Beyond the Glitter: Belly Dance and Neoliberal Gentrification in Istanbul

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Contemporary Turkish belly dance underscores real and imagined connections to an Ottoman past within overlapping Islamist and secular neoliberal projects and identities forged around female modesty, heritage tourism, and urban restructuring in post-1980s Istanbul. In this article, I use belly dance praxis as a critical lens to explore the complex ways in which gendered cultural worlds and urban economies actively intersect across multiple contemporary Istanbul venues. In a series of urban settings, I illustrate a rich array of distinctions along shifting lines of class and practices of female modesty to emphasize the wide range of Islamic and secular subject positions in the market-driven gentrification of Istanbul. While these ethnographic scenes reveal moral and economic possibilities as well as limitations for varied social actors, they also underline attendant tensions around urban public face and performance, profit and propriety, economy and etiquette.

Scene 1: Bach A L’Orientale

In a two-piece fitted dark suit, I am dressed to match a rare formal occasion in Istanbul: a classical music concert featuring belly dance. The spacious and austere foyer of the renowned Lutfi Kırdar Convention Center is far from welcoming. Concertgoers, clothed in cashmere and fur but nevertheless giving no impression of warmth, glide unhurriedly on impeccable marble floors, greeting guests amid Grecian columns and departing as if in step with a Bach gavotte.

I choose one of the 12 doors to enter the techno-smart concert hall on the ground floor. Surrounded by the maple proscenium and oak walls, the maroon velvet theater seats shine under bright spotlights like rare ruby gems. In this vast and pretentious space, Asena, a hypervisible Turkish belly dancer of the new millennium, takes the stage to perform two of her own choreographies for the premiere of Bach A L’Orientale. She rapidly alternates between the ballet lexicon (pirouettes, attitudes, arabesques) and belly dance vocabulary to match the energetic percussion and soaring wind instruments of the musical accompaniment. The dancer skillfully layers chest and hip isolations with torso and arm undulations in a polyrhythmic style that characterizes...
belly dance. Asena’s sweat-ridden staccato movements are a counterpoint to Anjelika Akbar’s serene and virtuosic piano playing.

After the final piece, the female spectators, adorned in sequined jeans and vintage jewelry, accompanied by men in tuxedos or casual chic outfits, all rise to their feet in appreciation of the unlikely meeting of different worlds: elite and popular culture, East and West, refinement and its lack. Standing next to her mentor Akbar, Asena smiles both demurely and proudly as she bows and poses for the television cameras. Her anxiety is palpable as she tightly presses the fresh white lily bouquet to the understated elegance of her designer costume. Equally palpable is the tacit question: “Has she finally made it?” The applause of the concertgoing elite expresses acceptance and offers welcome relief from the salacious press coverage of her illicit affair with an arabesk music mogul.

This scene, unimaginable a decade ago, illuminates some of the key linkages in the revitalization of belly dance in Istanbul. These linkages can be found not only between the increasing standardization of dance movement and a changing urban geography but also in the sanitizing elevation of a form of popular entertainment to an art form embedded in worldwide cultural and economic circuits that articulate with the shifting local moral economy in allegations against Asena’s sexual honor.7

Emergent dance scholarship has helped construe dance as a form of corporeal knowledge, keeping pace with or cueing almost every power-saturated urban and cultural beat.8 This opening vignette elucidates the connected choreographies of recent urban and cultural gentrification in Istanbul, both equally attuned to and indeed refashioned by the post-1980s Turkish free–market modernity. On the ground, we encounter the paradox of a newly chic yet often disparaged dance form in an increasingly restructured and economically segregated Istanbul, the cultural capital of Turkey as it seeks inclusion in the European Union. In what follows, I draw on the changing fortunes of a particular dance form and its practitioners to explore the specificities of neoliberal gentrification in and beyond Istanbul, with a particular focus on gender relations and on the specifically Turkish form of modern Islamism.

Belly dance, historically a morally and economically suspect profession, has entered local elite social space through the heightened recycling of Ottoman goods, buildings, discourses, and performance practices for tourist and local consumption. This recycling project is neo-Ottomania, a classed and gendered self-Orientalism particular to the post-1980s Turkish free–market modernity.9 As such, it signals a shared symbolic economy that inextricably connects bodily endeavors, gentrification, and tourism. Although scholars have addressed its ubiquity, none has yet adequately theorized neo-Ottomania’s particularity, its discursive and material cross-fertilization across Islamist and secular circles as these draw from the same discursive pool to concretize their alternate moral agendas in the landscape of Istanbul.10 Alternatively, this comparative ethnography of belly dance and the new Islamic veiling practices indexes how the domains of symbolic (neo-Ottomania) and political economy (neoliberalism) overlap in multiple and contradictory ways in the context of contemporary Turkey, in which Islam and modernity are conjoined rather than opposed. To reengage fully the materiality of neo-Ottomania in Istanbul,
I link the recent upgrading of belly dancing as a historic performance praxis to the larger urban projects of preservation and gentrification. Bridging cultural and political-economic analyses through an embodied lens, this study has larger methodological and theoretical implications for urban anthropological research.

My analysis pursues a number of convergent lines of argument: I extend the concept of gentrification to cultural practices, specifically performance, by articulating the connections between the upgrading of Istanbul and the upgrading of the new markers of taste via Bourdieu’s (1984:172) theory of distinction. I draw on Bourdieu’s configuration of classed and sedimented corporeal knowledge to emphasize the central role that embodied practice plays in generating and maintaining sociospatial distinctions. Ara Wilson’s concept of “intimate economies” (2004:9, 11) also provides a framework inclusive not only of class but of all other identity configurations—gender, sexuality, and religion—which both underwrite and emerge from the changing local market and nonmarket transactions in globalizing contexts. How does the inextricability of cultural (embodied) and economic capital, as differently formulated by Bourdieu and Wilson, articulate with Istanbul’s “strategic political geography” (Smith 1992:58) or the production of spatial entitlement across various scales? To what extent do such processes of spatial entitlement intersect with or override the prevailing local schemes of cultural purity and gendered supremacy? Specifically, how do the current Islamist and secularist renditions of female modesty weigh against material gain to delineate the contours of acceptable gendered and material public presence in changing Istanbul?

I thus call for a performance-centered and gendered theoretical intervention in analyses of gentrification in particular and urban ethnography in general. Recent political-economic analyses of gentrification—mostly in Western cities—focus on the local circuits of capital accumulation (Harvey 1985) or the interplay between global and local economic forces (Sassen 1991, 1998; Smith 2002), with some attention to the formation and exchange of cultural or symbolic capital (Logan and Molotch 1987; Zukin 1995). The very few studies on Istanbul’s gentrification convey a strict dichotomy between a cultural analysis (Bartu 2001) and a purely economic approach (Keyder 1999a, 1999b). This binary, in effect, demands either macrolevel analysis at the expense of the quotidian or political-economic analysis at the expense of a gendered one. Instead, by rendering both gendered data in particular and everyday performance praxis in general as indispensable ethnographic data, we can more fully capture how urban and cultural gentrification mutually constitute one another.

Here I draw from four years of participant-observation, formal and informal interviews, and shared movement across disparate field sites in Istanbul: a concert hall, a tourist restaurant, a local nightclub, a dance class, and a retail store. Located in the gentrified and historic districts of rapidly swelling and commercializing Istanbul, these sites all express the multiple shifting identities of belly dance in its commodified and noncommodified manifestations. They differ from one another in the practitioners’ socioeconomic variability, exposing the lived asymmetries of
gentrification. My multisited research enables a partial yet nuanced account of Istanbul’s diffuse modernity as it finds tangible expression through professional and quotidian performances. The ethnographic vignettes I offer below position the sanitization of movement and standardization of space as essential to local gentrifying efforts.

In addition to being an interdisciplinary tool and a material way of knowing, performance, as an analytical lens, reconfigures bodily acts as both markers for, and makers of, sociospatial distinction forged by the macro- and microvariability of intention and reception at the performance moment and beyond (Johnson 2003). Hence, drawing on Sharon Zukin’s (1995) reformulation of Erving Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical metaphor, I use the distinction between frontstage and back-stage to historicize the motivations not only of dancers but also of municipal and national governments, promoters, managers, and families. This back-stage also involves using performance as a methodology. My engagement in a chic dance class, for instance, helped me to comprehend the kinetic preparation for the elite entertainment in scene 3. As a whole, these vignettes elucidate “the shape of space and time” at differing scales and the distinctive consequences of gentrification across class and status (Tsing 2000:341). As such, these narratives unfold as substantive manifestations of the heterogeneity of capitalism and of lived Islam in a changing Istanbul. Intimacy lies in the embodied details.

**Istanbul as a Tourist Destination**

Although the post-1980s tourism boom facilitated the return of belly dance in Istanbul, it also reflected the dramatic political and economic shifts in Turkey as a whole. Following the 1970s political turmoil, the military, always a strong force in Turkish politics, took over the regime in September 1980 for the third time, ironically, to “restore peace” nationwide (Ahmad 1993:184; see also Zürcher 1998:293). The climate changed drastically with the center-Right’s rise to power in 1983 headed by Turgut Özal. Özal, who was himself a self-made man, embodied the triumph of merit over connections, a much-romanticized neoliberal characteristic, and his economic policies helped engender new commercial sectors and novel definitions of upward mobility (Zürcher 1998:297). As an export-oriented market economy replaced import-substitution strategies, the IMF and the World Bank allocated new sources of international funding for Turkey (Zürcher 1998:316). The early-1980s home improvement fad was closely linked to intermittent privatization, a gradual withdrawal of state responsibility, and the commodification of culture. The goal of this economic restructuring was to increase Turkey’s chances for gaining E.U. membership. These economic shifts also led to Turkey’s mounting indebtedness and its reliance on foreign loans and investment as well as the economic crises of 1994 and 2001.

In Istanbul and in Turkey as a whole, the post-1980s growth of the service and finance sectors provided new possibilities for social mobility. In particular,
tourism became a prominent tool for economic development, as profits from this industry escalated from US$770 million in 1985 to US$3.6 billion by 1992. Both local government and entrepreneurs capitalized on Turkey’s Ottoman and Byzantine heritage and on its well-preserved Mediterranean and Aegean coastline to lure tourists to the country. The current Islamist government’s website proudly lists culinary culture, theater, natural wonders, archaeological sites, and Ottoman relics as unique pillars of Turkish tourism.

Turkey’s main attraction for Western tourists, however, is its unique position as a Middle Eastern country grounded in a long-standing project of modernization and Westernization. In the past quarter century, Turkey has gradually developed a democratic and modern Islam and pro-American politics (it was formerly the sole Middle Eastern member of NATO). The reinvigoration of Turkish Islam and the republican nationalist project are interrelated, as Hakan Yavuz (2003.ix) notes, in contingent and transformative ways. The unthreatening cross-fertilization of Islamic and secular modernity projects thus distinguished Turkey as the “good and safe Muslim” from her “bad Muslim” Arab sisters. Endowed with the correct race and ethnicity as a predominantly white nation, Turkey ultimately benefited from its status as the Middle East’s noble savage.

Istanbul took center stage in the national tourist makeover. Once a grand imperial city, it had lost status after Ankara’s rise to political and cultural power in the Republican era (1923–50). By the 1950s, Istanbul began to regain its popularity. Subsequently, however, increasing rural-to-urban migration and insufficient infrastructure undercut Istanbul’s haphazard industrial and residential growth. Nonetheless, the Özal government singled out this historically, geographically, and commercially equipped city as a laboratory for its urban reforms.

The urban redevelopment projects of the center-Right government in the early 1980s were multiply linked with the national tourism project. Specifically, the interim government hurriedly passed the pre-constitution Turizm Teşvik Yasası (Tourism Enticement Act) to transform “more than forty historical urban lands and gardens” into sites for investment (Ekinci 1994:34, 173). Both local government funding and international financial capital assisted Istanbul’s city mayor, Bedrettin Dalan, in transforming Ottoman imperial sites into tourist hotels: the Swiss Hotel (Dolmabahçe Palace Gardens), Conrad Hotel (Yıldız Palace Gardens), and Four Seasons Hotel (Sultanahmet Imperial Prison) (Ekinci 1994:75–76). Arguing that skyscrapers would sharpen Istanbul’s tourist appeal, Dalan’s global vision resulted in high-rise finance and service centers and shopping malls (Bali 2002:126; Robins and Aksoy 1995:226).

Over the course of the 1980s, with the entrance of a new class of young urban professionals, Istanbul attained, in Martin Stokes’s words, a “glittering theatrical” form (2002:328), driven by a burgeoning market ideology and an unprecedented consumer boom. Surrounded by skyscrapers, big business centers, and shopping malls, the forerunners of Turkish yuppiedom began consuming ethnic cuisines, cigars, wine, renowned foreign and local designer clothes, and
international arts and music festivals as effortlessly as they spoke on their cell phones (Bali 2002:145–175; Keyder 1999b:15). By the 1990s, with its extensive and costly urban restructuring, Istanbul had emerged as Turkey’s preeminent metropolis and tourist destination. Indeed, the world-class convention hall I describe in the opening vignette embodies Istanbul’s future aspirations as a global cultural and commercial center. On the ground, the modern visual aesthetics cultivate the look of a modern global city conjoined with the features of a specifically Turkish place in which Ottoman quarters and buildings have been salvaged, renovated, and made highly marketable.

Following its 1994 victory in municipal elections, the Islamist Welfare Party continued the reification of Istanbul’s Ottoman heritage to valorize Istanbul’s religious legacy as an Islamic capital (Bartu 2001:141). By foregrounding inclusion of the urban poor in the cityscape, the Islamists also invoked the Ottoman model of tolerance and pluralism in their attempt to implement a softer urban neoliberalism. This “Just and Fair City” model, however, implemented restrictions on the use of public space: for example, on many streets in the Beyoğlu municipality, outdoor cafés and restaurants serving alcohol were ordered to move inside.

Zeynep Çelik (1994:85), an architecture historian, identifies shared paradoxical trends in the larger urban projects: both Islamist and secular municipalities have undertaken concurrent projects of demolition, displacement, and historic preservation. Specifically, Beyoğlu municipality legitimized the displacement of non-Muslim minorities as well as Muslim, impoverished, and mostly informal entertainment workers in Tarlabası through a “cleanup” agenda (Çelik 1994:84). Conversely, architect Çelik Gülseroy’s semiprivate revitalization project on Soğukçeşme Street helped the local government in preserving and refashioning the “dilapidated and modest Ottoman houses” located around the imperial Topkapı Palace in the Old City (Çelik 1994:89). This neo-Ottomanist project played on familiar 19th-century Orientalist fantasies: the architectural style faithfully reflects European travelogues at the turn of the 20th century, and the opulent interior decor evokes a timeless Ottoman glamour.

Over the course of the last two decades, neo-Ottomania found expression not only in the local and global circulation of material objects (e.g., prominent industrialist Sakıp Sabancı’s world-acclaimed Calligraphy Collection), urban spaces (historical preservation and gentrification), and discourses (the Islamist Justice and Development Party’s pluralist and tolerant urban capitalism) but also in urban entertainment. In particular, glitzy belly dance shows were indispensable to the promotion of an Ottoman palace spectacle for enthusiastic tourist audiences (see Figure 1).

Restaurants and nightclubs, featuring “Sultan’s Night” shows, proliferated in downtown Taksim and the Old City, where the remnants of the Byzantine Empire coexist with real or imagined Ottoman imperial landmarks. Many travel agencies catered Ottoman theme parties suffused with a familiar Orientalist fantasy, authenticated by “tantalizing and sensual” allegorical dances. Eager tourists could now
Figure 1
The promotional flyer for Sultanas, a small-scale tourist venue, conjures up Ottoman sensuality and opulence. (Courtesy of Sultana’s 1001 Night Shows)
don bejeweled traditional costumes and gleefully roam, or perhaps even shimmy, in period decor.

Scene 2: Sanitized Exoticism at a Tourist Restaurant

I engage in small talk with the burly middle-aged doorman of the Gar Restaurant located adjacent to the Old City and underneath a busy overpass. The lights of the belly dancers’ publicity posters at the otherwise unassuming entrance illuminate the doorman’s tired expression. After passing through the sparsely decorated square foyer, I enter the charmless main dining hall. The earth-toned walls are decorated with small barred windows from which artificial flowers droop lifelessly, and the air is filled with the scent of grilled meat.

Gar Restaurant is a vast, symmetrical, and orderly space. Mostly catering to an international clientele, it clearly shows the repercussions of the war in Iraq, hosting a crowd of 50 in a room designed for 300. The few French and German patrons, under the watchful eye of their Turkish tour guide, consume the folkloric dances as easily as they fork through the appetizers at the long white tables. The program, which includes three folk dances interspersed with three belly dances, condenses and fictionalizes Turkish vernacular entertainment spiced with the belly dancers’ sanitized eroticism—the dancers are elevated on a stage, allowing no opportunity for intimate audience tipping during the performance.35

Each tourist restaurant is an entertainment factory in which bodies are manufactured as an exotic Oriental extravaganza. This entertainment land testifies to what Jane Desmond labels “physical functionalism” (1999:xiii, xiv), an epistemological framework that privileges the live display of human bodies to secure the authenticity of a tourist encounter. Dance performance, in other words, is indispensable for a tourist experience to be complete and real. Here at Gar, a taste of Turkish nightlife in close contact with belly dancers and folk dancers both complements and authenticates all the sightseeing and souvenir shopping.

The last dancer, Nergis, acts as the repository of Orientalized, consumable Turkishness via her sanitized eroticism. Like Asena, she prefers choreography to improvisation. Her dance technique is enriched by hip drops layered with snaky undulations and an extraordinary variety of lateral and vertical shimmies.36 Despite the presence of a few fidgety audience members, most watch Nergis’s detached—no eye contact—and confident performance silently and attentively before offering loud applause. The dancer accepts this appreciation indifferently with an exhausted bow, a visible trace of a female entertainment worker’s social and economic marginalization (see Figure 2).

Nergis’s pay is both low and insecure, endangered by even one night’s absence. For financial security, she relies on “extras”—performances at elite weddings or corporate parties—in addition to gigs at exclusively male nightclubs. At the Gar Restaurant, she makes 30 million Turkish lira a night (US$17), although each customer pays US$50 to enter. This restaurant also has a 900-person auditorium that used to fill during Istanbul’s tourist season, between May and November, before the war in Iraq scared off the foreign visitors.

Nergis’s story registers the overlapping linkages between Istanbul’s tourism and entertainment industries through belly dance performances. The Turkish commodification of belly dance—whether for local or translocal consumption—could be viewed as a gesture to catch up with the au courant. Subsequent to belly dance’s endorsement by the West as an art form, these “harem” performances have
furthered Turkey’s fervent claims to cultural progress in its aspirations for E.U. membership. But then again, this process is not as smooth as one may expect.

In April 2002, the center-Left Turkish government banned belly dance performance at “Turkish Nights” for the non-Turkish clientele at southern holiday
resorts. Officials claimed that as a dance of Arabic origin, belly dance misrepresents Turkish identity to Western tourists (Alkan 2002). The ban’s secular nationalist tone, as in multiple other controversies over the dance form, evokes the constant struggle and deep contradiction between the past and present Orientalist and nationalist discourses: between the “dirty” yet essential revenue from the embodied Orientalism of belly dance shows and a Westernized self-image distinct from and superior to other, especially Arab, Orientals.

Islamists have forged an equally precarious dialogue with such Orientalist performativity. Eschewing dancers’ suggestive clothing and public mobility, the current Islamist government has excluded belly dance practice from Turkey’s marketable Ottoman and Anatolian heritage. Instead, the government’s official tourism webpage features folk dance, Hacivat and Karagöz puppetry, one-person Meddah shows, and minstrel and dervish narratives as “traditional” (i.e., honorable) Turkish cultural performance genres. Hence, the Orientalism of belly dance performances continues to be an open sore in ongoing moral and nationalistic Turkish modernization projects.

Nevertheless, the state and city governments, as well as foreign and local economic capital, still participate fervently in neo-Ottoman urban projects not only to preserve but also to restructure Istanbul. The inhabitants and makers of this not-yet-global city have efficiently deployed an urban strategy of gentrification. Following late-1970s suburbanization spurred by population density, environmental problems, and the construction of the Bosphorus Bridge, many affluent urbanites, inspired by nostalgia for old Istanbul, moved back downtown. Seeking refuge from what they envisioned as a lower-class invasion of migrants (Bali 2002:134–140), the nouveau riche settled in Pera, which had been the center of foreign affluence and Western civilization during the late Ottoman period. The secular elite’s recycling of the imperial past of Istanbul echoes William Bissell’s (2005) study of colonial nostalgia as constitutive of urban redevelopment in contemporary Zanzibar. Despite the historical differences between never-formally-colonized Turkey and formal British rule in Zanzibar, the privileged Istanbulites, along with the local neoliberal state, here as in Zanzibar, have engaged in idealizing Ottoman cultural cosmopolitanism, which has contributed to the urban displacement of the dispossessed (Bissell 2005:220–221, 228).

Having isolated themselves from lower-class “contamination,” young urban professionals then helped gentrify two historic neighborhoods: Ortaköy and Cihangir, both of which date to the start of the Ottoman period in Istanbul in the 15th century (Ergun 2004:394–396; Uzun 2001:102). Cihangir’s proximity to the redeveloping commercial and entertainment centers of Taksim and Beyoğlu and its unsurpassed view of the city attracted many artists and intellectuals who began renovating dilapidated historical buildings (Uzun 2001:108). With the arrival of real estate developers and young professionals, and thus of rising property values, Cihangir’s mixed-income and ethnic population was gradually displaced.
Residents who worked in Beyoğlu’s entertainment sector (nightclub and tavern workers) were the first to leave. But transvestites and transsexuals, also mostly sex industry workers, proved more resilient. Ethnographer Deniz Kandiyoti describes their forced departure in summer 1996:

When the UN Habitat II conference was hosted in Istanbul in the luxury hotels surrounding Taksim Square, stray dogs and transsexuals bore the brunt of the major “clean up” operation that preceded the event. . . . Recalling the event, Tülay describes a military-style operation, the police using fire ladders to break into flats through the windows, with triggers cocked; a first-floor flat was set on fire. [2002:287]

Along with the transsexuals and urban poor, belly dancers also frequently undergo urban criminalization. Despite growing public visibility and prestige for a few, most continue to be marked as fallen women. Gentrification in Istanbul maps a gendered process, one that strategically displaces not only economically marginal but also morally dubious bodies that, as Kandiyoti (2002:277, 290) argues, challenge hegemonic definitions of Turkish masculinity. Police violence acts as a last resort for “reinforcing social differences as spatial ones” (Smith 1992:68).

Some gentrifiers were purchasing distinction (Bourdieu 1984) as well as a new home to merge lifestyle with class. This refinement of taste worked in tandem with the redevelopment of Istanbul nightlife. Amid this diverse entertainment scene, young professional entrepreneurs strove to emulate New York upper-class sophistication by either opening or frequenting trendy new bars, nightclubs, and restaurants. In particular, the districts of Beyoğlu and Cihangir, with their abundance of upper-class taverns, were the initial loci of classy entertainment. Next, Etiler, a northern suburb close to the developing technology axis in Maslak, began to offer clubs and restaurants with impeccable service, fashionably casual dress codes, jazz-inflected music, and most important, a “safe” suburban space.

Belly dancers entered Istanbul’s upper-class entertainment scene as stars in the early 1990s, a time when the global fashionability of the dance form converged with local neo-Ottoman desires. As the demand for belly dancers increased, many trendy local venues featured Turkish pop or arabesk music and employed dancers dressed in two-piece “traditional” (neo-Orientalist) costumes. The number of belly dancers thus rocketed upward, while the variety of performance venues multiplied. Prior to the neoliberalization of Istanbul, belly dancers had limited resources in terms of job opportunities, public visibility, and access to international dance styles. Although the continued stigmatization of dancers continued into the 1990s, it coexisted with a desire for respectability through the adoption of less skimpy costumes and less suggestive dancing.

Scene 3: Gender and Class Conflicts Run Amok at a Local Club

As I enter an Istanbul oasis for upper-class entertainment, I am inundated by loud taped alaturka music. The air is thick with cigarette smoke wafting in counterpoint to spicy perfumes found in the “exotic” section at duty-free shops. Women flaunt their fit bodies in Versace or Armani miniskirts and scanty tops. One could easily mistake the
atmosphere as purely convivial, were it not for the frowns of fatigue on the waiters’ faces and their sweat-stained white shirts. The agitated rhythm of the waiters’ diligent movement contrasts with the rhythm of the crowd’s lighthearted amusement.

The female executives of a cosmetics company seem to shimmy harder than the belly dancer occupying the claustrophobic space of the rectangular stage for a five-minute routine. After this brief introduction, the dancer, Serap, in a purple costume thick and heavy with beads, steps down to mingle with her classy audience. She is paid only in tips and must visit tables during the rest of her 20-minute routine, leaving the performance space open. The women executives in the audience immediately seize this opportunity to distinguish themselves by performing gyrations, hip bumps, and camel walks. Their bodies sweat with the fever of competition. They displace the dancer by taking over the stage and deploying an oversexualized femininity and class privilege. Their vying for the limelight parallels the larger process of urban gentrification in Istanbul in which gentrifiers socially and spatially deride, exclude, and displace less-privileged homeowners or tenants.

Serap later frames her displacement in terms of sexual honor: “Some of these women are far more scantily dressed than myself. Yet I am the ultimate loose woman. Why?” Serap’s seemingly naive question echoes Lila Abu-Lughod’s (1997:502, 511) commentary on the popular stigmatization of Egyptian movie stars as “fallen” or dishonorable women. Despite the seeming class divides between wealthy film stars and struggling belly dancers, between poor Bedouins and wealthy Turks, the Turkish nouveaux riches, here as in Egypt, engage in class conflicts via the discourse of morality by stigmatizing the female performer. Conversely, the same clientele fervently deploy their newly acquired taste in belly dance (performative neo-Ottomania) to negotiate and re-mark their upper-class status. As entertainment, belly dance praxis signifies cultural and economic proximity to cosmopolitan culture. It is a localized element in a redeveloped, gentrified, and, thus, socially and economically more segregated Istanbul, in its aspirations for status as a global city.

During the 2001 financial crisis, many professional women—bankers, media workers, mid-level managers, public relations agents—were paying high tuition for belly dance classes. I attended evening classes for a year at Bilgi University, a trendy community college, as one of my field sites. Referencing their Ottoman heritage, most of my Bilgi classmates claimed that “every Turkish woman knows how to belly dance.”46 Despite its historical stigmatization, both Ottoman and Turkish men and women have mastered this dance technique through participatory mimicry at family gatherings. Why, then, were upper-class women taking lessons if they had already learned to belly dance at home or by cultural osmosis? First, before its gentrification, the public performance of belly dance denoted lower-class status. Second, belly dance itself has transformed from a participatory social form into a presentational codified dance technique.

In the dance studio, highly respected retired belly dancer Nesrin Topkapı aptly bridges the social and artistic environments by using standard vocabulary (hip drop, camel walk, figure eight, snake arm) while also referencing the dance’s communal heritage through associative domestic gestures (wringing the laundry, holding the baby, or
stirring the pot).47 From the students’ uniform—leotard and tights—to the use of a full wall mirror, the dance studio setting itself indexes the transformation of folk art into a classic dance performance genre. Our recital at Hamam, a pricey outdoor nightclub, epitomizes this transformation by privileging choreography over improvisation.48 Belly dance’s contemporary gentrification reflects the symbiosis between spatial and artistic upgrading, in which the standardization of its movement vocabulary is key to its novel cachet in gentrified Istanbul.

As elsewhere, the capitalization of gendered and classed exoticism reflected and furthered the uneven social stratification in Istanbul. The young urban professionals’ city center overlooked the dark hinterlands inhabited by the urban poor. Also hidden were the burgeoning urban feminist movements fighting for more space for secular urban female professionals.49 Despite some triumphs, gender inequality premised on the dictates of female modesty persisted in the judicial, political, and quotidian realms. Dangerously articulated by honor killings, state-run virginity tests, and domestic violence, it permeated Istanbul in particular and Turkey in general. Although frequently disregarded as extreme cases, these regular incidents, as Parla (2001:65–66) astutely notes, mirror the persistent and often state-sanctioned secular or Islamist concern with female sexual purity.

Some belly dancers have recounted how, in the early 1980s, the police openly raided disreputable, exclusively male nightclubs and even the dancers’ own homes. Following most raids, police took the financially insecure and socially disenfranchised dancers to public hospitals for STD exams.50 As one dancer irritably noted: “For the police, we were nothing but sex workers.” But a dancer could avoid such violent intrusions once she procured a performer’s identification card that documented her regular STD checkups. This identification card, in return, enabled the state to audit any informal economic activity and regulate the dancers’ modesty. Killing two birds with one stone, the state thus monitored both the dancers’ bodies and their pockets. Although officially banned in 1996, police raids nonetheless continue unrecorded.

The regulation of female bodies is not, however, novel to Turkish history. Since the late Ottoman reforms, modernizers from all walks of life have rendered women as a site of modernization, while their sexual purity guaranteed the sanctity of the family, the nation, or the religious community (Abu-Lughod 1998; Çakır 1996; Kandiyoti 1991; Tekeli 1990). In particular, the immodestly dressed and “dangerously” public (i.e., without immediate male patronage) belly dancers have posed a consistent challenge to such efforts. Furthermore, the dancers’ contemporary marginalization in Istanbul indexes a state or civic preoccupation with female public presence defined as much by modesty as by wealth.

Could the new female elite, then, fully escape this multifaceted surveillance of their modesty while they practiced a morally suspect dance form? I do not argue that the neoliberalization of Turkey has helped to weaken charges of female immodesty. Rather, the upper-class belly dance practitioners now have some leverage as they opt for a Westernized, secular, and elite cosmopolitanism while framing moral questions of sexual honor primarily with reference to class. However, do
professional dancers have the same option? In Asena’s case, her association with an elite art form and her collaboration with Akbar, who is an established classical musician, as well as her own wealth and fame, help to suspend the charges of her alleged immodesty. But Serap, a struggling dancer, is doubly taxed with neither the economic nor the symbolic capital to escape charges of sexual dishonor. My close analysis of Serap’s world thus invokes myriad familial and economic negotiations in and beyond the performance space.

**Behind Scene 3: Serap’s Backstage**

Drawing on Sharon Zukin’s (1995:157–158) ethnography of the role of the small service industry in the sustenance of urban symbolic economy, I suggest that a fluid frontstage and backstage divide implicates not a power-neutral architectural, spatial, or performative separation (Goffman 1959) but, rather, a division of labor and an ongoing power negotiation inflected by class, gender, and religion. My backstage analysis thus encompasses pre- and postperformance acts and the fluid yet conflicting presence of other social actors: the male clientele, the bosses, the agents, the costume makers, the musicians, and the dancers’ families. This backstage is “intimate” in Ara Wilson’s (2004:11, 14) sense, as it unveils how various social actors in Serap’s world actively draw on both capitalist and kin- or community-related moral principles that not only overlap but also shift with transnational and local material forces and demands.

The backstage of the local upper-class club is framed by the anxiety of men whose wives and girlfriends are onstage performing for others. They are uneasy with a public performance by the women, as it signals their insufficient surveillance and hence weakened masculinity. Also part of the backstage is the restaurant boss who explains dancers’ low salaries with reference to the recent financial crisis and the war in Iraq. Unapologetically businesslike, he tells me: “If this one leaves, another will come. There are so many unemployed dancers who would accept my offer without any complaints.” His attitude reflects the unemployment crisis severely affecting those in the informal economy after the post-9/11 collapse of the tourist industry. Because of slow demand and their large number, as many as 1,000 in Istanbul in recent years, belly dancers have become a form of disposable labor.51

Crowding the backstage is the entertainment agent Erotik Erol, who felt no need to see Serap’s dance before employing her because “her measurements said it all.” He receives 40 percent of her tips for each performance plus a new suit every few months. His interest in purely economic gain echoes the boss’s tone, but in this case, it is Serap who might seize the opportunity to move to a less costly agent in the unstable job market.

Who else occupies this backstage? The mother, a native of Istanbul, is glad Serap is finally moving back from Ankara and is fully confident that her daughter will earn enough to finance her brother’s wedding. Although she worries about Serap’s future—she is unmarriageable because of the “stain” of her status as a belly dancer—she suspends larger questions of sexual purity for now: Serap is the main breadwinner in this family.52 Her mother’s flexible position on modesty suggests how the post-1980s market logic increasingly refashions intimate domains. And filial duty is essential for the once-starving folk dancer Serap. Her decision to switch careers evokes Ara Wilson’s
portrait of the go-go bar workers in Bangkok: “It is the desire to be appropriate women that makes them inappropriate women” (2004:93).

Serap refers to the costume makers, an Ankara couple, as “my family away from home.” This use of fictive kinship parallels Jenny White’s (1994:14–15) discussion of Turkish mutual indebtedness. The costume makers tolerate late payments not only to sustain a web of reciprocal delayed obligations but also because of Serap’s help in landing them new customers. The costume makers’ profit orientation, sugarcoated with the idiom of fictive kinship, provides flexibility and security for Serap and allows her to survive the fluctuations of the unstable entertainment industry in Istanbul. This relationship highlights the blurring between commercial and noncommercial exchanges in an increasingly capitalist urban space (Wilson 2004:84). Specifically, both sides activate their web of relations and use this social capital to engage in a shifting, diffuse, and flexible socioeconomic contract.

Serap is adept at cutting corners. Like many other dancers, she evades taxation by working off the books. Serap purchases secondhand costumes when she is unable, even with a delayed payment or a bargain, to afford the prices of her main provider. She also borrows pirated CDs to avoid pricey professional CD reproduction (US$300–$500) or paying live musicians. When Serap has to perform with live music, she pushes some of her tips in the deep corners of her costume to avoid sharing them with the musicians.

The backstage also encompasses the dancer’s years of formal and informal training—in other words, the fine-tuning of “acquired-in-body techniques,” especially in and through performances with live music (Drewal 1992:10). Serap replenishes her bodily archive with moves collected from watching Turkish belly dance masters, the technique videos of German Oriental dancers, and MTV music videos. She samples Jennifer Lopez’s signature moves or those of international dance star Shakira, such as clockwise pivoting with salsa hip circles and sequential torso undulations. Serap’s increased access to international dance movement lexicons differs starkly from her predecessors’ limitations and is facilitated by the post-1980s privatization and proliferation of Turkish television channels. Her movement repertoire reverberates with neo-Ottomania’s loud pulse. But what are the gender and class limits of Islamic neo-Ottomania? Will the Islamist reification of the past accommodate a belly dance praxis that invokes not only a luxurious palace lifestyle but also sexual suggestiveness?

**Belly Dance and New Islamism**

Over the last two decades, Islamic revivalism in and beyond the Middle East has spurred reformulations of modernity to keep pace with the tools and consequences of globalization. As elsewhere, Muslim ideologues, reformers, and subjects in Turkey have faced the challenge of being incorporated into a world market while also upholding a distinct Muslim identity. Islamist politics in Turkey have transformed from an oppositional (Kemalist secularism) to a mainstream (conservative center-Right) stance. And this progression, though interrupted by the 1997 soft coup and the incarceration of an Islamist leader, resulted in the victory of the Islamist Justice Development Party (AKP [Turkish acronym]), in the 2002 general elections. By prioritizing family- or community-based welfare, the current Islamist government, headed by Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan, aptly valorizes Muslim moral idioms of egalitarianism to ameliorate the escalating uneven distribution of wealth and resources. Despite the Islamists’ consistent invocation of
moral discourses to undercut the effects of the capitalist market, the dismal reality of class and gender inequality frequently surfaces: burgeoning unemployment and Erdoğan’s attempt at criminalizing adultery both undermine the ideal of a democratic public urban space.58

Besides undertaking capitalist urban redevelopment and historical preservation projects, Islamists and Muslim elites have also extensively commodified potent Ottoman symbols. Yael Navaro-Yashin’s (2002:238–239) ethnography of an Islamic fashion show demonstrates not only how Islamic textile companies participate in the local and global fashion markets for Ottomania but also how they render *tesettür* (new Islamic veiling) central to their economic enterprises.

*Tesettür*’s complete coverage of the head and forehead differs from earlier more relaxed forms of provincial and lower-class traditional headgear in the degree of coverage and in its unlimited range of fashionable city styles, varying in color and length. *Tesettür*, as White (2002:213) argues, also articulates a desire for urban upward mobility. Fraught with a paradoxical symbolism, *tesettür* “incorporates ideas about an ‘Islamic modernity’ in which women are educated and professionally and politically active. On the other hand, it refers to values like patriarchal hierarchy, gender segregation, and women’s primary role as mothers and their place in the home” (White 2002:226).

*Tesettür* purports to ground female modesty ultimately in a fashionable covering while operating as a “mobile honor zone” effective even in the absence of *himaye* (immediate male patronage) (White 2002:220–223). The uneasy surveillance articulated in *tesettür* both frees covered women to engage in public life and implicates them as potentially dangerous public bodies capable of risking their own as well as their family’s honor.

As a gentrifying practice, *tesettür* indexes both a moral distinction over uncovered secular female bodies and a social distinction over other economically or culturally unequipped Muslim women (White 2002:223). Over the last two decades, numerous scholars have focused on the regional variability of *tesettür* to foreground both its emancipatory and restrictive sociopolitical aspects vis-à-vis shifting discourses of Muslim piety, propriety, and individual liberation (Abu-Lughod 2002; MacLeod 1991; Mahmood 2001). However, with the exception of White’s ethnography, most studies of Turkish *tesettür*, conducted among middle-class university students (Göle 1997a) or Islamist elites (Saktanber 2002), have explored neither the full range of embodied Islamic propriety nor the multilayered plight of disenfranchised Muslim women. Rather than reduce *tesettür* to “the quintessential sign of women’s unfreedom” (Abu-Lughod 2002:786), I emphasize particularly the triple burden of lower-class Turkish veiled women vis-à-vis the Muslim and secular elites, the secularist state, and the nonnegotiable dictums of Islamist morality.

Essentially elitist at its inception (i.e., the fashions are inspired by Ottoman palace styles), *tesettür* literally veils class differences by focusing on moral motivations. Like belly dance praxis, *tesettür* also draws from neo-Ottomania—but with an alternate emphasis on moral and religious discourses. Whereas secular
elites can and do negotiate morality with economic and cultural capital, for Islamic elites or masses, a once-stained female honor is not as easily cleansed by wealth or education. Despite these lived differences, as illustrated in the following vignette, female modesty is not negotiable in the Islamic idiom.59

If the Muslim female elite in particular, or the Islamist group in general, experiment with Ottomania through lifestyle preferences, then why do they not condone belly dance, a practice once so indispensable to the Ottoman palaces?60 Perhaps this is because belly dance, as public unveiled female performance at venues that serve alcohol, embodies all the vices that the ideal Muslim woman should avoid. Islamist neo-Ottomania selects only certain elite elements of the imperial past.

Thus tesettür and belly dance are the fraternal twins—the noble and nasty savage—of Islamic and secular Turkey, delineating the contours of morally and materially acceptable female presence in public space. Engendered by neoliberalism, both tesettür and belly dance oscillate between abjection and sophistication. Zeynep’s story charts the unpredictable road between the discursive and quotidian and demonstrates that social actors do not always obey the rules. They take shortcuts and, more often than not, enter dead ends.

Scene 4: A Serendipitous Encounter

During an outing with two friends on a hot, humid, late spring day, I climb the steep hill behind the Egyptian Bazaar to the dilapidated historic neighborhood of Tahtakale to purchase a few personal gifts. Out of breath, we enter an unassuming kiosk tucked away from the bustle of the street. Its two large rooms hold a kaleidoscope of shiny wooden and metal goods from India, Africa, China, and Mexico.

During our conversation about her prospects, university entrance exams, and English classes, I cannot help but notice the female shop assistant’s bright jovial eyes, hopeful spirit, and long-sleeved brown shirt and very long skirt. Under the long black wrap covering most of her forehead, Zeynep does not seem to sweat from wearing tesettür. Although I feel off duty—I am there to shop, not for fieldwork—Zeynep’s question intrigues me: “Do you want to see our Shakira scarves?” (I do, I do!) Then off we head to an exuberant discussion of various dance styles. With the intent of expanding her dance vocabulary while also sharing more of her Shakira-inspired innovative moves, Zeynep takes me to the secluded and mirrored second room across from the main shop. “We can be comfortable here,” she whispers and mimics me in pulling her T-shirt up to expose her highly competent belly isolations, movements picked up from neighborhood weddings and MTV. Zeynep tells me that she can only perform at female-exclusive weddings or family gatherings and adds sadly that “none of my close relatives like to dance as much as me.” Her Islamic head scarf does not contradict her undulant belly, as long as she dances in the safe confines of a woman-only space.61

I leave with this great puzzle of the head scarf paired with the exposed belly. Zeynep’s story is striking because it epitomizes the heterogeneity of lived Islamic practice in contemporary Istanbul. Zeynep’s clothing, prospects, and performance all animate a desired upward mobility, informed equally by neoliberal ideals of meritocracy (college education) and commodified Islamic fashion (tesettür) and constrained by her current class location and by paradoxical Islamist gender politics. Zeynep’s prospects also suggest how Islam and the free market, the gentry and the poor, belly dance and tesettür, discourses and people, continuously overlap in Istanbul. Given the Islamist
prioritization of home over work for women and the laicist ban on Islamic head scarves in Turkish universities, Zeynep’s future will perhaps hold negotiations more puzzling and more taxing than the incongruity of the head scarf combined with an undulant belly.

Conclusion: Remapping Contemporary Istanbul

As metaphor and analytical category, gentrification sheds light not only on the material effects of urban redevelopment—simultaneous demolition and upgrading—but also on the interwoven processes of displacement in the dance studios, the nightclubs, and the multiple neighborhoods of contemporary Istanbul. This analysis of gentrification elucidates the paths and locations available to moving bodies equipped with different social, cultural, and economic capital. An analysis of competition for space in the everyday urban landscape or professional performance enables us to see not only why but also how social bodies contend with their respective discursive and material reality. Each field site provides a different angle of the same story of how Istanbul’s recent globalization touches lives through a moral and gendered economy. These intersecting material and gendered economies find immediate and tangible expression in and through performance: How effective would urban reform be without inhabitants or dance technique without performance?

Belly dance’s incorporation into secular spaces, particularly in high-tech convention centers and upper-class clubs, demonstrates the extensive upgrading of this form to art and elite entertainment as a praxis of privilege. Asena’s and Serap’s narratives show how class can undermine charges of female immodesty in an increasingly neoliberal cityscape and secular discursive realm. The ongoing clash between honor and money in Istanbul translates as an escalating social constraint in an Islamist discourse best expressed in Zeynep’s conflicted story of underprivilege despite contrary hopes and dreams. The case studies suggest that both contemporary Islamist and secular urban restructuring in Istanbul perpetuate a multilayered, overlapping, and uneven development: glitz and glitter, paved roads, and high-tech infrastructure for some; and sweat, bare bellies and bare homes, and stained honor for others. At times these poles are negotiable, and at other times they are not.

Additionally, institutional efforts to promote Istanbul as a world-class global city are generating a facade of material and moral orderliness, as in the case of the UN Habitat’s “cleanup” operations. This facade projects a Western-oriented and morally steadfast visual order punctuated not only by towering high-tech edifices, luxurious shopping malls, clean streets, and commodified Ottoman relics but also by the conveniently exoticized and displaced liminal bodies of entertainment workers and the urban poor. Secular and Islamist macro-investments, united in the neoliberal goal of improving Istanbul’s urban face, are nevertheless fractured along the lines of image and content, economic gain and moral conduct.

Situating dance vis-à-vis a larger sociopolitical and visual context does not erase its rich kinesthesia, for a physical archive is inseparable from the artistic and the everyday in the making of urban culture. In other words, the dialogue between
hips and lips, the tacit and the vocal, or the discursive and the quotidian is simultaneously ethnographic and choreographic. I thus chart a complex urban ethnochoreography of how Istanbul inhabitants from all walks of life negotiate space, female honor, class, and religion on a daily basis as the city itself becomes increasingly incorporated into the world market. Following their footsteps and dreams, my analysis moves beyond the glitter and toward a gender- and performance-sensitive political economy of gentrification in Istanbul and around the globe.

Notes

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1. Belly dance is an ancient solo improvisatory movement performed across a vast array of geographical settings that range from North Africa, to Central Asia and the Middle East, to Europe. See Shay and Sellers-Young 2003:20–24, 31, for a critical history of belly dance. In the last two decades scholars have increasingly focused on situating belly dance’s cultural production and transmission vis-à-vis local and global histories. See Nieuwkerk 1995 on Egypt and Shay 1999 on Iran for ethnographies of belly dance in other places. Despite its escalating popularity and salacious media coverage, contemporary Turkish belly dance remains underresearched. Historical scholarship (And 1976; Uluçay 1971) has, however, focused on the Ottoman past in which belly dance was performed publicly as part of imperial festivities or privately in the imperial harems. As a result of Islamic restrictions, only young boys in travesty or non-Muslim women could perform in public.

2. The revitalization of belly dance in Istanbul presents ethnographic and conceptual challenges raised by the form’s changing and often contradictory manifestations at various scales: familial practice, trendy pastime, tourist attraction, erotic product, and art form. Shay and Sellers-Young contend that belly dance students in the West invest “millions of dollars and enormous time” (2003:13), contributing to the dance’s growing worldwide popularity.

3. I borrow this insight from an anonymous reviewer.

4. Lütfi Kirdar Convention Center, located in Harbiye, Istanbul’s main commercial and cultural district, was established to host the Habitat II Conference in 1996. Besides transforming Istanbul into an international congress and conference destination, this place implicitly mirrors Istanbul’s unsubstantiated claims to being a global city. See Keyder’s (1999b:20–23) macroanalysis of Istanbul’s infrastructural shortcomings that render it as more of “an international mart” than a “global city,” in Sassen’s (1991:3–4) terms. See Robins and Aksoy 1995:225–227 for a comprehensive review of contemporary functionalist urban planning and its consequences in Istanbul.
5. As the creative force behind *Bach A L’Orientale*, classical pianist Anjelika Akbar (2002) identifies the project as a popular merging of East and West. Thus she has collaborated with Asena to realize fully her vision of homemade participatory Orientalism.

6. In the field, most dancers identified instrumentation as the engine for their movement: wind instruments signal arm, torso, and hip undulations, such as snake arm, camel walk, and figure eights, whereas accelerated drumbeats call for hip accents (hip drops) or vertical (up and down) hip or shoulder shimmies. The accomplished dancers combine their isolated responses to instruments in various tempos, resulting in, for instance, the polyrhythmic layering of torso circles in half time with double-time hip shimmies.

7. Turkish belly dancers’ continued stigmatization stems from a local moral economy informed by cultural Islam and gendered hierarchies that marginalize dancers on the basis of skimpy costumes, the assumption of loose morals associated with nightlife, and the character of the venues, mostly nightclubs serving alcohol. For the intersection among the dishonor of the trade, Islam, and prevailing gender ideology in Egypt, see Nieuwkerk 1995.

8. See Reed 1998 for a comprehensive literature review that situates shifting bodily repertoires as productive and reproductive forces in the constitution of sociocultural and political identities. For a parallel history of endorsement from abroad in propelling domestic appreciation and sanitization, see Savigliano 1995:138 on Argentinean tango. Notwithstanding historical differences between colonized India and never-formally-colonized Turkey, see Meduri 2001 for similar middle-class-generated processes of sanitization of Bharatha Natyam, a once-disreputable Indian classical dance. None of these works, however, causally connects urban political economy with bodily acts.

9. Merging Edward Said’s discursive Orientalism (1978:3) with Marta Savigliano’s concept of “self-exoticism” (1995:138) based on her ethnography of Argentinean tango, I define “self-Orientalism” as the local deployment of globally available Orientalist tropes that reify Eastern sensual or religious exotica for material or symbolic gain. See also Shay and Sellers-Young 2003:14, 27.


11. Neil Smith’s “schematic theory of the production of geographical scales” (1992:54, 66) reconfigures geographical scale making as an exclusionary sociopolitical praxis that operates at the level of the body, home, community, urban space, region, nation, and globe. Similarly, in her critique on the ideological valorization of “the global,” Anna Tsing prioritizes the “culture and politics of scale-making” (2000:330, 347) to address the distinctive processes whereby material and institutional components facilitate and interrupt global interconnections.

12. See also Ergun 2004 and Islam 2005 for macroperiodization of Istanbul’s gentrification process.

13. Anne Allison’s (1994) ethnography of Tokyo nightlife, Martin Stokes’s (1992) research on the production and consumption of arabesk music in Istanbul, and Marta Savigliano’s (1995) work on the global exoticization of tango all utilize participatory embodied data for their urban ethnographies. These analyses, however, do not equally emphasize political economy, gender, urban topography, and performance praxis.

14. Initially, I had envisioned fieldwork in tourist restaurants and exclusively male underground nightclubs. The dancers’ migration among multiple venues in a single night and the perplexing phenomenon of elite belly dance, however, helped launch my query on gentrification. I thus expanded my initial scheme to address the intersecting domains of elite
entertainment and dance classes. Over the course of four years (1998–2000, 2002–04), I conducted field research at three tourist locales, two elite clubs, two dance courses, and two underground nightclubs, accessing more than 50 dancers and their social networks. I also worked as a dancer at a small-scale tourist venue in Harbiye, a rapidly gentrifying district.

15. For detailed discussions on the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the performance paradigm, see Conquergood 1991.

16. Shared movement conferred access to more venues and their backstage areas, while my belly dance literacy allowed for a kinetic engagement with performances and audiences. My class and professional aspirations, however, undoubtedly undermined my triple nativeness as an Istanbul-raised female belly dancer.

17. For a comparative case, see Ara Wilson’s (2004) ethnography of Bangkok, in which she reveals the diffuse intimacy within global capitalist venues. See also Tsing for a critical analysis of the globalist research that overlooks “the creative distinctive cultural forms of capitalism” (2000:349).

18. On the extent and impact of ideological battles between the Turkish Left and Right during the course of the 1970s, see Ahmad 1993:171–173 and White 2002: 38–40.


20. The reform program aimed at bettering Turkey’s human rights record by improving the state’s treatment of its Kurdish population and observance of the articles of the civil code related to gender equality and domestic violence (Kinzer 2004; Sciolino 2004). For a detailed account of the latest harmonization laws, see Amnesty International 2004.

21. Recent scholarship has focused on either the positive or the negative effects of neoliberal restructuring. On the liberalization of public political expression, see Bozdoğan and Kasaba 1997; Göle 1997b; and White 2002. On the socioeconomic turmoil triggered by heightened class polarization, see Keyder 1999b and Kozanoğlu 1995. Most scholars agree, however, that Turkey’s uneven economic development was characteristic of the global economy of the 1980s.

22. For these figures, do a search for “Turkey and tourism” on the Library of Congress webpage: http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/csquery.html.


24. See the webpage of the Turkish Ministry of Culture: http://goturkey.kulturturizm.gov.tr.

25. Islamic revivalism in Turkey has markedly attracted scholarly attention. Although the identity politics–centered approach of the first decade polarized secularists and Islamists (Göle 1997a; Gülap 1997), the most recent scholarship underscores the cross-fertilization of ideologies and lifestyles (Saktanber 2002; White 2002; Yavuz 2003) by examining the multifaceted connections among global Islamic movements, local party politics, sectoral differences, and the everyday.

26. See Mamdani 2004 for the global political implications of the “good Muslim” versus “bad Muslim” construct in the post-9/11 era.

27. I borrow from di Leonardo the notion that “correct race and ethnicity” (1998:36) are indispensable to the constitution of the noble savage. Here I distinguish between the political and the tourist portrayal of Turkey. Although the European Union might doubt Turkey’s noble savage status as a political and business partner, Turkey’s tourist appeal, as opposed to other Middle Eastern cultures, mainly stems from its soft and safe Orientalism implicated in its noble savagery.
28. See Mayor Dalan’s interview with a Turkish newspaper in Bali 2002:216.
30. Many local and global developments slowed down the tourist boom, however: the Kurdish problem of the 1990s, the 1999 earthquake, the recurrent financial crises of 1994 and 2001, the aftermath of 9/11 in which the whole Middle East was implicated, the war in Iraq, and the November 2003 bombings in Istanbul are among some of the most prominent.
31. In her assessment of the Islamist Welfare Party’s fault lines, White writes, “The inequity was perceived to be a moral problem, thus one with a moral solution” (2002:166).
32. Nilgun Ergun (2004:402–403) argues that the foundation of the Israeli state (1948) and the Greek–Turkish conflict (1955–60) contributed to the flight of non-Muslims (mostly Jews, Armenians, and Greeks) prior to the 1980s. From the 1950s on, rural migrants searching for urban jobs in the new industrial era settled in these old minority neighborhoods.
33. Orient House, Kervansaray, and Gar Restaurant are the trendiest tourist restaurants in Istanbul with belly dance shows. See their official websites and reviews: http://www.orienthouseistanbul.com/index2.htm and http://www.shira.net/kervansaray%20.htm. Undertaken by chic hotels and promoted by tourism entrepreneurs, Sultan’s Night shows are midscale exotic productions that reify Ottoman performing arts and opulence with period decor and set design.
34. See Tutku Tours webpage for a description of an Ottoman theme party: http://www.tutkutours.com/I_02_istanbul.asp.
35. Tipping at family gatherings expresses appreciation as the elders reward young children by sticking banknotes on their foreheads. In tourist clubs, where the audience is separated from the dancer, tips can be passed on via a waiter or manager, but tourist patrons often tip the dancers during the brief post-performance photo shoots. The dancers receive tips stuffed into their costumes only in the underground clubs or upper-class taverns. For the conflicts over sharing tips with musicians, see N. 54.
37. See the current Islamist government’s tourism website: http://www.kultur.gov.tr/EN/BelgeGoster.aspx?17A16AE30572D313AAF6AA849816B2EFB3C88D4C36927DEF. Although belly dance is not an item on the Islamist government’s website, it is still a primary tourist attraction for Istanbul and Turkey.
38. See Islam 2005:129–130 for a look at the recent partnership between Fatih municipality and the European Commission that culminated in a project worth seven million euros to rehabilitate Balat and Fener, two Ottoman neighborhoods on the Golden Horn.
40. See Keyder 1999a:145–147 for an economic analysis of the post-1950s rural-to-urban migration. Robins and Aksoy (1995:230–231) document ongoing suburbanization in the form of affluent villa towns and satellite housing projects. All of these authors, however, overlook the salience of gentrification.
41. For the cultural and economic marginalization of Istanbul’s urban poor, see Keyder 1999a and Robins and Aksoy 1995. Martin Stokes’s (1992) analysis of arabesk music speaks to how entitlement to certain performance practices plays into the controversies over ownership of urban space.
42. Detailing the origins, workings, and extent of Istanbul’s gentrification, both Ergun (2004) and Islam (2005) explain it as a three-wave process, moving from the Bosphorus villages to the Old City and then to the Golden Horn neighborhoods.
43. Here I allude, for instance, to bourgeoning türkü (regional folk song) bars, frequented by rural migrants and leftist university students, as an alternative locus of this vastly diverse scene. Also see Bali 2002:256–257, 268–278, for the Istanbul yuppie culture’s fascination with New York’s urban and entertainment style.

44. This “safe space” marginalizes the inhabitants of the other Istanbul: the poor, the uneducated, and, specifically, the rural migrants and ethnic groups such as the Kurds who cannot afford the lifestyle. See Robins and Aksoy 1995:229–233 on the discursive and material elite strategies employed in stigmatizing rural migrants.

45. Although belly dancers performed for gazinos (middle-class nightclubs) before the 1980s, they ranked below the Turkish classical music singers.

46. In interviews, some of my classmates also mentioned weight control, physical fitness, and sex appeal as reasons for taking the class.

47. Topkapı’s aversion to skimpy costumes, her demure manners, and her choice of elite and not exclusively male performance venues granted her a reputable status as “Turkey’s first family belly dancer.”

48. Both the name of the club, Hamam (a Turkish bath), and its proximity to the imperial Topkapı Palace signals a neo-Ottomanist subtext.

49. See Tekeli 1990 on secular feminist movements in Turkey.

50. Here, “the financially insecure” implies those who could not afford to pay bribes. By “socially disenfranchised,” I refer to dancers who were not protected by powerful bosses or boyfriends.

51. Because of the unrecorded nature of this work, there are no statistics at hand. This estimate of belly dancers frequenting Istanbul entertainment venues is based on myriad interviews with agents, dance teachers, and bosses.

52. As Ayşe Parla notes, “The importance of a woman’s purity as an icon of family order is reflected in the linguistic repertoire, most notably in the injunctions against staining the family honor” (2001:77).


54. In the field, I witnessed intense and occasionally violent conflicts over money between the dancers and musicians. Dancers often prefer performing to taped music because they have to share tips with musicians, who claim half of the tips and split their portion among an ensemble of at least four musicians. Despite these conflicts, most dancers admitted that dancing to live music is a rare opportunity to perfect their technique.

55. Specifically, Serap adds the Turkish drop (an accelerated back bend to the floor) and leg and full-body shimmies to her vocabulary.

56. Shakira is a half-Lebanese, half-Colombian pop star who samples salsa, tango, and belly dance in her music videos.

57. Prior to the 1980s neoliberalization, Turkey had only one television channel, which was run by the national government.

58. Suggested in fall 2004 by Prime Minister Erdoğan as “a measure to protect families,” the proposal to criminalize adultery indexed the unresolved tension between Islam-based family values, gendered inequalities, and civil rights (Sachs 2004).

59. The latest controversy on criminalizing adultery is a case in point.

60. On the history of belly dance as a prominent Ottoman public and private social practice, see n. 1.

61. Undoubtedly, there is lived variability among veiled women’s public performance of belly dance. Differences lie with context, the participants’ class location, and individual
taste. For instance, I worked with a devout former professional dancer who, after teaching belly dance in nonsegregated locales, donned her veil to travel across the city. Meral utilized all her income to finance an apartment in a segregated Islamist community, Başakşehir, where she had to hide her profession. In İbrahim Tatlıses’s show, a popular family-centered television program, young women, who are covered, belly dance with each other and thereby create their own segregated space in front of the cameras. These cases of strategic manipulation, however, do not indicate ultimate leverage in managing the demands of Islamist female modesty.

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ABSTRACT  With manifold projects of historic preservation, gentrification, and urban renewal, Istanbul has transformed over the last two decades into a preeminent metropolis and tourist destination against the backdrop of an increasingly neoliberalized and moderately Islamic, yet secular, E.U.-aspirant Turkey. In this article, I examine through an embodied lens the complex interplay among shifting practices of belly dance, new Islamic veiling, and urban space in contemporary Istanbul. In an analysis grounded in a series of ethnographic sites that include an elite concert hall, a tourist restaurant, a dance class, a local nightclub, and a retail store, I argue for a performance-centered and gender-sensitive examination of urban gentrification that is often missed in recent political economic analyses. [gentrification, Istanbul, neoliberalism, Islam, gender, dance]