

'Dark am I, yet lovely': Tracing diabolical evil and femininities in gothic fusion tribal belly dance

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Abstract: While belly dance as a dance genre has been recognised for its 'ambivalence' (Downey et al, 2010: 379) in terms of its empowerment of women's identities and body types and essentialising of narrowly constructed femininities, it has nonetheless in the research literature generally been regarded positively in its influence on women's spiritualities, corporalities, sexualities and overall well-being. But what about its attraction and allure in its 'darker' forms, as a way of empowering women, especially older women, and enabling them to negotiate and traverse a range of difficult, deviant, damaged and/or otherwise negative experiences? Based primarily on a participant observation of a six-week series of dance workshops held in the north of England and drawing on my other experiences as a dancer of other belly dance forms, this paper references Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic theory of horror and the monstrous feminine to explore the meanings, experiences and performances of 'darkness' in what is belly dance's darkest genre, Gothic Fusion Belly Dance (GFBD).

Enlightenment as an idealisation or project of modernity is and has been about the primacy of rationality, progress, knowledge and science as the route to manifesting and bringing to fulfilment, even perfection, the human spirit (Inwood, 2005). And yet, in late modernity, the more damaging aspects of progress and technology persist despite Enlightenment, and darker sides of human nature and the lure and presence of evil as an element of human spirit or *geist* are as potent as ever, if not more so:

Things long ignored or repressed often return with a vengeance. Evil, or the problem of evil, is a case in point. Heirs to the Enlightenment and wedded to unlimited progress, Western societies in recent centuries have tended to sideline evil as a spook or else as the relic of a distant past. In the poignant words of Lance Morrow: "The children of the Enlightenment sometimes have an inadequate understanding of the possibilities of Endarkenment" (Dallmayr, 2006: 169)

In modernity, darkness is persistent, occasionally prevalent; this is the case in science and technology as in art and performance. Modern history is one not only of light but also of shade, and this is as true of dance as it is of other forms. Referred to variously as one of ‘Pop’s Greatest Dance Crazes’ (BBC, 2013), belly dance is a hugely popular and diverse dance form that has received comparatively little attention as a subject for academic research. The relatively few studies there are of belly dance have concentrated predominantly on its more positive or ‘lighter’ aspects with respect to its influence on women’s health, self-esteem, body confidence, leisure culture, social networks, and well-being (e.g. Downey, Reel, SooHoo and Zerbib, 2010). These are viewed not merely as elements of the ‘spiritual’ charms of belly dance, but also as attendant social goods of what is a characteristically uncodified dance form that tolerates a broad range of abilities, femininities and corporalities (e.g. Kraus, 2009, 2012; Wright and Dreyfuss, 1998; Downey et al, 2010). But as Keft-Kennedy (2005: 280) declares, belly dance is and always has been deeply ambivalent as a ‘symbol of female empowerment’. While these studies are valuable, in my experience as a belly dancer and researcher, scholarly analysis of belly dance tends to gloss over the more ambiguous or overtly ‘negative’ or darker sides of belly dance with respect to spiritualities, movements, embodiment, femininities and interpersonal relationships. But I would argue that these are equally significant as they can reveal additional dimensions of each of these elements of belly dance as well as providing important insights into the poorly understood phenomenon of evil or ‘endarkenment’ (Dallmayr, 2006: 169). In a modern culture that focuses on the historical progress and formative subjectivities of enlightenment, such a shift of focus on to darkness offers insights into what are the vital transitional roles of popular cultural forms of dance such as belly dance as a mechanism for transgression, creativity and resistance, particularly in older and intergenerational women’s subcultures. Recognising the darker sides of belly dance ironically gives a fuller picture of the power and enduring appeal of this dance form as a mode of expression, healing and liberation for a diverse and complex demographic of women who often have histories of sexual trauma and/or are negotiating difficult transitional experiences in their present lives (Moe, 2014). This paper concentrates on what is perhaps the least studied style of belly dance, gothic fusion belly dance (GFBD) and the ‘darker’ shades of spiritualities reflected in bodies, femininities, movements and relationships within the predominantly dark and dystopian domain of goth subcultural dance, using participant observation methodologies and employing psychoanalytic concepts derived from the philosophical and clinical writings about the darker aspects of the maternal feminine of Julia Kristeva.

What is gothic fusion belly dance?

In the popular imagination, belly dance is typically associated with an almost hyper femininity, and one that is reflected in an exaggerated and narrowly stereotypical image of the exotically beautiful, flirtatious, flashy, scantily clad, slimly voluptuous, sensually alluring and possibly sexually available young woman from the harem who is completely uninhibited about shaking her stuff at strangers, mainly men who pay for the privilege in public places like bars, clubs and restaurants. And indeed there is plenty of reason why this is the image in the public mind, this sort of practice around what is commonly known as Turkish or Egyptian style, also known as Oriental or ‘Orientale’, or ‘cabaret’, belly dance being so commonplace. GFBD stands in stark contrast to its more coquettish, sparkly, flirtatious and girly cousin which for the purposes of brevity I will refer to for the remainder of this paper as ‘Egyptian’ belly dance, or its more folksy, gypsy, bohemian, collective improvisational sister tribal belly dance, though it does incorporate and adapt elements of these two belly dance forms. Downey et al (2010: 379) characterize these two dominant forms of belly dance as embodied by the ‘harem sex symbol’ and the ‘ancient earth woman’. In her study of spirituality and belly dance, Kraus (2009) identifies four main styles of belly dancing:

‘Cabaret is the flashy style that most people probably associate with belly dancing. The costumes for this individual and choreographed dance use sequins and iridescent fabrics. The folk style is based on traditional dances in the Middle East and surrounding areas. It is performed by soloists or groups and can be choreographed or improvised. The American Tribal Style (ATS) or tribal is rooted in North African dance and dances of the Arabian Peninsula. The costumes use natural fabrics, tassel belts, and antique jewelry. These dances are earthy, powerful, designed for group performance, and based on improvisation. The movements are simple and repetitive and allow for a “follow the leader” routine (Zenuba, 2000). Finally, tribal fusion combines or more styles of belly dance with each other, or other forms of dance, and/or different cultures, such as Goth’ (Kraus, 2009: 615-6).

Such images of belly dance form an elemental part of the ‘Arabian’ leisure culture or middle eastern experience of market consumption, as presented for example in bars, restaurants or cafés that serve food from the ‘exotic east’. Such performative praxes and formations of belly dance emanating from the leisure/nighttime economies also provide *de facto* measures of achievement for many amateur, professional and semi-professional belly dancers who, in the absence of an accrediting body that regulates examinations or competitions, view this as an informal system for validating their status and skills.

While this is a broadly faceted image of the public face of belly dance, like other dance genres, belly dance has its less visible or purposely obscure sides. As a rule, belly dancers who dance in clubs and restaurants are overwhelmingly of the popular Turkish or Egyptian Oriental type; this is not representative of the belly dance community as a whole (Downey et al, 2010). Among the developing forms of belly dance, there are also a large and increasing variety, as the genre continues to grow and transform as belly dance is ‘fused’ with other and new dance forms that are darker, edgier, or aggressive, such as gothic, burlesque, and hip hop (gothla.co.uk; Frühauf, 2009).

Consistent with the absence of formal codification of what is known generally as belly dance or *raks sharki*, there is no single definitive definition of GFBD, but according to Gothla.uk, a website devoted to what is probably the most prominent event in the gothic fusion calendar in the UK, it is essentially a mixture of goth culture, music and belly dance, fusing the main elements of these and adding its own distinctive touches to express, explore and perform ‘the dark side’. As detailed by Frühauf (2009) in a rare academic article on gothic belly dance by an academic/belly dancer, gothic belly dance, or GBD in her nomenclature, rejects and to some extent successfully elides many aspects of other genres of belly dance that adhere to—or are guilty of, depending on your point of view—orientalism (Said, 2003; Shay and Sellers-Young, 2008). However, for Frühauf (2009), it is arguably the exclusive preserve of GBD among other forms of belly dance to elide orientalism. She claims that this is largely down to the fact that GBD jettisons many of the aspects of the ‘exotic other’ that converge around the normative female body as the desire object of the male heterosexual gaze as in other belly dance forms. Instead, GBD opts for or plays with alternative interpretations of femininities, sexualities and aesthetics that many western men may actually find threatening or off-putting, even grotesquely ugly, preposterously risible, or overtly repulsive. In all forms of gothic belly dance, this is achieved for example the embracing of a goth aesthetic, typically embodied in

the adoption of an overtly powerful, scary or *unheimlich* demeanor, cadaver-like pale skin, a penchant for funereal black, and perhaps most importantly an attitude that derides the performance of belly dance as a way to attract, tempt, titillate or sexually arouse men. This goes beyond a goth fascination with death and abjection, but those are there too. These elements are fused through the medium of belly dance to embrace a new and in many ways novel alternative mode of recovery, expression, joy and potentially healing for the women who perform it.

As a dance of power, GFBD represents an attractive and unusual genre of identity and sexuality exploration for many of the mainly white middle class, middle aged women who comprise its practitioners, many of whom are in the processes of negotiating the transitional life stages of (grand)motherhood, marriage, divorce and/or menopause. For many older women, i.e. those approaching, experiencing or exiting menopause, these milestones have culturally marked their symbolic death and abjection as female and sexual beings, the trope of invisibility as consummately described by Doris Lessing in her novel *The Summer Before the Dark* (2002), whereby invisibility and abjection are emblematic of older women's being. Another way to put it might be their cessation of 'becoming', having exhausted their social and sexual capital in a 'sexual market value' economy, such stages of psychic and spiritual development and the wider cultural fears of death and abjection they intone evoke potent fears converging around the figure of the hysterical, dispassionate, archaic or 'crazy mother' (Kristeva, 1982; 2012) or alternatively the folkloric or 'mawkishly sentimental' Disneyeque figure of the 'wicked queen' (Nelson, 1978), bad girls, evil women, femme fatales, etc. GFBD is their dance. It is to this awesome elision of dark femininities and dance in the sense of 'tarrying with the negative' (Hegel in Žižek, c1993) that I will turn my attention, following a brief discussion of methodology.

Methodology

This article is an example of grounded research (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), and mainly draws on my experiences of dancing with each of these types of belly dancers over the past five or so years, with an emphasis on a six week GFBD workshop and a six week American Tribal Style (ATS) introductory course I recently attended in a small town and a small city in the north of England. With reference to a taped interview with the woman who later taught this workshop, email and Facebook exchanges with both teachers, my participant observations of the classes, membership of and participation in a closed Facebook Group, field notes,

research diary, and perusal of belly dancer message forums, I will pose questions about what such ordinary everyday activities like GFBD tell us about contemporary spirituality and dance, specifically in terms of the ‘darker’ sides of modern life, particular for white middle class women in older age? Does the ‘darker side’ of dance, or ‘dancing into darkness’ (Fraleigh, 1999) reveal anything about women’s identities, sexualities, well-being or spirituality in the twenty-first century? How do we as moderns and as dancers ‘tarry with the negative’, and what does this tell us about contemporary morality and spirituality, specifically the experiences and understandings of dance, movement and suffering, and the development of theories, concepts and methodologies for researching such deeply (inter)personal passions and biographical trajectories across the life course?

Crazy, dispassionate, monstrous, ‘other’ mothers, bad girls, evil women, femme fatales and wicked queens: alternative feminine rationalities in dark dance

Affectivity in Butoh (as in Ukiyo-e) is concentrated and exaggerated, an important element of its communicative power. Indeed, the emotional intensity of Butoh proves an example of aesthetic and social rebellion, drawing up a dualistic Japanese history, anything but puritanical, of behavioural tolerances and violations juxtaposed with a gentle fastidiousness and quiet grace. There is great ambiguity in both Ukiyo-e and Butoh. Significantly, Butoh holds parody, travesty, cross-dressing, and burlesque in common with Ukiyo-e. These can be seen in Hijakata’s outrageous dance, *Revolt of the Flesh* (1968). (Fraleigh, 1999: 11)

Kantian moral philosophy tends to align the good or enlightened against the evil or ‘endarkened’ along the dichotomous lines of the rational and irrational, free and not free, autonomous and heteronomous, sentient and emotional, spiritual and embodied (respectively). For Kant, what is wrong or immoral cannot be truly freely chosen by an autonomous rational agent, and this causes problems for his theory of evil; similarly, situations or influences that blur or obscure the invigoration of the clearly thinking individual subject are in themselves morally suspect if not openly evil or ‘bad’. For ‘irrational’, in the context of older women’s GFBD, we may read outrageous or ‘crazy’, and from the outside or common sense perspective, this would be the general sort of attitude I and my fellow dancers would encounter. However, though there are many solo gothic fusion dancers, for most, this engaging in this activity is a deeply reflective and/or collective experience—taking the

notions of tolerance and heteronomy to their extremes, albeit usually ‘within reason’, if within an alternative reasoning process, and/or a subcultural spirit(uality).

‘The Other’ and the experience, expression and interrogation of these heterogenous conceptions of darkness, femininities and spiritualities are, in my experience, vital and elemental forces in gothic fusion belly dance. This is encapsulated in the ‘otherness’ of this dance genre itself among the other forms of belly dance, with frequent references being made by our GFBD teacher Jess to our otherness at *haflas* whereby audiences will expect the usual glamorous and flirtatious belly dancers to feature ‘...and then WE come along!’. For us, this outrageous, bizarre ‘otherness’ that distinguishes us from our sister belly dancers is commonly experienced as a radically liberating, irreverent, and fun, thing. In GFBD, there is a quite wilful upending of normative notions of freedoms, femininities and will as itself an act of liberation and agency. What is notable in practice is that this does not result in outright anarchy, randomness and chaos such as in other resistant popular dance forms such as punk or rave, though there are elements of punk and some obvious former or older punks in our class. On the contrary, the tone of the classes is congenial and civil, there is order and restraint, quite organised and formal in some respects, without conforming to the authoritarian discipline of dance forms such as ballet. One main difference is an overt tolerant of those who may—for a variety of reasons such as age, experience, fitness, injury, illness or disability—fall short of what is physically demanded to execute the dance moves or choreography ‘properly’. Other forms of ‘western’ dance such as ballet and ballroom can be ruthless in their classification regimes driven by competition and regulation, resulting in the commonplace rejection, marginalisation or indeed humiliation of ‘substandard’ dancers (Lakes, 2008). Belly dance generally, and GFBD in particular, does not adopt such exclusionary or authoritarian practices (as also noted by Downey et al, 2009). This was expressed in our final workshop in which Jess stipulated that it wasn’t so much whether or not we got the moves right, but rather if it was our *intention* to do so. Which is in practice very sweet and endearing, but in Kantian moral terms, certainly does not cut it. Intentions and actions, when it comes to the practical realm of moral action, are two very different things. Not so in the GFBD world.

This concentration on intention and the organising principles of tolerance, acceptance and expressiveness in the turn to the ‘darkness’ in dance is instructive. Like other dance forms after the mid-twentieth century, darkness tends not to encapsulate itself in a rubric of discrete villainous characters or gendered stereotypes who cast their spells or perform their dastardly

deeds, but rather in the incantation of magical presences through dance onto which audiences and dancers alike can project their own innermost anxieties, fears and character flaws (Ulrich, 2004). The somnambulant, mesmeric, subversive ambience of this dance attests to this as our liminal space, chosen habitat, the fun and enticing yet not quite ‘right’ place, such as drafty old church halls, where we choose to dwell together and in front of our audience, if indeed there is one. Here we dance, work, laugh and play, often mischievously, with potent femininities that menace, that threaten, unsettle, enchant, amuse, repel, and are sometimes even ‘creepy’.

Does this mark a collapse of the boundaries separating good and evil unleashed by the diabolical, the blending of the sacred and the profane in a way that is socially predicated on the norms of feminine decency, particularly around motherhood (Sharpe, 2009)? Or, in Terry Eagleton’s words, does it reveal the preservation of a secret pact that exists between the ‘authoritarian’ and the ‘anarchist’, whereby the opposite of the ‘radical’ evil is not the diabolical but the political conventions of liberalism and conservatism (2005: 14)? In his reflections on evil, and also drawing on psychoanalytic theory, Eagleton finds fertile ground in the narrative of ancient Greek drama, notably Aeschylus’s *The Bacchae* or the witches in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. In the former, the protagonist Pentheus is enticed by the sexual excesses and potencies of the frenzied collective of women at the margins and later unwittingly set upon and murdered by his own mother. In the former, the witches’ circular dancing dissembles the order and orientation of *logos*, unleashing the delirium and insatiable plenitudes of desire without limit or purpose. What such stories communicate is not only the darkly seductive and secret fascination with the powerful sexuality of women in darker forms of dance, but the equally suspicious knowledge that through their antics they reveal vital clues about the nature of reality itself and our fragile ability to understand it as at once rational and emotional, desiring, aroused, embodied and sexed mature beings. Women, notably ‘knowing’ groups of ‘wise’ women orienting themselves in collective ‘frenzied cults’ prove their power to impart through their capacity to dissimulate, confuse but also seduce and beguile, and also to re-enchant fantastical performative spaces:

‘Reality becomes magically responsive to one’s touch, while individual identity, merged into a frenzied cult, takes on the spurious immortality of the collective. In this infantile condition, enraged as it is by the slightest hint of material resistance, violence becomes ineluctable. In the cult of Dionysius, with its curious mixture of the laid-back and the atrociously bloodthirsty, the regressive roots of power are laid bare.

Sensual fantasy swaddles you from the world, thus undoing your inhibitions and pounding it to pieces. We shall see a similar link between sensual decadence and brute force in D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*. In this sense, a certain barbarism is actually produced by culture or the pleasure principle' (Eagleton, 2004: 14).

In my collective of gothic fusion belly dancers, this happens not in a way that evokes coarse notions of social/class/gender roles in relation to codes of public decency and exotic/'dirty' dancing like some over the more overtly sexualised forms of dance do (Colosi, 2010), nor does it spill over into the excesses of a Bacchanalian orgy or occasion actual sex or violence. At most, it is probably a little bit naughty, possibly coarse or even a little embarrassing, or at times mildly ridiculous. But maybe this is its power and appeal, to play at these things, to suggest or conjure them up in front of everybody, without going the whole way. Given that so many white, middle class and middle aged women in western societies take up belly dance and are it would seem well if not over-represented in tribal/gothic fusion, it could be a valuable way of helping us to negotiate (inter)subjective experiences of deviance, sexuality, transformation and change. Or it could be a way of enabling us to experience and manifest ourselves as the 'dispassionate' or 'crazy' mother in psychoanalytic terms, mothers who no longer 'care' and are unapologetic about it.

With respect to the feminine in mid-life and the cultural tensions surrounding female sexualities, under the banner 'maternal passions', Julia Kristeva coined the resonant phrases 'feminine fatigue' and the 'crazy mother'; according to Kelly Oliver (2008-2010), these basically refer to the more negative or 'darker' aspects of the victimisation and masochism of femininity enshrined in motherhood. Hence the woman in midlife becomes simply too tired to uphold the punishing and relentless regime of idealised early femininity and mothering, and its spirituality of endless compassionate giving and selfless sacrifice. Similarly, she is equally tired of fighting her subservience in the phallic social order, leaving those now old enough to look after themselves to do just that, and renouncing the sovereignty of the phallic cultural order that casts them as passive or weak and in need of 'feminist avengers' (Oliver, *ibid*: 2) to defend them against their masculine aggressors. Instead, according to Kristeva, women in mid-life resolutely hold onto their 'bisexual allegiances' (quoted in Oliver, *ibid*: 2), and indeed there were several such references among my GFBD classmates. For example, two of my women classmates who were obviously close friends often referred to each other as 'wives', and cracking jokes such as 'are you talking to my wife?' to the point that I assumed they were actually in a civil partnership. This notion was upended when one

commented on their husbands complaining in a playful manner ‘is your wife texting you again?’.

Phallogentrism was similarly and typically deconstructed when a class member asked Jess some specific questions about the rudiments of a particular move or sequence of the choreography, eventually explaining that she was asking for the benefit of her husband, a reportedly six foot four inch former ‘copper’ to whom she taught the moves on her return home, so that he could learn them too. She went on to explain that he had an early love of dance, but in his adolescence was teased by the other boys for this as being ‘queer’, after which he gave up dance and took up rugby. Indeed, this is not the first time I have heard of this happening among boys and young men who dance; in my ballroom class, I encountered one example in which the adult rugby coaches and teachers in a boy’s school were complicit in this process as a way of reacting to the long hours of practice and time spent away at dance competitions to reclaim him as a star player on the school rugby team. In the present situation, Jess and the other class members said that he should come to join us in class, that he would be very welcome and that she had had a few male students before. But the idea was tacitly dismissed as untenable, with the understanding that the woman in question would continue to teach him in private at home as a way of preserving his masculinity and perhaps also our solidarity as a collection of women.

The complexities of gender norms, friendships, the marital/long term relationship and GFBD will be returned to presently. There are also deep and complex intergenerational relationships between young and older dancers in belly dance troupes and classes. This coalesces into the maelstrom of desire codified in what Kristeva calls the latent bisexuality of the ‘crazy mother’:

“‘We are not all psychotic, but we can all be crazy. Crazy for one another (men and women, women and women, men and men) because we are crazy for our crazy mothers.’” It turns out, however, that some of us are crazier than others for those crazy mothers! Too invested in pleasing the father with our intellectual pursuits to *be* her, yet too loyal to her craziness, to her depression, to *be* him. Confused about who to be and therefore about who to love. Wanting to be everything and to love and be loved by everybody, an extravagant and ultimately exhausting desire’ (Oliver, *ibid*: 2-3 emphasis in original).

For me and my dance mates, this ‘craziness’ of this craziest form of this dance craze converges around what could be termed a hyperbolic desire (echoes of Cartesian hyperbolic doubt deployed in the presence of the diabolical evil genius) not readily subsumed into reified discourses of sexual attraction, heterosexual normativity or ‘sexual market value’. Rather, they veer into less reified but perhaps similarly commodified arenas of ‘kookiness’ whereby at least one dancer continues to dress as a goth and even carries around presumably as a handbag a child’s lunchbox decorated with cartoon vampires and other Halloween characters, while others dyed their hair a fetching bright purple. The seemingly growing popular elision of the gothic via vampirism and children’s culture is resurrected, if from askance from the ‘spooky kooky’, and in this instance belly dancing, crazy mother. If the putative ‘mother’ figure carries the child’s lunchbox festooned with vampires and ghosts to her GFBD class on a Saturday morning, what does this connote? What does the child eat? Is the child alive, has the child itself been devoured or transformed into an ‘undead’ forever childlike entity who no longer requires the contents of a packed lunch? Is this absurd potentiality, from the maternal perspective, fun, or funny? The notion of the vampire as animated cadaver is further invigorated by the cartoon animation of ghosties, vampires and ghouls on the GFBD dancer’s lunchbox. The cultural temporality of Saturday morning is potent. Perhaps the child or children are at home watching such images on Saturday morning children’s tv; whatever the case, what is certain is the mother’s absence from the heteronormative ‘family’ time, whatever is happening at home, she is a ghostly (non)presence, as she will be as a woman who dances GFBD. This raises many issues of the feminine uncanny, female hysteria and fear of the ‘archaic mother’ all through the prism—or portable mini-crypt—of a child’s vampire lunchbox as a carrier of food or more probably an ironic replacement for a handbag, that epitome of woman’s consumer desirable object, in a gothic parody of female desire.

Such kookiness is the familiar domain of the aging goth woman and even more so the gothic fusion belly dancer. In popular culture, middle age is commonly represented as the time when women go ‘nutty’, their becoming as embodied and social beings is rendered spooky, weird, pathetic and a bit quaint as part of their ontological condition. This echoes Aristotle’s remarks on ‘kooky objects’ in his consideration of the man Coriscus who transforms from being ‘unmusical’ to becoming ‘musical’, or his other example of Socrates’ pallor or being a man in his *Physics* (Cohen, 2008). Are these merely ‘accidents’ of their existence, or are they key to, or mistakable for, their ‘essence’? Does the ‘unmusical’ man Coriscus cease to exist when he becomes ‘musical’, in which the unmusical person is replaced by the now musical

one, or do the two coexist? While these represent complex philosophical questions of ontology in Aristotelian metaphysics, their discursive construction can be projected onto contemporary women's realities, beings and identities in the current situation: are we still women when we have the audacity to age and lose our maternal 'moments' represented by the capacity to procreate, sacrifice, nurture and care? Or is this 'essence' of being a woman replaced when become, if not musical, then darkly dancerly in a transitive embodiment of our maternal (dis)passions?

The cliché of the midlife crisis as an existential dilemma is encoded by the woman in middle age who fuses belly dancing with gothic culture, who laughs in the face of mortality and physical and sexual decline, and refuses the false promises of youth-capturing cosmetic surgery. If she resigns herself to, or joins in, to the amusement that is the parody of her transitive and deviant self, then who—or what—she is, what she threatens, who she becomes, as manifestation of the ontological kooky object is reiterated, this time on our own terms. In a post-feminist age in which the notion of women's essentialism has been widely rejected, the question of essence or being obliquely resurrected by the emergent obscurity of her temporal and embodied feminine condition. The remedy for these anxieties, crises, crashes or jokes of femininities are enshrined in these maternal passions themselves, specifically the reflexive consciousness and capacity for encountering the other, and the resplendent and outrageous vagaries of desire and pleasure (Oliver, *ibid*), codified in such a resplendently dark form of dance, and its secretly attendant pleasures. 'For Kristeva, even when it is about the father, it is also and always about the mother and the pleasure and horrors of her body' (Oliver, *ibid*: 3). One element of this psychic effort is that 'the future mother becomes an object of desire, pleasure and aversion for herself' (Kristeva in Oliver, *ibid*: 3). While in pregnancy,

'She is completely absorbed by emotions invested in her body as the "hollow" habitation of a future love-object that she will have to allow to become a subject. ... This move from self-absorption to love of the child and then eventually release or weaning of the child is the "miracle" of maternal passion because the mother embodies both passion and dispassion, or passion and working through passion' (Oliver, *ibid*: 3-4).

The sublimation of passion, and the active pursuit of dispassion, detachment and resurgence of the dark death drive or *thanatos* are key to this moving process. She is bodily and symbolically at once the object of levity and pathos, though the (meta)physical negotiation of

her symbolic death and playful courting of her presence as a spectral, and indeed moving, dancing, imaginary:

‘This is why, here, Kristeva says that there is no good mother except the one who lends herself to matricide, echoing her earlier provocation from *Black Sun*, “matricide is our vital necessity”. She also claims that the good enough mother loves no one because her passion is eclipsed by her detachment, which leads to her “serenity”’ (Oliver, *ibid*: 4).

With respect firstly to the lending her herself to matricide, in GFBD, as in the gothic domain more generally, I do not think it is beyond the bounds of imagination to say that matricide is implicitly provoked. And indeed, in this particular workshop, with these dancers and the attendant choreography and music, this provocation is linked to the semiotic presence of the dispassionate mother as a spectral threat to her ‘dark’ offspring.

The choreography and music repeatedly mimicked this in the lyric ‘I want to be your little child’ that comprised part of the chorus of the black metal band Deathstars song ‘Syndrome’ (2008). The movement involved tilting our heads slightly, putting our hands under our chins in a ‘childish’ gesture while turning on the spot very, very slowly, drawing on the demonic and possessed aesthetic of scenes from horror films such as *The Exorcist* (1973). This movement by a group of about half a dozen women dressed in gothic black parodied any saccharine sweetness of the mother-child bond, the effect being disconcerting and sinister. The gaze, as Jess instructed, was strong and directed at the audience; unusually, we were to smile, but with ‘menace’. There was quite a bit of laughter and enjoyment in the class at the task of learning to look at and smile menacingly at the audience, with a view to ‘freaking them out’; typically belly dancers are taught to smile more or less all the time at audiences, to convey an expression of happiness, affability, flirtatiousness and joy, even to avert their eyes or look past the audience into the distance. Not so here.

The performance of such circular choreographic movements by dispassionate women dancers dressed in stark, funereal costumes, danced to challengingly slow and dark music evokes the themes of the mourning, grief and loss accompanying the death of children in the landmark Antony Tudor ballet *Dark Elegies*, danced to Mahler’s *Kindertotenlieder*, first staged in 1937. As Sawyer (2006) comments, *Dark Elegies* marks a traumatic moment in modern dance in which audiences and dancers alike are pushed to the limits in the dissembling of dance and music from the lightness and consolation of beauty and joy. The darkness is

expressed and explored in the ‘...universal nature of grief and isolation...’ (Sawyer, 2006: 2) that is emblematic of the human condition, unleashing a ‘maelstrom of emotion and a catalyst for action’ (ibid: 5) while at the same time resisting the collapse into ‘Victorian sentimentality’ (ibid: 3). Similar to the ‘myth of the wicked god’ metanarrative of evil (Ricoeur, 1967), it is the tragic spectacle of the hero’s, or in this case heroines’, suffering and loss that coalesce in the cathartic resignation and acceptance on the part of the audience and performers. While the same darkly isolated, alienated, intensely self-absorbed, somatic suspension in time and non-progressive, non-linear, circular movements of the women dancers are in evidence in our GFBD choreography, the ethos and aesthetic are quite different.

Whether or not GFBD is about catharsis is debateable, but given the nature of my communications with my teachers and fellow dancers, what it isn’t about is resignation or passive acceptance of anything to do with our human condition as feminine, embodied, dancing, and/or putatively (dis)spirited beings. It was not easy to get women to open up and talk about such issues, and when they did, they seemed hesitant, perhaps even a little suspicious, that my investigations into this area veered worryingly close to demonising or reifying either them or this form of dance, bringing either or both into moral disrepute. Posting questions on our closed Facebook site yielded only silence. However, direct discussions with my teachers Jess and Fiona were more fruitful, possibly because they wished to promote but also defend these forms of tribal belly dance. In her email correspondence with me, ATS dancer and teacher Fiona expressed some concern and discomfort with what was my original line of questioning about tribal belly dance with respect to its exploration of its ‘dark side’. In the following excerpt from one of our email exchanges, she distinguishes the ‘tribal’ from the ‘gothic’, keen to differentiate the two but also to stress the ‘lightness’ and ‘theatricality’ of tribal belly dance generally, whatever its association, and that it is a ‘good’ and ‘uplifting’ thing:

‘ATS is not dark or gothic, though a full range of emotions is possible in ATS, it’s [sic] essence is light. It’s an uplifted dance that celebrates life and community. Tribal Fusion, and more specifically Gothic Fusion, grew out of ATS. This form explores darker aspects of the psyche in a dramatic way.

Both ATS and Turkish or Egyptian Styles (as they are taught in the UK) manifest feminine archetypes, but they do this very differently. In Turkish and Egyptian style

you often see the ingénue, the diva or vixen manifest---x [names dance teacher] plays with these to profound effect in her Cabaret style, and I have learned a great deal from her.

I can speak to ATS, as I lived in San Francisco in the early 90s and saw Fat Chance Belly Dance, Carolena's troupe, in its inception, dancing at Café Istanbul. I was a Women Studies Major at the time at SFSU, and the powerful, earthy goddess archetype embodied in the dance resonated with me and still does.

With that said, I am comfortable with a darker spectrum of emotions. Before I learned ATS almost all my dancing was in gothic clubs! I have the honour of dancing with [Jess's, GFBD teacher and dancer] Gothic Fusion troupe...In dance, we explore darkness the way an actress would. There is a certain amount of theatricality in Gothic Fusion Belly Dance.

We all need balance, and ATS is my sunshine and my light. It is a very joyful dance to me, powerful in its ability to banish the blues!' (Fiona, 26/02/14).

In other words, its 'darker' qualities are dimensions of its emotional, psychic or dramatic character, not signifiers of culpable deviance or immorality either on the part of the women involved or the dances themselves, irrespective of what images of women or semiotics of femininities denoted. Tribal belly dances simply offer access to a darker palette, a broader performative and expressive spectrum of emotions. So while it is by no means a requirement for belly dancers to be feminists or indeed educated, it is at the same time entirely permissible for feminist and/or highly educated women to pretend to be, tilt at, or play with iconic images of femininities that extend from the darkly exotic volatility of the goddess of death to the compassionate nurturing of the earth mother or indeed the bubbly innocence of the ingénue, without impugning their respectable social status as women, sisters, or possibly mothers.

This sentiment was developed separately by Jess, who stated that gothic fusion dancers garner and express their 'strength' through the refusal of such commercially normative attitudes of cutesy femininity or easy 'lightness', electing instead to explore and play with other darker and more pagan 'goddess-y' influences in their genre and performances. Part of this aesthetic was the open rejection of 'pretty' or conventional femininities, including some goth femininities such as those that verge into Victorian or lingerie territory; we were clearly instructed to avoid this look in our costuming, e.g. no, or if necessary, as little as possible,

black lace or velvet, and hairstyles, instead seeking to embody a 'nu goth' style which is more austere and severe, less conventionally feminine, closer to a utilitarian or 'bondage' type style than Victoriana. In my GFBD classes, the body itself was typically and heavily adorned; there were many and copious tattoos on show, often extending down the arms and/or midriff area, a nod toward what were previously deviant subcultures and ideals of the purity of feminine beauty. Toying with or courting dominance, the grotesque feminine or even 'ugliness' was not a problem, in fact, it was implicitly encouraged as it would enhance the scariness and menace of GFBD performance. These are the sources of our power, the strength to depart from and 'bend' such gender and sexual norms:

You asked me before why I do it, well I think I've made up my own style in order to create territory I'm comfortable with; I want to dance how I want to dance, to the music I want to dance to. My metal bellydance workshops, for example, are all about trying to find a more empowering way to celebrate the music, which doesn't stray into 'rock bitch' or 'satanic slut' seduction territory. Even though I'm sometimes using cab[aret] moves I'm subverting them. I use a lot of cabaret moves to dance to Iron Maiden and to black metal. There's often a lot of posturing, often borrowed from the stagecraft of the dudes who front the bands; a lot of 'masculine' energy, for want of a better expression. When my dance (and my troupe's) is more 'feminine' I'm always aiming to be mesmeric and strong, not seductive, just as a FCBD [Fat Chance Belly Dance] troupe would be strong but not seductive (we share similar values and sexual politics to tribal even though we are not tribal). [Jess, Facebook message, 05/03/14]

The presentation of the body in this, as in all other forms of dance, is significant, and certainly belly dance is no exception. A common staple of the costuming for gothic fusion would seem to be the 'suspender' trousers, usually black tightly fitting jersey shorts with the bottom legs of slacks attached by a pair of suspender straps with buckles, exposing the thighs, something very much in the fetish style. When I asked if there were worn with nothing underneath, Jess responded 'If you're brave!'. Later it emerged that lace, fishnet or striped tights are often worn underneath, for modesty and cosmetic purposes. Though parts of the body suffused with erotic meaning, notably the midriff and thighs are exposed in this dance, being too openly 'sexy' is shunned, as it 'cheapens' and commodifies us as dancers and the dance. Such practices also, in my experience, can ignite jealousy and competition among a group of women and result in the fragmentation or weakening of the strong feminine self and

the collective bond in favour of the solicitation of the male audience gaze, not something that would be an acceptable feature of this sort of dance, its performance or its teaching. This sort of workshop atmosphere (in this instance, a yoga studio) is a dancer's space for dancing the feminine that rejects this normative sexual politics and consumerist ideologies of the female dancer (such as in club, podium, lap dancing or stripping). Equally important, if not more so, such an aesthetic and ethos would subtract from the gothic 'fantastique' qualities of this dance which veer more directly toward the decadent, descrescent and grotesque, to trace waning as well as waxing and destructive femininities (for a comparison with ballet see Meglin, 2005).

To illustrate this point about sexiness, Jess included a move in the choreography that incorporated a body ripple accompanied by a descent of the hands from overhead down to waist level. I know from my previous experience of belly dance that such combinations or 'layering' of moves using the hands to frame or trace the torso are very common in belly dance, serving to direct the audience's gaze to this part of the body and also enhance or even exaggerate the drama or emphasis of the move. This is typically done in Egyptian/oriental belly dance with the framing of the moving hips with the hands. However, in GFBD such moves were restricted by being 'smaller' or described as 'muscular', 'athletic', that is, not conforming to the exaggeration of the Egyptian 'camel' move—a contrast demonstrated by Jess by way of showing the comparative lack of restraint of such forms that overtly seek to make the moves 'bigger' or more exaggerated, undulating, 'skeletal' or dramatic. In a word, as dancers and as women, we executed the moves of belly dance to show we are *strong* as opposed to (merely) 'sexual'. It was not unusual in the workshops for Jess to demonstrate the gothic move, then show 'how an Egyptian dancer would do it', usually more dramatically, almost a parody, and then again return to the restraint of GFBD style. The body ripple was an interesting case in point in that she was clear, if not adamant, that our hands were not to touch our body on their way down, this not being 'that sort of' dance, not a tease. The movement of the hands down the body were to frame the body ripple, but not for the purposes of fantasy with respect to touch, actual or imagined on the part of the audience. Fantasy here relates to other realms of femininities, again real as in embodied and corporeal, and imagined as in symbolic and ideal. The strong implication was that we are not lap dancers or strippers who actively elicit the sexual gaze or convey open sexuality by touching ourselves while performing a move, let's be honest, that would not be out of place in a club or bar or on a podium or 'lap'.

However, its comparative subtlety and restraint are connoted as mechanisms through which we can putatively resist the commodification of our bodies and all that goes with that, but still do what are basically the same moves. What was sought was a sort of mesmerism, an animal magnetism, the illusion of knowledge and understanding from a female corporeal and emotional perspective, whereby GFBD represents a ploy on our parts, not to actually seduce, but to enable and allow, and to con. Older women, as sexual beings, are in a sense con artists, That could be what GFBD is saying, and this in itself constitutes a compelling message; this might be what allows us to feel empowered and entitled without slipping over into the territory of desperation or the utterly ridiculous. This is where as a group of dancers we ‘played’ around the very edges of femininities, toying with the stereotypes—old and new—concerning fears and worries about women’s sexualities and flirting at and with what we may or may not ‘know’ as sexual beings. This could be construed as implicitly delving into some of the more recent and controversial ‘red pill’ and ‘SMV’ (sexual market value) current ‘philosophies’ of gender and facing this notion of the sexual devaluation and decline of women in ‘mid-life’ (on some websites interpreted as taking place between the ages of 28-30) head on. So, in place of showcasing or enforcing our bodies to conform to a conventional ‘sexy’ femininity, instead we as a group of women mainly in their forties and fifties, we explored these territories of power, knowledge, deviance and loss as manifestations of diabolical darkness, an exploratory journey into monstrous, yet compellingly so, femininities.

In practice, this implies playing upon, emphasising or even exaggerating the parts of our bodies that we are so often compelled to hide or disguise because they are ‘not sexy’, most notably what for many of us who were over forty and/or had given birth, our sagging, ample and/or stretch-marked midriffs. In a reversal of the metaphor of darkness and secrecy that pervades popular feminine cultures of disguising the body and adopting manners of dress that ‘hide a thousand sins’ i.e. physical ‘faults’, this is a part of the GFBD aesthetic, though Jess and Fiona did reassure us that we didn’t have to expose our bellies if we didn’t want to.

While it isn’t easy, bearing the belly in public is or can be a remarkably defiant and liberating act, sometimes and for some of us. But there is no denying that it is scary too, for us certainly, and potentially for audiences alike. Sporting ironically ‘horrible’ hair that again flouts conventions of long, gleaming, glorious tresses by being wild and out of control, and gothic makeup that emphasises pale, decaying flesh and voracious appetites are also iconic in gothic fusion belly dance, a sort of Maenads enraged look. This part is great fun and attraction of GFBD and its ironic power.

Conclusion

Death, decay and the macabre are the stuff of dark metal music and goth culture that clearly influence this dance. This was not darkness as a crass opposite to ‘the light’ but a subtle and sophisticated playing around these themes. This is not a Manichean black and white dichotomy between good and evil as simple ‘black and white’ oppositional forces. In GFBD as in other tribal dances, conventional codes of ‘beauty’ are often subverted, rejected or even reversed, sometimes verging on or actively courting the ‘ugly’, unbalanced, irregular but not repulsive. To recall Žižek’s critique of Kant’s refusal of diabolical evil:

... (a)fter indicating the contours of this concept, Kant quickly withdraws and offers another, supplementary concept in exchange, a concept which already ‘pacifies’ the unbearable dimension of the first one: the Sublime (is offered) (instead of the Monstrous) (in the *Critique of Judgement*); radical evil (is offered) (instead of ‘diabolical evil’) (in the texts on practical reason)...” (Žižek, 1997, 227)’ (quoted in Sharpe, 2009: 3)

So what is not ‘beautiful’ in a narrowly commodified or conventional sense does not find its opposite in ‘ugliness, but rather in the monstrous, occasionally sublime, that refuses simply to ‘pacify’. In the opening verse of the *Song of Songs*, the seductive psalmist is apologetic about being ‘dark’ and thereby diverging from commonly held ideals of beauty, but nevertheless openly declares her beauty despite this deviance, perhaps even because of it.

The unsentimental, as encapsulated in the experiential singularities that are the real life encounters with the noumenal ‘real’, which while disconcerting, fleeting and grim are nonetheless familiar, ethereal and ‘true’. In contemporary discourses of femininities, such resurgences of the ‘essential’ feminine constitutes a radical/revolutionary/reactionary, but certainly defiant act. These encounters with the diabolical expose the ‘cracks’ in the universal that Žižek identifies in Kant’s slavish obsession with it, as well as his stoic adherence to duty ethics as a code of living. As dancers, what we sought to capture and convey was the uncanny that confuses, even consternates or threatens, yet rings true and fascinates (e.g. in the travelling mayas, movements that are strong, surprising, mesmeric, uncanny, serpentine, slow). There was openness to fantasy, enchantment, and ‘the real’, facilitated through our refusal to surrender our femininities to the reification of seduction, the pursuit of youth or fitness, or submission to the artifice of the tease. We conjured playful malice but not real

terror. Fear but not horror. Real fear does not allow the experience of the sublime, which we and our audiences do experience, now and then. Irrationality over rationality but without chaos (or maybe a little, on occasion). We wear a lot of black and are not ‘smiley’ or ‘girly’ like our Egyptian/oriental counterparts, our expressions are more typically grave or intense, though we do smile and when we do, it is with ironic malice. Our facial expressions were occasionally menacing, but mostly serene. We are ‘Goddess-y’, in Jess’s word. While it might not conform to ideologies of feminism or heteronorms of femininity, it is or can be extremely empowering by the act of rebellion and rage, in the face of inevitable decline and age.

Does all of this, as Kristeva suggests, lead to spiritual serenity, or enhance what we might call wellbeing? What GFBD seems to offer is a psychic space in which hysteria, kooky objects and ‘craziness’ are either transcended, dissimulated, or transformed into an experience of dispassion and detachment that incorporates these undercurrents of menace and death essential to the completion of this maternal cycle of formative subjectivity in middle age. *Thanatos* can be liberating, intoxicating, disturbing, destructive but also compelling, entertaining, empowering and fun. Such is the experience of the willingly resplendent pretend matricide in GFBD as a dance of darkness. But while these are undoubtedly playful and irreverent elements to GFBD, as Hales’ (2010) research into the woman moral panic surrounding the occulting powers of the darkly hypnotic ‘trance-dancer’ in interwar Weimar indicates, the darkly mysterious power of the ‘new woman’ as ‘femme fatale’ continues to encode insecurity, terror and fear in the bodies of dancing women, identifying female sexuality in the darkly dancing woman as a threat to social order during times of economic hardship, political crisis, global war, and social change. These are ongoing struggles over the power and potency of the darkly dancing woman that are unlikely to ever stabilise or achieve resolution, which is again probably part of their ongoing allure.

Psychoanalysis has had cause to consider the mythical relationship between the mother and daughter embroiled in the dark nexus of belly dance. In her analysis of the ‘fetishization’ of the dancer and the female body in what she terms the ‘Salome Effect’, Becker-Leckrone (1995) raises the notions of secrecy and loss crystallising in the concept of the phallic woman/maternal phallus, a discursive site ripe for the probing of these intricately linked experiences. In the past, I have often had cause—or felt I had to have cause—to try to hide the fact that I am a belly dancer, while loving it, it is a difficult if not actually impossible task

in the age of digital social media to manage or control as a university lecturer who strives to be, and be seen as, a ‘good’ woman and mother. Like many belly dancers, I also hide a secret history of sexual trauma and abuse (Moe, 2014). In negotiating these norms and deciding what to do and whether or not to disclose, I have had to ask myself recently, does anyone really care? Probably not. Do they think it is odd or even ridiculous or pathetic? Probably so. So what? GFBD has taught me that I can easily afford to be dispassionate about any opprobrium that might be directed my way as a result of being a belly dancer. Being a belly dancer is also, apparently, something we are averse to talk about as dancers, at least as part of a research project—it was difficult to get my fellow dancers to speak about their experiences, but this may have been simply because they preferred to dance.

Similarly, in my experience learning other more conventional forms of dance such as ballroom, Latin American dance and tap dance, belly dance is perceived as an anomaly, even not recognisably a dance at all. Are we phallic women? Freud’s original mention of this concept was in relation to the dream image of a spider, and GFBD would not find such a symbolic imaginary in terms of movement or femininity alien or problematic. In fact, the image of the dream spider is difficult to better as an icon of GFBD. Many of the movements of GFBD choreography involve a slowly creeping, slithering collective movement of either the solo or troupe of dancers inching menacingly toward the audience. On more than one occasion, Jess told the story of a particular GFBD performance at a *hafla* at which there were a number of young men of Afro-Caribbean origin in the audience, seated together at a front and centre table very near the performance space. Obviously they were positioned there to get a premier view of the belly dancers, expecting the Egyptian/oriental cabaret type, and indeed for much of the evening that is what they got. Until Jess’s troupe came on to perform. Dancing in a V shape, with Jess at the point and the other dancers aligned slightly behind and to each side of her, during the dance they advanced very gradually and slowly toward the audience, the closest of which was this table of young men. Fixing them with their unyielding stares and menacing expressions, and moving together as a witchlike coven, Jess proudly and vocally declared how funny and empowering it was to ‘turn the tables’ on them, making them feel under the feminine gaze and playfully under threat. She described how these men could be observed recoiling slightly, cowering back in their seats and grouping together as a mechanism for protection. Jess shared this story twice in my presence alone and I got the impression it is a frequently shared story if only because it codifies many things about GFBD

and what the aim is in a successful or effective performance. It should be different; ominous; menacing; empowering; but ultimately, just fun.

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