

University of Guelph, Department of History

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PhD Final Oral Examination

Hybridization and Uneven Exchange: The Transnational Popularization of
Belly Dance in Toronto, Canada (1950-1990)

ABSTRACT

**Friday
March 24, 2017**

Time: 1:30 pm

106 Rozanski Hall

**Advisor:
Dr. Femi Kolapo**

**Examining Committee:
Dr. Barbara Sellers-Young
(York University)
Dr. Marlene Epp (U Waterloo)**

**External Examiner:
Dr. Jennifer Fisher (UC Irvine)**

**Chair:
Dr. Alan Gordon**

Belly dance was first performed publicly in Toronto during the late nineteenth century. While immigrants to Canada from the Middle East faced discrimination, white audiences could not get enough of stereotypical portrayals of *danse du ventre*. Hollywood further popularized the Orientalist image of the belly dancer, and beginning in the 1950s, star Middle Eastern dancers like Samia Gamal and Nejla Ateş were making appearances on Toronto stages. By the 1960s, American, Middle Eastern, and Canadian dancers were performing belly dance in Toronto's hotel nightclubs and restaurants. During belly dance's peak popularity in the 1970s and 1980s, multiple venues were running two belly dance shows a night, six days a week, and belly dance classes were so popular they were often waitlisted. Why and how did this Middle Eastern dance form become so popular between 1950 and 1990 in the city of Toronto?

Various archival sources and twelve oral history interviews with professional dancers and teachers indicate that belly dance's popularization in Toronto was partially a result of its widespread stereotypical presentation in North America as something exotic, ancient, and sexual. This contributed to a growing demand for belly dance shows amongst white Canadians, but increasing immigration from the Middle East was an even more essential element in the growth of Middle Eastern entertainment in the city. White and Middle Eastern dancers and teachers who worked in Toronto hybridized belly dance performances as they circulated transnationally, with some working and performing internationally while also developing personal and professional relationships which bridged ethnic and cultural divides. Dancers and instructors alternately embraced and resisted Orientalist stereotype in their work as they navigated a social and political context in Canada which favoured whiteness. Many also laboured to increase belly dance's respectability by trying to distance performances from overt sexuality, or by aligning them with regional pride, spirituality, fitness, or feminism. Belly dancers, instructors, and choreographers participated in uneven processes of exchange and hybridization which characterized belly dance's popularization in

