

The Many Appearances of Little Egypt
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While selling hot dogs in *The Karnival Kid* from 1929, the Disney character Mickey Mouse falls in love with “Minnie the Shimmy Dancer” at a fair. He sees her dance act promoted by the carnival master who sings: “Puts you in a trance with her hoochie coochie dance!” and Mickey retorts by saying, “It’s a bumhole dance, keep your money in your pants.” The dance itself is not considered to be anything worthwhile, and yet Mickey falls for Minnie because of her gyrating movements that appear to be a take on bellydancing.

The main protagonist of the 1962 hit song “Little Egypt (Ying-Yang)” by the Coasters, is a burlesque dancer who “let her hair down and she did the hoochie-koochie real slow, wo, wo.” The last verse of the song tells us that “Little Egypt does not dance there anymore, wo, wo...’cause we got seven kids and all day long they crawl around the floor, wo, wo.” In these two examples, the dancer seduces her love interest even though the “hoochie-coochie” is regarded to be of debased moral value. What is to be considered however, is how bellydancing as a folkloric tradition entered popular American culture and informed the hoochie-coochie, which was a kind of parody that was sexual in both nature and presentation.

Nahed Mansour’s video *Little Egypt Doesn’t Dance Here Anymore*, collages found footage of seven performances of “Little Egypt (Ying Yang)” including the original by the Coasters crooning their song, a cover by Elvis in 1964, and Cher from a scene in the movie *The Mask* from 1985. Mansour’s video is the nucleus of her exhibition that comprises drawings, film, and archival materials. It is exemplary of how cultural appropriation, capital, and popular culture work in tandem and benefit one another, while directing us to concerns within her larger practice: gender, dance, and film.

While the video references more recent appearances of Little Egypt in popular culture, this persona appears as early as 1896 in *Fatima’s Coochie-Coochie Dance* by Thomas Edison, who toured the film throughout the US at peephole kinetoscopes.¹ Several women were all known under the umbrella coinage “Little Egypt” due to their performance of the “bellydance” in 1893 at the *Streets of Cairo* exhibition in the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago (who Minnie the Shimmy Dancer is modeled on). The bellydance, *dance du ventre*, or what became subsequently called the “hoochie-coochie”, was in fact *raqs al-sharqi*, a folk dance that uses

¹ Shannon Arvizu, “The Politics of Bellydancing in Cairo”, *The Arab Studies Journal*, Vol. 12/13, No. 2/1 (Fall 2004/Spring 2005), p. 167

There appear to be a couple of films by Edison – the second is “Fatima”, 1897 – with one of four women who were all called “Little Egypt”, and some of whom were not even Middle Eastern.

specific abdominal and womb muscles.² The stomach is exposed intentionally to display complex and skillful movements in the hips and pelvis that include shimmies and belly rolls. Victorian sensibilities of the time dominated perceptions, and the outraged Board of Lady Managers of the Chicago fair attempted to stop the act entirely. The Lady Managers failed in their efforts as the *Streets of Cairo* exhibition was both popular and economically profitable. However, Edison's film was subsequently the first to be censored with additions of bars covering the belly and breasts. These early recordings of gendered bodies of colour in performance for film and entertainment resonate in a larger study of cultural appropriation and the advent of cinema. Little Egypt impacted generations to come with many interpretations of bellydancing by Hollywood actresses in films, in Western culture as a way to reconnect with perceived ideals of femininity, and exercise classes (remember Miranda's jerky side-to-side movements in *Sex and the City*). The Egyptian parliament reacted to this appropriation nationally, by denying licenses to foreign dancers (primarily Russian) from professional bellydancing, enacting what ended up as a short-lived ban in 2004.³ Considered an art at risk (with over 5000 dancers in the mid-1900s to less than 400 now), restrictions grew on bellydancing – or oriental dance – with a growing conservatism both religious and cultural.

Economy is rooted into the history of *raqs al-sharqi* with women dancers having to pay the State a tax on their earnings, migrant women performing at the fairs in Chicago and Paris in 1889, and the recent controversy around the tourism of bellydancing in Egypt.⁴ The relationship between economy, gendered bodies, and exploitation is seen in three series of drawings using carbon paper as a metaphorical material. Carbon paper is used widely in the Middle East for writing out receipts of financial transactions. In the work *...displayed to serve the basest of uses*, Mansour displays several pieces of thin carbon paper on a lightbox, creating a kind of film-strip. After looking more closely at the ghostly figures, one may notice discrepancies between the shape of the bodies, the clothing, the gestures, even the jewelry. Mansour has drawn a number of women from the fair in 1893 and more recent Hollywood stars who were performing burlesque by appropriating *raqs al-sharqi*. The most prominent Hollywood actress is Rhonda Fleming who portrays "Little Egypt" in the 1951 colour-film of the same title. Fleming's character is unscrupulous and displays constructed stereotypes around the sexuality of "Oriental" women by fictionalizing a culture and its people with great liberty and privilege. The Hollywood movie *Little Egypt* also plays in Mansour's exhibition, but Fleming is silenced as the sound is intentionally turned off.

² Ibid., p. 170

³ Ibid., p. 159

⁴ In the 19th Century, there were two categories that dancers fulfilled, either as performers for women in the harem displaying their knowledge of music and poetry (*'awalim*), or they were from particular gypsy tribes performing in public spaces (*ghawazee*).

The residue of the carbon is used by Mansour to transfer imagery of these performers in two large-scale drawings, each six by two feet: *Streets of Cairo – Middle East* and *Streets of Cairo – North America*. Mansour has also drawn directly onto one hundred US\$1 dollar bills, using the Eye of Providence – illustrated as a Pyramid – to trace the portraits of these women's faces. These drawings chart the breadth of a century during which a misinterpretation of a folk dance entered cinema and popular culture in North America. Mansour's larger study of Little Egypt speaks to the exploitation of female migrant labour while these artworks address how gender and race are consumed and capitalized upon.

This essay is published on the occasion of the exhibition *Little Egypt Doesn't Dance Here Anymore*, on view in Hamilton Artists Inc.'s James Gallery from February 8 - March 14, 2020.

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