

Belly dancing has become especially trendy among non-Arab women across the United States since the 1990s and in the San Francisco Bay Area where it was popularized in the 1960s and 1970s with the emergence of female liberation movements focusing on body politics. This article reflects on what it means for American women to stage Middle Eastern dance at a time when the United States is engaged in war and occupation in the Middle East and there is intensified preoccupation with the figure of the Arab and Muslim “other,” and particularly with the image of oppressed Middle Eastern and Muslim femininity. The research is based on interviews with belly dance students, performers, teachers, and managers in the Bay Area that explore: why is belly dancing so popular among non-Arab women in the Bay Area? Why has it exploded at a moment when Arab Americans themselves have been profiled and attacked during the War on Terror? What does this embodied performance of putatively “Middle Eastern culture” reveal about post-9/11 U.S. nationalism?

The politics of dance forms that travel, such as belly dance, are important to consider, because they allow us to trace historical connections between the Middle East/West Asia and the United States/“the West” and the movement of bodies that migrate to the metropole. I argue that belly dancing performances are entangled with the imperial engagements that link the United States and the Middle East and reveal a deeper politics of imperialism, racialization, and feminism in this moment of U.S. empire. The article situates the massive appeal of belly dancing and its growing resonance with white American women since 2001 in relation to contemporary gender and nationalist politics, demonstrating that belly dancing has become a popular site for the mobilization of “whiteness” and “Americanness” in relation to Arab/Muslim femininities and masculinities.

Belly dancing has become a site for staging a New Age feminism and liberal Orientalist perspective on Arab and Muslim women. I explore how belly dance performances are layered with the politics of liberal multiculturalism, sisterhood, and female entrepreneurship. The relative invisibility of Arab women in belly dancing gives rise to a politics of Arab-face that allows non-Arab American women to explore a range of “imperial feelings” in response to the U.S. War on Terror and the specter of “un-free” Middle Eastern and Muslim women. Arab Americans who work in the belly dance industry express ambivalence about what some consider auto-exoticization that is intertwined with anxieties about ethnic authenticity, anti-Arab racism, and class mobility. I argue that belly dancing signals a domestication of Middle Eastern culture after 9/11 and makes female bodies a site where “American” femininity is linked to Western individualism and democracy, while erasing the specter of warfare against Arab and Muslim bodies, female and male.