

shaking bellies: dance and femininity

I am a Swiss social anthropologist who recently studied documentary photography at the Salt Institute of Documentary Studies in Portland, Maine. My assignment was to photograph the culture and identities of working-class women as represented in their practice of belly dancing. Since I am Swiss and not of the working class, the assignment forced me to cross both cultural and class lines. I am also accustomed to life in a modern European city, so studying an isolated town on the east coast of America was entirely new to me.

I found Portland to be lovely and charming. According to a guidebook which I read before arriving, the people are suspicious of strangers at first, but as time goes by they take people to heart. That was my experience in the fall and winter of 2002, and that is also what my essay is about. Luckily I did not have to bridge gender lines as well. As a woman, I found it easy to relate to the women I photographed, especially their ideas about women's bodies and femininity. I learned about these interesting issues as I improved my English, which made us both students of each others' cultures. I accompanied this group of belly-dancers for four months. Once a week I visited their advanced class to photograph their practice and performances.

One reason for joining the dance class is to get together and have fun. One woman told me that she most liked socializing at the dance class in an atmosphere free of competition. "Women can be very catty, critical, and competitive," she said. The class is an envi-

ronment where it is safe to celebrate being a woman. Another reason belly dancing is popular is that the women find a new social universe in the world of dance. They escape the routines of working-class life, where their jobs are often boring, repetitive, and rather oppressive. In this context, dancing is liberating. Women are in a comfortable space and feel they can be themselves.

There is no general belly dancing identity. Every dancer moves in a different way with her own style. Each woman expresses her personality and character through belly dancing; some are more serious, others more adventurous or open-minded. Through their participation in the group, they can escape into the mysterious world of the Orient. With clothing (costume, hip scarf, and veil) and makeup, they transform themselves into Oriental beauties for a moment. The female body is at the center of belly dancing. It is, indeed, the center of attraction. Being attractive is a big part of the women's identity, and belly dancing has a lot to do with taking time for oneself, taking care of oneself, and living as a woman.

Salome Weber lives in Zurich and works in an agency where she is responsible for selecting political news pictures from all over the world, especially the Mideast and Asia. The photos appear courtesy of the Salt Institute for Documentary Studies, Portland, ME.



The belly, the middle of the body, gives this dance form its popular name: the Belly Dance, also known as the Oriental Dance.



Jessica in front of her old-fashioned car, dressed up as Pink Gypsy for Halloween. The belly dancer, graceful and lovely, is dressed as an Oriental beauty.



Six women with different facial expressions and emotions. Together they form a sculpture. They have fun and move spontaneously. They go into each other's space to fill a hole. Their hands build connections.



Three belly dancers move their arms like snakes. Through their graceful movements, they communicate with each other. It is nonverbal communication, expressed by the dance.



The hips are wrapped in a scarf, characteristic of this dance. The coins make the familiar rhythmic jingling, which you hear with every movement the dancers make.



The women stretch before starting to dance.



Jessica shows me her favorite costumes.



Jessica prepares herself for a dance.



During the dance class, Jessica and Heather take a break. They watch how the other women dance. Heather is the gypsy dancer, earthy with big skirts and earrings. Jessica is more the cabaret dancer, with graceful and elegant movements.



Jessica and Heather have learned a lot from each other, especially how to move their bodies and how to gain confidence. Together they express their passion for and pleasure in belly dancing.