and herself, and the discourses is worth

NOTES

1. The women did identify as pregnant. One woman
2. All names are pseudonyms.
3. Her use of the is disparaging and used and accepted in Oriental style as more exciting.

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to be the permission it extends to women to claim a sense of sensuality and sexuality on their own terms. Rather than denying such elements of their identity, this dance seems to provide a safe space from which women may reexamine and redefine intrinsic aspects of themselves. It is thus worth examining how, why, and for whose interests certain activities are demonized, as well as why women’s embodied experiences and opinions are so easily disregarded.

Overall, it seems belly dance may be too easily dismissed as an illegitimate form of movement and expression. This dismissal is largely due to the multifaceted history of the dance, which has supported long-standing misconceptions about it and the women who practice it (MacMaster and Lewis 1998). That women from the United States and various other non–Middle Eastern countries are engaging in this misunderstood art form (Wright and Dreyfus 1998) is suggestive of its salience within their lives. As is seen here, it is important to examine all aspects of appropriation, including the ways in which contemporary Western women are negotiating their own use of the dance in light of enduring Orientalist stereotyping. What is clear is that it is important to listen to the voices and learn from the experiences of contemporary belly dancers. Certainly when it comes to the strain, pressure, and adjustment required during pregnancy and early motherhood, an activity that helps women feel good about themselves and retain a sense of individuality by challenging social scripts and cultural discourses is worth exploring.

NOTES

1. The women did report a range of European and Mediterranean ancestries. Two also identified as part Native American and one identified exclusively as a Russian immigrant. One woman identified as black.

2. All names are pseudonyms.

3. Her use of the term Oriental was intentional, since some practitioners take issue with the disparaging connotations attached to the term belly dance, preferring labels more often used and accepted within the Middle and Near East (e.g., Arabic dance, Middle Eastern dance, Oriental dance). This seems especially common for those who see their particular style as more ethnically representative.

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