



## Feeling Arab: Sound Worlding, *Hishik Bishik*, and Belly Dance

Juliana Fadil-Luchkiw

In early 2020, when I met B, a Palestinian-Jordanian artist who had recently moved to New York City for graduate school, I told her about my Lebanese family. I described the women as “typically Lebanese”: beautiful, beauty-minded, scandalously clothed, humorously cynical, exuberantly hospitable, generous, and complimentary. All my aunties are warm, friendly, smiling, and ready to chat people up, while wearing leopard print. My family is also probably what would be considered *fallaheen* (peasants) from the *baladi* (the country or countryside). To refer to something as *baladi* has a connotation of “low class” and a “real” or “authentic” person. So with this description of my family, my friend’s initial response was, “Oh, those are the trashy Arabs.” I laughed, taking no offense. She was not wrong. Clearly, this depiction stands in stark contrast with Western stereotypes of Southwest Asia (a.k.a. the Middle East) and North Africa (SWANA), supposedly filled with terrorists and oppressed, veiled women. Instead, the stereotype of Lebanese women is that they are all like the singers, models, and beauty queens (re: sex symbols) who do not have the shame to sing and dance in public and who are seen in the media throughout the Arab world. These Lebanese women are stereotypically viewed by other SWANA people as sexually available and supposedly “trying to be Western” with their revealing clothing and hypervisibility. Combined with the designation *baladi*, my friend understood them as

“trashy” due to the “shaky morals” implied by the stereotype of the Lebanese woman who uses her looks and charm for monetary gain. This stereotype occupies a space that overlaps and intertwines with the belly dancer, whose perpetual presence in Arabic cultural production is central yet also marginal to Arabness or what it means to be an Arab.



Video clip from the Egyptian film *Hawalet Rooh* (2014) starring Lebanese pop star Haifa Wehbe. [https://youtu.be/Hd4zxdwr\\_X0](https://youtu.be/Hd4zxdwr_X0)

This essay is a phenomenological account of belly dance as a reflection on Arabness. I share this opening anecdote in order to create a space to ask questions about self, other, and being with regard to belly dance. I use the term “belly dance” throughout this essay because it is the broadest, most well-known name for the dance I am referring to. As it is known globally, “belly dance” is an amalgamation of non-standardized dance practices and vocabularies, and it is often characterized by isolation of body parts and improvised movement. Anthony Shay and Barbara Sellers-Young explain in the introduction to *Belly Dance: Orientalism, Transnationalism, and Harem Fantasy* that belly dance “denote[s] all solo dance forms from Morocco to Uzbekistan that engage the hips, torso, arms and hands in undulations, shimmies,

circles, and spirals.”<sup>1</sup> It is an Afro-Asiatic dance that is typically associated with being Arab, although Arabs are not the only group to inhabit this part of the world.

Some people say “belly dance” was actually coined by the West as a bastardization of the word *baladi*. In the United States, belly dance has a specific history, which I will overview briefly for context, as the Western view of the dance has affected how it is perceived among SWANA people. The dance was first performed in the United States by Little Egypt (Fahreda Mazar Spyropoulos) in the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair. With her swiveling hips and revealing attire, “Little Egypt,” who was actually Syrian, scandalized the Victorian sensibilities at the time and became a pre-Hollywood sex symbol: a repository for Western sexual repression as projected through the fetishization of its Oriental obsession.<sup>2</sup> For the first half of the twentieth century, hypersexualized Little Egypt-like dancers proliferated among vaudeville shows and similar venues. Eventually, this dance met up with second-wave feminism and the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, and birthed the Western “tribal style” belly dance, which is a celebration of female sexuality that is aligned with a white feminist agenda.<sup>3</sup> During this time, Arab Americans took advantage of the rise in Orientalism—via bohemianism—and opened nightclubs featuring Arabic music and belly dancers. These were the kind of self-Orientalizing spectacles that continue today, although it is more likely to see dancers who are not Arab performing in these spaces. This phenomenon is also apparent in the SWANA region. In the past 20 years, there has been a rise in non-Arab dance stars in the region, mainly from Ukraine and Russia.<sup>4</sup>

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1. Anthony Shay and Barbara Sellers-Young, *Belly Dance: Orientalism, Transnationalism, and Harem Fantasy* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2005), 1.

2. It is important to note that while I mostly refer to Lebanese women in this essay, Lebanon was part of Syria until the French Mandate ended in 1943, and these stereotypes from the Arab world deal with *shami* women more broadly, although today they have become specifically Lebanese.

3. This information is synthesized and paraphrased from various essays in the anthology edited by Shay and Sellers-Young, *Belly Dance*.

4. Emily Gordine, “How a Russian Became a Belly Dancing Star in Egypt,” *DW Broadcasting*, November 26, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/how-a-russian-became-a-belly-dancing-star-in-egypt/a-51448665>.



*Another Little Egypt (Fatima Djamil), performing for Thomas Edison's film camera in 1896. <https://youtu.be/WIsYpNED838>*

In SWANA and abroad, belly dance—its movement vocabulary and sartorial idioms—carries a world within it, and when this world is conjured in certain ways, it can generate a communal experience. To make this claim, I am thinking with *hishik bishik*, an Arabic slang used in the region, which refers to belly dance and its surrounding culture. The term is an onomatopoeia for the sound made by the coins on the dancer's hip scarf. The term implies shaky morals, "meaning something carnival-like, related to low-class dancing, with a connotation of being trashy."<sup>5</sup> The sound is produced by the movement of the dancer's hips, which causes the coins to shake and clink together in sync with the beat. It is through *hishik bishik* that I understand how belly dance provides a model for and a practice of relationality that simultaneously values autonomy and collectivity, which hinges on the kinesthetic energy of the dancer and the aurality and materiality of the hip scarf as it is worn by the dancer. The essence of *hishik bishik* relates to B's reaction to my family as described earlier.

5. Sherifa Zuhur, *Popular Dance and Music in Modern Egypt* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2022), 205.



Since the beginning of the pandemic and thinking about life online, I have been making what I call "Orientalist paintings," based on the idea that Orientalism is abstract art. These are small glimpses into dancing in the private space of the home. I have included this one in order to provide a visual example of the coin scarf. Juliana Fadil-Luchkiw; "Everybody's in My Bedroom This Pandemic" Orientalist Painting #73; digital video still.

Belly dance ranges from a social dance to a performing art. As Arab societies are not a monolith, sentiments toward the dancer have changed depending on the point in time, location of the performance, social class of the audience, and ethnicity of the performer. Najwa Adra's study "Belly Dance: An Urban Folk Genre" explains how, in SWANA and its diaspora, belly dance events are usually highly social with lots of interaction between performer and audience. In her ethnography, Adra compares social dancing in private spaces with professional dancing in public spaces. While dancing in public for money is often frowned upon, she writes, "almost everyone in the region dances or has danced at some point in their lives."<sup>6</sup> This is because dance is highly embedded into our culture and daily life. According to Fatema Mernissi, in SWANA cultures, dance is passed on "from generation to generation as a celebration of the body and a ritual of self

6. Najwa Adra, "Belly Dance: An Urban Folk Genre," in *Belly Dance: Orientalism, Transnationalism, and Harem Fantasy*, ed. Anthony Shay and Barbara Sellers-Young (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers 2005), 29.

enhancement."<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Rosina-Fawzia Al-Rawi claims, "Most Arab women can belly dance without ever having learned it in a dancing school."<sup>8</sup> This also applies to Arab men and Arab people in general. For example, I always danced in the house with my mom, sisters, aunts, and cousins. It was mostly my aunts, who danced with an *awalim* troupe when they were younger, who taught me.

As a social dance, Adra claims that belly dance can be thought of as a metaphor for the values of Arab society, in which community is the main unit while autonomy and self-expression are also valued, although mostly only acceptable in the private realm.<sup>9</sup> She puts forth the idea that belly dance's emphasis on improvisation and lack of programmatic intention and limits on which body parts one can use all maximize the autonomy of the dancer, yet these are clearly bound by the private space. The autonomy expressed by amateurs dancing in the domestic space is not flaunted or discussed in public. Further, Adra describes an experience that matches my own: when there is dancing in the home, someone might tie a scarf around the waist of the best dancer, or she ties it around herself, and dances until she is tired, handing the scarf off to the next dancer. Historically, the hip scarf was both ornamental and served a functional purpose to lift the *thobe* so the legs could be free to dance. As Badr Sellak explains in an article for the queer Jordanian magazine *MyKali*, "[the scarf] still occupies a significant place in [Arabic] cultural memory and allows us to see the erotic side in the everyday attire seen in homes and on the streets of [Arabic] cities."<sup>10</sup> Note that the erotic differs from the sexual here, but it is the conflation of the two that has rendered the dance taboo in certain contexts.

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7. Fatema Mernissi, *Scheherazade Goes West: Different Cultures, Different Harems* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2001), 71.

8. Rosina-Fawzia Al-Rawi, *Grandmother's Secrets: The Ancient Rituals and Healing Power of Bellydancing*, trans. Monique Arav (New York: Interlink Books 2003), 59.

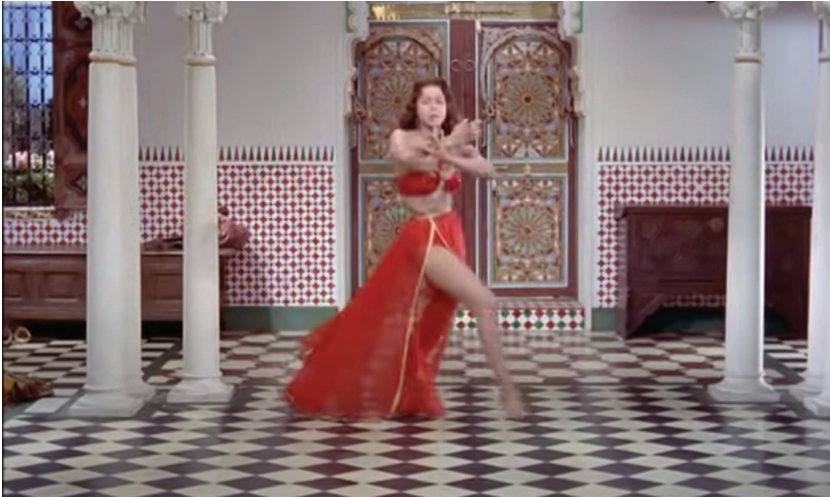
9. Adra, "Belly Dance," 43.

10. Badr Sellak, "Faded Icons: Belly Dance and the Nostalgia of Erotic Imagery," *MyKali*, October 2021, <https://www.mykalimag.com/en/2021/10/02/faded-icons-belly-dance-and-the-nostalgia-of-erotic-imagery/>.



Egyptian dancer Fifi Abdou performing her shisha dance.  
<https://youtu.be/TU5oCaslPKU>

While *hishik bishik* refers to the scarf, the trashiness that it implies comes about when the scarf is moved from private space into public space. Dancing in the home, as Adra describes, can be contrasted with dancing at weddings and nightclubs, where professional dancers are paid to perform in more ornate suits, called *badlah*, with sequins and tassels, and people dance, clap, sing, ululate, and shout encouragement. The spectacle as well as the fluid and improvised movements of the dance inspire participation from the patrons. In the Arab world, specifically, *raqs sharqi* (literally, Oriental dance) was developed by Levantine and Egyptian performers in Egyptian cabarets and cinema, and as such is particularly attributed to Egypt. As part of a lineage of “low-class” and “traditional” dancing from the SWANA region, *raqs sharqi* has a *baladi* aesthetic folded into the art-form itself. So you might say that “Oriental dancing” is constituted by *hishik bishik*.



"Golden Age" Egyptian dancer Samia Gamal in the film *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* (1954). <https://youtu.be/t1hoCRfeFc0>

The coins on the dancer's hip scarf collapse sound and movement into *hishik bishik*. So, how does a sound call a world into being? In her discussion of the Indigenous Arctic soundscapes used in the Discovery channel show *Flying Wild Alaska*, Jessica Bissett Perea introduces the term "sound worlding." As she writes, "whereas settler-colonial sound worlding silences and disappears the ways in which colonized people are brought into existence and thus framed by colonial epistemologies, Indigenous sound worlding is a critical embodied practice that unsettles audible formations of colonial logics and representations."<sup>11</sup> Sound worlding combines sound and movement not only because sound *is* movement but because one must *do* something with sound in order to engage in the process of making a world. Bissett Perea's framework is helpful for my argument because of how the sound *hishik bishik* refers to a world of sexy dancing, seedy cabarets, and illicit behavior; how this is a dance that brings a place with it; and how

11. Jessica Bissett-Perea, "Inuit Sound Worlding and Audioreelism in *Flying Wild Alaska*," in *Music and Modernity Among First Peoples of North America*, ed. Victoria Lindsay Levine and Dylan Robinson (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2019), 176.



multiple worldings—for Perea, settler-colonial and Indigenous—can exist at once and sometimes overlap. I am thinking about *hishik bishik* as a sound worlding. As such, it unsettles the colonial frameworks that have constructed the erotic affect of the hips as trashy, in the East, and overdetermined them as sexy and seductive, as well as liberatory, in the West. The back and forth between the Eastern and Western imaginaries shows how, in today's world, it might be impossible to separate the two from one another. *Hishik bishik* is like the stereotype of the Lebanese woman, who also holds multiple truths.

Clearly, belly dance is a central part of social gatherings within and outside the home. I contend that *hishik bishik* is why Oriental dance maintains an ambivalent position within the SWANA region. Looking to Egypt—the central producer of Arabic film and media as well as Oriental dance—the figure of the belly dancer, today, is simultaneously viewed with nostalgia and disdain. While belly dancing is a beloved part of Egyptian culture, apparently nowadays no respectable Arab woman would make her career by earning money through her body. Belly dance and prostitution have been almost synonymous in the public imaginary. That collapse of dance and sex work allowed for nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western powers to construct the Oriental woman as excessively sexual, which functioned as justification for the need to colonize the region. At the same time, paradoxically, the dance came to represent freedom for Western women.

As the scarf occupies a space in Arabic collective memory, the dancer's deployment of the scarf conjures up those memories, and makes new ones, in each performance. The role of the dancer is to interpret emotions through the dance, which is often referred to as "the feeling." There is one ethnographic study published by Candace Bordelon in 2013 that connects "the feeling" to *tarab*—musical ecstasy, or a vicarious outpouring of emotion from the performer to the audience through the invocation of personal and collective memories. *Tarab* usually emerges through the voice and is expressed through the improvisational structure of *maqam* in *musiqa al-gadid*, which is highly associated with belly dance and pan-Arabism. According to Bordelon, what makes

a good dancer is her ability to express “the feeling” through her body. I quote Bordelon at length in her description of how this occurs:

The feelings produced by those memories, are, in turn, transferred to the current performance environment, inching the dancer, the musicians, and the audience towards a state of *tarab*. As music and dance conjure emotions and memories in the dancer, the images and ideas that inspire an Oriental dancer’s process emerge as movement. But while the movement flows from the body of the performer, that movement is actually a facsimile, with a bit of pixilation. Individuals who share in these experiences clarify these meanings for themselves and find their own connection to a memory, which in turn, propels them into a world that is meaningful. This meaningful world is not just one that waxes nostalgic. The current sensations are *presently* alive with meaning, because the memory and the images associated with that memory gradually evaporate, and what comes to the forefront is the residue, the *essence* of the emotion often associated with being Egyptian or Arabic. It is this essence that lingers, that transforms both the dancer and her audience.<sup>12</sup>

In Bordelon’s description, the dancer guides the audience to a place where they feel emotionally charged because her movements open up a world through the play of fantasy brought about by the music. This *feeling* of being Egyptian or Arabic is its *essence*, but it must be performed in order to be felt. Further, as Bordelon writes, the feeling is a residue. So, if it is what is left behind, then maybe it is *trash*, or rather, the resonance of *hishik bishik*—the affective relationality that creates a shared experience and opens up a world. For the purposes of my own study, *hishik bishik* adds a sonic element, coming from the dancer, to the material and kinesthetic evocations of the feeling. Also, with its relation to the carnivalesque, *baladi* aesthetics, and trashiness, *hishik bishik* holds together all of the parts of what it means to be Arab and not just

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12. Candace A. Bordelon, “Finding ‘the Feeling’ Through Movement, Music, and Memory: Oriental Dance, *Tarab*, and Umm Kulthūm,” *Congress on Research in Dance Conference Proceedings* (2012): 43.

the “respectable” ones. Additionally, while it is generally said that non-Arab dancers don’t have “the feeling,” they do say that they can gain it after living around Arabs for a long period of time. Therefore, “the feeling” draws one into being Arab through a process of contamination. It is a mobile essence and therefore indeterminate; where one might expect to find being, there is nothing but the feeling. So the feeling is a vibe that arises from the play between being and nothing—an erotic charge that brings the world near through *hishik bishik*.

*Hishik bishik* conjures a world, and this can happen through the dance performance itself. This is clearly a dance that brings a place with it, however imaginary. While the phrase has general connotations of belly dance and trashiness—which often revolve around themes of honor and shame—the ties to the *balad* are also a central component of Arabic cultural production and practices. So, as a second-generation, heterogeneously diasporic dancer, how might I perform “the feeling”?



The video is a belly dance performance for the Theater 52AC: Dance in American Cultures class at UC Berkeley in fall 2021. The performance followed a lecture on the topic of belly dance. For the full video, visit the online journal at <https://journals.publishing.umich.edu/conversations/>.

In October 2020, as the Graduate Student Instructor for Theater 52AC Dance in American Cultures, I was charged by the professor to present

some aspect of my research with the undergraduate students. American Cultures, or AC, courses are ethnic studies classes that every student at UC Berkeley is required to take during their undergraduate career, so the majority of the students are STEM majors without much performance background. Because my research considers how information is mapped onto and produced by my own body, I wanted to not only talk about but also demonstrate the affective relationality of the scarf as it sways on the hips as a mode of knowledge production and structure of feeling.

So I improvised a dance for them, performing to folkloric music with a *baladi* beat. *Baladi* is a 4/4 rhythm whose phrase is “dum-dum/ tek/ dum-tek.” I wore the coin belt around my hips, and I also wore a leopard print dress an homage to the aunties. I presented myself to the students in the same way as I always do: an amalgamation of things but above all Arab. I explained to them that I do not have formal dance training and asked them to think about what questions that raised with regard to cultural transmission, essentialism, and who is “allowed” to perform as they experienced the dance. When I started at the front of the lecture hall with the opening *taqasim* and eased into the beat, the room felt dull. The professor was the only one clapping along to the music because she knew how an audience member is “supposed to” interact with this type of performance. Reading the room, I started to move out from the front of the space and into the aisle, ascending the amphitheater. At this moment, it became a communal space. The room erupted with shouts of encouragement and everyone clapping to the beat. All together, we participated in the performance until its completion, when the music stopped. The changes I made as a performer led to this transformative energetic exchange opened by my circumnavigation of the space. Later that day, when my friend B saw a video of the performance, she replied, “Only you.” Yet it was not only me—it was all of us together, participating in the improvisatory space that I opened up for us with *hishik bishik* of my hips. My dancing brought a world with it, and for a moment we were linked to all my ancestors through the personal and collective memories they carry in their moves, swaying and shimmying along to the music. So, who, here, was “feeling Arab,” and what are the

stakes of this claim? For this performance event, the feeling required the audience accompaniment, drawing them into the worlding of the dance. We had to be together, and this feeling continued to linger among everyone in the room, its dissipation marked by the incursionary institutional clock tower chime of the 12 noon Berkeley bell.

## Author Biography

**Juliana Fadil-Luchkiw** is an artist and PhD student in the Theater, Dance, and Performance Studies program at the University of California, Berkeley. Her work deals with the play between fantasy and lived experience in sociopolitical life under imperialism. Her dissertation research focuses on how Middle Eastern and North African cultural practices and gestures are rerouted through certain forms of *Latinidad*, with specific emphasis on the iconography of the “Oriental woman” and belly dance. This study examines South–South exchanges, imperialist constructions of otherness and colonial fantasies, transferable racialized aesthetics, and the relationship between dance and sex work. Fadil-Luchkiw has also performed and exhibited work throughout the United States and internationally. She has an MA from the Gallatin School of Individualized Study at New York University.

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