

Infinite Infant: Embodying a Revolution to Restore Spirituality in Dance

by

Zhixuan Zhu
Program in Dance
Duke University

Date: _____

Approved

Michael Klien, Supervisor

Sarah Wilbur

Pedro Lasch

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Program of
Dance in the Graduate School of
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

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My MFAEIP thesis project represents an interdisciplinary integration of spirituality and dance. This thesis based on a 40–min live performance, animated by my ongoing questioning of how innate spirituality in dance is being suppressed. This claim is, evidenced by the disappearance of numerous sacred dances, the growing emphasis on technical and practical proficiency in dance education and performance, and dance being constrained by a standardized and specific aesthetic. I have personally experienced the suppression of dance education in China, through corporal punishment, and verbal abuse,

INFINITE INFANT strives to peel off constraints such as preconceived notions of beauty, prescribed movement patterns, or concern for an audience's preference. My movement praxis, in contrast seeks to locate the spiritual core of dance by allowing and waiting for unforced and unrestricted movements to emerge.

Through my humble perspectives, writings, and performances, I'm trying to call on the audience to rethink dance's meaning, form, and existence while evoking empathy and general reflection on dance field.

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1. How Infinite Infant evokes spirituality

Infinite Infant, as the action of my thesis, aims at the restorative process of embodying and evoking spirituality through intuitive, in-the-moment movements. In this artistic research project I observe, investigate, and comment on what I deem to be suppressed spirituality in dance. This process is based on methodologies I developed using dance 'scores', as well as drawing on the concept of emptiness from Buddhist philosophy. Infinite Infant is a 40-minute live performance situated in an imaginary cosmic underworld. I claim, that through a series of movements, two entangled, feminine spirits share and unveil the infinite reincarnations that elevate love. Infinite Infant opened in the Von der Heyden theater on February 8th at 7pm for a general audience.

1.1 Process of Infinite Infant

This chapter discusses the creative process of Infinite Infant, starting from the concepts of infinity and reincarnation, and with metaphors ranging from giant womb to blurred underworld. I will elaborate on the connection between spirituality

and dance in Infinite Infant at a conceptual level, then discuss the implementation and development of the process.

1.1.1 Spirituality- based infinity and reincarnation

Infinity and reincarnation are two essential concepts in Infinite Infant.

Although Infinite Infant departs from dominant concepts of Worth, Legitimacy, Politics, Gender, Sexuality, Race, and Ethnicity, which have been tightly related to dance in the present age discourse, and I do not deny or reject the value of using dance as a tool or even a weapon with which to comprehend the current state of social concerns globally (Geduld 2008). However, I desire to remove, or suspend, the radical or non-radical social significance in Infinite Infant, as the word "Infinity" takes its place as the natural center of spirituality, through which "the window of the Moment opens to the sky of the eternal" (Houff 1993). This word is also frequently represented with the sign " ∞ " in Mathematics, meaning limitless, unending, or greater than any natural number.

In addition to "Infinity," the Buddhist notion of "Reincarnation," which is linked to the methodology of restoring spirituality in dance, forms another central theme in my research process. First, Buddhism describes reincarnation (Sanskrit: samsara) as infinite. The doctrine of reincarnation is the basic idea of Buddhist moral metaphysics. Its goal is to transcend reincarnation and become Buddha because reincarnation symbolizes that all states of life are "suffering" (Dong 2007). Without enough merit and virtue, people must reincarnate infinitely until they reach the Buddhahood state. Second, I supposed that infinity and reincarnation can be translated as the physical theory of "eternal repetition" in Nietzsche's philosophy, because Nietzsche mentions in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche 1968) that "in an infinite period of time, every possible combination would at some time be attained." In other words, when time is nonlinear and cyclic, all existence repeats itself countless times. In my view this supports the argument from a non-religious perspective that reincarnation is infinite in an ideal state.

Overall, the notion of infinite infant should be regarded as a hybrid newborn, infused with the concepts of spirituality, infinity, and reincarnation simultaneously.

1.1.2 Tracing trajectory- from giant womb to blurred underworld

Infinite Infant sprouted from the inspirational nutrients of the Hothouse/Arks Incubator in the summer of 2022. The artist we worked with in week five was James Clotfelter, a wonderful instructor in the Duke Dance Program. He asked us to prepare at least one object, source of inspiration, or design element important to our present creative work. As I had already established that my research would focus on spirituality, I imagined utilizing a white, stretchable fabric to cover the body and then moving the body to reach the goal of internally and externally isolated, blurred, sacred, and non-human growth dynamics. Thus, I envisioned myself as a creature poised to emerge from the shell, using my body to free myself of the wet, sticky fluid inside the uterus. Besides the fabric, I collaborated with luminous lighting in my experimental movement. The fabric attempted to conceal both my body and the light, yet a warm yellow glow defined my silhouette projected

onto the fabric. Thus, the entire scene resembled a colored ultrasound projection of a sleeping, lightly trembling newborn within its mother's womb, and I was that adult infant in the womb's field of joy.



Figure 1: Initial form of Infinite Infant

Therefore, the Infinite Infant was conceived in a single womb, which grows into a giant, multi-layered womb that is both a tribute to the resilience and fragility of life and a celebration of human existence. I regard this new womb as a site of fertile soil, a warm ocean, and a communal spiritual habitat open to all souls. Thus, I created the conditions for Infinite Infant, at this stage in a museum-like space, filled with incense, mirrors, crystals, hanging fabrics, chanting bowls, drawings and so on. The participants were invited to this museum to interact with various objects,

for example, being immersed in incense and strolling through the fabric. In addition, traditional Chinese rituals such as the "jump over fire" of Shandong province and the "water-sprinkling" of the Dai minority formed elements of Infinite Infant, which I included to bless the participants. In what I proposed as sacred and spiritual realm for movements, Infinite Infant retained movement under the fabric. As I moved under the fabric, I enlarged the movement patterns by mimicking the unborn Infant's actions. The main movement features are hands and feet that remained mostly parallel and move simultaneously, with eyes closed, occasional spasticity, and general quietness.

Yet, merely grasping the dynamics of the infant was insufficient to sustain the notion of the Infinite Infant in an attempt to restore spirituality in dance, just as a space is not necessarily to be labelled a "museum" simply because it contains a few objects. As the womb and Infant were figurative representations and I was intent on "serving the audience" by providing them with a satisfying museum-going

experience, I neglected my movement expressions so that they became flimsy and unconvincing at that stage.

My decision to set the Infinite Infant in the underworld presented a huge twist in my artistic process. I searched for methods to address the challenges outlined in the previous paragraph to develop Infinite Infant. First, the "womb" and the "infant" concepts were blurred. The giant "womb" was thus trans-morphed into a vague and chaotic underworld river, which governed not only birth but also death, where reincarnation appeared. Besides this, I decided for the "infant" to become a wisp of a living soul floating on the river, waiting to be born. Thus, Infinite Infant left the framework of rebirth in the physical world and embraced the spiritual zone between life and death instead. Second, I nourished Infinite Infant with specific cultural roots, such as Buddhist theory with its meditation practices, restoring spirituality through connection to Emptiness in movements. Based on these two methods, I sought out Nicole Schwartz, a Duke senior undergraduate student, as my collaborator. I was interested in the possibility that spirituality can be evoked and

shared between different bodies in movements. Thus, Infinite Infant was transformed into a 'dual' movement on the underworld river.

1.2 Elements of Infinite Infant

A range of elements had to be incorporated into Infinite Infant to bring to life the vision of an underground river. These include light sources like egg-shaped lights set on the floor and Chinese lanterns hanging on the audience space, the costume of long white fabrics, topless performers, and a specific selection of sounds.

1.2.1 Light sources

For the lighting Infinite Infant, twenty egg-shaped lights were arranged in a non-linear pattern on the theater floor. As fire was not permitted in the theater, the initial natural fire setting was replaced by warm egg-lights, which emitted a golden, elliptical light. The decision to use egg-shaped lights was based on their qualities, which complement the concept of Infinite Infant. Eggs are fragile and need protection, making them "weaker" than square or triangle shapes. However, the

circle shape of an egg holds great meaning in Chinese culture, as it symbolizes harmony, completeness, and a cyclical nature. In the underworld of Infinite Infant, which is hidden and fragile yet also inclusive of all souls, the egg-lights serve as guiding lights for the deceased, illuminating the path to the afterlife. When placed on the theater floor, the warm yellow light reflects off the ground, creating a black mirror or water surface effect. This reflection adds to the impression of the egg-lights as clusters of souls, leading them towards their destination.

The second component of Infinite Infant involved ten red lanterns, each with a 20-inch diameter, which hung from the balcony on the second floor, where the audience was situated. Initially, the idea of hanging lanterns was inspired by an architectural form in the Chinese Fujian province called a Tulou. A Tulou is often a massive, enclosed, and fortified earth construction, most commonly rectangular or circular, with extremely strong load-bearing rammed earth walls between three and five stories tall and holding up to 800 people ("Fujian Tulou" 2022). These buildings are designed for communal living and have the distinctive feature of red lanterns

hanging in each apartment. Thus, each floor of the Tulou has a layer of red lanterns visually, and not only one layer. That's why I had the idea to transplant the lantern element from Chinese Tulou to a square theater with multiple levels of space. I set the performance area on the first floor, the audience area on the second floor, and the music and lighting control on the third floor. The lanterns were hung on the second floor, the space in which the audience was situated most of the time. In addition, since the hanging lanterns symbolize the poised state of human beings moving on and welcoming good fortune, this feature suggested that the second floor belongs to the dimension of the material world. In contrast, the blurred underground river on the first floor indicated the non-human spiritual realm; hence the choice of egg-lights.



Figure 2: Tulou in Fujian province

1.2.2 Costume and Sound

Apart from the two long white fabrics utilized in Infinite Infant, costumes were an element that I intentionally "ignored", because I believe that an infant does not need to be dressed in any fanciful costume, but rather in the simplest clothes or even none. In fact, I decided to perform topless in front of the public. Thus, I envisioned the costume in Infinite Infant as two long white fabrics and flesh.

First, the white fabric appeared in the second part of Infinite Infant. Nicole and I each had a 4-yard-long piece of fabric, one end being secured around our waists, after which we dragged the two pieces onto the stage behind us, walking at

an even pace. The fabric could be described as a long white tail or a long skirt, and aimed to allude to the umbilical cord that connects infants to their mothers at birth. Like the fabric I used, an umbilical cord is soft and slender. Nicole and I continued walking separately around two egg-lights, as in the gnostic growth of a shell, until the fabric was wound into a small "nest" surrounding an egg-light. We then stepped onto the fabric that was wound into this shell shape and bent down to lift a part of the fabric. The fabric was stretched upward so that it covered the front of our bodies. At this point the fabric was translucent with the warm yellow light of the egg-light at its base, aimed to reflect a fetus within the womb. I wanted the fabric in Infinite Infant to visualize the womb, the umbilical cord and other elements related to human birth.

Second, why did I decide for Nicole and myself to perform this process topless? Besides the fact that infants are born naked, I consider that it takes courage to peel off the external decoration in front of a public. I did not propose it as a rebellion against inner shame, but rather an expression of an emptiness

connected to spirituality. It is how I wanted to express my view of the body as a vessel for the human cosmic soul rather than a yoke of sexual innuendo, political implications, and so forth. Thus, the (partly) unclothed natural body became the costume for the infinite infant.



Figure 3: Infinite Infant in Von Der Heydon theater, photo by Alaric Zhou

Sound formed another essential part in the artistic process of Infinite Infant.

I chose multiple parts of two pieces of music and then arranged and combined them. The first piece is, and untitled sound file sourced from NASA, and the second is ‘Sound Support’ from the composer Masterminded. Thus, the recognizable sound elements in Infinite Infant are the universe, bells, flowing water, the child’s humming

in an exotic language, and dripping water. Most of the sounds in Infinite Infant lack a definite rhythmic structure, for the sound elements to function as a transducer between movements and parts. For instance, when the bell rings, Nicole and I recognized the end of the first part and begin to stand up and approach the black curtain. Therefore, the sound acts like the Infinite Infant's skeleton, supporting each part's proper functioning.

1.3 Practice of restoring spirituality

This section expands upon two methodological practices I developed to restore dance and spirituality in Infinite Infant. The first are the dance scores that I created and merged with two scores composed by Nicole. I outline below, how Infinite Infant used the scores to focus on and evoke spirituality and mention potential shortcomings of the score's use. The second practice, the one of Buddhist philosophy, focuses on meditation on emptiness, including the rituals, forms, and modalities of the Infinite Infant.

1.3.1 Examples of dance scores

Most of the movement scores for Infinite Infant were written in prose or poetry and begin with descriptions of one or multiple senses to tap into Nicole's and my movement responses. The descriptions of color, taste, sight, and touch helped us to imagine and construct the scene in which we were embodied, one that was extracted from our memory or was completely new and otherworldly. Then, we created and experienced new movement languages to respond to that scene. I believe that the use of dance scores in Infinite Infant focused on transcending the limitations of place, time, and space by virtue of sensory stimulation. For example, we felt we could dance with Buddha one moment and the next moment we could transport ourselves to a different planet. The scores helped Nicole and me to perceive and evoke spirituality incarnated through different objects. Here, I would like to clarify that I believe that the objects that evoke spirituality are not limited to gods, spirits, and ancestors which are generally beyond the material world; instead, they can be all kinds of objects that stimulate our senses on a larger scale. I have

provided some examples of scores that permeate the creative process in 'Infinite

Infant' below:

Mushroom in the rain:

As the autumn rain falls, refreshing droplets cleanse the chilled earth, invigorating your senses. You stand amidst the rain, embracing your sensation as it reawakens your being. Envision yourself as a humble red mushroom, exposed to the elements yet content, as it extends its roots deep into the mud. Your toes and feet tenaciously burrow into the soil, expanding into soft, feathery tendrils, foraging for nourishment and moisture. Begin with a single mushroom that taking shape in your mind's eye, then broaden your visualization to encompass thousands of mushrooms sprouting, decaying, and journeying throughout your body.

When the moss covers your body:

The moss creeps and crawls, intent on engulfing your entire form. Shut your eyes and visualize a thick blanket of greenery cloaking every inch of your body, rendering you damp, restless, and immobile. These creeping vines spawn

ceaselessly, replicating and spreading like wildfire, attempting to corrupt your mind and flesh. Yet, you remain conscious and alert, communicating with the moss through tiny, minute movements. Though you appear still and silent, you negotiate with the moss using your body, constantly contending its insidious influence. Finally, you seize the moss with your bare hands, biting and tearing it with your teeth or crushing it underfoot. As you purge the last bits of the moss, you revel in the exhilarating sensation of a naked, unfettered body, dancing without restraints.

I am the back of you:

We entered this world as a single entity, and now I invite you to lie down and visualize the ground as the central axis. Take your time to carve me with your entire back, from head to toe. As you do this, my essence merges with yours, and your back grows additional senses – eyes, nose, mouth, and ears. We have shared everything, from cherished memories, all the way down to our deepest secrets. Can you recall every aspect of me that you've observed? Or are there still parts of me that remain unknown? Am I constantly evolving, tightening, melting, or dissipating?

Regardless of how I change, I will always be present in your consciousness. As you slowly rise to your feet, you can sense my presence behind you. Together, we move in harmony, dancing as one.

Waiting (Nicole Schwartz):

Let yourself wait for the moment when love flows through every cell of your being, pure and liquid. Trust and allow it to come, and listen deeply within yourself, where it takes the shape of nothingness. Ignore any distracting thoughts that may arise and focus instead on sitting in stillness and saying a prayer.

Listening (Nicole Schwartz):

There are billions of ears all across your body. Let the listening and sensing move you; Be in stillness and then become the skin of the earth.

Though scores greatly amplified Nicole's and my bodily senses and allowed our consciousness to travel through time, space, and dimensions in movements, we concluded after extensive practice that the scores assisted our bodies more as individuals than the union. In other words, we found that scores could sometimes

isolate us in our own worlds, impeding our spiritual connection with each other and the outside world. Thus, we optimized the scores by adding the Buddhist concept of emptiness to further enhance the connection between our bodies and souls.

1.3.2 Meditation on emptiness

The comprehension and practice of emptiness in Buddhist philosophy served as a conduit that unites the body and consciousness between Nichole and me while also connecting with spirituality. So, in *Infinite Infant*, meditation is the way to arrive at a status of emptiness. To this end, Nicole and I established a daily ritual before rehearsal, spent at least ten minutes lying on the ground in *Infinite Infant*, and incorporated Buddhist walking. First was a daily ritual to immerse us in nature for one to two hours in Duke Garden before rehearsing in the theatre. During this time, we meditated on thick layers of fallen leaves beneath the big trees, attuning ourselves to the natural rhythms and purging any superfluous mental distractions. Additionally, we spent time sitting by the riverbank, observing the long wake created by ducks swimming through the water, like the element of white fabric we

used in Infinite Infant. Our attentions also extended to the growth and maturation of the surrounding plant life as we continuously drew upon the sustaining energy of nature to achieve an awakened state of emptiness within our natural selves. Thus, Nichol and I were infused with heightened natural energy through meditation before each rehearsal or performance, which imbued us with calmness as well as a sense of emptiness.

Second, In the opening scene of Infinite Infant, Nicole and I lay on the ground for over ten minutes with only our little fingers contact. It was a process designed to gradually sink our bodies into the ground, whilst emptying our minds of distractions. In Infinite Infant, I did have to overcome various obstacles to reach the state of mental clarity, including my concerns about beauty, validity, continuity of movement, and audience preferences. These distractions often seem to annihilate the spirituality of the dance in Infinite Infant and severed the connection between Nicole and me. Therefore, it was necessary for us to prepare ourselves mentally and physically before each instantiation/performance by spending at least ten

minutes clearing our minds to attain a state of meditation and emptiness. I propose that our bodies became natural, non-performative bodies that moved in response to evoking our inner spirituality after entering emptiness. It felt like we transformed into cells, breathing and alive, and entangled. It is this spirituality that we intended to transmit outward from this state of being.

Third, Buddha's walking is vital in Infinite Infant. According to Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh, "meditation is about your state of mind as you're walking, each step you make must make you happy, peaceful, and serene (Prajit 2017)." I suppose the feet carry the body's weight while walking, and every step involves an intimate interaction with the ground. Buddha walking is a slow and stable movement, anchored in the present moment and accompanied by the passage of time. In Infinite Infant, walking was undoubtedly meditation on emptiness, referring to the part of experiencing birth in reincarnation. In my view, walking in the infinite Infant was akin to carrying a bowl of water on the head, where the person is completely

focused on each step in the present moment. Thus, the walking process is being
sacred and spiritual.

2. Suppression of spirituality in dance and its restoration

This chapter aims to give the reader a broad conceptual context for chapter one. The primary focus of chapter two is to discuss the suppression of spirituality within the context of dance, as well as proposing methodologies for restoring spirituality. I will begin by defining my approach to spirituality and its association with dance how I have encountered it throughout my dancing career. Subsequently, I will speculate as to the reasons behind the suppression of spirituality in dance, which I trace to institutionalized religion, dance education, and performative spirit possession forms. Lastly, I will offer two methodologies for restoring spirituality with dance, based on my personal experience: dance scores and the emptiness in Buddhist philosophy as touched upon above.

2.1 The definition of spirituality – in specific dance forms

"Spirituality" derives from the adjective "Spiritual," which St. Paul first utilized to denote something inspired by God's Holy Spirit. Having its etymological roots in the realm of religion, the idea of spirituality is elusive despite its use in

many different contexts nowadays (Keown 1999). Sandra M. Schneiders defines spirituality as a personality, a fundamental or anthropological quality of the human species at large (Schneiders 2003). Spirituality is inbuilt into the human species — presumably an inborn product of evolutionary biology (Hardy 1977). However, according to Barber, spirituality, rather than being inborn, is a path toward deeper self-awareness and truth (Barber 2019). Besides, Peter Van Ness, Associate Professor of Religion at Columbia University, describes spirituality as "the quest for attaining an optimal relationship between what one truly is and everything that is." (Peter 1998).

Thus, spirituality in this thesis is a quest of every spiritual being to pursue their true nature as infinite, with the omnipresent spirits, and to connect with existence beyond the material world. Personally, I have come to understand the general notion of spirituality as a concept that is highly Western and rational. However, I have infused it with my own embodiment, cultural background, education, and religious beliefs to make it a part of my very being.

Hence for me, the beauty of spirituality embodies the wildness of creatures, uncontrolled movements, sincere prayers to the deities, and beyond. It comes from the call of the sacred land, the whispers of native people, the jungle, the ocean, the sun, and the stars. It comes from all, and it is all. It has become a unique and all-encompassing form of spirituality for me, and dance is the path through which I can connect with it.

As an art form encompassing both the physical and spiritual realms, dance is a conduit for exploring this intersection. First, dance is physical movement; secondly, dance can serve an essential spiritual purpose by representing spiritual joy (Luling 2013). "Higher levels of consciousness" (Halprin 2003) work when people dance. Besides, Nietzsche ties dance intimately to his philosophical concepts of body, soul, and life. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, he states, "I only believe in the dancing God" (Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche [1883] 2018). It is through dance practice that many cultures communicate their cosmology and promote a relationship with the divine. Thus, I conclude that whether God is dancing or not,

the dance itself is imbued with spirituality, regarded as a form of moving spirituality that connects the cosmos.

From my standpoint, dance serves as a container for spiritual expression, and my body acts as a conduit to excavate and articulate dance's intrinsic spiritual core through bodily movements. Moreover, the spirituality in dance I have observed is a constant flow, unending, undifferentiated, invisible, dense, and steadfast. It permeates and affects people, objects, and phenomena by transmitting, what I would describe as high energy toward low energy. Therefore, most of my movement focuses on connecting with spirituality and how spirituality is awakened and expressed through my body.

2.2 The suppression of spirituality in dance and how my work responds

However, my strong conviction is that spirituality in dance is being subjugated. According to Tacey, "the spiritual waters are rising." However, he also notes that our secular and religious institutions are suppressing spirituality but

cannot contain the spiritual impulses of our day (Tacey 2004). Thus, I would like to investigate the factors that suppress spirituality, specifically in dance and divide them into external and internal reasons. So, institutional religions and my previous experiences in dance education are the evidence of external factors. As for internal factors, I primarily refer to the performative spirit possession forms. To elucidate the argument of spiritual suppression in dance, I relate to my past dance work, "Simulated Summoning".

2.2.1 Institutionalized religion

First, I suggest that institutionalized religion and some dance education systems I experienced are among the external factors contributing to the suppression of spirituality in dance. What exactly prohibits the spirituality of dance in a religious context? Religion, a neutral concept tied to creation and feeling, is the cultural vehicle that gives people forms to express their relationship to divinity (Harris 1991). It does not necessarily conflict with spirituality. Moreover, I conclude that religion could initially be seen as a fertile ground for spiritual development, and

the two realms could be mutually constituted. However, institutionalized religion seems to suppress embodied spirituality. According to Erricker (2001), institutionalized religion that rejects alternative worldviews, such as humanism, should be abandoned since institutionalized religion disregards the spiritual growth and worldviews of individuals (Erricker 2001). Throughout history, when religious sects are granted the dominating power, it ceases to be neutral, and instead, these sects employ it as a tool of restriction and jurisdiction. This phenomenon brings to my mind the ancient Chinese emperors who wielded absolute power to perpetrate torture precisely because the populace believed they were the sons of god. These divinities descended from the heavens to the earthly realm. As a result, all forms of suppression were rationalized as a mandate from heaven.

When it comes to the wider field of dance, institutionalized religion does seem to suppress the expressive nature of dance. Dance is as much physical as spiritual. The uninhibited movements signify spiritual emancipation and autonomy, which caused some religious leaders' contemptuous attitude towards or even

prescription of dance. For example, during the medieval period, Christians endeavored to eliminate dance, as it was viewed as seductive and disruptive of the natural order. Similarly, Islam generally disapproves of dance, considering it a superficial diversion from the contemplation of the wisdom of the prophets ("Dance. Dance and Religion | Encyclopedia.com," n.d.). Therefore, I conclude that institutionalized religion has frequently suppressed dance since its spiritual potential for wider connection could lead individuals to search for freedom, truth, and humanity beyond the material world and religious regulation.

2.2.2 Dance Education

In modern secular times, while religion loses its grip on dance, it has become subject to the disciplinary power of societies' dance education. I suggest that it is the formulaic training and rigid criteria of certain dance education that suppress the spiritual essence of dance. I will elaborate on this phenomenon by drawing from my experience of Chinese dance education and the relevant Western scholarship. In retrospect, I recall the tough days of being a dance student in China. The Ballet

barre was always damp because of our hand sweat and the mirror was fogged on summer days. We kept training and repeating again and again, leaving traces on the dark blue Marley floor of the dance studio. We were required to wear tight dance attire so that our teacher can better examine our muscle form and its accuracy when we danced. We need to follow the teacher's direction on movements as though we were dance machines. Moreover, there was a punitive system. Take the weekly weighing for example. Every week, the teachers recorded how much our dance student's weight. If one's weight was heavier than the week before, he/she would suffer the punishment of writing an 800-word self-reflection essay and running five laps around the playground. Additionally, we needed to have our hair tied up all the time even when we were not at dance sessions, which according to our teachers was to sustain the image of "dance student". Also, the teacher would patrol the school store to ban us from buying snacks for the purpose of body-weight management. If we got caught in these situations, we would be castigated and punished. More importantly, I suffered self-doubt and body shame because of

the ideal dance body that such dance education indoctrinated: skinny physique, small face, flexible and supple body. I hated my thick neck and short legs, and I started to believe that I was not suited for dance. However, it turned out it is not that I am not capable of dancing, but that it was difficult for me to conform to ossified dance techniques, ideologies, and forms.

In my opinion, dance education can be likened to institutionalized religion that does not prohibit dance per se but suppresses the potential of dance – for freedom, self-awareness, and autonomy, which deeply relates to my concepts of spirituality expanded above, by imposing a series of restrictions on dance. Jill Green writes, "I look at dance education as a disciplinary power that trains students to be docile citizens in the dance world and creates standards for dance behavior and bodily being (Green 2003)". Therefore, I believe that dance education often fails to cherish the singularity and uniqueness of each dance student and treats them like mass products on the assembly line, making them look and dance properly. Consequently, dance students could possibly be subject to a "double

consciousness" when they perceive themselves through an external perspective and standard.

2.2.3 Performative spirit possession form and how my work responds

In addition to the certain suppression of spirituality in dance by both external institutionalized religion and dance education, this section aims to provide a rational critique of the performative forms of spiritual possession within the internal realm of spiritual dance, also known as a sacred dance. It can be suggested that sacred dances which involve spiritual possession are done as a means of awakening spirituality (Stewart 2013). For example, sacred dances such as the Shamanic dance, Sufi whirling, Kundun Blu-ray, and the Buddha's palm are all used to combine ecstatic dancing with supernatural forces to evoke spirituality. These forces may be ancestors or divinities, ghosts of foreign origin, or entities both ontologically and ethnically alien (Boddy 1994). When the body serves as a temporary vessel for the divine, spirituality is evoked. In this way, spirit possession is a way to connect with spirituality in dance.

However, paradoxically, the spirit possession form could repress the spirituality of dance for the two reasons posited below and be responded to by my past work, "Simulated Summoning". First, this particular dance genre might idolize supernatural forces and neglect one's internal strengths and spiritual growth. I view such a spirit possession as a possible way of gaining respectability from and authority over others, meaning dance is somewhat instrumentalized in such situations. This is because such movements and behaviors exhibited in an authentic state of possession often involve uncommon and non-human movements, such as spasms, eye-rolling, convulsions, and chanting of mantras. They not only expanded the possessed person's dance language but also made them regarded as gods in the present. Second, the performative nature of possession dance contradicts the very goal of connecting with spirituality since one could possibly just "pretend" and "perform" rather than form a real connection with spirituality. For instance, in Haiti's spirit possession performance, as elsewhere the medium's impersonation of a familiar spirit is a skilled performance enhanced by elaborate costumes and props.

Thus, performative spirit possession is less a genuine experience than an orchestrated performance (“The Spiritual Quest” n.d.), and the spirituality in dance is also suppressed by performativity.

The form of performative spirit possession reminds me of my previous work, "Simulation Summoning," in which I portrayed an evil snake god possessing my body through stage performance rather than an actual spirit possession ritual. I designed this performative setting because I believed inviting a spirit into one's body on stage is dramatic, irrational, and irresponsible. Moreover, I lacked knowledge of the specific possession rules and culture, so being "possessed" on stage was also inauthentic. However, even though the snake god's possession on stage was performative, it gave me powerful energy. I danced on edge between being controlled by external forces and retaining self-awareness. I preferred to be controlled entirely, believing that being possessed could unleash stronger energy and create bizarre movement patterns. Besides, I used red lighting and snake-language ritual music and drew black symbol lines all over my body to serve the

performative "possession." Nevertheless, I must admit that not every performance or rehearsal had spirits or spirituality involved due to both, god, and I, being uncontrollable. Therefore, I relied on or even exploited the "god" in my performance, and the performative settings actually suppressed spirituality. Meanwhile, I decided to not create or dance similar works again because "Simulated Summoning" felt somewhat deceptive. As a dancer, I do not want to pretend to move until god descends and is irresistible.

2.3 Embodied methodologies to restore spirituality in dance

I believe that evoking the suppressed spirituality in dance is a return to the original purpose of moving. A return to a natural, balanced, non-patronizing, non-serving, non-pleasing dance pattern. Obviously, I do neither have a method nor power to change institutionalized religion, dance education, or the development of spiritual dance at large. However, through my embodied methodologies, I can experiment with a connection between dance and spirituality in my body. There are

two main aspects as discussed above: dance scores and the integration of emptiness in Buddhist philosophy, which I will elucidate further.

2.3.1 The use of dance scores

The first methodology for evoking spirituality in dance is to use my own scores. “Scores allow people to do anything because, at the same time, we’re supported” (Reymond 1997). It is usually in a manuscript or printed form of a musical work and typically consists of several musical notes. So, when the score used in the field of dance is a record of inspiration for movements usually used in improvisation. It can be almost anything (Millard 2015). So, scores can consist of brief requirements such as immerse or decay, a poem, a narrative, a photograph, and so on. For example, American choreographer Deborah Hay created scores ‘take six steps into the light without taking a step’ and ‘no time to fly’ to create a piece (Millard 2015).

In my opinion, the score enabled me to transcend dimensions, time, and space, expanding my consciousness beyond the confines of the physical realm.

Thus, my body got permission to travel in multiple dimensions through movement, interlinking with spirituality. For example, Professor Michael Kliën gave us a score called "magical crowd" in his class, and he proposed that all souls could be part of our magical crowd, including animals such as a dog. When I used this score, my consciousness and body were transported to a funeral of my past or future life, where many people and spirits materialized. Then I recorded all my feelings and experiences through the "magical crowd" score, which eventually created my own score.

Here is my score born out of "magical crowd": The flowers and butterflies were bright and colorful, but the coffin where you stayed was pitch black. Your arms were outstretched, and your hands were crossed in front of your slightly protruding tummy so that you looked like you no longer looked alive. The crowd was slowly moving toward you, just like an impenetrable wall. You have a deep, abiding affection for my parents, and you are familiar with every feature on their faces, from the placement of their features to the sagging of their skin and the

arch of their brows. However, you are unable to interact with them visually or aurally. Your funeral was attended by everyone you had met in this life, yet no one showed any emotion on their faces. Their faces were totally blank.

Therefore, I can directly establish a spiritual connection by using the scores I create or the ones I recreate based on the scores from others. Furthermore, I desire that individuals who use my scores will and should interpret them in their unique way.

2.3.2 Drawing on emptiness in Buddhist philosophy

The second methodology for evoking spirituality in dance is drawing on emptiness in Buddhist philosophy. Growing up in a traditional Buddhist family, I was introduced to Mahayana Buddhist teachings at quite a young age. From my understanding of these teachings, I see emptiness as a means of deconstructing my body's performative or staged aspects, returning it to a more spiritually heightened state of sensitivity. Personally, I believe that this is a crucial step in evoking spirituality within my dance practice.

The first concept that I would like to speak about is emptiness, which is a fundamental idea in Madhyamaka philosophy and is also known as Sunyata. Emptiness refers to the notion that all dharmas lack inherent existence or svabhava (Westerhoff 2009). This relates to the idea that everything is not independent, eternal, or contained within anything else. Instead, things rely on various causes and conditions to exist, and when these conditions cease to exist, so does the thing itself. It's worth noting that emptiness, according to Buddhism, is not synonymous with nihilism or nothingness. When emptiness is experienced as a meditative state, it is attained by letting go of any mental themes and entering a state of internal emptiness (MN 122). Being in these state aims to disengage the mind from automatic responses to sensory stimuli, eliminate mental defilements, and cultivate perfect equanimity and awareness (Vetter 1988).

Another reason for presenting emptiness as a tool for deconstructing my performative or staged body, and then bringing it back to a spiritually heightened state, is that my body has been shaped by various dance genres and years of stage

performance. While these experiences have added to my body's dynamism, they have also resulted in a rigid set of movement patterns. Previously, I prioritized obtaining high levels of dance techniques over listening to my body's needs, leading to a focus on performance rather than spiritual connection. Therefore, emptiness ultimately provides me with the opportunity to shed entrenched performative aspects and cultivate physical resilience within my dance practice. This allows me to connect with the genuine essence of dance and express what I perceive as my innermost self.

Also, within my embodied dance practice of reaching emptiness, I regard my body as the container that holds all histories of this life, including any thoughts, traumas, desires, feelings, perceptions, behaviors, education, family, and finally, my soul. The state of emptiness for me is to leave the material self temporarily and return to the spiritual self. In a state of emptiness, my energy circulates with the outside world. I scan my body, respecting and listening to the demands of each part

that come unexpectedly to me and not confronting them. I wait patiently for the unknown, spiritual movements.

Conclusion

The central theme of this thesis is how spirituality in dance is suppressed by institutionalized religion, dance education, and performative possession forms, and how I attempt to restore spirituality in dance through the development of a personal practice. Thus, as my thesis action, Infinite Infant explores the origin of dance, the spirituality of dance, and the energy of dance. It uses the Buddhist concept of reincarnation and meditative practices on emptiness, combined with my personally composed dance score, to deconstruct my performative, heavily trained body. To me, Infinite Infant is not a dance performance but a series of movements, acts, or daily routines. As audience of this piece, they are invited to observe the flow, breathing, stillness, and disappearance of spirituality in the theatre. Similarly, Nicole and I also observe spirituality in this way, patiently waiting for the body to connect with spirituality and for bodies to connect with each other. Besides, as for future goals, I am interested in exploring the possibility of infinite infant occurring in various environments and how the spiritual connection may be influenced by

different external factors such as temperature and spatial settings. I am particularly intrigued by the potential of creating an infinite infant experience in the multilayered Tulou Building in China. Additionally, my near-term goal will be establishing an infinite infant space in a museum or installation space where I have previously used hanging fabric and crystals. I envision this space as being both isolated and social, with a flowing and evocative spirituality. Overall, the purpose of writing this thesis and creating Infinite Infant is to connect with readers and collectively explore the meaning of dance outside of its institutional containers. It is my conviction that dance is meant to be spontaneous, enjoyable, spiritual, and joyful, free from the constraints of popular aesthetics, institutionalized education, religion, and other forms of secularism. All people are beautiful dancers.

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