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# Beyond the Belly: An Appraisal of Middle Eastern Dance (aka Belly Dance) as Leisure<sup>1</sup>

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*Middle Eastern dance (aka belly dance) is an ancient and expressive form of movement, associated with feminine and community-based celebration and ritual. However, it is also thought of as erotic, seductive, and titillating. Despite stereotypes, belly dance appeals to contemporary women as leisure. This paper examines the intrigue with belly dance in the United States, specifically why women practice this dance form and what their involvement suggests about the gendered nature of leisure, and the need thereof, in women's lives. It also considers the possibility that belly dance may be a feminist form of leisure. Based on participant observation, journal narratives provided by dancers, and publically accessible online discussions, findings are examined along four themes: healing, sisterhood, spirituality, and empowerment.*

**Keywords:** Belly dance, Middle Eastern dance, women, leisure, qualitative research

Belly dance, also commonly referred to as Middle Eastern dance, Oriental dance and Arabic dance, is an eclectic, ancient and expressive form of movement. As Shay and Sellers-Young (2005) describe it, belly dance 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 (p. 11).

Unfortunately, few recognize or appreciate the diverse nature of this dance form, seeing it instead as an erotic form of entertainment, on par with striptease, burlesque and cabaret, with an air of harem fantasy. Its performers have thus been subjected to a host of stereotyping and prejudice, often being seen only as objects of the unadulterated male gaze. It is indeed interesting, then, that despite negative conceptions, belly dance has become wildly popular in recent years as a form of leisure. This is particularly true among non-Middle Eastern women in such countries as Great Britain, Germany, Australia, Japan, and the United States. The U.S., incidentally, is known to have the highest number of belly dancers of all countries in the world, including those of the Middle and

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Near East (Houshan & Copeland, 2005). Though women's interest in belly dance is burgeoning through classes, retreats, workshops, performances, videos, and musical productions, a dearth of academic scholarship exists in regard to it. As Franken (2003) notes, this is "one of the least analyzed and investigated aspects of dance scholarship" (p. 111). Shay and Sellers-Young (2003, 2005) contend that this may be due to the social stigma that has long plagued the dance form. The same may be said for the lack of research on dance, specifically belly dance, within leisure research.

Indeed, leisure research has been fairly silent on women's use of artistic recreation (Kraus, 2010b). While studies on artistic leisure exist (see Brown, McGuire & Voelkl, 2008; Stebbins, 1992), they have not explicitly centered on women. Additionally, while some recent studies on women's leisure may be relevant to artistic or creative pursuits (e.g., quilters [Stalp, 2006], Red Hat Society [Stalp, Radina & Lynch, 2008; Yarnal, Son & Liechty, 2011]), they are not explicitly movement based. Those that have been movement based have not focused on creative movement, but rather on sports and athletics (Wright & Dreyfus, 1998; Hoefle, 2001). Thus a relative dearth of research exists on gendered forms of leisure that are premised on creative movement, particularly dance. The closest thus far is Kraus' (2010b) study, which examined belly dance as a form of serious leisure. Serious leisure, as conceived originally by Stebbins (1992, 1996, 2001), is a concept applicable to recreational activities that involve intense and dedicated involvement over a period of time, often with an eye toward establishing a particular skill set. Such participation often involves sustained membership or networking within specified groups, such that the requisite knowledge, equipment and aptitude may be acquired. While Kraus (2010b) provided the foundation for examining belly dance as a form of leisure, her focus was on how female belly dancers negotiate stigma and prejudice within their recreational activities, not on the affirming benefits of belly dance as a form of gendered leisure per se. I argue that it is exactly because of the stigma and prejudice associated with belly dance that analyzing it in terms of the benefits it may provide women is important.

It is thus the purpose of this article to examine how this particular form of dance, despite its negative connotations, appeals to contemporary women as a form of leisure. By addressing issues of gender, culture and the embodiment of leisure, this article contributes to leisure research by expanding our understanding of the contexts in which recreative and creative endeavors occur. Specifically, the research questions guiding this inquiry include the following: 1) Why do American women practice this dance form? 2) What does their involvement suggest about the gendered nature of leisure, and the need thereof, in women's lives? 3) Can belly dance be considered a feminist form of leisure? As a context for examining these questions, I begin with a review of the historical and social context of belly dance, as well as a review of literature related to gender and leisure that may relate to understanding women's recreational use of belly dance. From here, I describe my methodological approach to this study, which involved various modes of field research conducted between 2003 and 2010. These included the collection and analysis of field notes taken through the course of participant observation, journal narratives provided by belly dancers, and publicly accessible online discussions by belly dancers. The intent behind this long-term, mixed method approach was to garner as rich and as complete a set of data as possible, and to do so with an eye toward respecting the unique standpoints of practitioners. My findings are presented along

four themes: healing, sisterhood, spirituality, and empowerment. The relevance of these findings on women's leisure is discussed throughout the findings and conclusion of this article.

### **Historical and Social Context of Belly Dance**

Knowing something about the history of belly dance is helpful in appreciating the larger sociopolitical context of this research. Unfortunately, due to the vast geographical area and the lack of complete historical records throughout it, the exact origin of belly dance is difficult to determine (Deagon, 1998). Based on the records that are available, it is often considered a derivative of the oldest documented dances (Djoumahna, 2000). Archeological evidence dating back to at least 3400 BCE (Knapp, 1981), from ancient Egypt and the lands lying on the eastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea, suggest that dancing was an important part of ritual, celebration and community activities within ancient societies (Baring & Cashford, 1993; Stewart, 2000); in effect, an early form of leisure. Specifically, dance was used by both women and men in tribal rituals aimed at creating good communal energy, as well as warding off or appeasing various spirits, gods or goddesses, so as to receive ample rain and sun, a dearth of plant-destroying insects or disease, and a productive harvest (Anonymous, 2001; Buonaventura, 1998, 2010; Deagon, 1998; Dinicu, 2000; Knapp, 1981; Mourat, 2000; Stewart, 2000; Strova, 2006). It also played a central role in holiday celebrations, courtship practices, marriage ceremonies, and funeral rites, and has been used as a form of sex education, pregnancy preparation and birthing support for young women (A1-Rawi, 2003; Dinicu, 2000; Djoumahna, 2000; Dox, 2005; Knapp, 1981; Mourat, 2000; Stewart, 2000; Strova, 2006; Zuhur, 2001).

The way in which belly dance has evolved from indigenous customs, celebrations and rituals to what many see today (e.g., a scantily clad woman undulating and shimmying for tips in a Middle Eastern restaurant) involves an interconnected stream of gendered social, economic, and political forces related to tourism, Orientalism, and European colonialism. Such forces have formed a constant juxtaposition between the East, as it was originally perceived (hence references to the "Orient" or "Oriental" dance), and the West. In this regard, the last several hundreds of years are of greatest relevance as it is within this time period that the connection between the misinformed fascination with and exploitive objectification of female dancers of the Middle and Near East, and contemporary views and treatment of belly dancing/dancers the world over, was solidified.

As part of the myriad writings and paintings to emerge during Orientalism (1700s and 1800s), women were often depicted as well-endowed, usually partially nude, performers within harem or outdoor settings. Their presumed goal was to titillate, seduce, or otherwise entertain men (Alloula, 1986). While it is difficult to determine whether and to what extent such exhibitions ever did occur within public or otherwise accessible settings to visitors, it is unlikely that the majority of Orientalist works were based on reality. Ottoman harems were highly secretive and completely private; few if any foreign male visitors would ever have had access to them. Moreover, female dancers have been consistently regulated and ostracized in the Middle East (Adra, 2005; Dougherty, 2005; Karayanni, 2004; Senkovich, 2006; van Nieuwkerk, 1995). Thus, Orientalist artists would have had fairly limited access to the types of scenes depicted within their paintings. In fact, many Orientalist painters used European models within their home studios, and simply added what they

thought were oriental elements to their attire and surrounding decor (MacMaster & Lewis, 1998). Regardless, since little was known by Europeans about the Middle and Near East, such renditions were taken as reality, providing mysterious and sexual fodder about the exotic Other in a foreign land (Carlton, 1994; MacMaster & Lewis, 1998).

These Orientalist depictions were advanced through various public spectacles in the late 1800s and early 1900s. For example, "dancing girls" from the Middle and Near East were brought to the U.S. in 1893 for the World Columbian Exposition (World's Fair) in Chicago. Becoming infamous for their "hootchy kootchy" dance, these entertainers boosted ticket sales by conservative Victorian fair-goers (AlZayer, 2010; Carlton 1994). Oscar Wilde's 1894 tragedy, *Salome*, and Richard Strauss' subsequent operatic adaptation, further added to the stigma associated with Middle Eastern dance(ers). The play and opera depicted the infamous "dance of the seven veils," a striptease seduction of King Herod by his stepdaughter (Carlton, 1994; Deagon, 2005). Regardless of its historical inaccuracy, adaptations of the dance became hugely popular within concert and vaudeville stages in the early 1900s (Deagon, 2005). Also popular during the early to mid-1900s were cinematic portrayals of dancers within the over 200 films shot on location in North Africa (MacMaster & Lewis, 1998). While not necessary central to their plots, stereotypical scenes portraying music and dance were quite common, with the performers being presented as seductresses, home-wreckers, tricksters, villains, prostitutes, and harem slaves (Dougherty, 2005; MacMaster & Lewis, 1998). Colonial-orientalist spins on the portrayal of female dancers easily became a characteristic of the productions, as Egyptian cinema (known best for such films), in particular, became increasingly popular in the mid-1900s and was heavily influenced by Western financing and technology (Dougherty, 2005).

Indeed, such art contributed to the exoticism associated with the Middle East, which was becoming increasingly controlled by France and Britain, and set the stage for exploitation of its female entertainers. Throughout the colonial period of North Africa, female entertainers were paid relatively poorly for their dancing (van Nieuwkerk, 1995). In order to supplement their income, many resorted to the requests, which sometimes bordered on threats, to converse with patrons, perform striptease, dance nude, and even engage in prostitution (Bounaventura, 1998; Carlton, 1994; MacMaster & Lewis, 1998; van Nieuwkerk, 1995). It is no wonder that public perceptions about belly dancing and the women who do it are less than positive and affirming.

### **Gender, Leisure and Belly Dance**

The blemished history of belly dance begs the question of why it is appealing to contemporary women. It is within the literature of feminist perspectives on gender, the body, and leisure that a framework for answering this question may be found. Within such literature, gender as a display or performance is a well-accepted concept (Bordo, 1993; Butler, 1990; Dyer, 1992), as "masculinizing and feminizing practices associated with the body are at the heart of the social construction" of gender identity (Whitson, 1990, p. 23). Given how entrenched hegemonic norms of masculinity and femininity are throughout many contemporary societies, performance vis-a-vis the body also becomes a "medium of culture" (Bordo, 1990, p. 13). For the female body, the means through which

culture is displayed through illustrations of patriarchal oppression has been widely discussed by feminist theorists (Bartky, 1988; Bordo, 1990; Dimen, 1989).

Leisure activities are often central to a culture, in terms of the forms, structure and meanings attached to them. Thus, while leisure is often thought to encompass autonomy, freedom, self-expression and satisfaction (Shaw, 2001), it may also be a place through which societal norms of femininity and masculinity are reinforced by gender performance. Indeed, feminist analyses of leisure have found that traditional gender roles are often reproduced within recreational activities. According to such research, women's leisure is most often associated with the familial sphere, wherein they are most likely to already play care-giving and nurturer roles. As such, they become highly susceptible to maintaining such roles during leisure activities, even if the context is distinct (e.g., preparing a picnic for the zoo, as opposed to the family dinner at home) (Hutchison, 1994; Shaw, 2001). This may be why research has found that while women appreciate leisure within relational-familial contexts, they also crave distinct forms of personal leisure (Hunter & Whitson, 1992; Samuel, 1992; Stalp, 2006).

Also a product of many contemporary cultures, women are more likely than men to inhabit several, sometimes conflicting, roles within their personal and professional lives (e.g., mother, caregiver, employee, wife/partner, chauffeur, housekeeper), and thus have less time for leisure as compared to men (Henderson, 1996). Beyond a lack of time, women simply experience more constraints on leisure than men do. Such constraints may be related to socialization (how much time women believe they are entitled to have for leisure activities), gender role expectations/ conformity (what types of leisure activities are deemed appropriate for women), and fear of victimization (whether it is perceived as safe to engage in leisure activities) (Du, 2008; Jackson & Henderson, 1995; Shaw, 1994; Stalp, 2006). This is unfortunate in that leisure has been found to hold many wellness benefits, such as enhancing mental health and personal growth (Du, 2008); facilitating relationships (Du, 2008); mitigating negative effects of pressure and stress (Coleman & IsoAhola, 1993; Kerr, Fujiyama & Campano, 2002; Klitzing, 2004); and healing from victimization (Davila & Shinew, 2005) and illness (Shannon & Bourque, 2005).

This is not to say that leisure, as a product of culture and gender performance, is completely bound by traditional constructions of gender and analyses thereof. Recent research has attested to the means through which women may resist traditional gender norms and/or expectations of their identity through leisure (Du, 2008; Shaw, 2001; Stalp, 2006). By bolstering self-esteem, women may actively oppose unequal social relationships in various spheres of their lives, and thus work to overcome aspects of gendered role expectations (Freysinger & Flannery, 1992; Shaw, 1994). Stated differently, leisure activities may help women understand that the social structures under which they operate on a daily basis are not necessarily a fixed phenomenon (Du, 2008). Leisure, then, may provide the impetus to challenge gender-role stereotypes through the enhanced empowerment it provides (Shaw, 2001).

This may be especially true in dance, which has received less scholarly attention by feminists and sociologists, as compared to other forms of leisure such as sports and athletics (Wright & Dreyfus, 1998; Hoefle, 2001). The studies that do exist often focus on the etic, or external social observation,

as opposed to the emic/personal experience of dancers themselves (Hoefle, 2001). Thus existing research has most often analyzed the ways in which women's roles in dance are "both indicative and (re)productive of social relationships, including power relationships in the wider society" (Wright & Dreyfus, 1998, p. 95). Certainly the social construction of female dancers has traditionally been geared toward the male gaze, with subjugation of female dancers in terms of body shape, form, and composition (Adair, 1993). Indeed, such factors may play into women's self-image and thus hinder their leisure experiences (Frederick & Shaw, 1995; James & Embrey, 2002; Liechty & Yarnal, 2010; Shaw, 1994). However the material body must also be studied as a "source of kinesthetic pleasure rather than, or simultaneously as, a site of inscription and oppression" (Wright & Dreyfus, 1998, p. 95). Even though activities might reinforce hegemonic femininity, they may simultaneously provide women the agency through which to view themselves in a distinct, self-directed manner (Wesely & Gaarder, 2004). In this way, pleasure and oppression may occur concurrently. The body must be considered a site wherein many discourses coexist, even if contradictory and opposing (Shilling, 1993).

Such is an appropriate foundation from which to consider belly dance. If we limit our view of belly dance to etic observation, and thereby possibly essentialize women's experiences with it, we risk missing the complex interplay of culture, societal norms of femininity, individual expression, and women's emic experiences inherent within this type of leisure. Indeed, there is something about belly dance that appeals to women, seemingly without much regard to demographic (Wright & Dreyfus, 1998). The studies that have focused on contemporary women's emic experiences with belly dance have found several benefits related to well-being, including greater happiness, confidence, body acceptance and self-esteem (Giovale, 2006), as well as increased acceptance of self and others, body image, enjoyment, self-confidence, stress reduction, comfort with femininity, fitness, personal growth, and spirituality (Bock & Borland, 2011; Downey, Reel, SooHoo & Zerbib, 2010; Kraus, 2009, 2010b; Moe, 2011; Paul, 2006). Of particular note is that these benefits seem to be related specifically to the level of freedom and creativity allowed in this particular form of dance, as compared to more codified and managed genres (e.g., ballet, tap, and jazz) (Bock & Borland, 2011; Hoefle, 2001). While these studies relied upon relatively small and localized samples, as well as primarily cross-sectional and single modes of data collection, they do suggest that belly dance ought to be given more serious scholarly attention as a form of gendered leisure due to the myriad benefits possible to women who practice it. By analyzing women's narratives about belly dance within the lens of gendered leisure, this study is aimed at advancing the current state of empirical research on this genre of movement as a form of recreation.

Women's subjective experiences and investments in forms of leisure that hold cultural meanings regarding femininity require sensitive and nuanced analysis, cognizant of the diversity with which women approach the activity (Wright & Dreyfus, 1998). Indeed, women may find belly dance appealing both because of the means through which it allows one to explore norms of hegemonic femininity, as well as the ways it allows one to challenge gender scripts (Bock & Borland, 2011). Women may also be drawn to belly dance because they simply find it fun and enjoyable, "intrinsic aspects [that] may be more important than extrinsic outcomes if people are to sustain physical activity" (Henderson, 2003, p. 6). As an outlet of personal, autonomous leisure, and one in which

typically only women participate, it may also provide an important creative and communal space that is unique from other forms of leisure.

### **Methods**

My scholarly interest in belly dance emerged directly from personal experience. I entered my first belly dance class in 2002. At the time, I was not intent on finding a research project--quite the opposite. I had hoped to find a respite from my personal and professional obligations. Not having any formal dance training, I had also hoped for a fun, relaxing, and nonobligatory retreat for one hour a week. As a feminist, I was admittedly skeptical and felt a bit guilty about voluntarily participating in (and paying for) an experience that I assumed was sexually exploitive of women. Thus, I entered my early classes with a critical eye toward underlying meanings and functions of the dance, particularly as they related to gender. I was immediately struck with an apparent contradiction: If this dance was a mechanism for women's oppression, why did it feel so good? For the first time, I appreciated my body for what it was able to accomplish physically and aesthetically, just as it was. My disproportionately (by Western beauty standards) full hips and the layer of fat hiding my abdominal muscles were assets in shimmies, stomach rolls, and mid-body undulations. It became quickly obvious that there might be more to this dance than the preconceptions I had of it. The women surrounding me in the class seemed to understand this as well, though it went largely unspoken. Smiles, laughter, and knowing glances seemed to communicate nonverbally what most of us were feeling. As many of us progressed into more advanced classes, several of which offered public performance opportunities, our burgeoning self-confidence and commitment to the activity made it clear that there was a story of scholarly relevance to be told about the meanings of this form of expressive movement and its popular appeal to women as a form of leisure.

Because of the limited scholarly literature on belly dance, I relied primarily on Charmaz' (2006) grounded constructionist theory as a framework for this study. I began tentatively, so as to avoid projecting my own analytical subjectivity (i.e., what I thought was important to women about the dance, based on personal experience). Accordingly, data were gathered and analyzed inductively, with intentional methodological flexibility in terms of respecting the views, values, beliefs, feelings, assumptions and ideologies of a study's participants. Such an approach rests well within feminist standpoint epistemology, which holds that the experiences and voices of women who participate in research, particularly those of marginalized status--in this case, female practitioners of a largely misunderstood art form--ought to be privileged over other, more hegemonic discourses (Harding, 1987; Hartsock, 1985). Moreover, grounded constructionism respects the mutuality that often occurs in fieldwork between researchers and participants. Being that I am myself a belly dancer and that my early experiences and observations gave rise to this investigation, it would be arbitrary and misleading to suggest that I assumed a traditional role of objective observer. Indeed, being subjectively involved in the field of inquiry allowed me a deeper understanding of how belly dance fit within women's lives as a form of leisure, as well as aided my recruitment and data collection efforts.

Following Sklar's (1991) guidelines for conducting dance ethnography, I utilized a variety of data-collection efforts so as to most fully appreciate belly dance within its "contextual web of social



relationships, environment, religion, aesthetics, politics, economics, and history" (p. 6). Thus, my research has evolved through a series of methodological strategies over a period of several years. (All procedures related to these data-collection efforts were approved by my university's institutional review board for research on human subjects.) In doing so, this study is distinguishable from prior research on belly dancers specifically because it utilizes more than one method of data collection and occurred over a substantial span of time. I began in 2003 by keeping observational field notes after dance classes in which I was enrolled in the Midwestern U.S. As I became more involved with belly dance, these observations expanded to national and international educational lectures, technique and choreography workshops, as well as live performances (as both an audience member and a performer) over the past seven years. These observations have accumulated in excess of 1,000 hours between 2003 and 2010. As will become clear below, data collected through this method occurred before, during, and after the other means of data collection. However, in the interest of honoring the standpoint of my research participants (Harding, 1987; Hartsock, 1985) and bracketing my own experiences (Creswell, 2007), these field notes have been used contextually here, to elaborate and expound upon the analysis derived primarily from the other forms of data.

The second form of data was collected between 2006 and 2007, wherein I recruited belly dance practitioners, mostly those surrounding me in classes and at workshops, to write their own stories (what I called "journal narratives") about the meaning of belly dance in their lives. Recruitment was conducted in person through verbal announcements wherever possible (i.e., when an instructor or workshop sponsor allowed me to make an announcement), and through fliers placed at registration desks and informational tables. Approximately 500 people (mostly women, but some men were present) were reached through these efforts, and 150 showed some interest in participating, by either speaking to me or picking up a flier. In the end, 18 women and two men participated (the men's entries are not part of the present analysis). Fifteen of them identified as white, one as Native American, one as African American and one as Hispanic. Seventeen identified as straight/heterosexual and one identified as bi-sexual/queer. Eight were in their twenties, five were in their thirties, three were in their forties and two were in their fifties. All journal excerpts are identified in this paper by pseudonyms (often self-selected) for confidentiality purposes.

In light of the grounded nature of this project (Charmaz, 2006), journal participants were given few instructions about how to participate, beyond the simple prompt of "Why do you belly dance?" My intent was to allow them as much flexibility as possible in describing and interpreting their experiences. They were also given great liberty in how they recorded and submitted their journal narratives. Many did so through e-mail attachment, but others provided hard copies to me in person or by postal mail. One opted to audio record her thoughts, which I transcribed. Moreover, some produced a single document ranging from 2 paragraphs to 10 pages, and others sent several journal-type entries ranging from a few sentences to three pages each. A total of 54 narrative entries were collected from the women. Two rounds of grounded analysis occurred with these narratives. The first round was based on an open coding strategy, followed by a collaborative effort aimed at collapsing the initial codes into meaningful clusters (Patton, 2002). The collaborative effort, which involved five students (undergraduate and graduate) in my academic department who

were also taking belly dance classes at the time (Moe, Williams, Schrein, Hayes, Simon & Edel, 2006), provided for communicative validity (Kvale, 1996). This analysis encompassed 27 journal entries by seven women and concentrated on four preliminary themes: encountering misconceptions about the dance, making time and creating space for this form of leisure, experiencing physical and emotional empowerment, observing heightened spirituality through dance, and encountering its omnipresence in other aspects of one's life. Upon collecting the rest of the narratives from the full sample of participants, I continued analyzing the data via open coding and cluster development (Patton, 2002), eventually refining the analytical themes into the following: healing, sisterhood, spirituality, and empowerment.

These second-round themes were used as a guide in searching for and collecting 160 online statements from women on two popular U.S.-based discussion boards in late 2006 and throughout 2007. One objective in this final stage of data collection was to verify and further refine the conceptualization of my four themes, given the relatively small sample of narrative contributors, as well as to achieve methodological triangulation (Silverman, 2006; Yeh & Inman, 2007). A second objective was to continue honoring the unique voices of the dancers themselves and to do so in a way that limited any subjectivity I could have interjected through other means of data collection (i.e., interviews). For this phase of the research, I concentrated on two popular discussion boards offered through *tribe.net*, a popular social networking venue for belly dancers at the time. I considered three discussion threads that seemed especially pertinent to my work: "What's your interest?" (*bellydance.tribe.net*), "Why do you dance?" (*yogaandtheindigo.tribe.net*) and "Body image in bellydance" (*bellydance.tribe.net*). Though I do not have a sure way of knowing the demographics of the contributors to these discussions, I was careful to narrow my consideration to comments made by those who identified as women within the U.S. (as may be surmised through screen names and commentary). Online postings are identified in this paper by the usernames connected to them, as such information is within the public domain. I only altered these identifiers in cases where multiple contributors used the same screen name (as indicated by their distinct avatars).

Analysis of these online statements occurred similarly to that used with second round analysis of the journal entries--open coding and thematic cluster development (Patton, 2002), with an eye toward verifying and refining the conceptualization of my four primary themes. The analysis of these online postings did reflect the general thematic conceptualizations of earlier analyses, and as such, the four themes presented here have been confirmed via triangulation (Silverman, 2006; Yeh & Inman, 2007). Each theme is nuanced, multifaceted, and somewhat cumulative in terms of how it contributes toward understanding belly dance as a form of gendered leisure. Thus conscientious efforts were made to clearly delineate between the themes, conceptually and operationally. The thematic labels are purposely general in this regard, as my intent, in accordance to grounded constructionist theory (Charmaz, 2006), was to account for the totality of the findings involved in this fairly elaborate and long-term study. Moreover, while space permits for only a few illustrative quotes to be shared here, they are presented within the context of existing literature, my own observations, as well as the published writings of other belly dancers so as to provide as full and

elaborative discussion as possible. All quotes are provided verbatim, with emphases, capitalizations and the like retained.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **Healing**

A central component of women's recreational interest in and attraction to belly dance centers on health and well-being, particularly as related to healing. Healing was operationalized broadly so as to include any narratives that spoke to the curative or therapeutic aspects of belly dancing. This included recovery from physical illness, injury or disease as well emotional and psychological means of recuperation. Thus, healing was conceptualized as holistic in nature (Robison & Carrier, 2004) in that it acknowledged aspects of health and healing that encompassed the mind and spirit, as well as the body.

It was the need for healing that brought some women to belly dance by conscious choice. As Catt explained in an online posting: "I dance so I can walk. Dancing is a tremendously healing force, I have congenital spinal arthritis, and since I was a child dance has given me the spirit, motivation, and discipline to walk and function... This dance can save your life." Indeed, it was often the low-impact nature of the movements that allowed women with physical ailments to feel comfortable while moving. Artemis, an online poster, described such a scenario: "I first started belly dancing for the exercise. After [an] injury, it was one of the few exercises that did not aggravate my condition. I then got really excited about going to class. I felt graceful for once, and whenever I would dance I felt an immense joy."

For others, the healing potential of belly dance was discovered by chance, particularly that which was more emotional or psychological in nature. As Aradia explained in an online posting:

Many years ago, I decided that I was going to try two new things every year. I did pottery, tai-chi, scuba, rock climbing ... you name it, I tried it. And most of it, I was pretty bad at. One year I was stuck for something to try and a friend suggested ballet dance. I thought she said belly dance. No kidding; I found belly dance by total accident! LOL! But, as it turns out, I'm pretty good at it. And I loved it from the very first class. At the time I was coming out of a really horrible point in my life and the classes really helped me focus on myself, my muscles, my breathing, and there was no time for my mind to wander into negative territory.

For some women, the emotional-psychological benefits of belly dance were precipitated not from a class, but from observing a performance. Rebecca, an online contributor, explained such a scenario involving a famous and innovative American belly dancer whose particular style (tribal fusion) involves very slow, precise and intricate isolation of muscle groups:

A little more than two years ago, I was going through a very tough time in my life.... I had a very bad eating disorder (5'7 103 lbs). I had the worst body image you could think of... I thought I was meant to be a boy... I had really bad paranoia and no friends. I

hated life and I was in therapy four times a week because of it. Then one day, I was in a sport chalet with my dad, and in the exercise video part (where you push little buttons and you get a little two-minute demo of the videos) and there was one that was black and red and it caught my eye. I pushed it, and little Miss Rachel Brice came on the TV and my life has never been the same. The way she moved and how she made the music obey her every move amazed me. She had everything I wanted, confidence, great body ... a strong amazing woman. And I knew right then and there that I wanted to be a belly dancer. I started with getting that movie and memorizing every move on that tape and doing it every night.

Rebecca went on to explain the emotional-psychological transformation that occurred in her life:

It [belly dance] stated taking place of my therapy. But I wasn't having anxiety attacks, so it was okay... I started eating more... I was gaining weight, but it was okay because it made the moves look better. Then I started taking classes, and that's what I put all of my energy into instead of sitting in front of the mirror picking out flaws. And every time I looked in the mirror, I loved what I saw. Rachel and belly dance saved me from myself. I dance because it really is my life ... why I get up in the morning, why I don't have that second helping of cake but another serving of green beans (even though I hate them) and I have no problem keeping them down. It's why I love being me ... it's the first thing that made me realize that being a woman was the best thing I could ever be.

As Rebecca notes, emotional-psychological healing is often gendered in that it is connected to women's identity as women. Eating disorders and body image issues were quite salient here, as Belle expressed in a journal response: "When I was 16, I had severe anorexia, partly due to the constant pressure to be 'perfect' ... I have come to realize that I should love myself just as I am.... Belly dancing has all the more confirmed this realization and made it a part of my life." Molly also shared the gendered nature of her healing within a journal entry:

I really didn't channel into my femininity at all. I've had a lot of problems in my life with my ovaries and my uterus and things along that line ... and so I've just struggled a lot ... and just really grown to resent being a woman.... So this has been a really good way for me to kind of be one with my body ...

Similarly, women who had experienced prior victimization and trauma, particularly that which was gendered in nature (e.g., child abuse, sexual assault, intimate partner violence), spoke of the draw to belly dance. Joyce explained through an online posting:

I think I needed to connect to my feminine side after finally healing emotionally from my past trauma, and not knowing what I was looking for, I was drawn to dance and dance has really done that for me.... When I dance I see the beautiful person that I am, and no longer feel ugly or ashamed. I dance because it helps to heal me.

Of course, belly dance may simply be what works for helping some women heal, whereas for other women some other form of dance, exercise, or recreation may suffice. However, several made it clear that it is exactly the feminine nature that they perceive in belly dance that draws them to this form of leisure. For Witchy, an online contributor, belly dance served as a means through which she reconnected with her femininity: "I got back into it because I worked at a job where I had to ... play a guy. I had been doing it for several years and had lost most of my feminine mannerisms." The struggle for healing and the support garnered through the feminine properties of belly dance was also explained through an online posting by Mandy:

It is also very healing and is helping me deal with past issues. I was molested when I was young. When I dance, I connect with something older and motherly, and it feels like I'm getting the biggest hug from all mothers past. I feel very safe and so strong.... I'm also very shy, things or emotions I can't say, I can dance. I still hold back when I dance, partly because I'm shy and sometimes I don't want to connect to some feelings that I repressed from being molested. I'm working on it, so we will see how it goes. But every time I hear the music I just have to dance with it. It just calls and beckons. I hear the drum beats and I have to move my hips. I want to go dance now.

As Witchy and Mandy attest, it is perhaps because of the positive and self-affirming nature of belly dance, as a conceivably feminine form of leisure, that women who have suffered gendered illness or injury find value in it. To experience something that focuses on women and emphasizes their femininity, rather than preys on or targets it, may hold strong healing potential.

Healing through belly dance thus takes on both physical and psychological-emotional aspects, and may be sought as a healing modality for overt forms of harm, such as illness and victimization. However, it may be sought out for more subtle needs as well. Gia, for example, was drawn to belly dance as a way of becoming less sedentary as well as reconnecting to her Middle Eastern ancestry. As she noted in an online posting:

For me, this dance was a return to my roots as a dancer and to my Middle Eastern heritage. I was working a very sedentary life as a writer and as a sculptor and wasn't in the best of health. When I returned to the dance studio after years of being gone, it was like returning to my own skin. Everything felt natural and good and energized me and was positive. I lost 30 pounds, while studying with three to five teachers a week.... I couldn't get enough. Still can't.

Thus, the search for healing does not have to involve such obvious and direct physical and psychological implications, as women may seek it out as an outlet for reconnecting to their femininity, as they define it, as a means of creative enjoyment, and as way through which to reconnect with their ethnic heritage. As noted earlier, this means of healing is holistic in nature (Robison & Carrier, 2004). Holistic health, by acknowledging the interconnections of body, mind, and spirit, supports the notion that movement may be a strong impetus toward mental, physical, and spiritual healing (Halprin, 2000). As has been documented in established holistic movement

modalities, freedom to feel one's physicality and to move spontaneously is facilitative of self-experimentation, discovery, and personal liberation--characteristics deemed central to healing (Halprin, 2000; Payne, 2006). Being physically active, and having a choice in how one does so, allows women to be in their bodies in ways that are distinct from historical and social directives of female physicality (Bartky, 1990, Bordo, 1993, Martin, 2001). It is important that women be given the latitude to "fluidly reconstruct or reexamine their tendered sense of self through engaging their bodies in physical activity" (Wesely & Gaarder, 2004, p. 647). As demonstrated in this section, healing may result in such freedom.

## **Sisterhood**

A second theme that speaks to the benefits women derive through recreational belly dance involves a sense of community. Since most of the settings in which women belly dance are made up exclusively of women, this aspect was referenced as a "sisterhood" within both this study and prior research (see Deagon, 1999; Downey et al., 2010). Narratives that fit within this theme specifically noted the benefits of being among other women while they danced. Most often such references were made within the guise of a dance class, but they were also pertinent at some performance settings, such as those occurring within home or studio-based social gatherings, haflas (semipublic Middle Eastern dance parties), and theatre-based productions (within dressing rooms and backstage areas). For example, Mariska Chavi commented on the supportiveness of the belly dance community within both her dance classes and performance group. As she wrote in her journal, "I have also had the opportunity to establish camaraderie with fellow dancers. The ladies in our troupe are supportive of each other and are always looking for a way to collaborate..."

That women find recreating with other women attractive is not surprising given that they are especially likely to engage in physical activities when they have social support, especially the kind of social support that is empathetic and approving of their efforts (Henderson, 2003). What may set belly dance apart from other forms of leisure that encompass women-only groups (e.g., Red Hat Society [Kerstetter, Yarnal, Son, Yen & Baker, 2008; Stalp et al., 2008]), however, is the fluidity with which community is defined. While some women know other women well, and derive their social support out of building relationships with one another while belly dancing, this is not a prerequisite to participation. Belly dancing does not typically occur within a context of a club or exclusive group. It requires no membership application or dues, beyond payment for classes and the like. Many do not know the women with whom they are dancing, and notably, are not necessarily troubled by this. So while female friends may use dance classes intentionally as a type of "girls' night out," as Ronnie, a journal contributor noted, "I have fun with my girlfriends, the camaraderie is awesome. We laugh and practice our shimmies at work," the sense of community may transpire amongst near-strangers as well. As Aoise noted in a journal response, "Belly dancing is one of the few places I go that is all women. Even though I don't know anyone as an individual, it makes me feel as if I belong. I think there is something about the connection you feel just being around women." In short, it is not necessary for women who belly dance to be relationally close to one another in order for a sense of community to be established.

Moreover, there was a recognition by the women in this study that this unique sense of community was attractive because it resisted larger social values and norms, particularly as related to individualism and stereotypes about women. Shay, an online contributor, noted: "Perhaps there may be something bigger as in the sense of community that tends to be lacking in our overall culture. This has always been a huge part of it for me ... the connection with others." It seems that having such a collaborative and collective experience is refreshing and unique within a society like that in the U.S., which is largely individualistic. Perhaps this helps explain why belly dance has become so popular in Western industrialized countries. In addition, the draw to a space that is made up exclusively of women, familiar or unfamiliar, is suggestive of a desire to simply be among others who are supportive and nonjudgmental. Such qualities may seem unique to those who have bought into gendered stereotypes about women being inherently jealous of and competitive with one another. This is not to say that belly dance is devoid of such happenings; however, for the women in this study, it was overwhelmingly the opposite. Indeed, as other writings about belly dance have noted, "...women's dancing bodies revive a history of female communities where women care for and entertain each other" (Stavrou, 1999, p. 16).

Additionally, the above excerpts underscore the link to femininity (variously defined) within belly dance. Just as was the case with healing, this connection was seen as incredibly important. As Cher explained in an online posting: "So that I can hang around with other WOMEN! There are virtually no other women with similar professional interests, so this is the only time I can feel comfortable doing 'women-type' things." As Julie also noted in an online posting: "I work and live with male influences. I guess I dance to get in touch with my femininity. I needed female bonding. After my first class, I was obsessed. I needed and craved belly dance each minute of the day." Hence, the communal attraction of belly dance might also be representative of an attempt by women to find an escape from other parts of their lives that feel masculine, and to reconnect to that which feels feminine. That women seem drawn to belly dance because of the sense of community it provides, particularly amongst other women, begs the question of why such a space is so salient within our contemporary culture. It could be that women are simply attracted to a form of leisure that is of their own choosing and distinct from familial forms of recreation, as suggested by prior research (Hunter & Whitson, 1992; Samuel, 1992). It could also be that such a space is less plagued with the competition, comparison and judgment so prevalent in other spheres of women's lives. A third possibility is that women simply lack such spaces. To dance before and with one another, in this type of woman-space, may facilitate a social and emotional connection based on mutual understanding and appreciation. In any event, what is clear is that a substantial part of the appeal of belly dance involves sharing space and creative energy with other women

## **Spirituality**

A third theme regarding women's use of belly dance as leisure related to spirituality. Narratives that fit here included those that described a deeper, enhanced, or newfound spirituality through belly dance. Spirituality was variously defined for the purposes of this study, since women's references to it were not specific to one faith. An array of beliefs were mentioned, including the major monotheistic and polytheistic world religions (e.g., Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism), as well as a variety of pagan and earth-based spiritualities. While it may appear odd that belly dance could be perceived as a spiritual activity, this is a fairly accepted notion within the belly dancing community, as has been documented in recent studies (see Kraus, 2009, 2010a). The key factor seems to be the way in which this largely interpretive, and often improvisational, form of dance allows women freedom in attaching meanings and intentions to their movements. Stated

differently, the common thread throughout the narratives in my study had to do with the experience of expressing one's beliefs through movement. As Katrina, a Native American journal respondent, stated, "Dancing is like going to church ... tribal dancing, pow wow dancing, and now belly dancing is like going to church. Your feet are on the floor, the beat, or drum, of the music is running through your spirit." For some, movement was the equivalent of prayer or meditation, as Oracle commented in an online posting: "Dance is meditation for me. If I'm having a bad day, all I have to do is throw on some music and move, and I'm a happy camper."

Yet for others, dance equated to a type of ritual: "I also find belly dancing allows me as a Pagan to connect with the Goddess on such a spiritual level; it's like a ritual without the ritual." [Obie, online posting]. Obie's mention of "Goddess" is particularly relevant within the spirituality theme. Likely connected to the sense of feminine energy and communal space expressed within the two previous themes, women who spoke of spiritual elements within the dance very often also invoked amorphous references to the Goddess within their descriptions. Sometimes She was referenced more specifically as Mother Earth, sometimes as representative of the entire universe, and sometimes as an embodiment of the divine feminine in all women. All such references are common within contemporary Goddess worship (Christ, 1997; Eisler, 1995; Nicholson, 1992). Emily's online posting was also telling: "I dance in homage to the dakinis, goddess mothers and grandmothers who have danced before, to summon, embody and express the mind-blowingly beautiful rumbling quaking energies of the earth beneath us and the expansive energies above and beyond..."

For those not versed in Goddess worship, the notion that women may find spirituality through a mystical embodiment of a divine feminine may be perplexing. It is important to entertain this notion, however, as it may be helpful in understanding why women are drawn specifically to belly dance. As Crosby (2000) has attested from her research on belly dance and Goddess worship, the embodiment aspect may be conceptualized as a celebration of the female body and of the "archetypical feminine power which is strong, graceful, playful, seductive, transcendent, and joyous" (p. 170). She also explains that there is "little doubt that when women see their bodies as divine, they get a taste of the power which has been the traditional province of men for millennia ... [they] reclaim their bodies from male profanation" (Crosby, 2000, p. 169). As such, it is possible that women are drawn, consciously and unconsciously, to a form of leisure that provides a type of self-efficacy not present within other spheres of our lives.

As part of but also distinct from Goddess references, women also expressed spiritual components to belly dance in terms of feeling an increased awareness to a higher power and the connectiveness of all things. In an online posting, Elissa described such feelings of connectiveness within a performance venue:

There have been a few times when I've felt like all of a sudden it just connected, like a few of those watching and I have just shared little bits of ourselves without having to say anything, when I look out and meet eyes with people and suddenly they are part of a warm and benevolent world. I don't know how successful I ever am after the fact but it feels like the closest I can come to drawing people into my perception and just for a moment understanding each other. Sometimes I feel that way when I watch other people dance, which are the performances that blow me away.



Just as connectivity was predominantly expressed in terms of performance, so were the notions of flow, energy circulation, and higher consciousness. This was particularly powerful with regard to the process of transcending one's concern about the gaze of observers. It was within such narratives that women struggled with balancing common public perceptions of the dance with their own personal experiences. As Ria expressed in a journal:

It is such a wonderful feeling to have that energy flow and pulsate in beautiful rhythms ... to illustrate emotions through movement and mastery, holding one's audience captive. To smile with one's eyes over the haze of the veil and invite your heart's desire toward the flame with shoulder shimmies and undulations.

In this regard, some women drew attention to the benefits of particular genres of belly dance. For example, Piper described an eclectic form of belly dance created in the U.S. that is premised on group improvisation: "ATS [American Tribal Style] gives me the feeling of being almost ethereally different when I perform.... When strangers approach me after a performance and speak of the energy they felt from me, I know I had a good show." [journal response] Thus, in several ways, spirituality emerged in the data as a very important benefit of belly dance.

### **Empowerment**

Empowerment emerged as a fourth theme in this study. It is here that women spoke of feeling happier, healthier, stronger, and more confident with themselves because of their belly dancing. Narratives placed under this theme largely spoke to the transformative effects of the dance on a personal level. A reclamation, of sorts, was common as well, as several felt that through belly dance they were able to reconnect with their bodies and to appreciate their own unique beauty and sensuality. Zucca, for instance, explicitly began belly dancing as a way to examine and accept her physicality. As she explained in a journal entry:

I wanted to choose a class that forced me to take a good, hard look at my body. And then challenge me to embrace it.... The first one I walked into had all sorts of ages, shapes, and sizes. Shy at first, these women eventually moved, shimmied, and shook without regard to how they appeared, and that was so relieving. I went from an over-sized shirt to skin-tight pants.

Part of Zucca's motivation for continuing with belly dance classes was the observation that any woman could participate, regardless of background, ability, age, or identity. This was noted in several other narratives, as Wendy commented in an online posting:

What is it about this dance? It just has this way of making every person of any body type look amazing--any age ... ever notice how some women walk into a room in their late 50s and shed 20 years when they are dancing and you sit there thinking, 'No, that can't be that same woman I saw walk in.' There is so much of a physical difference? It's like magic.

Similar to other research on belly dance (see Bock & Borland, 2011; Crosby, 2000), engaging in this specific type of creative movement helped women feel more comfortable in their own skin and resist social pressures to conform to a particular body type. As Mariska Chavi noted in a journal entry: "Sometimes I think my being in dance allows other full-figured women and women of color the opportunity to see that this art form is for all women." Raquel elaborated further in an online posting:

Bellydancing has definitely had a profound effect on the way I view my body. I have never been, nor am I likely to ever be, a skinny woman and I used to judge myself very harshly for that. I was never in ballet and didn't stick with jazz for very long, but I knew girls who were and the ideal dancer always seemed to be tallish and willowy, their strength hidden by a seeming physical fragility. As I began bellydancing, it became much clearer that to be a strong dancer doesn't necessarily mean you must be thin ... having curves does certainly seem to naturally emphasize the movements of the dance. It was at that point that I really began to love and accept my body. I had finally reached a point where I could say, 'You know what? I'm damn sexy!!' and meant it.

What these excerpts suggest is that belly dance may help women reconcile self-consciousness regarding body size and composition, components of self-image that may hinder women's leisure experiences (Frederick & Shaw, 1995; James & Embrey, 2002), particularly those that emphasize physical aesthetics like dance (Liechty & Yarnal, 2010; Shaw, 1994). As Oatley (1999) confirms, "the basic movements that are particular to this dance form inevitably involves a sense of liberation on the part of the dancer" (p. 19). In part, this may be because of the dance's concentration on the torso, a region of the body many women feel less than positive about, as well as the relative flexibility and individualist nature of the dance, which does not assume moves will or ought to look the same on every body (Hoefle, 2001). In this way, women may autonomously explore the angles, movements and gestures their bodies are capable of creating, without a sense of needing to conform to anyone or anything else.

Also prominent in Raquel's excerpt is the emphasis on feeling "sexy." While such sentiments may be dismissed as products of hegemonic gendered socialization (women need to feel sexy in order to feel valued), another interpretation is possible. Belly dance may allow women a safe and creative outlet for exploring and reconnecting with their sensual and sexual selves, which are, after all, intrinsic aspects of the human state. Thus, a dance that is dismissed as being overly and inappropriately erotic may actually hold value to women on these same grounds. As Kallie commented in an online posting: "I dance now because it is my way of expressing myself and my way of feeling utterly womanly and sensual. As such, I find it very liberating and relaxing."

Indeed, such exploration was particularly salient for women who felt that their bodies otherwise departed from Western ideals of beauty. Of particular note were women who, through belly dance, found a new appreciation for their bodies after childbirth. Sahri's journal was illustrative: "For having two children, I have been blessed by God, with 'rounder'/'softer' curves. I'm not complaining, but this journey into the world of Middle Eastern Dance has finally allowed me to embrace all that I am." As was Della's online posting:

I've always been curvy, or as some people might put it 'fat in the

right places.' After I had my son, I felt like everything that got stretched out didn't go back to exactly where it was before, and bellydancing definitely made it easier for me to be comfortable in my new body. It's not so much my size that makes me uncomfortable, but I have really bad stretch marks ... it [belly dance] made an immense difference in my life.

Many women struggle with accepting their changing physical shape during and after pregnancy and such struggles are facilitated within our culture, which enforces somewhat contradictory messages about the appearance and behavior of (expectant) mothers (Bailey 1999; Dworkin & Wachs, 2004). While it is acceptable to gain weight (to a certain extent) during pregnancy, there is a lot of societal pressure to lose it as quickly as possible afterward. This is often presented under the guise of "getting your body back" (Dworkin & Wachs 2004, p. 610), as if one's true body is somewhere else, not part of one's postpartum physique. Belly dance, as it was experienced by women like Sahri and Della, allowed them to admirably experience their fuller, maternal bodies.

Not all such concerns were expressed with regard to larger body sizes, however. Some women found that they were able to reconnect to their smaller or thinner bodies as well. As Ayshah explained in an online posting:

What I LOVE about belly dance is that all women are accepted. It is refreshing! When people used to say this to me it bothered me because I have always been called 'too thin' in my life. Some women say, 'Oh I wish I had that problem of being called too thin,' but sometimes it can be tough, just as being 'heavy' can be tough (I hate these terms). Now, though, I explain to people that women of all shapes, sizes, ages, and cultures are belly dancers. I go on to tell most people this dance is not only an art for me but it is also a way I have found to stay in shape and improve the way I feel about myself. Some people seem to assume that when you are thin you must not have self-esteem issues. NOT true. Belly dance helps me (most of the time) feel empowered and inspired.

Thus, a particularly strong conceptualization of empowerment involves women connecting to their bodies regardless of, and often in direct contrast to, social expectations. In this way, belly dance may be envisioned as a feminist form of leisure in that provides the impetus to challenge gender-role stereotypes through the empowerment it offers participants.

However, the resistance did not stop at physical conformity. Another relevant aspect to empowerment involved women's realizations that they excelled at belly dance, and that they could feel proud of themselves for discovering their creative potential. As Joy explained in an online posting:

I dance because I FINALLY can. I had wanted to dance all my life, but it never quite worked out that I could get instruction. But now ... I can. I can dance. I've found that I can move gracefully, and with practice and discipline, it can become something FAR beyond what I ever saw in myself. Dancing moves me beyond boundaries set in place by the influences I experienced growing up, by my social set, my community. I exceed, and completely destroy the

expectations placed on me as a person. Personally, I find that incredibly satisfying. I dance for freedom. Because now I can.

Similar to previous studies of women's leisure (Freysinger & Flannery, 1992; Shaw, 1994), Joy found an increased sense of self and ability through her chosen activity. While what draws women to belly dance over other forms of exercise, recreation or movement-based genres may be specific to the individual, the immediate sense of enjoyment and purpose illustrated thus far provides some insight as to the dance's general appeal. The transformative properties belly dance is capable of instilling, in terms of self-awareness and confidence, which have been likened by other belly dance scholars as an "awakening" (Deagon, 1996, p. 28), is also telling.

Another element of empowerment related to having a respite from one's daily routines, particularly those that are gendered in nature (e.g., housework, caring for others). The following quote from Zucca's journal was illustrative: "I know 'me' when I'm dancing. Not what I have to do tomorrow, not what I have to clean when I get home. I am feeling my muscles work, but not because I'm racing to look like a model. I am responsible for no one. It is something I do singularly for me alone. And I love it." The draw to belly dance as a respite from domestic obligations should not be surprising given prior research on women's motivations for leisure (Du, 2008; Jackson & Henderson, 1995; Shaw, 1994; Stalp, 2006). What seems to set belly dance apart, however, is the very explicit ways in also allows women to critically examine issues of sensuality and sexuality through creative movement. As Deagon (1999) attests, "[t]hrough bellydance, many women found a way to escape, for the class hour or on a wider scale, from society bonds that restricted them from power, adventure, exploration or their own sensuality, and claiming a public voice" (p. 9).

Thus, belly dance seemed to serve as something of a permission slip for women in this study. Within the space of the class and feeling comfortable with the others in the room, women learned to let go of certain inhibitions, expectations, and engrained practices. Liora described her experience in an online posting: "I started dancing and I continue dancing because it makes me feel so good about myself and my body. I love dancing because it makes me feel so happy and so alive. There is nothing in this world better than letting the music fill you up and just letting yourself go with it." More specifically, Aoise, a journaler, spoke of letting go of seriousness: "One thing that I have especially enjoyed is the laughing at myself, when the body just isn't working like the instructor's. I think I have found my sense of humor again..." Zamani, another journaler, let go of social standards of physical conformity, recognizing what Buonaventura (1998) has noted as the "West's perception of the body as something inferior which needs to be played down, even apologized for" (p. 201). As she commented, "It took a long time to loosen up these parts; I mean we're taught from such an early age to suck them up, trim them down, keep things tight, and here we were jiggling them, and bouncing them around and on top of that (gulp), wearing hip scarves..." Women who are able to let themselves go, by whatever means is relevant to them, may begin to reclaim and honor areas of their bodies that have been subjected to judgment and ridicule (Andes, 1998). Such is the process of empowerment for many women as they venture into belly dance.

Such sentiments are poignant reminders of the juxtaposition between forces of socialization within many contemporary societies, and belly dance, wherein "body parts that are ordered by cultural norms to remain subdued and covered suddenly acquire a voice and a privilege as they carry the beat and 'speak'" (Stavrou, 1999, p. 14). As has been seen thus far, several women exhibited this newfound ability to "speak," using their bodily movements to overtly challenge and resist gendered social discourses. Through the process of exploring the dance, several were able to overcome

concerns about performing, which required them to publically put their bodies on display. An excerpt from one of Zamani's journal entries was illustrative: "I am sharing only on my terms and ... you will have to accept me and my performance on those terms. I don't have to flirt or buy into anyone's interpretations of what I ought to be in order to command respect and admiration." In this way, Zamani, while participating in a form of leisure that many would dismiss as demeaning to women, re-envisioned the experience as a form of resistance to the public gaze. She did this, in part, by concentrating on the emic (internal) experience rather than eric (external) (Wesely & Gaarder, 2004; Wright & Dreyfus, 1998).

A final, and perhaps most important, aspect of empowerment that emerged from the narratives was omnipresence. The effects of belly dance seem to reach beyond the dance class or performance to other realms of women's professional and personal lives. In other words, what the women gain from belly dancing becomes ingrained or internalized in their perceptions of themselves. Lisa's online posting mentioned this pointedly: "[I]t's a part of who and what I am. I quit dance for a while and I didn't feel right ... it's my heart ... I can't live without it...." Similarly, in an online posting, Tina noted succinctly the centrality of belly dance in her life: "The first thing that comes to mind when I really start to think about is that it makes my heart happy. It calms me when nothing else can." Thus, belly dance seems to facilitate a type of transformative process, wherein it becomes of central importance to a woman's life, beyond what one might expect from a recreational exercise or dance class.

### **Conclusion**

The goal of this article was to add to the small body of scholarly research on belly dance and leisure by examining why women practice it and what their involvement suggests about the gendered nature of recreation, and the need thereof, in women's lives. Dance, as a creative endeavor, is not a topic frequently addressed by leisure research (Kraus, 2010b). While studies on artistic leisure exist (Brown, McGuire & Voelkl, 2008; Stebbins, 1992), they have not explicitly centered on women. Recent studies on women's leisure that may be somewhat artistic or creative (see Stalp, 2006; Stalp et al., 2008; Yarnal et al., 2011) have not been movement based. Research that has focused on women's movement has overwhelmingly focused on athletic, not artistic, movement (Wright & Dreyfus, 1998; Hoefle, 2001). Only very recently has a study examined women's involvement in belly dance as a form of leisure (Kraus, 2010b); however, the focus of this work was on the negotiation of stigma and prejudice, not on the unique benefits of belly dance as a form of gendered leisure. Such is the scholarly gap this study addressed. To go a step further, this article examined the potential for belly dance to be considered a feminist form of leisure, a notion that at first glance may seem improbable given common beliefs about the dance being about seduction, titillation and subjugation. In short, by considering issues of gender, culture, and the embodiment of leisure, this article contributes to contemporary leisure research by expanding our empirical understandings of women's recreative and creative endeavors. It also advances the small but growing body of empirical work on belly dance by specifically analyzing the genre through a gendered leisure framework.

Because of the limited scholarly literature on belly dance, I used Charmaz' (2006) grounded constructionist theory as a methodological guide. In an effort to garner a fairly comprehensive set of data that emphasized standpoint epistemology (Harding, 1987; Hartsock, 1985), I made use of multiple data-collection efforts over the course of seven years. Such an approach also distinguished this study from prior research, as previous studies on belly dance have primarily made use of

relatively small and localized samples, as well as cross-sectional and single modes of data collection. Through participant observation, personal narratives provided by dancers, and publically accessible online discussion postings, it is clear that several meanings are placed on the dance by its contemporary practitioners in the U.S. This, in itself, is indicative of the unique nature of belly dance as a form of leisure. Perhaps because of its somewhat ambiguous history, diverse nature, and eclectic evolution (Deagon, 1998; MacMaster & Lewis, 1998; Shay & Sellers-Young, 2005), women seem to feel free to interpret and utilize the dance as a form of leisure in ways that make sense to them. Specifically, four themes were examined as a means through which to appraise belly dance as a form of gendered leisure.

First, there is a strong healing potential to this dance. Healing took myriad forms, ranging from being a means of relaxation and stress reduction to providing physical rehabilitation and emotional respite. For some women, belly dancing was a conscious decision, often due to it being a relatively safe, low-impact form of exercise and thus helpful for those with physical restrictions and/or undergoing physical rehabilitation. For others, the healing benefits of belly dance were unexpected, often related to emotional and psychological wellness. Regardless of the means through which women became aware of its healing capacities, many readily recognized the role of belly dance in their overall health and well-being. This was particularly the case for those who had experienced illness or victimization that was gendered in nature (e.g., anorexia, sexual abuse). Central to many women's healing was an association to the feminine nature perceived within the dance. In other words, women seemed drawn to it because of a yearning for greater connectiveness to femininity, variously defined. This is interesting in light of those who shared experiences with gendered forms of illness and injury.

Belly dance seems to be appealing, in part, because it allows a person to emphasize feminine beauty and creativity, as opposed to negativity and harm. What the data here suggest is that belly dance may hold healing potential because of its holistic nature, that is, its interconnected emphasis on mental, physical, and spiritual well-being vis-a-vis autonomous and creative movement (Halprin, 2000; Payne, 2006; Robison & Carrier, 2004). In this way, then, belly dance comprised a movement-based form of leisure that allowed women to move toward greater wellness in interconnected ways. This, in itself, sets belly dance apart from other forms of leisure, especially those seen as more gendered/feminine. Not only is it a physically creative endeavor, versus other feminine, albeit sedentary, forms of recreation (e.g., quilting [Stalp, 2006]), it allows women to tap into their physicality in ways that allow critical examination of both sensuality and sexuality. Certainly part of the attraction to the dance seems to be the consent it provides women to explore and claim a sense of sensuality and sexuality on their own terms. As feminist theorists note (Bartky, 1990, Bordo, 1993, Martin, 2001), recreating in this way allows women a means of being in their bodies that is distinct from historical and social directives of female physicality. Thus, belly dance is unique from other forms of physical leisure that are not as clearly gendered (e.g., hiking [Wesely & Gaarder, 2004]).

Second, there is the sense of community, or sisterhood, that results amongst women involved in this dance. Women spoke of the camaraderie, support, connection, and bonding they felt within the space of a dance class or performance venue. It is notable that such camaraderie and connection were noted by women who took classes and performed with others whom they knew well, as well as with those who were near-strangers. What was consistently noted with regard to this communal space is that it was largely, and often exclusively, made up of women. The collaborative and collective experiences that emerged from these scenarios were described as joyful and refreshing.

This was unique for the women in this study, some of whom felt as if they were living in a patriarchal world that either encouraged them to lose touch with their femininity for the sake of a career or devote themselves unquestionably to the care of families and the like. The notion that women would be attracted to forms of leisure that allow them an escape from the domestic sphere is well documented in prior research (see Hunter & Whitson, 1992; Samuel, 1992). However, the experience of connecting back to one's femininity through belly dance is unique, particularly because it is so commonly thought of as being overtly and inappropriately erotic. That it holds value to women on these same grounds is thus noteworthy.

It was also significant that recreational belly dancing did not involve the kind of competition and judgment by other women that is typically associated with all-women groups within our society. This is interesting within a culture where physical objectification is pervasive and women, by consequence, are often intertwined in a Foucaultian-type of self-management that condones rivalry and antagonism. So while this study confirms prior research regarding women's attraction to leisure activities that contain social support (Henderson, 2003), particularly by other women (Stavrou, 1999; Wright & Dreyfus, 1998), it is also suggestive of some unique qualities of belly dance that, in terms of communal experience, may distinguish it as a form of leisure. Such collective experiences are unique within societies that are largely individualistic, such as the U.S.

A third theme encapsulates spirituality, broadly defined. This theme is not exclusive to those with a particular belief system, as an array of religious and spiritual traditions were represented among research contributors. These included both major monotheistic and polytheistic world religions, as well as a variety of pagan and earth-based spiritualities. While it may seem a bit of stretch to link belly dance with spirituality, such has been documented in recent studies (see Kraus, 2009, 2010b). Because this form of dance allows women freedom in attaching meanings and intentions to their movements, personal interpretations were common. Thus for some women, belly dance was likened to church services, religious ceremonies, rituals, and moving meditations. A common observation was the feeling of a heightened awareness to a higher power and the connectiveness of all things through the dance. To be more specific, some saw belly dance as a way through which to experience a deeper, more enhanced spiritual connection, often describing a particular energy circulation and flow during performance, when they felt a connection to others around them. In this way, spirituality, as enacted through belly dance, fostered greater spiritual awareness, connectivity, and well-being.

Of particular salience was the frequent, albeit amorphous recognition of a higher feminine power, sometimes referred to as The Goddess, which was variously defined as Mother Earth, the entire universe, or the embodiment of a divine feminine in all women (Christ, 1997; Eisler, 1995; Nicholson, 1992). This recognition is helpful in understanding why women are drawn to belly dance as a form of leisure as well, as it is within this connotation (that belly dance embodies or represents a form of divine femininity) that they may recognize their own potential as relevant and creative beings (Crosby, 2000). Moreover, by focusing inward on the emic/personal experience of dance as a spiritual experience, the women were able to more easily tune out, ignore or transcend external/etic perceptions of belly dance that are not always very positive. As with prior research on women's leisure more generally, activities that may appear to reinforce hegemonic femininity, can also simultaneously provide women a personal means through which to view themselves in a distinct, self-directed manner (Wesely & Gaarder, 2004). Indeed, women's bodies are subject to myriad discourses and interpretations, some of which may be contradictory and opposing (Shilling, 1993). The women in this study illustrated how, through the lens of spiritual embodiment, a dance

that is often seen in a negative light may be internalized by its practitioners to mean something much more personal and self-affirming. Thus, belly dance may serve as a unique form of leisure that very clearly subverts and challenges public perceptions of women and their physical expressions.

Fourth, heightened feelings of empowerment seem to result from belly dancing, as women experience enhanced health, strength, confidence, self-esteem, creativity, and personal liberation. Such findings confirm previous research on belly dance (Bock & Borland, 2011; Crosby, 2000; Deagon, 1996; Moe, 2011; Oatley, 1999), as well as women's leisure more generally (Freysinger & Flannery, 1992; Shaw, 1994), in that women seem particularly attracted to forms of recreation that focus on the self and individual ability. Thus, women used the empowering qualities of belly dance to arrive at greater acceptance of their bodies, regardless of their shape, form and ability. Women's reflections about their larger/heavier bodies were predominant in this discussion, particularly as they are experienced after having children, an often demoralizing time for those struggling with societal pressures to lose weight (Bailey 1999; Dworkin & Wachs, 2004). However, empowering sentiments were also shared with regard to appreciating thinness as well.

Thus, belly dance appears to be a form of leisure that allows women a means through which to reclaim and reconnect with their physicality in empowering, self-affirming ways by supporting women's reconciliations with their physical size and composition. Such reconciliation is critical, as physical aspects of self-image may hinder women's leisure experiences (Frederick & Shaw, 1995; James & Embrey, 2002), particularly those that emphasize bodily aesthetics such as dance (Liechty & Yarnal, 2010; Shaw, 1994). Moreover, supporting the women's experiences with belly dance were their observations that others from myriad backgrounds, locales, and identities were involved in it. These properties seemed to distinguish belly dance from other forms of exercise, dance or recreation where more rules and structure dictate the activity (e.g. more codified forms of dance like ballet, tap and jazz, in addition to many organized sports) (Hoefle, 2001).

In this vein, then, belly dance provided many women with an outlet through which to challenge hegemonic norms of femininity, and of the dancing body, through a leisure activity. Consequently, belly dance became a form of resistance to social and cultural norms about women, their bodies, and physical activity (Wesely & Gaarder, 2004; Wright & Dreyfus, 1998). It is also important to note that this subversion, and resulting empowerment, seems to be cumulative, as women's initial reactions to belly dance facilitated further exploration in terms of their bodies, movement potential, creativity, and self-acceptance. An important aspect of this self-explorative potential was the "letting go" quality that many noted about belly dance, as suspending social expectations and self-judgment in the space of a dance class was a unique experience for the women in this study. Indeed, this self-exploration was deemed transformative for many, in that they began to recognize the beauty, grace and joy their bodies allowed them through the course of belly dancing. Notable was the way in which belly dance allowed women safe and creative outlets for exploring and reconnecting with their sensuality and sexuality. In the process, they began to feel more confident, accepting and balanced in various spheres of their lives. Belly dance thus became omnipresent.

It seems clear that belly dance holds many positive benefits to women which, according to this study, distinguishes it as a form of gendered leisure. Women of various backgrounds, shapes, identities and locales seem to be able to find a place within this dance. Moreover, belly dance offers a means through which to experience leisure through an autonomous and self-directive creative outlet, which substantiates prior research (Hunter & Whitson, 1992; Samuel, 1992; Wesely & Gaarder, 2004) and is suggestive of the feminist potential of this activity. Thus, it is perplexing that



this dance form remains so misunderstood and understudied. Certainly its improper history has played a substantial role in contemporary views, particularly in terms of the effects of colonialism, cultural imperialism, Orientalism, and the resulting gendered commodification. However, this is only part of an outdated and, I would argue, essentialist picture.

As the findings of this study illustrate, disembodiment occurs through various means and circumstances throughout women's lives, causing them to view their bodies as sources or reminders of pain, discomfort, and shame. Crosby (2000) has gone so far as to suggest that the maintenance of patriarchy depends on women being disconnected from their bodies. Through belly dance, a holistic reclaiming of the body, along with a (re)connection of body, mind and spirit, seems to occur. It is possible within the quotes shared here to observe the ways in which women belly dancers challenge social constructions of the ideal female form (Wright & Dreyfus, 1998). By illustrating autonomous movement, self-defined grace and creative ability, they are actively resisting etic (external) perceptions of the dance (Adair, 1993; Hoefle, 2001). Hence, it would indeed seem that belly dance is too easily dismissed as another means through which women are objectified via hegemonic views of beauty and sexuality. Just as women's leisure in general does not need to be bound by traditional constructions of gender (Du, 2008; Freysinger & Flannery, 1992; Shaw, 1994, 2001), nor does belly dance as a specific form of leisure. Indeed, anything we, particularly women, do in the public (or private) sphere may be misjudged. We do, after all, live in a "culture that demands and constantly threatens women with objectification" (Stavrou, 1999, p. 15), and the risk of this objectification is certainly heightened in belly dance. Several of the narratives shared in this article speak to this. Women are aware of the negative conceptions surrounding their chosen form of leisure, and they seem cognizant of their limited ability to do anything about them. Despite being involved in an activity that may be seen as reproducing norms of hegemonic femininity, they are also aware of a sense of agency provided to them through the dance, which allows them to view themselves in a distinct, self-selected way (Wesely & Gaarder, 2004). Thus, they find ways to celebrate their bodies and movement, and to find joy among the company of other women, while often also challenging public perceptions and assumptions, to the extent that they are able, about women's occupation of space and the exotic nature of the dance. In this way, the body becomes a site on which many, often competing, discourses coexist (Shilling, 1993; Wright & Dreyfus, 1998).

As with most topics neglected in critical thought and empirical investigation, belly dance is much more nuanced than it may first appear. It is, in short, a "dance by and for women and an expression of women's power" (Deagon, 1999, p. 4). In that way, it is most certainly a gendered, and likely feminist, form of leisure. The feminist nature of the dance is an arena ripe for further theorizing and investigation. While we do indeed live in a society where patriarchal interpretations of women's behavior inevitably occur, this research moves us one step closer to recognizing the transformative, healing, enriching, and empowering aspects of a dance form that deserves more than essentialist conceptualizations. Based upon the empirical evidence presented here, it is important that future research continue to examine the multiple layers of this art form. There are several other aspects of the dance that may be examined in regard to leisure. For instance, while a couple of men asked to contribute narratives, and I did not turn them down, my focus was not on their experiences. More earnest attention ought to be paid to their often marginalized status within the dance. For instance, why do men choose to participate in belly dance, knowing (as many do) that this is a woman-dominated sphere and that by entering it, they may be ostracized, ridiculed, and stereotyped (it is largely assumed that only gay men belly dance)? In terms of furthering analyses of the themes introduced here, each of them could be examined in further detail, possibly with the incorporation

of more direct and focused data collection strategies (e.g., interviews aimed explicitly at the healing potential of belly dance). Finally, future research could continue examining the conceptualization of belly dance as "serious leisure" (Stebbins, 1992, 1996, 2001), versus casual leisure, a line of delineation examined in the one other study (Kraus, 2010b) that explicitly considered belly dance as a form of recreation. Though my goal here was to advance the intellectual understanding of belly dance as a form of gendered leisure, it remains to be seen to what extent the benefits of this form of recreation fit with and/or are limited to varying degrees of leisure.

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## Endnote

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<sup>1</sup> Deciding upon the term to use for this dance is extremely problematic, as there are myriad possibilities. Middle Eastern dance, Oriental dance, and Arabic dance are among the most common, since they may be fairly universally applied to the region of the world from which the dance originates. However, given the expansive area and cultural differences within the Middle and Near East, several other names are used to connote language and regional differences (e.g., Turkish orientale, Lebanese nightclub, Andalusian [Moorish], Egyptian Arabic references to "beledi" [dance of the country or common people] and "raqs sharqi" [dance of the East]) (Osweiler, 2006; Richards, 2000; Shay & Sellers-Young, 2005). Several additional terms have emerged throughout the West, particularly within the U.S., as the dance has evolved and fused with other genres (e.g., belly dance, cabaret, American Tribal Style, gothic) (Osweiler, 2006). While there is ample etymological debate (naming a dance after a specific body part that plays a relatively minor role in the genre and contributes toward its stereotyping) and post-colonial controversy (as discussed in this paper) surrounding the label of "belly dance," it is and remains the most common name for this dance in the U.S. While many dancers recognize the term is misleading, objectifying, and culturally inaccurate, a strong allegiance to it persists. It was indeed the most common term used within the data-collection efforts of this project (alternating somewhat between the use of one word-- "bellydance"--and two words--"belly dance"). In fact, there seems to be a conscious use of the term today as a means of reclaiming that which has been historically misinterpreted and subjugated. It is for these reasons, and out of respect of the epistemological philosophy guiding this research, that I predominantly rely upon "belly dance" (opting for two words out of grammatical preference) throughout this paper.