Decolonizing Belly Dance

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Encountering the Other

In early December 2005 I arrived at 440 Studios on Lafayette Street in the East Village, prepared to expand my experience as an (ethno)musicologist and belly dancer by attending the first Goth belly dance workshop in New York City. I anticipated feeling like an outsider; after all, for many years my main focus of research had been Jewish music. Indeed, after finishing my weekly...
Sunday service as church organist, it seemed a true stretch to dive into a new world, where I expected to be perceived as an intruder, and join the experience as, at best, a participant or, at worst, a silent observer. In contrast to my own personal identity, the “dark aesthetic” of Goth is marked by diverse musical styles coming out of rock (Hinds 1992:152–59), an alternative lifestyle that includes distinct fashions, a predilection for socializing at clubs, and “underground”/alternative media such as zines, fanzines, and personal websites. Further, the Goth subculture is rooted in punk, horror movies, historical and recent Gothic novels (152–59), comic books, and Christian apocalyptic and hellish imagery (see Martin 2002:28; Young 1999:81). Far from Goth myself, there was no doubt that I would be instantly recognized as the Other, a disturbance, and a conspicuous stranger in the dark world of Goth belly dance; considering my Teutonic heritage and accent, perhaps even an Other on several levels. But none of my predictions proved true. Perhaps the cause of my late arrival made all the difference in my first encounter with the newly emerging Goth belly dance (GBD) scene in New York.

When I entered the small studio, about 25 women were sitting casually on the floor in a circle, all dressed in black with belts or scarves around their hips. Not all of them identified as Goth, and as each woman introduced herself she explained her reasons for attending the workshop. These varied from sheer curiosity, to a desire to separate from the larger belly dance scene in the United States and its complex social interactions, to a need to express Goth identity in belly dance.

The last to arrive, I was also the last to introduce myself. Still out of breath from my surreal Sunday journey from the organ bench to the studio, all I divulged was an apology for my lateness due to “hitting the organ.” The small but evidently important detail that I came straight from church won me a big applause. Evidently it was a Goth-style introduction. Rather than hanging back as an outside observer, I united with the group over one crucial factor that defined all of us beyond our differences: our interest in a new face for belly dance that reflects contemporary female identities. During the next three hours we learned about the nature and origins of the GBD phenomenon and its subgenres from Tempest (Laura Schmidt), one of its major proponents, creator of the popular Goth Belly Dance Resource (www.gothicbellydance.com), and moderator of the “Gothic Belly Dance” forum, a discussion group at tribe.net. This event marked the beginning of GBD’s development as a performing art and my own three-year journey through its culture of theatrics, music, and dance.

Western interpretations of Eastern dances and hybridized dances of the East have been practiced in the US since the early 20th century, beginning with the Egyptian dancers of

1. An idiomatic expression that dates back to the Renaissance period, when playing the organ required tremendous physical strength.
2. Middle or Near Eastern dance, called danse du ventre, and Oriental dance, are Western names coined in response to varying interpretations of dances from the Middle East, Asia, parts of the Mediterranean (known there as tsifteteli or oryantal tansi), and North Africa. In the US, “belly dance” is an umbrella term for dances based on what are widely and to a great extent falsely believed to be traditional Middle Eastern dancing. In Arabic the dance is known as raqs baladi, raqs arabi, raqs misri, and raqs sharqi; the latter translates as “dance of the East.” For a further discussion of terminology, see Sellers-Young (1992).

Figure 1. (previous page) A self-portrait by Aepril Schaile from her piece The Morrigan, which honors Morrigan, a figure from Irish mythology who was the Celtic goddess of battle, strife, and fertility. This performance can be viewed at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sZjpGKzARD8. (Photo by Aepril Schaile)

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around 1900 and the Salomé dancers of the 1910s (see Deagon 2005:250–52), and continuing to the growing popularity of theatricalized Middle Eastern nightclub dancing based on “raqs sharki” (also known as American cabaret belly dance) from the 1950s to ’70s. New forms developed in the 1980s when belly dance matured from a popular fad to a culturally engaged and committed community. Belly dancing fused with a range of genres, including Caribbean dance, flamenco, and modern dance. Experimental forms such as tribal style belly dance and American tribal style arose. Thus, as a belly dance fusion genre, GBD is not as much of a novelty as one might assume. As belly dance is neither formalized nor codified—this is especially evident in the taxonomy of its movements—it is keenly receptive to change and heterogeneity, and open to interpretation and exploitation, borrowing, and cross-culturalism. Because its codes are still relatively unregulated, it has become accessible to various movements and subcultures, one of them being Goth.

GBD combines the Goth subcultures of 1970s Great Britain and 1980s North America with belly dance in its cabaret or tribal forms. GBD, in accordance with Goth culture, is also based on dark aesthetics. In opposition to more traditional belly dance and following Goth, it does not celebrate “pretty, sanitized sensuality but the terrible beauty of the grotesque and tragically mortal” (Siegel 2005:166). If Goth, according to Sara Martin, is a manifestation of the “postmodern resistance against the excessive rationalism of the first half of the twentieth century” (2002:41), then Goth belly dance directs this resistance against cultural colonialism as embodied in belly dance, while still remaining rooted in it. Thus GBD holds a peculiar position within both Western culture and postcolonial studies.

GBD developed in the late 20th century as an unselfconscious style that by 2000 was variously called “raqs gothique,” “Goth belly dance,” and “Goth fusion dance.” In the first

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3. Tribal style is accredited to Jamila Salimpour, who from the 1960s on with her Berkeley-based troupe Bal Anar fostered a fusion of folkloric dance styles from the Middle East and North Africa. American tribal style belly dance (commonly known as ATS) was created by FatChanceBellyDance director Carolena Nericcio in San Francisco in the 1980s (see Sellers-Young 2005).

4. On origins, migrations, and appropriations of belly dance, see Shay and Sellers-Young (2005) and Dox (2006).
decade of the new millennium the GBD scene developed rapidly, especially once Goth women began to perform GBD in dance clubs and, in turn, some of their moves and styles made their way into club dancing. Unlike folk dances or more traditionally oriented belly dances that conform to specific traditions and aesthetics, GBD has fewer restrictions as a dance form. It is fantasy, fashion, style, and individual expression. GBD is distinct from other belly dance forms in music, costuming, makeup, and attitude. Goth belly dancers, in general consensus, describe their art as a rebellion against the “sweet” aspect of belly dance and aesthetic, cultural, and sexual imperialism—yet as a movement practice and performing art, it remains rooted in belly dance.

Belly Dance and Its Orientalist Agenda

Colonialism, understood as the Western domination of the Other, is embodied in the belly dance of American women who have embraced this Middle Eastern dance form. Homi Bhabha wrote that the colonized is a fixed “social reality, which is at once an ‘Other’ and yet entirely knowable and visible” (1994:101). From this perspective, belly dance in the US is treated as a colonized art form. Indeed, belly dance, embraced and to a certain extent created by the West, has been the object of cultural appropriation and, as Stavros Stavrou Karayanni confirms, “manipulated into complicity by an Orientalist agenda” (2004:xii). Cultural expropriation and borrowing led to the Westernization and Americanization of Middle Eastern dances. At the same time, viewing the “Orient” through Western eyes resulted in an imaginary identification with the Middle East. Indeed, the Orientalist paradigm is so deeply embedded in American consciousness that dancers themselves are often unaware of how many of the qualities that they value are actually a product of Western (male) representations (Dox 2006:58). GBD, on the other hand, has developed a sensitivity to this, as expressed by Ariellah Aflalo, a 33-year-old dancer from California, who says that Goth belly dancers “are no longer geared towards aesthetically pleasing a man’s wants and desires” (2006).

GBD, as we shall see, is as much of an Orientalist construction as belly dance. This is supported by the fact that Goth and the Orient are given the same attributes: the feminine, the mystical and mysterious, and the dark (for Goth, see Hodkinson 2002:36). In other words, unintentionally, Goth shares concepts of what Edward Said calls latent Orientalism—the unconscious, untouchable certainty about what the Orient is—in which the East is constructed as dark and feminine (1978:206–08).

At the same time, GBD is unique in that it is created within already existing structures—an Orientalist invention within an already existing Orientalist invention—from which it departs. But beyond this, it is (unintentionally) an ironic response to its model, given how it quotes and transforms other forms of belly dance. Following Said as well as Marta Savigliano’s assertion that “decolonization means rejecting the search for the origins and authenticity of the colonized”
(1995:9), I argue that GBD is Orientalist while embodying decolonization at the same time. The relation of GBD to Orientalist practices that exoticize the Eastern Other and the simultaneous departure from them (decolonization as process and product) is the focus of this essay.

The Goth as Dancer—The Dancer as Goth

The GBD community comprises several thousand dancers worldwide in Australia, Britain, Germany, Finland, Spain, New Zealand, and—the focus of this study—the US. As with belly dance and Goth subculture, GBD is a transglobal phenomenon. Goth belly dancers are predominantly women ranging in age from adolescence to their early 50s, the majority being in their 30s. Some Goth belly dancers are not Goth in their daily lives, but most are. These fulltime Goths make belly dancing a cornerstone of their lifestyle. They organize dance events, give dance classes, and socialize with like-minded dancers, thus living Goth through belly dance. Aflalo embodies the double identity of Goth and belly dancer:

For me, I was a goth for so very long and it was a natural occurrence for it to come through in my belly dance. There was no way to prohibit that from happening. I do know that the goth community is more aware and in tune with belly dance and is more likely to have seen a belly dancer, even before GBD existed, than in your average group of people in the U.S. I am unable to exactly explain why that is, however, perhaps b/c the goth scene has more of a darker, saddened, heartfelt edge to it, that it is only logical for Goths to be in tune with such a passionate dance form. (2006)

Goth is about being different and escaping the mainstream—and so mainstream dance forms such as ballet, jazz, or modern do not suit Goths’ self-identification as Other. But even within the belly dance community, Goths are marginalized. Aneaj Deletra, a tribal belly dancer of African descent, recounts: “Being an outsider in terms of mainstream America, I came to belly dance to find something to be a part of, yet I was the outsider again. My choices for presentation (music, costume, movements, whole ball of wax) were odd for some people” (2006). Ultimately, going Goth in belly dance leads to a total departure from mainstream culture, thus allowing for the possibility of an unconventional display of femininity.

Figure 4. Ariellah Aflalo as featured on the 2007 DVD Gothic Bellydance Revelations. (Video grab courtesy of WorldDance New York)

6. My fieldwork took place from 2005 to 2008 in New York City and other selected cities on the East and West Coasts.

7. This is evident in different belly dance forums on tribe.net, where women from all over the world exchange views and ideas on belly dance. The different forums also attest to the diverse interest groups within belly dance: The Everyday Bellydancer, Belly Dance Instructors, Bellydancing Mamas, Weight Loss for Belly Dancers, Gothic Belly Dance, Men of Middle Eastern Dance, Northeast Tribal, New York Belly Dance, Belly Dance Electronica, Tribal Belly Dance Threads NYC, Holistic Bellydance, Neo-Fusion Belly Dance, Gothic Bellydance Babes. Tribe.net brings the scattered dancers together by providing a forum that goes far beyond a discussion group; it creates communities.
So-called Middle Eastern belly dance in the US is predominantly practiced by white middle-class women (Karayanni 2004:160), while GBD provides a home for those who may be considered, or consider themselves to be, socially displaced and marginalized. Goths and punks who may not be welcomed by “regular” belly dancers feel at home among the GBD community they have formed for themselves. Again, Aflalo:

I never quite fit in. I had dark hair and dark eyes and ate different food, spoke French, and spent my weekends surrounded by my Moroccan family and their activities. I never felt like I belonged with the other kids at school and they reciprocated this. I grew up with more melancholy music and a not so good home life, all of this I feel led me towards the gothic subculture. (2006)

Having grown up feeling “Other” and consequently turning to Goth, a self-elected Other, Aflalo eventually found her way to belly dancing as a creative outlet and a way to express her identity. Extremely versatile and unburdened of a debt owed to ethnic dance, GBD answers the demand for a mode of expression that addresses the complexity of the postmodern woman’s (emotional) life.

Granted belly dancing is marginalized and Goth subculture even more so; Goth belly dancers are at the fringes of both scenes—a voluntary and self-elected location. This location gives rise to a strong camaraderie among Goth belly dancers, a support network that in its collective marginalization respects individuality and Otherness. Moreover, GBD negotiates oppositional and antagonistic elements, and is conceived to create an in-between identity in belly dance.

GBD also attracts some curious “ordinary” belly dancers who are drawn to Goth music, the dark, the occult, and the mysterious—and to unusual clothing. These belly dancers do not immerse themselves in Goth subculture; they merely live on its surface temporarily. Despite the fact that these dancers are not convincingly Goth, Goth belly dancers accept such outsiders as long as they treat the dance and the culture it embodies respectfully. On the “Gothic Belly Dance” forum at tribe.net, the Cincinnati-based cabaret and fusion dancer “Zahara” (also known as “Draconia” and a member of Cincinnati’s only Goth hula group, The Witches of Waikiki) shares her motivations as an outsider morbidly fascinated by GBD: “Like all dancing, it’s very personal and every dancer has her interpretation. For me, Gothic Bellydance is my way of dealing with the darker side of my personality and getting out all those emotions & feelings that everybody tells you to ignore or deny (anger, sorrow, loss, betrayal, etc.).” (“Zahara” 2006).

“Izmaragd,” a 33-year-old dancer from Indianapolis, explains that GBD allows her to live Goth temporarily without defining herself or committing herself fully to the subculture and its lifestyle:

I work at a biomedical company and we have to be upstanding members of the white-collar community. I love my job, but it’s nice to go home, take off the lab coat and slip into the black silk. When I dance, I relax and let my wings unfold and stretch out, then my hair comes down over my face and I can look out through the curls and into the souls of my audience. I think it’s that stark contrast between the day me and the night me that helps to fuel that inner conflict. (“Izmaragd” 2006)

Lastly, the dance draws in non-Goth dancers who like to try something new. Feeling inspired by Goth aesthetics and music, they perform on special or seasonal occasions and are labeled the “Halloween crowd” by regular Goth belly dancers (Asha 2005:14). These drop-ins seldom get deeply involved. Overall, it is more common for a Goth to do belly dancing than for a belly dancer to become a Goth.

Some Goth belly dancers are professionals or semi-professionals, performing either solo or as troupes of two to five dancers. More unusual is Melbourne’s Raqs Gothique, an organically evolving troupe, with both core and guest dancers presenting solos, duets, trios, and full troupe routines. These flexible group structures are rarely seen in traditional belly dance and
are most likely inspired by the group improvisations characteristic of tribal style belly dance group formations.8

Generally, neither soloists nor groups adopt Middle Eastern stage names. In traditional belly dance, however, Middle Eastern–sounding names such as Ayshe, Leilah, and Suheila are preferred as a way to self-Orientalize. Goth belly dancers exoticize themselves by choosing names relating to fairies and Celtic mythology (Tempest), ancient Egyptian tradition (Isis),9 or pure fantasy (Jeniviva). A few Goth belly dancers, such as Aflalo, keep their given names. An unusual choice was made by Egyptian-born Zanaya Yassin who took the stage name “Zan Asha”—choosing to de-Orientalize her name, a reverse of the self-exoticization process. Similar exoticizing marks GBD troupe names. Prominent examples are Weird Sisters (North Wales, England), Medusa Maidens (Portland, Maine, disbanded as of 2007), Mystic Hips (Louisville, Kentucky), Belly Dance Asylum (New York), the Daughters of Dionysus (New York, disbanded as of 2007), Martiya Possession (Washington, DC), and Desert Sin (Los Angeles, California).

Stage name choices in GBD and “regular belly dance” stem from a similar motivation: the infatuation with and romanticizing of the exotic—a fundamental aspect of Orientalism. However, that Goth belly dancers do not choose “Oriental” names also indicates a departure from their Orientalist model. The fact that their stage names conform to Goth identity underlines naming as one step in the process of decolonization.

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8. In 2007 the group also voiced plans to work with live musicians and to showcase a new student dance performance project based on the Goth fusion dance classes given by “Ma’isah.” The group’s 2008 calendar was impressively full and versatile, ranging from appearances at Melbourne’s Bizarre Music Festival to new choreographies presented in the Sugar Kitten Cabaret of Melbourne in support of Breast Cancer research, and a performance at Euchronia, the Steam Punk/Neo-Victorian New Years Eve ball held in Melbourne (Raqs Gothique 2008).

9. Indeed, some Goths experience an attraction to cultural elements relating to ancient Egypt (Kilpatrick 2004:22).
Appearance as Otherness

Makeup and Costuming

Karayanni remarks that, “In connection with colonialism and Middle Eastern dance in particular, makeup has always been an inexhaustible source of fascination [...] and is closely related to the perceptions of dance” (2004:xii). Through makeup, the dancer not only beautifies her face but also transforms herself by adding attributes of glamour, the Middle East, or Goth, the latter expressed through white foundation and black eye and lip makeup. A deep contrast between black and white with perhaps purple or deep red accents or ornamentation creates the undead and abject look desired by Goths, even as it embodies their preference for the Victorian aesthetic—pale skin as a sign of nobility. Paradoxically, the makeup underlines absence and blankness, masking the fact that Goth belly dancers feel joy in their dancing.

The widely adopted emblematic belly dance costume is the bedlah (Arabic for “suit,” a combination of bra and belt worn by belly dancers). Commonly accepted as the “traditional” garb, it is a product of Orientalist fantasy and reflects an invented or imaginary tradition that is taken even further by Goth belly dancers. The bedlah, originating in the late 19th century at a time when many Europeans and Americans made no distinction between different Middle Eastern and Asian ethnicities and customs, is a composite of Indian, Middle Eastern, Western, and Far Eastern costumes particularly inspired by the Indian choli (a midriff-baring top) and skirt, and popularized by Salomé dancers of the early 20th century. By the 1910s, all Eastern dancers performing in the West wore a version of the bedlah. Broadway and Hollywood made sure that the bedlah came to epitomize their generic Oriental woman.

Although there is a tendency to see the bedlah as an American imposition on the East, the costume also indicates a tendency to self-Orientalize, especially on the part of Egyptian dancers (see Nieuwkerk 1995:42–49). Their reinvented bedlahs offered Eastern women a way to preserve their dance as a cultural product even as they were complicit in the Westernization of the dance. Thus the “traditional” bedlah externally represents a colonial relationship (both gendered and sexualized). GBD costuming, on the other hand, redefines this relationship by departing from the bedlah in different ways.

In GBD, the costumes range across a variety of styles associated with different types of Goths but generally preserve the naked midriff characteristic of the bedlah. Although rooted in feminine display and Orientalism, the costume is transformed in color, materials, and accessories in Goth belly dance. Black, metal, lace, leather, skull beads, and long, spiky fingernails convey the dark aesthetic, female and supernatural powers, or danger. Tattoos, unusual hairdos and hair accessories (skull hair sticks, feathers, etc.), and piercing are common and parallel the tribal style belly dance aesthetic. 10

Instead of being barefoot or wearing dance shoes, the Goth belly dancer departs from Orientalist imagery and chooses high heels, combat boots, platform boots, and other footwear with lots of lacing. 11 Costuming depends on the particular style of Goth, which can range from Victorian to punk or even art nouveau, as long as it is identifiably Goth. Recently, corset belts

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10. The latter was taken to a new level by “Sashi,” a California-based dancer who had metallic wings pierced on her back for the Tribal Fest in Sebastopol, California, in May 2006. Her performance evoked major controversy, most of which is documented in the online magazine The Gilded Serpent, including a response by “Sashi” (see Grant 2006; Harper 2006; “Sashi” 2006).

11. In other forms of belly dance, footwear has varied over time and depending on venue. Most dancers from the 1960s to ’80s danced barefoot. But if dressed in a glamorous costume or performing in a nightclub, heeled shoes are common. However, one can also see flats, sandals, or dance slippers; or footwear in accord with folkloric and regional costumes.
and bras merge Victorian Goth style with the bedlah. This blending so heavily alters the bedlah that it is barely recognizable as “Middle Eastern.” Similarly, the baladi dress, a straight cut, ankle-length dress of Egyptian origin, has been adopted by some Goth belly dancers. Made of material that resembles a spider’s web, it conforms to the Goth dark aesthetics.

Renamed and exotically adorned, Goth and non-Goth belly dancers alike embody “the ambiguity of binary construction” (Karayanni 2004:167): self versus Other, East versus West, and fantasy versus reality. These oppositions are evident on several levels: in given name versus stage name, performing a dance in the US that originated in the East, and producing a creative space outside and in addition to everyday life. These binaries are also expressed in makeup and costuming. However, here the Goth belly dancer goes much further in the transformation of traditional belly dance.

The highly individualized makeup and costuming of GBD exhibit a postmodern pastiche of materials, designs, and colors, comprising a self-created Other that has significantly transformed the Oriental Other. Not only does GBD give belly dance a new name, it also gives it a new face. Although the main motivation for this transformation is to conform to Goth aesthetics, there are other underlying factors. Aflalo confirms that: “The costuming expresses the fact that they [Goth belly dancers] are not flaunting their femininity in a sexual way” (2006). This, however, does not imply an absence or lack of interest in femininity or eroticism. The Goth belly dancer is no longer an embodiment of an Orientalized (sexual) stereotype, nor a projection of Western male fantasy that in its most extreme form is represented by the harem girl. Rather, she is the embodiment of the dark-exotic Other and of her own fantasies, romanticizing the dark femininity that is inherent in Goth. Thus GBD appears as a nonstereotypical expression of femininity, while still being perceived as erotic by its Goth and non-Goth audiences, and by most of the dancers themselves, who strive for a contemporary, alternative, and at the same time “exotic” look.

Figure 6. Self-portrait of Acpril Schaile, 2008. (Photo by Acpril Schaile)
Dancing to Goth Rock and World Music

The emergence of Goth in the 1970s is closely linked to some of the new music that came out of punk. This repertoire encompasses a wide range of styles, with themes of suffering, death, vampirism, satanism, the occult, and other aspects of “darkness” (see Anderson 2005). Goth belly dancers use the whole repertoire of Goth rock, especially darkwave, ambient, neo-classical and apocalyptic folk, neo-folk, and industrial. Tempest (Schmidt) explains how the music correlates with costuming and movement to form the image the dancer wants to project:

Due to the wide spectrum of Goth music out there—there’s elegant, slow, swirly pieces, and there’s hard-core industrial/metal—[...] you can have both and be in the realm of Goth. When I’m in my big boots and vinyl, I’ll most likely be doing some pretty hard-hitting moves [...] Meanwhile when I’m pulling out Theda, I’m going soft, soft, soft! (Tempest 2006b)

Although Goth groups are favored—particularly Tourniquet, Dead Can Dance, and Siouxsie and the Banshees—GBD music also includes world music and electronica, fusions of Western music with Indian and Middle Eastern, or polyethnic blends with or without Middle Eastern influences. The different choices of music for GBD reveal that a combination of dark and mystical sounds is preferred, which is achieved through different techniques, such as the use of echoing reverberation as a metaphor for emptiness, slower tempos, and eerie or gloomy texture; and lyrically through themes of death, destruction, and darkness. Goth belly dancers also look for underlying rhythms emulating Middle Eastern or at least non-Western beats. Some of the repertoire has complex rhythms reminiscent of Middle Eastern music but is most likely influenced by progressive rock bands, whose odd meters and metrical changes were inspired by the avantgarde music of the late 20th century. The metal bands System of a Down and Tool, for instance, use 9/8 rhythms. Tool’s song “Schism” on their album Lateralus (2001) alternates the time signatures 5/8 and 7/8 in each measure, and in “Vicarious” and “Jambi” on the group’s 2006 CD 10,000 Days, 10/8 and 9/8 (and 6/8) rhythms alternate respectively. The metrically complex music of Solace is used by several Goth dance troupes for their darker tribal sounds and ethnic mixes.

As the GBD community is expanding, demand for its own specific music increases. The 2006 release Strange Flesh, an electronic collection of selected Goth inspired works by Blind Divine,
Collide, Solace, Maduro, and others, provides macabre funereal musical tones and tempos, lyrical references to the undead, deep voices, eerie vocals, a dark twisted form of androgyny—and, most important, danceable rhythms. Maduro, for example, describes his music as “an amalgamation of spacey Middle Eastern and South Asian drummings and progressions, crunched electronica, warped 8-bit game sounds, and darkwave arpeggios” (Maduro 2007).

Strange Flesh set the bar for a number of new releases in subsequent years by Solace, Maduro, and others, most of which are available through Eventide Music. The latest release of GBD music is the album Nour (October 2008) by Stefan Hertrich’s group Shiva in Exile. The CD presents an innovative mix of Goth, electro, and different ethnic elements, utilizing sounds of Near Eastern, African, and Native American instruments.

The musical repertoire is GBD’s furthest departure from Orientalism; Middle Eastern music no longer serves as a model to be quoted, individualized, or transformed. Stylistically the repertoire is rooted in Goth rock (as opposed to the Middle Eastern music used by “regular” belly dancers); rhythmically it is rooted in progressive rock; and in regard to timbre it draws upon world musics or emulates ethnic and electronic sounds. The process of decolonizing belly dance through music is one of the most transformative aspects of GBD as it affects the core of the dance form: movement needs to be adapted to conform not only to the Goth mood but also to its sound.

Adapting Belly Dance Movements to Goth Style

In her timely study on Goth club dancing, Tricia Henry Young remarks that “there is no specific name for the kind of dancing done at Goth clubs” (1999:81). She loosely describes Goth dance forms as danse macabre, flamboyant and theatrical—and always conveying torment and pain. Convulsive moves are common, but the styles of the movements can vary. However, the priority for Goth dancers is “showing off their clothes and exhibiting the requisite ‘Goth attitude’” (82) through movement. Following this, Goth belly dancers—both when improvising and when following set choreography—access the whole vocabulary of movements found in traditional forms of belly dance.

Despite its name, belly dance involves motion of the whole body, from head to toe. The dance has a horizontal and grounded dimension. Dictated by musical motives and rhythms, the complex movement vocabulary contains isolations and undulations, shimmies, circles, figure eights, and spirals, and thus forms a distinct vocabulary, rhythm, and fluidity. But GBD differs from other belly dance styles in regard to performance technique, presentation, and the accentuation of these movements. Although movements that belong to the “classical” belly dance repertoire are used,18 they are so strongly tilted towards dark aesthetics that the Middle Eastern connotation is blurred. Often the movements themselves are not fluid. Also, of course, costume and music impact the movement. A corset, a popular GBD costume piece, inhibits the free movement of the torso and abdomen. The realignment of the body leads to dancing with stiffer and heavier hip drops, very staccato chest movements, and the heavy use of exaggerated arms and shoulder movement. Thus, the corset leads to a sharp, angular quality in the dance, with the torso lifted up.

To accentuate sharp rhythms, Goth dancers sometimes borrow from breakdance poppers and lockers, using subtle stops and muscular ticks and locks to emphasize abrupt musical phrasing, occasionally combining these small, sharp movements with the smoother, snakelike elements of belly dance. Often softer movements such as torso undulations, vertical hip figures, and interior

18. Goth belly dancers feel that Turkish- and Egyptian-style belly dance captures the feeling of elegance, decadence, romance, and delicate intricacy inherent to Goth, while some hard-edged movements of tribal belly dance align more closely with the industrial and ritual side of the subculture.
hip circles (a three-dimensional movement that involves hip lifts and pelvic tucks and drops, which together create an elliptical circle that stays within the frame of the body) are broken up into percussive “micromovements” that disrupt the fluidity of the original movement and create more accentuated, and at times interrupted, effects. Further, GBD technique expresses itself in less fluid movement, extremely dramatic arms (Egyptian-style belly dance has rather still arms), and grandiose hand gestures. Occasionally, movements are added that have little to do with dancing. Goth belly dancers agree that stomping can serve as a means to express the side of Goth that aligns with industrial music (tribe.net 2007b), which is characterized by unorthodox percussive elements ranging from machine and metal sounds to distorted electronic drumbeats (Anderson 2005:171). They seek new movements particularly suited to their style and share them via YouTube (see for example www.youtube.com/group/gbdmoves). This forum gives dancers an opportunity to film themselves demonstrating their new moves, to name them, break them down, and explain their development.

With the creation of movement variations, Goth belly dancers are developing their own vocabulary. In her workshops Dancing Darkly: Introduction to Gothic Bellydance and Strange Presence, Tempest uses the name Infinity Axis to describe figure-eight movements, Into the Grave for a deep hip drop, and Zombie Bride for snake arms performed in front of the body. Inventing Goth terms for belly dance movements is especially inviting because belly dance lacks a universally accepted set of terms for its movements.

A number of DVDs provide instructional help for Goth belly dancers. In Bellydance for the Beautiful Freaks (2006), Tempest teaches steps and combinations, and gives guidance for style and costuming. She discusses footwear (the warm-up is done barefoot, the combinations performed in both platform heels and killer boots), slow combinations, and fast combinations, all broken down step-by-step.
Over the years the dissemination of movements and styles has come a long way. In its infancy GBD relied on sporadic workshops, but by 2008 regular classes in some areas of the US provide those in the scene with the opportunity to learn new styles of dance fusion and all other aspects surrounding them. The dancer Jennifer Espinet (Jeniviva), a pioneer and member of New York’s GBD scene, introduced a five-week course called Introduction to Gothic Bellydance, in which she fuses core elements and movements of American, Egyptian, and Turkish cabaret, tribal fusion, ritual, and theatrical dance forms into her own GBD vocabulary, which she calls “The Serpentine Method.” The course was complemented by several workshops that took place in fall 2008 and continued in spring 2009. These workshops, held at the Panetta Movement Center in Manhattan, address specific topics of GBD and are geared towards the advanced beginner or intermediate Goth belly dancer. Topics of the workshops are Poison Parasols (an introduction to parasol/umbrella dance), The Shroud (an introduction to veil and energy projection work), Belle-Raqs (a three-hour session on makeup and hair ornamental design for the Goth belly dancer—Jeniviva is a certified esthetician), Fan-Tabulous (an introduction to burlesque feather fans), and Raqs Assaya Gothique. The latter focuses on the use of a cane or staff in a choreography that incorporates various elements from belly dance to voodoo.

While most of these workshops counted up to 30 dancers, Raqs Assaya brought together a very small group of women on a Sunday before Christmas (perhaps the reason for the low attendance). Two of the women were Goth (one of them even displayed some nice fangs, augmented by vampire-looking makeup), and a third was not Goth. During the two-hour

19. In the fall of 2006, Tempest (Schmidt) organized a six-week coast-to-coast Durga Tour bringing Goth, sacred, and experimental belly dance to 26 locations from Sacramento to Boston and from Ocean City to Palmdale. In 2007, the shorter Movin’Th’Mischief Tour brought GBD to six states (Tempest 2007).
workshop Jeniviva taught choreography to “Filii Neidhardi” from the 1998 album *Viator* by the German band Corvus Corax. The piece emulates the sound of medieval music by using bagpipes as a solo instrument, then sometimes brings in other period instruments. In contrast, most of her choreography was inspired by imagery ranging from the Amazons to voodoo, and incorporated a pastiche of elements from burlesque to so-called cabaret belly dance. Jeniviva added a ritualistic expression to the movement by using a stick to double as a mallet, with the floor serving as a drum, thus structuring the complex rhythm played by the bagpipes. Her approach to the movement was relatively free (and so was the prelude to the choreographed part in which each dancer improvised her own entrance and displayed her individual mood), with only occasional references to traditional belly dance moves such as torso undulations and hip drops. This freedom of expression is indicative of GBD’s prioritizing pastiche over monolithic presentation, and self-expression over movement.

Indeed, at the heart of GBD is the dancer’s ability to express deep emotions through movement in a dramatic and individualistic style. There is an appreciation of the “anti-smile,” though never to the extent of the totally blank expression commonly seen on most Goth faces. The dancers describe GBD as more sincere with a freedom of expression that, in their view, belly dance lacks. Collective individuality is key to this idiosyncratic form of feminine (if not feminist) self-expression.

Dramatic and theatrical effects in performance are achieved through the use of fog machines and other stage illusions that are not used in belly dance as performed in the West. Props include albino snakes, cloaks and daggers, knives, Mulan fans such as those used in martial arts, masks, and sticks with skulls. But there are also more conventional belly dance props such as veils and wings of Isis (a permanently pleated two-part cape first used in the US by Las Vegas showgirls). Some props established in American belly dance receive a Goth twist. For example, Tempest in her choreography *Shadow of Memory* (presented at Shadowdance on 10 November 2006, Oakland Metro Doors) used an adapted form of these Las Vegas wings. Black instead of gold lamé tissue or iridescent organza in pastel colors, her wings had fringed edges instead of pleats. Thus the wings departed from their common association with the Egyptian goddess Isis and instead evoked the raven, which in Goth is a symbol of the undead.

The veil is adapted in a similar fashion. In a performance on 10 June 2006 at the annual Goth Fly A Kite event in Maine, the Medusa Maidens (the group disbanded in 2007) fused Victorian

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21. The raven is often discussed in conjunction with Edgar Allan Poe’s poem by the same name, which is well-known among Goths.
elements with belly dance by using black veils, black fishnet stockings with garters, parasols, black lacy blouses, and skirts embellished with coins, while keeping their midriffs bare.

If the veil in belly dance is a Western addition that serves as a “marker of cultural alterity, veiling a dancer’s Western identity with a fantasy of Otherness” (Dox 2006:61), in GBD the veil is associated with a place darker than the belly dancer’s harem fantasy. Both the Western belly dancer and the Goth belly dancer exoticize the veil, but while the former idealizes the veil and thus inaccurately associates it with the “Orient,” the latter uses it as symbol for whatever “Otherness” she is dramatizing in her Goth performance—another rejection of authenticity and origin indicative of decolonization, and an ironic twist on the veil and its use in conventional belly dance forms.

Many Goth belly dance performances are connected to pagan rituals, including spells for “grounding” and prosperity, and the Beltane ritual (an old Celtic fire ritual that celebrates the end of winter and the beginning of spring). The creation of a ritual is often approached as an internal process by the Goth belly dancer. Here, the use of the four elements (earth, air, fire, water) or the four axes (North, South, East, West) serve as a framework for the dance.

If in belly dance Middle Eastern movements and appearance are exoticized and romanticized, in GBD these movements are distorted—by dancers who are not concerned with the Orient as Other. As Goths, they are primarily concerned with cultivating their own glamorous and dark Otherness. Belly dance generally conveys soft forms and shapes, and other conventional feminine qualities such as grace and gentleness, but GBD movements can be edgy and sharp; belly dance, although improvised, follows a set sequence of different dance types (i.e., an entrance number with a veil and a drum solo), while GBD draws upon different, mostly non-“Oriental” imagery and internal states to initiate movement sequences. Thus, GBD uses belly dance as a point of departure towards an individualistic self-expression that leaves the “Orient” far behind.

Locating Goth Belly Dance

GBD rarely occurs in Middle Eastern nightclubs, once the predominant locale for belly dancers. The nightclub scene in the US began to wane in the 1980s (see Rasmussen 2005:195), replaced by a variety of newer performance environments. Today, belly dancers perform in cafés and restaurants with Turkish, Greek, or Arabic cuisine; during medieval festivals and Renaissance fairs; or in dance schools and auditoriums where the dance is often showcased as an art form. Goth belly dancers consciously segregate themselves from this scene. As they prefer staged

performances over dancing among audiences in nightclubs or restaurants, Goth belly dancers choose theatres, art galleries, Goth clubs, and Goth events such as vampire balls, the Convergence (an annual Goth-Industrial convention and music festival), the annual Burning Man event in the Nevada desert, and Renaissance and fantasy fairs as their venues. Because the Goth and Bondage-Discipline-SadoMasochism (BDSM) scenes in some American cities overlap, Goth belly dancers also perform at events that both subcultures share (see tribe.net 2007a).

A rather unusual performance space was the Synod Hall of St. John the Divine in New York, a building in the 13th-century High Gothic style of northern France, where the experimental belly dance event Tempting the Fates took place in July 2006. Pagan rituals and GBD challenged and transgressed this sacred space. However, organizer Laura Liguri (Naraya), a belly dancer formerly located in New York and now the artistic director of Vadalna Tribal Dance Company in Boston, confirms that the church was open-minded if not directly supportive of this and other innovative arts: “I was never able to really answer just how such pagan influenced events seemed to flourish there, but they did. There was some sort of unspoken, mutual understanding and respect that went farther than just skin deep. It was truly inspirational” (2008).

The places and events where GBD is performed differ widely. There are events organized by and for Goths where GBD is an integral part of the “ceremony” or program. This has been the case for years in New York. Supported by the creator of New York's vamp club scene, Sebastian Todd (“Father Sebastiaan” of Endless Night Productions), Goth belly dancers frequently perform at various Goth gatherings such as Long Black Veil, the Vampyre Ball, the Black Abbey, the Necromantic Blood Moon Masquerade Ball, and the Endless Night Festival. These happen at New York nightclubs such as the Bank (now Element), the Knitting Factory, and Mother, and formerly at the Limelight (once an Episcopal church, also known as Avalon, which closed down in 2005). Events outside New York tailored for GBD include the 2007 Shimmy in the Shadows at the Regent Underground Theatre in Arlington, Massachusetts, featuring a workshop and party with open-floor dancing and performances with many local as well as out-of-town performers. A similar event held in the same place in 2008 was called Raqs Spooki.

“Gothlas,” blending linguistically and culturally the Arabic party (hafla) with Goth elements, often take place in conjunction with workshops such as the Conjuring, a national festival that took place in February 2008 in Fullerton, California. For two days the scene gathered for workshops, performances, and a GBD market.

GBD also enjoys its own club-dancing scene, such as New York’s monthly Opium Party: A Night of Dance, Decadence, and Unearthly Delights, conceived by Jeniviva in mid-2008. These events are predominantly attended by the Goth and GBD communities, while the “Halloween crowd” comes just for opening nights. The event Opium Party was preceded by Shadows of the Harem in March 2006 at the Remote Lounge bar, a smoky venue that continues to be transformed several times a month into a Goth club. The name “Shadows of the Harem” conveys the essence of Goth belly dance: dark contemporary femininity. By referring to the dark side of the harem, the organizers of Shadows of the Harem challenge the feminine ideal promoted by Western belly dancers. The dichotomy of an anti-colonialist dynamic (shadows of) versus a colonial domination (harem) operates via the name of this and other events: Haunted Hafla, Horror Hafla, Black Desert, and Raqs Spooki. Combining Arabic terms with Goth concepts

23. St. John the Divine is known for its Animal Blessing and the annual Halloween Extravaganza with the Procession of the Ghouls. The church also has an artist-in-residence program with performances celebrating the divine feminine in the church or in the crypt itself; concerts are given in the church on solstice and equinox, sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation and a new age organization called the Lindisfarne Institute.

24. A similar merging of two different concepts is Punk Raqs of June 2006, an all-punk, Goth, industrial, and alternative event inspired by belly dance in Redlands, California.
introduces a new perspective on the Middle East. Although these concepts conform to the Orientalist’s dark, mysterious void as discussed by Said, they at the same time offer a twist that would be ironic if GBD did not intend otherwise.

A number of events particularly reach out to anybody interested in Goth and experimental forms of belly dance, and they are mostly organized around Halloween, when non-Goths are more receptive to Goth outfits and spectacles. Zan Asha, a dancer and organizer of contemporary and fusion belly dance events, organized VictOrient: Tales of the Macaberet—Wyrd, Wylde, and Wycked in conjunction with Halloween, held on 20 October 2006. The event was advertised as a “dark belly dance” and “circus” displaying peculiar, strange feats and freakishness.

Since 2006 the Belly Horror Show, a “spooky belly dance variety show,” has been held annually in Washington, DC. The organizers, a group of tribal fusion belly dancers residing in the area, invite spooky, macabre, and horror or B-movie monster–themed performances to delight, frighten, and amaze. The one prerequisite is that performances are rooted in traditional or fusion belly dance.

Even though Goth belly dancers are almost exclusively women, the audiences at most venues include plenty of men and also a mix of Goths and non-Goths. Often people travel long distances to attend such events since they are infrequent and found mostly in urban areas.

When in the 1990s belly dancers had to branch out to different venues because of the decline of the Middle Eastern nightclub scene in the US, they initiated a process that has been taken even further by the Goth belly dancer: the removal of (Goth) belly dance from the Arabic-style nightclub entertainment that it was once rooted in. In this context, de-Orientalization affects all belly dance communities. However, while “regular” belly dancers try to maintain a bond with their former performance venues by continuing to seek out opportunities as restaurant enter-

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25. Other events include Belly Boooo in Syracuse, New York, the “chilling performances” at Wake the Dead, a party supported by the radio station KTHX that took place on the roof of the Nevada Museum of Art in Reno (both 2006), and the release party of the DVD Gothic Bellydance II—Revelations in New York (2007).
tainers or by celebrating belly dance as a Middle Eastern art form even in venues without any “Oriental” flair, GBD distances itself from any Middle Eastern context, working instead to create new performance possibilities and finding new venues. The move of GBD to different venues segregates it both physically and contextually from the belly dance scene, thus showing not merely a departure but a break with any Orientalist context.

**Receiving Goth Belly Dance—Or Not**

GBD brings out strong reactions from tradition-oriented belly dancers, who find the new style scandalous and vulgar. Believing that they represent authentic Middle Eastern culture, belly dancers express their disapproval of what they see as a distorted version of the “real” dance form. Disputes over authenticity and artistry abound; ethnic puritanism clashes with creative interpretation (MED-Dance List 2006).

When Tempest announced her Gothic Belly Dance website on the well-established and widely distributed MED (Mediterranean)-Dance list, reactions were far from kind: “Puh-leez!” shrieked one writer (the Goth belly dancers call those critics the “ethnic police”). But none of the protesters took the time to describe what exactly disturbed them—and they all requested that I omit their names and responses from this article.

Stella Grey, a belly dance instructor and former host of the website Belly Dance NY (http://www.bellydanceny.com/) commented on the stills from the then just published Gothic Bellydance DVD (*Gothic Bellydance* 2006) that she “was feeling a little better until [she] saw this webpage” (Grey 2006). The inherent irony of GBD often transfers to its critics. Thus Egyptian-style belly dancer Renée Fleysher (“Ranya”), during a personal conversation with me in October 2008, discussed a planned spoof GBD performance on the occasion of Halloween using little stuffed toy cats as hair ornaments, sarcastically remarking that anything can be Goth and “who would care anyway?” However, many of GBD’s critics avoid making public statements, expressing their disapproval through their lack of support for their Goth counterparts. Rebecca Firestone’s review of the three GBD DVDs, titled “Welcome to the Gothla! Dancing Along the Sulk Road” and published in the online magazine *The Gilded Serpent*, is one of the few public criticisms of GBD—despite her attempt to appear objective. After trying to reduce Goth to a fascination with eroticism and death, and drawing parallels to angst and sexual freedom in Weimar Germany and the Indian Tantrists to prove that this combination is not novel and that GBD is “old wine in new bottles [...] beautifully designed [...], with an elegant label in a dark-looking font,” Firestone gets personal in regard to the dance technique of selected Goth belly dancers. On Schmidt she remarks:

When Tempest first started getting her name out there, in a way that many people felt was premature, her dance technique was the elephant in the living room at some of the South Bay MECDA [Middle Eastern Culture and Dance Association] shows. It was awful. Gotta say that, sister. I didn’t see the MECDA show, but I saw Tempest perform on several other occasions and the smoothness, the solidity, the core strength: it just wasn’t happening. So maybe this is all just sour grapes, but it seems to me that to succeed today as a bellydancer, all you need to do is design a nice web site for yourself, get yourself on YouTube, get on tribe, get a credit in a self-produced movie, learn how to write a good grant proposal, and write yourself up in Wikipedia. Tempest describes herself as the “GothMutha of belly-dance.” Isn’t she a little young to be giving herself such grandiose titles? (2008)

26. The reception is reminiscent of when belly dance was introduced into the US in the early 20th century. Some audiences were shocked, and there was even a lawsuit filed to prohibit public performances of the dance (see Monty 1986:101–24).
And even Aflalo, who has received professional ballet training at the Royal Academy of Dance in London and is internationally renowned for her technique, receives a poor reception from Firestone:

I think Tempest should do the voice-over and then have someone like Ariellah do the demonstration. Of course, maybe Ariellah could have someone like Tempest create choreographies for her so she can go beyond improvising the same tricks to different music. (2008)

Firestone criticizes not only the GBD dance technique; she mentions underdeveloped choreographies, awkward stage presence, and self-promotional attitudes of other Goth belly dancers as well.

In reading these reactions, it is important to consider that many American belly dancers view the GBD scene from a great and mediated distance. Most have only seen Goth belly dance on the internet and on DVDs, if in fact they have seen it at all. The disputes also reveal that the definition of belly dance is a relative matter depending on location, age, and social status. There is no consensus because the traditions are fluid and shifting, with “authenticity” being a matter of perspective. Belly dance and its meanings in Western society have evolved and continue to do so (see Shay and Sellers-Young 2005), making a single definition impossible.

But if more traditional belly dancers reject GBD, those from other alternative scenes, especially Goths, metalheads, and pagans, greet GBD with open arms. An important factor contributing to this exuberance is that Goths and their allies are interested in a less conventionally sexualized yet erotic look. Now that belly dance has become an established subculture, it also has become more commercial, catering to audiences who know what to expect. But GBD is not yet on the commercial dance map. As a group still trying to find itself, it falls into the neo-tribe category.

Figure 12. Maiiah with her snake Maharet at Shadows of the Harem, Remote Lounge in New York City, 30 April 2006. (Photo by Pryor Dodge)

27. During the past four years, tribal fusion and theatrical belly dancing have been positively featured twice in Gothic Beauty (2005/06:23; 2008/09:25–26), America’s largest magazine on Goth fashion, music, art, and entertainment.

28. A neo-tribe, different from a traditional tribe, is an unstable, self-defined community marked by fluidity and dispersal. It is affective rather than “given,” elective, responsive, effectual, and diverse (see Maffesoli 1996:72–100).
Re-Orienting the Orient

In her study “Dancing Around Orientalism,” Donnalee Dox concludes that although belly dance was born as an Orientalist form of dance, combining diverse movements that looked exotic to Westerners, by the late 20th century it had become thoroughly Western, reordering Orientalist attitudes (2006:66). As belly dance has partly lost its identification as exotic and Other, and its popularity has diminished in American society, so GBD has taken its place as the location of nonconformity, taboo-breaking, and the auto-exoticism once associated with belly dance—but still without drawing as extensively on “Oriental” imagery.

Instead, GBD demonstrates a complex interplay of challenging and reinforcing stereotypes associated with belly dance. GBD redirects identities by challenging existing aesthetics and providing a highly subjective experience for the participants. For the Goth belly dancer, the dance is self-expression, not cultural association. Colonial or Western fantasy through mimicry is replaced by dark fantasy, and the Orient is replaced by the Goth aesthetics of difference and nonconformity. The Goth Other takes over the Oriental Other, while maintaining selected recognizable aspects of belly dance.

GBD and “regular” belly dance relate to Orientalism in entirely different ways. Belly dance restructures Orientalism while keeping it as a core element. The Goth adaptation of this popular practice represents a departure from Orientalism through the distortion of belly dance aesthetics and an orientation towards the East. The Goth subversion into belly dance and vice versa shows how GBD as the embodiment of the feminine and the sensual in the late 20th century transforms borders to the extent that Orientalism is a mere historical remnant. This disassociation from the Orient—we may call this cultural decolonization—is not as much a conscious decision as a genuine development. Goth belly dancers are aware that they learn or perform a dance form that is associated with the Middle East. At the same time they know that the transformation of belly dance through Goth departs from the more traditional dance styles and introduces new concepts of “authenticity.” Thus, following the theory of Savigliano (1995:9), GBD is the corporeal expression of decolonization.

A cultural product of postcolonialism, GBD is a cultural hybrid—or as Homi Bhabha calls it, “the Third Space,” which enables new positions to emerge. As Bhaba states: “The process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation” (1990:211).

The process of decolonization in belly dance confirms that cultural decolonization does not necessarily imply going back to the origins or an “authentic” state. In GBD, the dance’s cultural affiliation with the Middle East is not completely dissolved but instead modulated into an embodiment of a sensuality/sexuality that relates to Goth’s dark aesthetics. Thus Goth belly dance repositions the Western appropriation of Middle Eastern dance forms from an idealized “exotic” cultural tradition towards a subcultural and no longer ethnic-colonial Otherness.

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