

Hi. My name is Margaret Morley and I use she/her pronouns, but they/them is also fine. I am a white woman with wavy dark brown hair wearing a magenta leopard print top and spiral silver earrings because I'm about to go out on a research trip to a night club. Behind me, you can see a white wall, white curtains, and an empty dark wood bookcase.

I am a PhD Candidate in Anthropology at Indiana University, and I am currently a visiting scholar at the American University in Cairo where I am conducting my dissertation research with the support of a Fulbright US Student Award.

My talk today is called "Inciting Debauchery: Attention and Corporeal Economies in Egyptian Dance" and in it I will mainly be talking about the digital portions of my research conducted from Spring 2020 through August 2021.

In Spring 2018, a professional Russian belly dancer known in Egypt as Gohara was arrested, charged with "inciting debauchery," and nearly deported when a video of her Cairo disco performance went viral. After her release, Gohara catapulted to stardom in Egypt and is now by far the most popular professional belly dancer on Instagram, where her account regularly features sexy and glamorous photos and videos of her. Gohara is one of many foreign dancers working in Egypt today and one of many female performers charged with inciting debauchery due to viral videos, and her story encapsulates the entanglement of changing cultural politics and economies in Egypt that my research investigates.

Recent events, including COVID-19, have pushed dancers online and to change the nature of their performances in order to succeed in new types of attention and corporeal economies. By attention economies, I mean the activities in which people engage in order to capture or deflect

others' attention to get or generate other necessary resources and forms of capital. These new dance business strategies sometimes make them targets for political attempts at directing the attention economy, as seen in the arrests of dancers. For dancers in Egypt, the attention economies are inextricably intertwined with corporeal economies – the accumulation and circulation of bodily labor and value as described by Wacquant, since the service/product that they offer is inseparable from their bodies. This paper will theorize the interweaving of attention economies and corporeal economies in the digital and physical lives of dancers in Egypt, arguing that foreign dancers have an advantage overall due to ongoing global inequality.

Now I'll give you some background information on dance in Egypt. Egypt has numerous folkloric and professional dance styles, the most famous of which is *raqs sharqi* (meaning "eastern dance"), known in English as belly dance. It is a form characterized by sinuous, percussive, and isolated movements of the hips, chest, and abdomen. It may date back to ancient Egypt, with a similar form found throughout the Mediterranean in Roman and Byzantine periods, performed at elite private parties, public festivities, and venues of questionable morality (e.g., taverns and coffee houses). The development of modern professional *raqs sharqi* at the turn of the 20th century was driven by Egyptian women's participation in projects of decolonization, with dancers common in the classic films which were central to developing Egyptian national identity.

Despite their popularity at weddings and in live and mediated entertainment, dancers have always been accused of and associated with prostitution. Although *raqs sharqi* and its social antecedent, *raqs baladi* (dance of the country), seem to conflict with Arab-Islamic gender ideals, Noha Roushdy has argued that they remain important in Egyptian society *because* they offer a

symbolic inversion of ideal female modesty. The temporary suspension of norms when women dance socially allows a negotiation of the tension created by social pressures to restrain feminine sexuality, while the punishment of transgressions through social marginalization of professional dancers enforces gender and sexuality norms.

Foreign dancers have been popular as performers and scapegoats for the alleged vulgarity and immorality of the dance since Byzantine times. In 2003, Egypt experimented with banning foreign dancers, blaming them for the rise of vulgarity in Egyptian dance forms and saying they were taking jobs from native Egyptian dancers. However, many venues were unwilling or unable to hire Egyptians and instead stopped offering performances altogether, so foreign dancers were reinstated after one year.

The last two decades have seen the development of a new Egyptian musical genre and accompanying dance style, sparking changes in the entertainment industry. Starting around 2005, young men in the poorer neighborhoods of Cairo began experimenting with easily accessible music and sound editing software and applications. The result was the style Egyptians call *mahragan* or *mahraganat* (festival(s)). Based on the Egyptian *shaabi* (popular) music of the previous three decades, *mahraganat* adds electronic aspects and the influence of other popular music genres from around the globe, including hip hop and reggaeton. Because of its origins in the lower classes, popularity at lower class street weddings, and associations with drugs and alcohol, *mahraganat* is not considered respectable by many Egyptians. Nonetheless, the genre's popularity has grown steadily, and it has become much more mainstream since the 2011 revolution.

A new venue for music and dance started developing in Egypt around 2011: discos, or Western-style nightclubs. The music in these clubs is generally played by DJs, often with a famous singer making weekend appearances to sing backed by recorded tracks. The music and the singers are always of the *shaabi* and *mahraganat* genres, to which the patrons – who are generally relatively wealthy and cosmopolitan – all enthusiastically dance and sing along. The discos also hire dancers who perform on bars or small stages to the latest *mahraganat* and pop hits, sometimes accompanied by a singer. The dancing that professionals perform to *mahraganat* is a mix of *raqs sharqi*, *raqs beledi* and the dancing being done to *mahraganat* at street weddings, itself a mix of *raqs beledi*, hip hop, break dancing, and the sorts of dancing seen at raves and EDM concerts in the West.

Now I'm going to discuss Attention Economies in more detail. Constrained to primarily social media-based research for the duration of 2020 and first half of 2021, scrolling through Instagram and TikTok came to be an experience of overwhelming sameness. On all social media platforms, most of the dancers currently based in Egypt share clips of themselves dancing at weddings in fancy hotels, clips of disco performances to *mahraganat*, and sexy and glamorous photos and videos; the majority of these fall into the realm of what is referred to as “thirst traps” in internet-speak.

Thirst trap is a term that was initially used when someone posted a deliberately but usually subtly sexy picture or video of themselves on their own social media page because they were “thirsty” for attention. Generally, people post thirst traps not because they want just any attention, but because they want attention of a sexual nature; posters are trying to get followers

to reveal thirst (or sexual desire) for them. Increasingly, thirst traps are used in social media not just by individuals seeking validation and attention, but for economic purposes. Influencers might use them to increase their following, and thus their income, or as a technique to help promote a particular product or service. And sex workers, broadly conceptualized, can use thirst traps to generate an online audience of potential clients for transactions off-platform or offline.

On TikTok, I found that the more videos of professional dancers in Egypt I watched and liked, the more the algorithms pushed thirst traps to my “For You” page. At first, the vast majority were women dancing at home in revealing clothing, often to some form of Latin music – it clearly never occurred to the algorithms that I was interested in the dance, music, or even women of a specific country. The more of these videos I watched and liked for research, the bolder the thirst trap videos TikTok showed me, until I was watching videos from sex workers in English-speaking countries, in which they both advocated for sex worker respect and solicited off-platform transactions. Changing the application language to Arabic steered me away from sex worker videos, and gave me a bit more Arabic content, but I continued to get a lot of amateur dance/thirst trap videos from around the world.

Sex sells. It’s been said for a long time. And yet, until recently, dancers working in Egypt did not need to publicly advertise themselves online at all, let alone in a way that leverages their sex appeal. I’m not saying that they were never sexy or never had to use sex appeal for economic advantage. Sex has long been an integral part of the profession for many, with some dancers doubling as prostitutes. The practice of *fath*, forbidden to Egyptian women since 1933 and banned outright since 1952, had cabaret dancers sitting, drinking, and flirting with customers to encourage them to spend more money, a percentage of which was shared with the dancer. As

Francesca Biancani has described, if the customer requested sex at the end of the night, the dancer was expected to comply. *Fath* can be seen as a kind of thirst trap, using sexual tension and appeal to elicit attention and turn it into economic gain. And it is apparently necessary for the profitable running of cabarets in Egypt, since they have replaced *fath* with the hiring of *reklam*: attractive young women who wear revealing clothing, sit in the cabaret and drink or smoke shisha, dance socially when there is not a professional dancer on the stage and interact with customers. But until recently, the need to sell sex, literally or metaphorically, was limited to certain venues and people. In fact, many Egyptian dancers tried to keep their careers secret to avoid the consequences of the stigma of the profession.

With the advancing neoliberalization and global interconnectivity of the Egyptian economy, this has begun to change. Combined with the growing piety movement, there has been less work for dancers, so they have had to work more gigs with less stability to get by. The development of discos, the only dance venues to use social media for marketing, has given dancers with established online presence an edge in getting the higher-paying gigs at these venues and elite weddings, where hiring the hottest dancer of the moment can provide social capital and prestige. Videos from the discos tend to go viral when they include the latest hit song and a beautiful dancer in a particularly risqué costume doing especially sexual movements, often in a way that seems to risk revealing more of her body than she intends to (or does she?). Videos that go viral are good for disco business and therefore a big career boost for dancers, leading them into a new kind of attention economy where they need to sell their sex appeal much more publicly than before.

One might argue that Gohara is partially to be credited (or blamed) for the recent social media trends of Egyptian dancers. This would be an over-simplification, and global online trends and phenomena like influencers are certainly part of the changing environment in which Egyptian dancers live and work. But seeing Gohara catapult to stardom after a vulgarity scandal and consistent posting of glamorous and sexy pictures and videos certainly encouraged other dancers to use similar strategies.

As Joyce Carol Oates commented (quoted in Wacquant) dancers, like boxers, ARE their bodies. Their bodies are the sites of their labor and the source of all their economic capital. The most valuable kind of bodily capital in Egyptian dance is coming to be that of appearance. While attractiveness has always been one of the requirements to succeed in dance in Egypt, the standards for physical beauty have not always been so high and it has not always been so essential. Maintaining oneself as an exceptionally sexually attractive woman in just about any modern society is extremely laborious, and often requires significant financial resources. For dancers in Egypt, these may include investments of time and money in diet, exercise, plastic surgery, makeup, hair, nails, and costumes.

Traditionally in *raqs sharqi* and social dance forms in Egypt, the feelings, *ihsaas*, are what matter. A dancer should translate the emotions communicated by the music through her own emotions into a bodily expression that the audience can feel and connect to. This does not appear to be the case any longer. In person, it is easier for the audience to feel the vibrations of the music and physically sense the energy being expressed to them by the dancer. Thus, while her body was a commodity in some senses, the dancer's body was not the whole product. The

product was the entire dancing experience – feeling and hearing the music, watching the dancer and feeling her emotions reverberate in your own body and affect you, appreciating her particular interpretation of the music. While this experience is not impossible online, it is much harder to achieve and much reduced given the physical and quantum remove from the event. You simply cannot feel energy and musical vibrations from a screen the same way you can at a live event. Because of this as well as economic and social reasons, the product being offered in online performances tends to be different, as does the audience.

You may still be able to appreciate the dancer's musicality, but you cannot feel her emotions or the music to the same extent. Thus, the viewers come to care more about the dancer's body and how sexy they think it is. They can no longer be overcome by her stage presence, so they focus on her physical attributes. Conversely, having so many dance performances available online creates an opportunity for people with varying levels of interest in Egyptian dance to watch videos for prurient reasons in privacy. That some internet users are looking for belly dance videos purely for semi-pornographic uses is naturally combining with the social and economic factors within Egypt to push dance videos in a more sexual direction.

Accounts exist on Instagram and TikTok where videos of professional and amateur dancers, only of the sexy variety, are reposted. Users are then directed that they can watch the entire video on YouTube, where the owner of the channel (never any of the dancers or women featured) can monetize the video and make money from the views. Thus, the dancer's body becomes a true commodity, digitized, separated from her, and passed around the internet, with various random men profiting from the sexual appeal of her moving and scantily clad body. But I have yet to interview a dancer who is really upset by this; they all seem to believe in the adage

that there is no such thing as bad publicity, and the more people who watch videos of them, the better the chances of their financial success.

Success in this environment is largely based on class, with foreign and upper-class Egyptian dancers having significant advantages over dancers from the Egyptian lower classes. Egyptians generally consider themselves to have the advantage over foreigners when it comes to *iHsaas* (feelings), believing that this is intrinsic to their bodies as Egyptians. And, at least until the pandemic, Egyptian dancers did have the advantage in getting hired at cabarets; very few cabarets hire foreign dancers as the customers often find them too cold onstage and a bit thin for their tastes. But discos and the internet –where a dancer’s sexual appeal in more Western terms is paramount and her foreign “classiness” counterbalances the perceived trashiness of her profession and the *mahraganat* genre – are a different story. There, foreign dancers generally have the advantage. In addition, foreign dancers in Egypt generally come from the middle and upper classes of their home countries, thus giving them more financial resources. They can afford better internet access, better photo and video equipment, more expensive costumes, better makeup and makeup artists, as well as better and safer plastic surgery. Dancers from other countries likely already have social media presence and skills. They also usually have friends and family who support their choice of profession, giving them a wider social network to draw followers from. Most of them were already established belly dance performers and teachers in their country of origin, giving them a base of students who will pay for online lessons and workshops if available, as well as connections to event organizers who will hire them to come do weekend workshop and performance events.

This last resource has made an especially big difference between Egyptian and non-Egyptian dancers during Ramadan every year and the pandemic of the past year and a half. Many foreign dancers make Ramadan a month-long tour, traveling outside of Egypt to give workshops and visit friends and family, but most native Egyptian dancers must forego all income from dance until the celebrations at the end of Ramadan. Only the most world-famous Egyptian dancers get invited to teach outside of the country, and getting them visas to travel remains difficult. During the pandemic, foreign dancers have been able to turn to teaching and offer online classes and workshops, thus giving them an income when there was no nightlife and no weddings. Now that weddings and performance venues are picking up again, dancers who maintained a very active social media presence throughout the pandemic have obviously been more successful at getting work.

Thus, as dance in Egypt has moved increasingly into online spaces and away from live performances, foreign dancers are at an overall advantage at this new nexus of attention and corporeal economies. In a digitized corporeal economy that is largely determined by attention, dancers from outside of Egypt often have more resources. What else this situation means for Egyptian dance is something I am still researching.