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Abstract

Threads: A Dance Dialogue of Love and Longing, an MFA thesis film, narrates the story of two individuals from China and Panamá, longing to unite but separated by continents and oceans. This film symbolizes my profound connection with Panamá and China, countries that have significantly shaped my journey as a dance artist. Showcasing Ilda Mason from Panamá and Jason Sheng (张胜) from China, the film features improvised dances in various locations, inspired by the modernist Panamanian poem “La Última Gaviota” by Ricardo Miró and the ancient Chinese poem “Conversation Among Mountains” by Tang Dynasty poet Li Bai. The poetry and the environment serve as catalysts for spontaneous movement, with the unpredictability of the dance sequences, the rhythm and emotions of the poems, and the unique responses of each dancer shaping the film’s direction and impact.

The film, which premiered virtually on April 14, 2024, stands as a testament to the power of collaboration. Each collaborator, including the dancers, cinematographers, editor, musical composer, and English translator, added a unique layer to the final product, surpassing what could have been achieved individually.

This document delves into research that informs this project, including the history of improvisational dance, an examination of the symbiotic relationship between dance and poetry, and an analysis of the featured poems in the film. Additionally, it discusses the film-making methodology, my creative interactions with the collaborators, and the potential implications of this film for future projects.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

Threads: A Dance Dialogue of Love and Longing

by

Lisa Carina Fourmyle

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

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College of the Arts

Department of Theatre and Dance

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A THESIS

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Montclair, NJ

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Introduction

Imagine a dance, poetry, and a film, seamlessly interwoven into a single artistic tapestry, telling a tale of love and longing that connects across continents. My MFA thesis project, titled *Threads: A Dance Dialogue of Love and Longing (Threads)*, fuses the artistic languages of dance and poetry through the medium of film. The film presents a poignant narrative of love and yearning between two dancers separated by geography. Their story symbolizes my affection for two countries, Panamá and China, that have profoundly shaped my personal life and dance career. In crafting *Threads*, I delve into the transformative process inherent in artistic collaboration. Much like the childhood game of telephone, where a whispered message evolves as it passes from person to person, this film takes shape through each participant's interpretation. As the director and creator of this story, I collaborated closely with dancers, cinematographers, the musical composer, and the editor. Their unique perspectives enriched the narrative, but ultimately, the final portrayal rested in my hands.

Drawing from my immersive experiences in Panamá and China, I collaborated with dancers Ilda Mason from Panamá and Zhang Sheng (Jason) from Mainland China. The film opens in a softly lit room where a character is writing a note which says "I miss you," in three languages: English, Spanish, and Mandarin. The viewer is then transported to a brief time-lapse of each dancer in a bustling city, one in New York and the other in Shanghai. The time-lapse shot accentuates the constant flow of passersby, a metaphor for the ever-moving flow of life. The note and the timelapse serve as an introduction indicating separation and the passage of time. The film unfolds in three main sections: Ilda's dance solo, Jason's dance solo, and a third section which merges the two in a side-by-side dance sequence, which resolves with both dancers following their separate paths.

The film's score features music composed by my long-time friend, Jeff Goodkind from California, along with two poems: a modernist Panamanian poem and an ancient Chinese poem. These poems, recited by the dancers in their first languages of Spanish and Mandarin, serve as pivotal connectors between the dancers that also inform their improvised movements. Ilda's dance embodies a sense of freedom and longing, mirroring themes in the Panamanian poem, while Jason's movements express introspection and contentment, resonating with themes in the Chinese poem. During filming, I guided the dancers' improvised movements with impromptu verbal cues related to the poems, such as "You have lost your words," "You are searching to no avail," and "Your breath is all you need." These cues introduced an element of unpredictability, triggering spontaneous dance sequences, which steered them towards a narrative of love and longing.

Along with the dancers and composer, the film's creative team included film editor Edward Campbell, English translator ¹Dr. Alvaro Gomez Prado and cinematographers, Fido Wu (China) and Rachel Batashvili (New York City). My personal experiences and friendships in Panamá and China led to the selection of collaborators and poems for this project. Reflective of my relationships with the dancers and my longing to return to Panamá and China, *Threads* portrays my own love story with these lands, transformed through the lenses of the artists that contributed to this project.

This paper delves into the process of creating my thesis film *Threads*, where I explore the use of poetry as a catalyst for choreography and merge the languages of movement and words to build characters and to shape a narrative story. My research also examines the historical context of the two poems, their relevance to the project, and their influence on the dancers'

¹ No official English translation for the Panamanian poem could be found; therefore, at my request, Prado provided an unofficial translation based on his proficiency in both Spanish and English, his background as a Panamanian, and his literary studies.

improvised movements. These inquiries contributed to my new found interest in artistic collaboration, which brings us back to the metaphor of the telephone game. Some of the key questions that directed my research were: How does the spontaneity of improvisational dance contribute to a dance film's framework? How can a poem's themes, emotions, and rhythms be interpreted and expressed through improvisational dance? How does the use of multiple languages in poetry influence the dynamics and aesthetics of the improvisational dance in the film?

The paper also documents the methodology used to create the film, organized according to the stages of filmmaking. The pre-production phase covers preparation, the production portion details the filming day in both Shanghai and New York, and the post-production phase is where all elements are unified through editing, audio layering, effects, and other final touches. The paper concludes with an explanation of the film sequence, followed by an analysis of the lessons learned during this process. I also write about future implications and the audience's response to the livestream event held on April 14th. My hope is that this work provokes a visceral experience in the viewer, while accentuating the multilayered process of collaboration.

Background

The inspiration for this thesis dates back to 2009 when a profound personal loss triggered a period of introspection and reinvention. Following my father's passing – a man whose diverse passions included writing, poetry, linguistics, and travel – I found myself adrift, entwined in shock and regret. Eager for change, I let go of nearly all material possessions and sought opportunities abroad. As I began teaching and volunteering along a path that stretched from Panamá to China, immersion in local cultures, learning local languages, and collaborating with dancers and artists rejuvenated my spirit. Despite the challenges, navigating unfamiliar customs

and landscapes instilled a sense of homecoming and cast a fresh perspective on the expansive range of methods we used daily to communicate, through language and movement.

My career as a dance instructor led me to various countries outside the United States, with significant periods in Panamá and China. These experiences not only fostered a deep appreciation for these two distinct cultures but also reinforced my belief in dance as a powerful medium for teaching and connecting with others. As a dancer trained in the technical nuances of ballroom and Latin American dance forms, I have always prized skill, precision, and a deep understanding of codified dance forms. However, my time abroad caused a shift in perspective, leading me to view dance as a medium for spontaneous connection and communication, transcending the boundaries of prior training. This insight led me to explore a variety of dance genres previously unknown to me, igniting a particular interest in improvisation. However, my experiences with improvisational dance prior to my MFA studies at Montclair State University, pertained mostly to social partner dances and creative movement concepts for young children.

The desire to learn more about improvisation led me to Montclair State University, and when the pandemic prevented me from traveling to Panamá and China, I joined the MFA dance program hoping to deepen my understanding of this genre. During my time at Montclair State University, I took courses with Claire Porter, Kathleen Kelley, Stefanie Batten Bland, Maxine Steinman, and Christian von Howard, who elicited a new way to approach my creativity. In these stimulating environments, I explored improvisation in dance and composition, movement analysis, dance film, and self-reflection aiming to extract the reasons why I pursued this work. I also engaged in collaborative projects that explored artistic dialogues combining dance, music, and poetry. This gave me a base to draw from in reference to how a work changes as it undergoes the interpretive and editorial processes during collaborative creations. As discussed in Sharrie

Barr's article, "Collaborative Practices in Dance Research: Unpacking the Process," she details the multilayered, adaptable, and personal aspects that contribute to a collaborative relationship, stressing the importance of sharing and mutual respect (57). I was also interested in how dance could influence my teaching, in instances where I was not fluent in the local language.

During my creative work in Spring 2023, under the guidance of Maxine Steinman, I embarked on my first collaborative project involving language and dance. This collaboration with Costa Rican musician Fiorella Arredondo resulted in my debut dance film, 'The Rhythm of Translation,' where we engaged in a series of three short artistic dialogues, blending our individual creative languages of dance and music. We used a poem as a starting point to evoke responses through dance and music. The project demonstrated that the merging of poetry, dance and music can serve as a potent form of communication and creative storytelling. It not only affirmed my interest in dance as a powerful medium for conveying thoughts, ideas, and emotions but also confirmed my belief that dance can express meanings with an intensity that rivals, if not surpasses, verbal expression.

The direction of my thesis was also influenced by the dance technology courses with Kathleen Kelley during the summer sessions at Montclair State University. In the first course during summer 2022, Professor Kathleen introduced the basics of filmmaking related to dance. This sparked my interest in the medium for two reasons: firstly, due to the ever-evolving technological landscape, I was keen to explore new avenues for creating, sharing, and potentially teaching dance; secondly, because film allows the narrative to be strongly influenced by the creators. During the subsequent summer course in 2023, we were tasked with creating a technology-based dance piece with a small creative team of our peers within four days. My creative team and I collaborated with two undergraduate dance majors from Montclair State

University. With two days for planning and filming, and another two days for creating a soundtrack and editing the film, the process reminded me of an intense “tech-week” in a musical theatre production. However, two significant differences were that with film, I felt I had more control over the viewer’s attention and could guide them towards my intended outcome, and I could share the finished product through several technology related platforms, making film an ideal new frontier in my career.

Finally, I feel it is important to discuss why I chose to work with improvisational dance as opposed to a form that I was proficient and comfortable with. Focusing on improvisational dance forced me out of my comfort zone. Many regulated dance forms, such as ballroom and Latin American dance (the forms with which I am most familiar), still adhere to fixed authoritarian structures that restrict creative possibilities and determine who can join; therefore, perpetuating the hierarchy in dance (Rösch 72). Improvisational dance differs from codified forms in that it does not have any connection to power, ranking systems, or gender biases, as seen in ballroom and Latin American styles. The accessibility of improvisational dance, regardless of socio-economic status and other often restrictive aspects, makes this method of making dances a flexible and inclusive way to create dance stories.

Research

Dance, with its immense expressive potential, is a powerful medium for conveying stories, thoughts, and ideas to diverse audiences. This potential was amplified for me during teaching stints in Panamá and China, where language barriers transformed movement into a primary mode of communication. This experience heightened my sensitivity towards others’ movements, as I found myself interpreting body language due to our inability to communicate

verbally. It also underscored my reliance on using words and language for teaching dance, rather than movement.

These experiences in Panamá and China profoundly shaped my teaching approach and steered the direction of this thesis work. They sparked an interest in exploring dance as a communication tool beyond the conventional settings of dance studios or theatrical stages. Amid these transformative experiences, I found myself contemplating the traditional boundaries of dance and its capacity to bridge cultural and linguistic divides. The notion of dance as a method of communicating, capable of forging connections and eliciting emotional responses in ways that words often fall short, intrigued me. This led to an exploration of dance's potential beyond the studio, envisioning it as a tool for communication and expression in everyday life. The integration of dance with other forms of art, such as poetry, emerged as a compelling concept, promising a more comprehensive and immersive experience.

This curiosity ignited the inception of my thesis project, propelling me to navigate beyond my personal experiences. This project explored the narrative potential of dance in unpredictable environments, drawing inspiration from poetry and the spontaneity of improvised movements. My thesis investigates the fusion of improvisational dance and poetry as a means to generate movement and express emotions while pushing personal boundaries and examining the benefits of integrating these creative forms.

An Exploration of Improvisational Dance

Historical Context – Dancing Our Stories

Dance ethnologist Allegra Fuller Snyder (1927-2021) posited that dance is a multidimensional form of expression, potentially one of the most intricate forms (Johnson and Snyder 8). This complexity is evident in the diverse representations of dance throughout history,

from ancient cave paintings to sculptures and prose. Historical evidence suggests that dance served as a unique form of expression in various ancient societies. This is demonstrated by French cave paintings from the Late Paleolithic period, Bronze Age pottery, figurines, and tomb reliefs from Iran, Egypt, and Crete, and artifacts from Greece's Archaic period (Snyder 12-13, Choubineh). These artifacts indicate that dance played a significant societal role, whether in religious practices or festival celebrations, underscoring its enduring presence as a means of conveying meaning and storytelling.

Traditional dance forms researcher, Professor Georgios Lykesas, defines tradition as “knowledge that has been accumulated over a long period within a society and passed down from generation to generation. This knowledge pertains to songs, dances, fairy tales, dramatic performances, etc.” (108). This definition underscores the crucial role of dance in preserving and transmitting knowledge across generations. Dance, as a way of expressing oneself, has been a vital part of human history, using movement and gesture to convey messages and stories (Chandrakha 74). Although dance rooted in tradition is important for history and culture, my goal for this project was to challenge my own traditions of structured dance knowledge and explore spontaneous methods of creating and telling stories through dance.

The Freedom of Spontaneity

In the realm of dance, improvisation is not merely a spontaneous act but a crucial element in the evolution of the arts. As Curtis Carter articulates in his article, “Improvisation in Dance,” improvisation disrupts habitual actions, paving the way for innovation. He states, “With improvisation, there is the hope that one will discover something that could not be found in a systematic preconceived process. Improvisation is thus a means of assuring a constant source of fresh materials and avoiding stagnation” (181-182). Stepping into the uncharted territory of the

present moment, dancers shed the weight of tradition, becoming vessels for innovation. The fluidity of improvisation offers liberation—a canvas where new narratives emerge organically (Carter 189). It invites exploration of the interplay between intention and intuition, infusing technique with immediacy rather than discarding it. In the journal article “Improvisational Dance-Based Psychological Training of College Students’ Dance Improvement,” the authors add that improvisational dance is “...the most primitive form of dance origin,” which gives dancers opportunities to externalize their inner expressions by integrating both mind and body (Dou et al, 2).

My thesis project leverages the unpredictable nature of improvisation to share its storyline. The unrehearsed dancers embodied the ebb and flow of affection and longing underpinned by motifs found in the specific poems. The plot was driven by impromptu verbal cuing, and the final film’s score was a work of improvisation, threading a common device for creating in the moment throughout the life and layers of the project. The unpredictable environments we chose for filming significantly contributed to the overall essence of our project. Take, for example, our shoot in Shanghai. The ever-changing terrain of mud and foliage made the surface slippery, causing Jason to lose his balance on several occasions. This led to a series of rapid movements from Jason, which strikingly contrasted his usual fluid style of movement. The decision to film in these uncontrolled locations turned out to be beneficial. It pushed the dancers out of their comfort zones, preventing them from relying on the familiarity of spaces like dance studios.

Although *Threads* does not incorporate the dance aesthetic and technique of contact improvisation, in my research I found the ideas from early innovators in the United States valuable and applicable to my film. An early definition of contact improvisation emphasizes the

importance of spontaneity, alertness, and self-correcting actions, resulting in shared physical and emotional dialogues (“About Contact Improvisation”). These aspects were most evident during the filming process in busy urban spaces, necessitating alertness and adaptability not only from the dancers but also from the cinematographer and myself. For example, during filming in New York City, a combination of rapid verbal directions from me to both the dancer and cinematographer were muffled by the onset of a large group, leading to a minor collision. This incident underscored the importance of staying alert while improvising. Alertness and adaptability are beneficial traits when working in unpredictable scenarios. In Danielle Goldman’s book, *I Want to Be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom*, she states, “This instability, however, is what makes improvisation most meaningful, with negotiations both ongoing and urgently live” (39). Based on my verbal cues, both dancers, Ilda and Jason, made in-the-moment choices as to what their movements would be and how they would evolve, resulting in an impromptu dialogue of expressions and an unrepeatable experience.

Poetry and Dance

In Jacques Lecoq’s work, *The Moving Body*, he conveys the intricate possibilities that lie in the silence before words exist to discover more about our human experience, sharing, “In any human relationship two major zones of silence emerge: before and after speech. Before, when no words are spoken, one is at a state of modesty which allows words to be born out of silence” (29). This concept of words and silence possessing equal creative potential and importance inspired both the use of poetry in my film’s sound score and the placement of the poems in relation to silent moments. Within the silence, the viewer has space to imagine their own progression of the narrative, sometimes necessary without the words, as “...the spoken word

often forgets the root from which it grew” (Lecoq 29). The merging of poetry and dance in my film was a means to fulfill these two necessary components of a human connection.

Furthermore, I chose to incorporate poetry to stimulate the creation of movement and provide dancers with cultural context as conveyed through the poems' themes. By combining the artistic language of dance as it communicates through movement and physical expression, with the literary discipline of poetry, conveying meaning through language and written word, I strived to create a rich, multifaceted experience that draws on the strengths and techniques of both arts. I initially became interested in working with dance and poetry in 2010 yet did not pursue this curiosity in depth until this MFA journey.

Shifting to an academic lens, I examine an article from Professor Miriam Giguere published in the *Journal of Dance Education*. In her work, Giguere explores the intersection of movement and linguistic languages, focusing on the relationship between kinesthetic learning and academic skills. Her article, “Thinking as They Create: Do Children Have Similar Experiences in Dance and in Language Arts,” delves into the intrinsic connection between these two artistic disciplines. She investigates how young individuals acquire knowledge and solve problems in movement-centric arts like dance and academic areas such as poetry. Giguere’s research includes case studies from school programs where children participated in dance and poetry creation exercises. Her findings reveal that both art forms provide children with a multitude of transformative learning tools. As she articulates, “Observing, empathizing, recognizing patterns, transformational thinking, and creative reverie were noted in both poetry and dance making” (Giguere 46). The fusion of dance and poetry sparks creativity and critical thinking abilities, eliciting empathetic responses. This is a reaction I sought to provoke from my film’s audience. Furthermore, this research informs my pedagogical approach and future plans

for dance and poetry projects. Giguere's research emphasizes that engaging in both movement and academic learning situations promotes a deeper understanding and retention of knowledge by stimulating multiple senses and cognitive processes relating to the creative process and critical thinking skills (47).

In relation to *Threads*, the poems, expressing key elements of national identity, cultivated a deeper bond for each dancer. During the pre-production phase, as the dancers engaged with and discussed the poems, I witnessed their introspection of the profound meanings symbolized in the words. For instance, while reading the Panamanian poem, Ilda paused to reflect on the word 'anhelo,' which lacks an English equivalent as conveyed in the poem. Her attempts to express the feeling she experienced after reading the Spanish poem left her emotional and sentimental. Martha Eddy's research in the *Journal of Dance Education*, posits that dance's communicative capacity can effectively translate the symbolic meanings expressed through words, in this instance, poetry (107). Consequently, the amalgamation of dance and poetry in this project amplified the dancers' comprehension of the poems and offered a multi-layered medium for expressing the intricate emotions and themes inherent in the poems.

Cori Kresge – A Current Example

Some artists have combined dance and poetry to express themselves and document the experience. Cori Kresge, a New York City-based dance artist, poet, and teacher, has performed with notable dance companies such as José Navas/Compagnie Flak, Merce Cunningham, and Stephen Petronio Company, and is featured in the CUNNINGHAM 3D documentary. Her choreographic work has been presented internationally, and as an educator, she has taught for the Merce Cunningham Trust, NYU Tisch, Suny Purchase, and School for Poetic Computation. Kresge also founded the "Play With Matches Workshop" to foster interdisciplinary artistic

collaboration (Kresge “Bio”). Kresge pairs dance and poetry to explore life, the world, and “...how the universe works” (Chametzky). She writes a poem after dancing to express in words the essence of her physical and emotional experience imparted by the dance. In her poetic work “Combustion Suite,” Kresge describes this process of writing after dancing as a natural state of transformation, stating, “They are the word-skin my actual body has shed” (prologue). This descriptive metaphor reflects the significance of the words that Kresge feels the need to write after dancing, as they relate to her very being. To shed one’s skin is to be open and defenseless as the symbolic skin is removed, showing more inner layers of oneself to the world. In a *Dance Magazine* article, dancer and writer Hallie Chametzky asks Kresge why she chooses to integrate both dance and poetry. Kresge shares, “They both feel like the purest, most immediate ways that I can participate in a conversation that’s bigger than myself. I crave connection, I crave intimacy, and dance and writing are how I find that. I want to be in conversation with humanity; I want to be adding my little voice to this much bigger choir of truth” (Chametzky).

In a personal interview I conducted, Cori Kresge draws a spectrum with dance and poetry at its opposite ends. She eloquently states, “Dance is ephemeral; a wordless experience of movement, existing only in the moment, shaped by time and space. Dance is usually staged and witnessed by an audience. Poetry is a written document, disembodied, preserved for future readers, often experienced by one reader in their own private time, brought to life inside their imagination” (Kresge). Kresge admits that she does not “combine or layer” dance and poetry simultaneously, yet she underscores their interconnectedness and the cultivation of both mind and body through their expression. Kresge further elaborates in our interview:

I find dancing and writing complementary— one feeds and generates the other. What I mean is, if my body is warmed up and primed by dancing/moving, then I feel more

available to write from a flow state and explore ideas and mysteries that live in my body; in the subconscious. I think writing is a physical practice that requires oxygen and blood flow and endurance, like any sport. Alternately, when I write or read poetry it infuses my movement. The imagery of a poem decorates my inner landscape and adds emotional resonance, character, nuance, and layers of meaning to my physical expression. (Kresge)

Kresge's insights shed light on the distinct yet interconnected roles of dance and poetry in artistic expression and how this fusion of movement and words can foster a deeper self-understanding. Revisiting the earlier mentioned work of Jacques Lecoq, he states, "For me, poetry is a major source of nourishment" (51). This sentiment resonates with Kresge's approach, where poetry nourishes her dance, and vice versa, and with my own desires to create a narrative that intertwines both poetry and dance in a balanced relationship.

This exploration of using poetry and dance as both learning tools and expressive mediums for creative works, such as my thesis film, offered practical examples of current research areas as well as how artists merge the two mediums to add physical and cognitive aspects to their work. The mingling of dance and poetry provides unique benefits, engaging both the body and mind, and fostering a holistic learning experience. The nonverbal language of dance is a potent tool in translating the symbolic meanings conveyed through words. Artists like Cori Kresge, who use dance and poetry to express themselves and document their experiences, illuminate the distinct yet interconnected roles of dance and poetry in artistic expression and learning.

Study of Culturally Specific Poems

When in China, I became interested in the classical poems of famous Tang Dynasty poets, among them Li Bai (李白701-762) whose ancient classic poems are still memorized by

every school child (Salopek). Li Bai was probably born in Central Asia but lived most of his life in Sichuan province in southwestern China (Young 49). From a young age he showed interest in several areas of the arts that defined the Tang dynasty (618-907), currently referred to as the “Golden Era” of classical studies, including philosophical, spiritual practices, martial arts, and poetry (Young 49). David Young, in his book *Five T’ang Poets*, describes Li Bai as a man who has reached the status of myth, stating, “The Chinese have valued Li Bai for his gaiety, freedom, sympathy and energy for so long that he has become a sort of archetype of the bohemian artist and puckish wanderer” (45). Young tells of one myth relating to Li Bai’s death which says he drowned by falling into a river while drunkenly trying to hug the moon (45).

A research article in the *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences* by linguistics professors Ma Yan and Wang Feng, introduce Li Bai as follows: “Straightforward, unrestrained, wild, and optimistic, Li Bai, the most outstanding poet of the Tang Dynasty, is known as the ‘Poetry Immortal’ and ‘Poet Knight-Errant’” (1226). Influenced by ancient Chinese Daoism, Indian Buddhism, and the dominant Confucianism of the period, Li Bai’s poetry often reflected on national peace, the beauty of China’s landscapes, and a deep concern for the fate of the common people during tumultuous times of uprisings against the government (Chan 136, Yan and Feng 1227). Yan and Feng present a mystical element to Li Bai’s work, stating, “In his poetry, he pinned his ambitions and patriotic sentiments on his praises for mountains and rivers to build a magnificent and ideal homeland transcending reality” (1230).

The Li Bai poem in *Threads* reflects this concept of an ideal reality, living in mountains that transcend our earth amongst peach blossoms drifting in the subtle breeze. I chose this particular poem based on personal taste, as the brief 4-line poem shows my imaginative view of how this poet sage’s life might have been in mid eighth century China.

Here is one translation of the poem:

“Conversation Among Mountains” (山中问答),” by Li Bai (李白):

問余何意棲碧山	You ask why I live in these green mountains.
笑而不答心自閒	I smile, can't answer, I am completely at peace.
桃花流水杳然去	A peace blossom sails past on the current.
別有天地非人間	There are worlds beyond this one. (Young 69)

In this succinct piece, Li Bai is at peace, harmonious with nature, and feels no need to justify his actions—a reflection of ancient Daoist philosophy (AllPoetry). As Professor Wing-Tsit Chan describes in his work, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, this philosophy strives for harmony with the natural flow, unaffected by attachments and human desires, a sentiment that still exists in Mainland China as I experienced in my travels, particularly in the Sichuan region where Li Bai is from (136-137).

The second poem is by one of Panamá’s most influential poets and writers, the national poet of Panamá, Ricardo Miró (1888-1940), who inspired the prestigious Panamanian literary award, the Ricardo Miró Prize, established in 1942 (Anderson-Imbert and Malley 471, Burrell). Miró spent time in Columbia and Spain, and it was during those times away from his homeland where he wrote his most famous works, most notably, “Patria,” translating to homeland in English (Mia). In “Patria,” Miró describes his homeland, a beautiful, small isthmus country where the sky is clearer and the sun is brighter, and the music of the soil echoes within him (Miró). For Panamanians, “Patria” is often used as a second national anthem that reflects the nation’s struggles for freedom (Gonzalez and Balderston 356, Mia). The poem I selected is an earlier work of Miró's from 1905, “La Última Gaviota,” which translates in English to “The Last

Seagull.” Panamanian independence, a yearning for the country and soil, and a wish to find his place amongst his people, are culturally specific themes expressed in Ricardo Miró’s poem.

Here is the original Spanish version with the unofficial English translation:

“La Última Gaviota,” by Ricardo Miró (1905)

Como una franja temblorosa, rota	Like a trembling strip, torn
del manto de la tarde, en raudo vuelo	from evening’s cloak, in swift flight
se esfuma la bandada por el cielo	the flock fades away across the sky
buscando, acaso, una ribera ignota.	Seeking, perhaps, shores unknown.
Detrás, muy lejos, sigue una gaviota	Behind, far off, a seagull persists
que con creciente y pertinaz anhelo	with growing, steadfast yearning
va de la soledad rasgando el velo	the veil of solitude it tears
por alcanzar la banda ya remota.	To reach the flock, now fading.
De la tarde surgió la casta estrella,	The noble evening star appeared
y halló siempre volando a la olvidada,	and found the forgotten one, always flying
de la rauda patrulla tras la huella.	following the swift patrol’s trace.
Historia de mi vida compendiada,	Story of my life, condensed
porque yo soy, cual la gaviota aquella,	for I am, like that seagull
ave dejada atrás por la bandada.	a bird left behind by the flock. (Prado)

The poem’s themes reflect the chaotic times that Panamá was experiencing during the early 1900s, after the 1000 days war and a battle for independence, not to mention the occupation

from both France and the USA as they built the Panamá Canal (Davidson 130, Burrell, Mia). Panamanian historian and literary critic Rodrigo Miró (1919-1996), also the son of poet Ricardo Miró, relates a literary work critique to the difficult times Panamanians were living in, sharing, "... the lack of true and intimate coexistence between the local population and foreigners. The presence of strangers is purely a matter of existing within the same confines" (Burrell). The poems by Li Bai and Ricardo Miró offer profound insights into the societies they lived in that resonate still. Li Bai's work, deeply rooted in Daoist philosophy, reflects a harmonious existence with nature and an idealized homeland that transcends reality (Young 69). On the other hand, Ricardo Miró's poem depicts the struggle for identity and belonging amidst the socio-political upheavals of early 20th century Panamá (Burrell). Both poets provide a window into their respective cultures and times, and highlight the enduring power of poetry as a medium for expressing human experiences and emotions. Furthermore, the fluidity and expressiveness of dance can physically embody the emotions and themes present in the poems, thereby enhancing storytelling and providing a multi-sensory experience.

Methodology

The methodology employed in this project unfolds in three primary stages that align with the filmmaking process: pre-production, production, and post-production. The pre-production phase was the birthplace of the project's theme and layout. During this stage, I identified key components such as collaborative artists, logistics, and budget. Additionally, I selected the poems that would play a major role in creating the film, and scouted filming locations. The production stage included all the activities that took place during filming, like collaborating with dancers and cinematographers on site, and creating dance in various urban and natural settings in response to verbal prompts inspired by the poems. Filming occurred in two separate shoots, each

comprising two filming locations: the first in Shanghai in December 2023, and the second in New York City in March 2024. A third shoot in Los Angeles, regrettably, yielded unusable footage, the lessons from which influenced subsequent project decisions. The post-production phase, involving film and audio editing, text editing, and adding subtitles, gave the film its final form.

Pre-Production: The Preparation

The pre-production phase of my thesis project was a crucial stage, laying the groundwork for the dance film. The decision to create a film rather than a live performance was inspired by the dance technology courses I engaged in earlier during this MFA journey. Making dances through the medium of film was a new and exciting challenge that I wanted to learn more about. At the inception of this project, I wanted to incorporate three dancers, one from each of the three countries where I have lived and worked over the past decade; however, as issues arose, the end result was altered to include only two dancers, as seen in the final version.

The pre-production stage began with brainstorming sessions and building a bibliography of research that encompassed ideas that I wanted to explore, logistical organization, and conceptualization to ensure the theme aligned with the film's intended message. Brainstorming was influenced by all three of the “special topics” courses that I had during the MFA process at Montclair, which included a course each fall and spring semester preceding the thesis semester. During my mind-mapping to outline the work, I pulled from my experiences in these courses, which involved exploring improvisational dance, poetry, and film. With this information in mind, I began writing storyboards that fit my objective. The original idea was to film three dancers in separate locations; However, I could not secure an indigenous dancer in Panamá, nor did my

shoot with an L.A. street dancer pan out, so the cultural aspect of my film changed drastically. The final film was revised to portray two dancers, one from Panamá and one from China.

Early preparations continued as I embarked on a trip to Shanghai in July 2023 that would significantly influence the trajectory of my thesis project. The purpose of this trip was twofold: to refine the initial concepts of my research and to film exploratory footage of my friend Jason, a dancer whose talent I had long admired and who was my first procured dancer for the project. In 2013, Jason and I crossed paths while working on a musical production in Beijing, China. At that time, Jason was a seasoned classical Chinese dancer, yet unfamiliar with Western dance styles. After several years in musical theatre, he embarked on a journey to New York to immerse himself in contemporary and modern dance. Following his studies, he returned to China and settled in Shanghai, his present residence. There, he contributed to the Shanghai production of “Sleep No More” before transitioning to an independent career in performance and teaching. Throughout this journey, from our initial meeting in 2013 to the present day, Jason and I have nurtured a familial bond. During my July 2023 trip to Shanghai, I shared with Jason the poems I was contemplating, outlined my filming ideas that encompassed several contrasting locations, and delved into concepts of the project relating to the fusion of improvisational dance, poetry, and storytelling. These interactions intensified my understanding of why I was following this path. For example, in discussing the Chinese poem, Jason’s insights pertaining to the aloofness of the poem’s theme enhanced my comprehension of its deeper meanings connected to Daoist thought and the detachment of earthly concerns (Alexander).

This trip proved particularly productive as I managed to capture footage of Jason improvising a dance in old-town Shanghai. The footage served as a valuable example for experimentation from which I practiced various ways of layering dance and poetry in a video

format. For instance, I superimposed poems with Jason's dance. One version used the Panamanian poem while another version used the Chinese poem. Reorganizing the spoken poems to align with specific sections of the dance produced a sense of harmony, similar to how music can be paired with dance to accent a particular beat. A key insight from these explorations was the profound power of spoken words layered over visual content. For example, in one scene Jason's arm movements swayed up and down akin to a bird in flight, which was underscored by the prose of the Panamanian poem describing a seagull's plight, as the poem reads, "Seeking, perhaps, shores unknown, behind, far off, a seagull persists with growing, steadfast yearning." Whether the poem was in English, my native language, or in Mandarin or Spanish, pairing it with dance elicited profound responses such as increased muscle tension and a wave of sadness. The combination of spoken words and Jason's dance movements transmitted emotional significance. This is similar to how a musical piece and a singer's rendition can generate atmosphere and depth, even if the lyrics are in a foreign language.

After returning to the United States at the end of August 2023, I got to work on the aspects within my control, such as confirming the poems I would use, creating a budget for artist fees and travel expenses, and organizing logistics for travel dates, shooting locations, camera rentals, and other such details. The budget was set, and the travel dates for filming were tentatively planned to take place in December 2023, and January 2024, providing sufficient time for writing, editing, and revising afterward. The next step was to procure the artistic team. In the Fall of 2023, I sent out feelers to friends and colleagues in the areas that I wanted to film: Los Angeles, Panamá City, Panamá, and Shanghai, China, where I already had a dancer (Jason), but still needed a cinematographer.

A friend in the filmmaking industry recommended cinematographers in both Shanghai and L.A., both of whom I worked with during the production phase. Fido Wu, the cinematographer for the Shanghai shoot, is from Northeast China but now resides and works in Shanghai. Fido, a director of photography, cinematographer, and film editor, attended Los Angeles Film School in California where she worked for several years before returning to China during the Covid-19 pandemic (Wu). Once both Jason and Fido were confirmed available, we coordinated schedules and set a tentative filming date for Tuesday, December 19th.

Production: Filming Day

Shanghai, China

On the chilly, blustery, and foggy morning of December 19th, we embarked on our production journey in Shanghai. Despite the adverse weather conditions, the resulting footage was strikingly beautiful. Our day commenced at 10:00 am near Jason's residence in the Jing'an district, from which we journeyed to Zhongshan Park. This tranquil location in the heart of Shanghai provided secluded spaces for filming scenes of Jason interacting with nature. Jason's performance was an improvisation influenced by three elements: the poems, my prompts, and the surrounding environment. I specifically prompted Jason to incorporate the essence of the air gifted by the surrounding trees into his dance. I also introduced an "arm toss" gesture to establish a connection between dancers during the editing process.

After spending two hours at the park, we relocated to a popular tourist destination, The Bund. The impressive skyline, featuring the distinctive "Oriental Pearl" television tower, served as a backdrop for our film sequences. Amidst the bustling crowd, we filmed a timelapse, a running scene, a dance sequence focusing on upper body movements, and the recurring "arm toss" gesture. Despite minor interruptions, such as a security guard advising Fido not to step on a

park bench, the dynamic environment added a layer of complexity and uniqueness to our scenes. We initially attempted to incorporate a prop—a distinctive red scarf—into the shoot, intending it to be a recognizable element across all dancers. However, the inconsistent movements of the scarf did not yield quality footage, leading us to abandon this idea. Instead, we decided to use the “arm toss” gesture and a simple walk away from the camera, followed by a glance into the lens, as the main connectors for the dancers. In conclusion, the Shanghai shoot was not only productive and informative but also an enjoyable experience that taught us the value of adaptability and creativity in the face of unexpected challenges.

The Los Angeles Misstep

Although this step in the methodology did not end up in the finished project, the lessons learned from this failed shoot are important to discuss as they impacted my decisions for the New York filming. The first issue was uncontrollable, as the date that I arranged to film, February 4th, coincided with a major storm and three consecutive days of downpours throughout Southern California. This pushed our shoot forward to February 7th. The storm passed, but the original filming time of early evening was not possible, so we shot in midday at the Venice Boardwalk. The location perfectly captured the essence of the street dancer I was working with, with graffiti covering the walkway and the environment displaying Venice’s infamous slogan, “Where Art and Crime Meet.” But the sun’s brightness during midday made it nearly impossible to check the camera while filming to ensure there were no issues. When the shoot was finished and we uploaded the footage, it was then clear that the filter setting shot in a blue hue that could not be changed, rendering the footage unusable, especially when compared to the high-quality look of the footage obtained in Shanghai. This led to a disappointing setback. I had to re-evaluate my project layout, revise my budget accounting for the lost funds spent on the L.A. shoot, and

replan. These hard lessons pushed me to be more prepared for the New York shoot, by establishing both indoor and outdoor filming locations, and by checking in with the cinematographer at every step, basically following her every move.

New York City

The decision to film in New York arose after the Los Angeles shoot failed. I needed to swiftly adjust my original project layout and devise a plan to compensate for the lost time and finances. During a social-media break, I scrolled through some filmmakers' accounts for inspiration and stumbled upon a project that Ilda Mason was doing in New York. I first met Ilda Mason, a native of Panamá, on the set of Panamá's version of "Dancing with the Stars" in 2012. She is an accomplished actress based in New York City, having made her feature film debut as Luz in Steven Spielberg's *West Side Story*. Ilda's acting journey began in Panamá with theatre productions such as *Peter Pan*, *A Chorus Line*, and *Hello Dolly*. After winning the second season of Panamá's "Dancing with the Stars" and earning her bachelor's degree in Structural Architecture from Universidad Santa Maria La Antigua, she moved to New York City to pursue her passion for acting ("Resume — Ilda Mason"). Seeing the social-media clip sparked the idea to reach out and inquire if she was available and interested in contributing to the project. She enthusiastically agreed – step one for a New York shoot was secured.

The next step was to secure a cinematographer so that I could solidify a date for filming. I again reached out to my friend Chevy Tyler who had recommended the previous two cinematographers in Shanghai and Los Angeles. I was aware that she often worked in New York City and had ample contacts in the filmmaking industry, including cinematographers. She connected me with Rachel Batashvili who was also available and willing to work with my limited budget. Rachel is a New York based director of photography and cinematographer who

has worked on projects for Vogue, Nike, Puma, Uniqlo, and the Washington Post, to name a few (“Work”). With Ilda and Rachel both available, a date for filming was set for March 3rd. Pending the weather, we would film at Washington Square Park and Freeman’s Graffiti Alley.

I arrived in New York early on Sunday morning, March 3rd to a beautiful and warm, sunny day, a perfect day to shoot. We planned to meet at 2:00pm, therefore I had ample time to scout the desired locations in person, since I had previously only done so virtually. Although Washington Square Park was not as vibrant as presented through online images (partially due to the season), it was bustling with people out on a sunny Sunday afternoon, providing an appropriate setting that portrays an aspect of city life in New York. I chose some locations where I wanted to film: the middle of the main entrance arch for a timelapse, a secluded dirt area that was enough space for dancing yet close enough to park benches and pathways, to get the crowd in the scene, and a busy intersection at the Northeast entrance to the park.

Prior to meeting in New York City, Ilda and Rachel both received a storyboard that included a comprehensive shot list and visuals portraying what the afternoon agenda would be. Some of the shots that I listed would coordinate with the Shanghai footage to make editing a smoother process. For example, the time-lapse shot in Shanghai set Jason in a wide shot on a busy man-made structure, showing him in the center of the shot in stillness with people and small vehicles passing in front and behind him. We recreated that moment in Washington Square Park at the main entrance arch with Ilda set in the center. We also shot a running scene, several walks with a glance back to the camera, and numerous “arm toss” gestures, to capture abundant footage to coincide with the shots from Shanghai.

During the filming process I gave Ilda extensive time to improvise at will with the poems underpinning her actions. Spontaneously, I would give verbal cues to adjust her mood and

movement. These cues related to the feelings and themes of the poems. Most of the cues that I gave Ilda related to the Panamanian poem, with only a few mentions of the Chinese poem scattered throughout the filming. In hindsight, I would have filmed dance sequences where I used the Chinese poem as the main motivator to observe the contrast, if there would be one. Ultimately, the resulting footage shows Ilda passionately going through many themes found in the Panamanian poem, such as longing, searching, and desiring to belong.

Post-Production: Assembling the Elements

Having gathered all the footage, I embarked on the editing process. This involved selecting the most compelling clips and weaving them into a 15-minute narrative. I collaborated with an editor and a musician to transform these fragments into a cohesive film. Initially, I intended to undertake the editing myself. However, the scope of the task, compounded by the time lost during the L.A. shoot and my limited familiarity with film editing software, proved overwhelming. I reached out to my friend Edward (Eddie) Campbell from Panamá who is both a dancer and graphic designer. Eddie, known as “Funk E” in the hip-hop world, is a founding member of one of Panamá’s oldest and still active breaking crew’s, “Fullstyle Family” (“Funk E | Pound It Hip Hop”). Currently, Eddie runs his own graphic design company in Calgary, Canada, where he also continues to teach hip-hop to the younger generations. Aware of Eddie’s proficiency with editing software and his history with dance, I invited him to contribute to the project. Eddie enthusiastically agreed. Our longstanding relationship made the collaboration both personal and reassuring. I trusted Eddie to communicate effectively with me. Adding to the project’s sentiment, Eddie also knows Ilda.

In the video editing stage, my primary responsibility was to specify the exact clips and timestamps I wanted to use and their sequence. I singled out scenes that accentuated notable

contrasts between the dancers, such as Ilda's persistent search and sense of longing portrayed by reaching actions paired with expressions of sad anticipation. Jason's actions conveyed introspection and, to some extent, emotional indifference. Using this information, Eddie assembled a preliminary draft, or 'skeleton', of the film. This skeleton served three purposes: it offered a version for my thesis committee to review, it gave the musical director a sense of the piece's mood to inform the score, and it allowed me to assess whether the narrative was developing as envisioned. After incorporating feedback from my thesis committee and discussing my concerns with Eddie, we progressed to a second draft. This version aimed to present a clearer depiction of the intended story by integrating the music and poems into a comprehensive audio score and refining the transitions.

To create an improvised score for the film, I enlisted another longtime friend, pianist and composer Jeff Goodkind. Jeff is a jazz musician who specializes in playing and composing classic and Latin jazz genres. He has more than twenty years professional experience performing internationally as a solo artist and with Latin and classic Jazz bands. I sent him the skeleton draft and a brief synopsis, which described two dancers reflecting on their shared past and responding differently to their separation. After a detailed phone discussion with Jeff, he composed layered tracks of piano, drums, strings, and organ to accompany each stage of the film's progression. The subsequent step in audio editing was to identify where the poems would fit best in relation to the dance and the musical score.

A third version of the film, initially intended to be the final draft, was produced. However, due to my concerns about certain editing choices and feedback from my thesis committee, further revisions were initiated. I requested Eddie to slow down most of the transitions, as I felt the existing speed disrupted the narrative flow. The subsequent revisions

involved finding a location for the overlapping poems, setting the scene of the dancers' past with a simple "I miss you" letter at the film's opening, and adjusting minor details to enhance the dramatic impact. Eddie promptly delivered the fourth revision, the final film, within a day. As the project neared completion, I undertook one more crucial task: adding subtitles. Given that the poems were recited in Spanish and Mandarin, I added English subtitles to help viewers understand the poems' connection to the movement. With the option to select their preferred language, viewers could read along as each dancer recited their specific poem.

As mentioned in the introduction, the film starts with the "I miss you" letter and time-lapse sequence, setting the tone of longing and separation. The viewer then follows Ilda down a busy park path, where she glances into the camera with an inviting smile, as if she is seeing Jason. Strolling through the crowded park, Ilda's demeanor is light and carefree, enjoying the casual afternoon walk. Then Ilda's improvised dance solo takes the viewer through joyous celebrations countered by moments of reflection and frustration, as Ilda realizes that the past cannot be rekindled. In the second section, the viewer accompanies Jason for his contemplative dance sequence. Jason's scene opens in a misty park setting as the camera follows behind Jason's pensive walk. Like Ilda, he turns back to glance into the camera, yet his expression is pensive and aloof, a foreshadowing of his acceptance of the situation between him and Ilda. Here we hear Jason recite the words of the Chinese poem accompanied by English subtitles for the viewer. The words paint a picture of solitude and peace, and a man unimpacted by the desires of the world. Jason's improvised dance sequence takes place in a wooded space void of others, as he maneuvers alongside and over the trees, one with nature, fluidly moving from dynamic spins and twists to tranquil stillness.

Transitioning to the third and final section, the film climaxes with a brief display of tension as the music builds and images of both dancers overlap showing Ilda frantically searching and Jason gazing pensively into the distance. The viewer then sees Ilda and Jason in a split screen as they dance side by side. Both Ilda and Jason are transported to new locations. Ilda dances in a narrow graffiti-covered alleyway, contrasting her solo park setting, and Jason is centered in a busy city walkway, replacing a man-made construct with his solo's serene space of trees. With the split screen format, the dancers improvise in reaction to their surroundings, but also appear to be connected, even if only through purposeful editing. At this point, we hear both poems integrated into the musical score, overlapping with one another. Near the end of this section, Jason ends his dance sequence by running which erases his side of the screen as Ilda's fills the entire screen. Here, Ilda recites the Panamanian poem in Spanish, while subtitles in English scroll across the bottom of the viewer's screen. Resonating with Ilda's improvised dance expressions, the Panamanian poem speaks of longing and a desire to belong yet missing the opportunity. Subsequently, the split screen returns as both dancers glance back at the camera just missing each other's gaze, then turn to continue down their current separated path as the screen fades to black.

Results and Implications for the Future

The development of *Threads* was a voyage of discovery in collaboration, adaptability and preparation. Collaboration served as the adhesive for all facets of the project and an expedition into artistic communication. This endeavor fostered a deep appreciation for each collaborator's creative contributions and expertise. Adaptability emerged as a crucial attribute, mirroring the improvisational theme prevalent in *Threads*. Amidst various setbacks, unpredictable weather, and uncooperative security personnel, adaptability proved essential, with improvisation playing a

pivotal role both on and off camera. This journey underscored the importance of contracts for collaborating artists to clarify roles and expectations. In terms of preparation, the formulation of a comprehensive storyboard and shot list was key, offering a clear project roadmap. Consistent check-ins with the cinematographer at each filming stage were vital to prevent loss or unusable footage, a lesson learned from the Los Angeles shoot.

On April 14th, 2024, at 8:00 pm EDT, I hosted a YouTube livestream event to debut *Threads*. The virtual premiere was a success, attracting 19 viewers in real-time and an additional 65 within the first 24 hours of its release. To gather feedback, I implemented a viewer survey focusing on the storyline, the impact of the poetry, and the character portrayal through dance. The viewer responses offered valuable insights into the film's resonance. A substantial majority, 90%, affirmed that the film effectively presented a clear narrative arc. The incorporation of spoken word poetry was positively received, with 81% of viewers stating that it amplified their enjoyment of the film. All viewers agreed that the dancers' movements offered insights into their characters, affirming the potency of dance as a medium for character expression.

These insights revealed that more attention is needed when crafting a dance film's story if the desired outcome is for the viewer to experience a progressive tale. Furthermore, these insights have sparked curiosity about the role of poetry in enhancing the film viewing experience. Could the inclusion of more spoken prose or perhaps poetry in a different language than those used in *Threads* enhance viewer engagement? These are questions that invite further exploration and experimentation. As I look to the future, I am committed to delving deeper into the realm of dance filmmaking, seizing opportunities to create more dance films, and participating in screendance festivals. I have already started preparations for a potential project this summer with the Shanghai crew, Jason and Fido.

In addition, I aspire to evolve my dance teaching practice to resonate with a wider audience. One strategy I plan to employ is the integration of improvisational dance methods into my ballroom dance curriculum. These methods will aim to enrich dancers' social and competitive experiences and serve as an impromptu way of communication during a dance. For example, I intend to design practice exercises for my social ballroom classes that highlight improvising to navigate a crowded dance floor with ease, therefore avoiding collisions.

In creating this film, I merged my personal stories of love and longing for these lands and communities with newly gained experience into the intricacies of filmmaking with dance and language. The journey of creating *Threads* and the subsequent feedback from viewers have left an indelible mark on my artistic trajectory. Whether it involves creating dance films or teaching movement, the lessons learned from *Threads* will continue to illuminate my path as I navigate the dynamic landscapes of dance and filmmaking.

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