

Introducing Spirit/Dance: Reconstructed Spiritual Practices

ABSTRACT:

This project was provoked by the almost nonexistent pushback from the Democratic liberal establishment to the (2020) exoneration of Kyle Rittenhouse, despite his acknowledged killing of two Black Lives Matters protesters against the police murder of George Floyd. It builds on three prior articles arguing for the revival of ancient Dionysian practice, Haitian Vodou, and Indigenous South American shamanism to empower leftist revolution. In essence, I propose an assemblage of spiritual practices that are accessible today for the neo-colonized 99% of the global population, by synthesizing and reconstructing three democratic, lower-SES, Indigenous religions, all of which share a militant defiance of their respective tyrannical plutocracies. To avoid cultural appropriation, I center these reconstructed spiritual practices on the figure of the “mage,” a psychosocial healer loosely analogous to a shaman. And the mage’s signature activity, “magic,” I redefine naturalistically as free interpersonal performative action, practiced using two theoretical disciplines (philosophy and psychology) and two practical disciplines chosen by each mage. More precisely, Spirit/Dance channels the “spirits” of dead ancestors, historical figures, legendary heroes, mythical beings, and fictional characters, into the three ultimate objectives of “mindfulness” for psyches/souls, “liberation” for mindful bodies, and “social justice” for liberated communities, indirectly empowering long-term revolution.

Keywords: reconstruction; dance; magic; spirit; Indigeneity; social justice

Though long engaged in social justice activism, including through a recent paper that exhorts fellow academics to create their own local chapters of the Birmingham Philosophy Guild, the aftermath of the Kyle Rittenhouse trial convinced me that more must be done, immediately, to repair our world.¹ My first effort in this vein was to propose the creation of a militant wing of each Philosophy Guild chapter, whose focus would be armed resistance to right-wing injustice, including protecting social justice protesters against armed, right-wing counter-protestors and police and government brutality.² Given the numerous obstacles to realizing that strategy in the present moment, however, it seemed prudent to also pursue an alternative that

¹ See Joshua M. Hall, “Dionysus Lyseus Reborn: The Revolutionary Philosophy Chorus,” in *Philosophy Today* 66(1): 2022, 57-74. More precisely, the justice system exonerated and praised as a hero a white teenager who killed three unarmed protesters, and the Democratic party accepting that verdict as a functioning justice system.

² See Joshua M. Hall, “Guerrilla Warrior-Mages: Tiqqun and Magic: The Gathering,” *Philosophy Today* 67(3) (forthcoming).

might be more approachable and actionable for everyday folks, thus indirectly empowering revolution in the long term, by fostering comportments and habits more open thereto.

In this spirit, it might be helpful to approach Spirit/Dance via the history of leftist revolutionary theory, most of whose theorists can be divided into two interpretive camps (oversimplifying for reasons of space). While one camp advocates for immediate, militant transformation (as in Mao Zedong's *On Guerrilla Warfare*), the other camp settles for a slow, hypothetical result to be achieved by indefinite generations of liberal arts education (as in Kant's famous essay, "What is Enlightenment?").³ As has been observed *ad nauseum*, however, there are numerous problems with both of these camps.

Regarding the first camp, most times when revolution seems desirable are not times in which it seems practically achievable. Thus, "now or never" usually reduces to the sad latter. As for the second camp, those who are liberally educated mostly end up taking the bribes of our capitalist hierarchs, abandoning their youthful ambitions for mass liberation. Put in W. E. B. Du Bois' memorable terms, the "talented tenth," from one colonized space to the next, betray those whom he exhorts them to uplift, preferring the mythical Atalanta's golden apple to bread and wine for all.⁴ Moreover, at least according to those dismissed as "cynics," this result has been deliberately engineered by the creators and shapers of today's Germanic/Global Northern university (including the arguably proto-Nazi German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte).⁵

³ See Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: 'What is Enlightenment?'" *Kant: Political Writings* ed. and trans. H. S. Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

⁴ See W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Modern Library, 2003).

⁵ See Hans Sluga, *Heidegger's Crisis: Philosophy and Politics in Nazi Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

In the context of this repetitively disappointing dichotomy, Spirit/Dance's method, like that of the militants, is significantly radical, more intuitive for the non-academic majority, and aspiringly transformative for every stratum of society. But like the liberals' method, Spirit/Dance's is gradual, calibrated to transgenerational historical time, and indirect enough not to threaten the powers that be (thus giving it a fighting chance to bypass the enemy's well-defended front). Admittedly, in sharing these strengths of both camps, Spirit/Dance also inherits their weaknesses. Like the militants, spirit-dancers face the enormous rhetorical challenge of helping academically educated folks overcome their (arguably economic privilege-based) reluctance to embrace its radicality, but without their advantage of immediate and viscerally liberating change. And like the liberals, spirit-dancers require the exceptional patience to sustain massive investments of time, energy, money, etc. into an endeavor whose intended results may initially seem non-revolutionary, but without their advantage of avoiding of potential regression, obscurantism, impracticality, and counterproductivity (financial, professional, and interpersonal). Seen otherwise, however, these challenges for Spirit/Dance can be reframed as what is most distinctive and promising therein. To wit, this assemblage of spiritual practices blends and balances militant zeal with liberal patience, militant meaningfulness with liberal pacifism, and militant selflessness with liberal cunning.

I. Redeploying Research

On this note of liberal educational cunning, and in part to reassure readers that Spirit/Dance possesses a legitimate academic basis (or at least that its river is fed by several academic streams), I now turn to a summary of my three prior peer-reviewed articles, each based on a different marginalized global religious tradition which Spirit/Dance channels, synthesizes,

and reconstructs. One is from Eurasia (the Dionysian Mysteries), another from Africa and the Caribbean (Haitian Vodou), and one is from South America (Indigenous American Shamanism), so jointly they extend to most of the globe. The result is an assemblage of reconstructed spiritual practices, born out of the needs of the vulnerable and disempowered from across global history, but reformulated to be more accessible for the majority of Global Northerners, who help form the neo-colonized 99% of the globe today. The goal is to inculcate intergenerationally the comportments, habits, and virtues that can help empower leftist revolution.

Of the three main global religious traditions on which Spirit/Dance draws, I have published the most about the one closest to my own predominantly Indo-European ancestry, namely the Dionysus Mysteries (which scholars have shown to be intimately connected to the Hindu sect of Shivaism).⁶ This Indo-European focus is intended, in part, to honor the current Dalai Lama's advice to Westerners to dig for buried spiritual treasures in our own traditions, rather than rushing abroad to forage for those resources in unfamiliar traditions (such as his own Tibetan Buddhism).⁷

To summarize the results of my previous research on the Dionysian Mysteries, I have attempted to show how (1) since Nietzsche's pivotal writings, most scholars and writers have ignored or suppressed Dionysus's androgyny and his advocacy for women, queer people, the poor, foreigners, the city, democracy, and peace; (2) a marginalized line of scholarship recovers Euripides' figuration of Dionysus' (and Shiva's) political progressiveness along exactly these axes of gender, race, class, nationality, etc.; and (3) numerous attempted wars of liberation in

⁶ For more, see Alain Daniélou, *God of Love and Ecstasy: The Traditions of Shive and Dionysus*, reprint edition (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 1992).

⁷ See Tenzin Gyatso, *The Essence of the Heart Sutra: The Dalai Lama's Heart of Wisdom Teachings*, trans. Thupten Jinpa (New York: Wisdom, 2005).

Ancient Rome were fought under the banner of Dionysus, including the slave revolt of Spartacus, whose paramour was a priestess of the god, preaching that Spartacus was divinely chosen by him for a mission of liberation.⁸

The main point here for Spirit/Dance is that there is a major political dimension to the Dionysian (and Shaivite) tradition that has been suppressed in Western history. This is vividly illustrated by the fact that, during ancient Athens' largest annual Dionysian festival, a standing reward was offered for anyone who brought to the city the decapitated head of a tyrant. Despite this rich political history of social justice revolution, many popular figures in the Global North that were originally derived from Dionysus have been censoriously stripped of that inheritance and its associated political valence. For example, the name of Irish playwright J. M. Barrie's titular character, "Peter Pan" is an intentional allusion to "Pan," the closest Roman equivalent (albeit also significantly watered-down politically) to the Greek "Dionysus."

The most important contribution from the Dionysian Mysteries to Spirit/Dance is the positing of dance as central to its spiritual practices, more specifically that a community healer should not only be a dancer, but also incorporate one or more literal or figurative kinds of dancing into their healing work. In short, certain kinds of dance are inherently healing, and a community healer should heal through dance.

Though an argument could be made for simply filling the spiritual vacuum of leftist revolutionism with a revival of the Dionysian Mysteries alone, numerous considerations caution otherwise. First, there would be a constant risk of ethnocentrism and alienating an (increasing) majority of Global Northern potential revolutionaries who do not identify with any European spiritual tradition. Many of these allies are understandably weary of the tendency, pervasive

⁸ See Joshua M. Hall, "Pregnant Materialist Natural Law: Bloch and Spartacus' Priestess of Dionysus," *Idealistic Studies* 52(2): 2022, 111-132.

among academy-inspired political movements, to look to an idealized model of the ancient Greeks as a template for today. Second, and relatedly, the pioneering work of the crypto-Marxist and atheist Christian philosopher Ernst Bloch reminds us that nostalgia is never adequate for a communist future, in part for the simple reason that no era has ever been unilaterally virtuous enough to make it worthy of resurrection. Finally, and most importantly, there are crucial pieces of the puzzle of leftist revolution that are either absent from or marginalized by the Dionysian tradition, as evidenced in part by the fact that the global revolution has still not happened. Thus, turning to global supplements is both unavoidable and desirable.

First among these alternatives, and the closest thing to a tradition that could be defensibly and feasibly rehabilitated and expanded in the Global North today, is Haitian Vodou (formerly “voodoo” in Anglophone discourse). This fitness is due in part to the fact that Vodou is the youngest of these three traditions, and maintains a place in post-industrial nations today (along with other Neo-African religions of the Caribbean such as Cuban Santería and Brazilian Candomblé). Perhaps the primary strengths of Vodou, for Spirit/Dance, are that it was created by a highly diverse, majority-BIPOC community, and that is unique among the world’s religions in having directly empowered the only successful slave revolution in a modern nation-state.⁹ I will now summarize the three main conclusion of my prior research on Vodou.

Starting with the past, what has become known as “Vodou” was originally a loose assortment of West and Central African spiritual traditions and practices, the dominant tradition (called “Rada”) being more conformist and quietest, and the most marginalized tradition (called “Petwo”) being the most militant and playing an outsized role in Haiti’s war of independence.

Turning to the present, in the Haitian Diaspora, Vodou’s political dimensions have been mostly

⁹ For more on how Vodou helped catalyze Haiti’s war of independence, see Joshua M. Hall, “Tornadic Black Angels: Vodou, Dance, Revolution,” *Journal of Black Studies*: <https://doi.org/10.1177/00219347231153174>.

suppressed, through marketing the religion as a benign source of self-help, with scant open embracing of Petwo's defiance (despite constant rumors of secret practices thereof). And looking to the future, by augmenting the hints of Petwo in the most satirical tradition (called "Gede") today, the revolutionary power of Vodou can be reanimated, particularly through dance.

Dance's central importance is reflected in Vodou and other Neo-African religions' complex philosophy of psychology. According to the latter, the psyche consists of two main parts (in Vodou, the "little good angel" and the "big good angel"), the former representing mere conscious awareness or wakefulness, and the latter representing the individual personality. Crucially, during the danced performance of ritual possessions, the dancer's personality (or big good angel) is temporarily replaced by the big good angel of a particular spirit (called a *lwa*). This is possible because the *lwa*'s big good angel once belonged to a now-deceased human, but now roams free. So, too, does the dancer's big good angel roam free during the possession, and potentially after the dancer's death as well, when they may become a *lwa* themselves. Precisely because possession involves reembodying a part of the psyche of dead relatives and legendary ancestors, Vodou's dancing empowers interpersonal healing (especially in Rada dances), sociopolitical militancy (especially in Petwo dances), and satirical preparation thereof (in Gede).

The most important contribution from Vodou to Spirit/Dance is the positing of the community healer's dance as necessarily channeling an indefinite number of spirits into an improvisational community performance. In short, the dance of healing involves, not just one dancing healer, but indefinitely many figurative fellow-dancers. Each seeming solo is, in truth, an ensemble. This is one reason why the dancer's openness to spontaneity and creative adaptation in healing is essential.

And the piece of the puzzle of leftist revolution that Vodou supplies, absent or minimized in the Dionysian Mysteries (at least as we perceive them today), is that the dance of healing is not merely danced alongside other spiritual practices, but also danced in preparation for the revolution. In Vodou's case, this is achieved through its self-presentation as a supplement to Christianity, rather than a pagan competitor thereof. As every scholar of Vodou emphasizes, the consensus among practitioners is that one can only "serve the spirits" (the proper term in Haiti for "Vodou") if one is also a "good Catholic."¹⁰ Whether deliberate or no, this avowedly supplementary nature of Vodou allows its defiant spirit to inhabit the same bodies in Haiti as its submissive spirit-spirit of Catholicism (qua colonizing religion). For the same reason, I articulate Spirit/Dance here as "an assemblage of spiritual practices" (rather than as a "religion"), trying to avoid alienating readers who may be invested in other, less progressive traditions.

Perhaps if Vodou were not so heavily racially stigmatized in white America, especially as a religion that was born from chattel slavery, and then instigated a Black political revolution, I would have already understood Vodou prior to this research. And if so, perhaps I would have based Spirit/Dance on Vodou alone, without needing recourse to other global religious traditions. The political reality being what it is, though, I was first inspired to this project by the spiritual traditions of the peoples against whom my ancestors perpetuated genocide (rather than slavery).

This third tradition for Spirit/Dance, after the Dionysian Mysteries and Haitian Vodou, is Indigenous (South) American shamanism, one of the central roots of the diluted, homogenized, and popularized phenomenon that Global Northerners refer to with the catchall "shamanism." As I have explored elsewhere, the dominant tendency in Western history, epitomized by historian of religion Mircea Eliade and controversial U.S. author Carlos Castaneda, is to abstract away from

¹⁰ See, for example, Kate Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

the histories, concrete practices, and community enmeshments of various spiritual leaders, including the Siberian tribal practitioners from whom the word “shaman” is derived. This yields the figure of a transhistorical psychosocial healer which theorists analogize to Western poets and philosophers.¹¹

Against this tendency, I argued that any Global Northerner who insists on labeling themselves a “shaman” should, at the very least, ground their bodily-material transformative linguistic practices in the practices and environments of their own communities, and in pursuit of social justice for all. More precisely, within “linguistic practices” here I explicitly include the nonverbal languages of bodily comportment, fashion, and dance; and within “social justice,” I emphasize (a) political sovereignty, (b) ecological justice, and (c) adequate social welfare for Indigenous peoples worldwide. Moreover, it seems strongly preferable not to use the culturally specific term “shaman,” and instead opt for one that is loosely analogous thereto.

Having previously resolved to leave the matter there, I was inspired to return to this issue by an autoethnography called *The Falling Sky*, written by Davi Kopenawa, a living shaman of the Yanomami people in Brazil.¹² To summarize his account, Yanomami shamans ingest a hallucinogenic substance, namely *yākoana* powder derived from the sap of local trees, to generate visions of “spirits” (as the translator renders the Yanomami word *xapiri*). Kopenawa’s descriptions of these spirits suggest a cross between the Euro-American concept of “fairies” and “angels” (the latter, Kopenawa writes, being what “the missionaries call” the *xapiri*) (208).¹³

¹¹ See Joshua M. Hall, “A Critique of Philosophical Shamanism,” in *The Pluralist* 16(3): 2022, 87-106.

¹² Davi Kopenawa & Bruce Albert, *The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman*, trans. Nicholas Elliott & Alison Dundy (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2013).

¹³ The translator elaborates on the *xapiri* in an endnote, as follows: “Any existing being has an ‘image’ (*utupë*) from the original times, an image which shamans can ‘call,’ ‘bring down,’ and ‘make dance’ as an ‘auxiliary spirit’ (*xapiri a*). These primordial image-beings (‘spirits’) are described as miniscule humanoids, wearing extremely bright,

Crucially for both the Yanomami and Spirit/Dance, the spirits' entire being, as well as their communications with the shamans, consists of elaborate dances. Moreover, since Kopenawa also compares these spirits to images from television, movies, photographs, etc., their dances can also be the figurative dances of lines and shapes of color across an electronic screen, or mental images frolicking in fields of the imagination.

Since Kopenawa's book is the only major text in the present article that I have not previously explored, I will now flesh out his account with a few more excerpts. I begin with his first description of this shamanic dancing work.

My wife's father, the great man of our *Watoriki* house at the foot of the Mountain of the Wind, had made me drink the powder that the shamans extract from the *yākoana hi* tree. Under the effects of its power, I saw the spirits of the *kopena* wasps come down to me. They told me: "We are by your side and will protect you. This is why you will take the name Kopenawa!" It is so. This name comes from the wasp spirits who absorbed the blood spilled by *Arowë*, a great warrior of the beginning of time. My father-in-law made their images come down and gave them to me with his breath of life. Then I was able to see them dance for the first time (19).

As with the *kopena* wasps, many other animal species possess spirits, according to Yanomami, as do other natural phenomena. "The sun and moon," for example, "possess images that only the shamans can bring down and make dance," Kopenawa explains. "They have a human appearance, like us, but the white people cannot know them" (29). According to Yanomami oral history, the first ever shaman was the son of their creator god, *Omama*, who instructed his son in

colorful feather ornaments, and body paint. Among the eastern Yanomami, the word for 'spirits' (plur. *xapiri pë*) also refers to shamans (*xapiri t ë pë*). Practicing shamanism is referred to as *xapiripruu*. These expressions refer to the fact that, during the shamanic trance, the shaman identifies with the 'auxiliary spirits' he is calling" (490n3).

the shamanic art, in part, as follows: “Hold up the sky so it does not fall apart” (32). Kopenawa updates this warning as the imperative to avert a global climate catastrophe, to which he has dedicated his life. “Following on from” this mythical first shaman, Kopenawa claims, “many of our elders became shamans,” and “He taught them to make the spirits dance” (33).

As to the purpose of this spirit dancing, Kopenawa constantly emphasizes that it is a form of linguistic communication. “It is these spirits’ words that I make heard,” he writes. “It is not just my own thought” (314). More precisely, when fed by the *yākoana* powder (i.e., when the shaman inhales the tree sap powder), the *xapiri* literally alter the shaman’s body to render him capable of receiving and understanding their dancing messages. These spirits’ dances are performed on shiny reflective surfaces (which Kopenawa calls “mirrors”), onto which the spirits descend, along gossamer-thin lines, from their palatial mansions in the skies. “As fine and translucent as spider webs or fishing lines,” Kopenawa relates, “the *xapiri*’s shining paths will become fixed along our arms and legs” (referring to the limbs of an experienced Yanomami shaman) (378). “Then the spirits will come down along them to tear our chest and open a large clearing in it where they will be do their presentation dance,” Kopenawa concludes, the interpretation of dances is the shaman’s constant, lifelong occupation (378).

As Bruce Albert puts it, in his translator’s afterword to the book, “the ‘I’ of Davi Kopenawa’s account also embodies the voices of many shamanic ‘images’ of animal ancestors and cosmological beings” (447). From this, Albert concludes that his interviews with Kopenawa, which form the basis of *The Falling Sky*, amount to “shamanic intercultural exchanges” (448). From Albert’s outsider perspective, though, this practice initially looked unrecognizably different. “The [shamans] appear to be doing everything possible to impress their hosts with the exuberance of their performance,” he writes, recalling his “first experience of the elaborate

chants, sumptuous ornamentation, and impressive *choreography* of such shamanic opera” (437, emphasis added). For Kopenawa, too, the core of the spirits is dancing, as is clear from his own simple explanation of the same event: “They were making the spirits dance together” (437).

Thus, the dance of the spirits is performatively identical to the dance of the shamans, which is one reason I chose the name “Spirit/Dance” for this assemblage of spiritual practices. Eschewing a more conventionally abstract title, I wished to emphasize the embodied physicality and worldliness of Spirit/Dance’s indirect empowering of revolution.

The most important contribution from Indigenous American shamanism to Spirit/Dance is the positing of not only the community healer, but also the spiritual figures whom they channel in their dancing, as essentially dancing beings. In short, these interpreted dances constitute the fundamental form of spiritual communication. And the piece of the puzzle of leftist revolution that this tradition supplies, absent or minimized in the Dionysian Mysteries and Haitian Vodou, is that these healing dances are not mere catalysts for revolution—they are the revolution itself, which has already begun as soon as the dance has begun, and has already ended if the dance does. And this revolutionary healing dance must always be sustained, because it is necessary if our existence as the 99% is to become bearable, including in the context of impending climate catastrophe. In other words, it’s not too late to dance. It is only too late not to start dancing. Onward, then, to a further fleshing out of Spirit/Dance’s multidisciplinary magic.

II. Multidisciplinary Magic

This second section concerns the various “disciplines” (both academic and non-academic) on which a mage draws to make their magic. The origin of Spirit/Dance’s four-discipline schema goes back to my undergraduate years. At the encouragement of a psychology

professor, I attempted to construct and make sense of my evolving identity by generating a short list of the four most important roles or positions in my life. Remarkably, these four roles—namely, “philosopher,” “psychologist,” “poet,” and “dancer”—remain at the center of my identity today, twenty-one years later. Even more surprisingly, they have also resonated with many students, colleagues, and loved ones over the years. This ultimately persuaded me that these four roles are perhaps more fully understood relative to the most marginalized aspects of Global Northern communities, those desperately in need of reconstruction. In short, what had initially seemed most therapeutic for my broken self, now seems so for our broken communities.

In support of the latter inference, in my subsequent years in graduate school I discovered a radical social critic, namely Nietzsche, who for the first time in my philosophical education seemed to jointly perform all four of these roles in his own work. More specifically, in addition to being understood primarily (today) as a philosopher, Nietzsche also frequently describes himself in his writings as a “psychologist” (living before the disciplinary divorce whereby the APA split into the American Philosophical Association and the American Psychological Association), published a fair amount of poetry (both conventional verse and prose poetry), and practiced what he preached (in *The Gay Science*) about the spirit of the philosopher wanting to be nothing more than to be a good dancer. Nevertheless, what was still missing for me in Nietzsche was the explicit fusion of these four roles into one formal title that could plausibly be affirmed in the Global Northern present.

Thus, it was not until my reading took me further outside of academic philosophy, into the “ethnopoetics” of U.S. American poet and translator Jerome Rothenberg, that I first encountered the philosopher-psychologist-poetry-dancer blended into one vital institutional role,

namely that of a “shaman.”¹⁴ And since then, I have found many other concepts analogous to that of the shaman, especially in Indigenous traditions geographically and culturally connected to those whose poetry Rothenberg collects (including the Dionysian Mysteries, Shivaism, and Haitian Vodou). As a Global Northerner, however, I felt powerful ethical and political obligations not to engage in cultural appropriation, unjustly channeling the authority and authenticity of Indigenous traditions into a practice external to them.

Therefore, the name I chose for the central figure of Spirit/Dance is, not “shaman,” but “mage.” In addition to having been, according to the Online Etymology Dictionary, “an ‘archaic’ word by late 19c. (OED), revived by fantasy games,” the word *mage* has an Indo-European heritage with which Euro-Americans can less problematically identify, as it is derived from the Latin *magus*, the Greek *magos*, and ultimately the Persian *magush* (thus borrowing from the same cultural origins as Nietzsche’s Persian Zoroastrian prophet, Zarathustra).¹⁵ Thus, philosopher + psychologist + poet + dancer = Spirit/Dance’s mage.

Though I acknowledge that there would be certain advantages in requiring each spirit-dancer to practice exactly these four disciplines, including in terms of clarity, coherence, and organizational consistency, I also see other advantages in leaving all four disciplines up to each mage to choose. Thus, I settled on the strategic compromise of proposing that all mages share the same two theoretical disciplines (philosophy and psychology), but get to choose (or create) two practical disciplines for themselves. I will now elaborate on the two shared theoretical disciplines, followed by offering the example of my own pair of practical disciplines.

¹⁴ See *Technicians of the Sacred: A Range of Poetries from Africa, America, Asia, Europe and Oceania*, 2nd ed., ed. Jerome Rothenberg (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2005).

¹⁵ For more, see <https://www.etymonline.com/word/mage>.

Beginning with philosophy, Spirit/Dance holds that reality, even at its deepest levels, is (1) dynamic, evolving, and transformable by free action, (2) knowable only from embodied vantage points, and (3) best evaluated in the context of historical communities' sociopolitical judgements. Characteristic (1) rules out any kind of determinism which would deny human freedom (individual or collective) at a metaphysical or scientific level. Characteristic (2) rules out any endorsement of a final, God's-eye-view (or perfect-AI-view) of the totality of knowledge. And characteristic (3) rules out any radical subjectivism or nihilism which sanctions the atomized individual Global Northerner opting-out of their communities (being "free riders" on others' meaning-making). Beyond these three characteristics, however, each mage is free to flesh out their philosophy as they choose.

As for the second discipline, psychology, Spirit/Dance understands the psyche/soul as an active blending of matter, imagination, reasoning, and social/political construction. Correlatedly, this psyche/soul can only heal itself, and become capable of healing others, through embodied reconstructions of imaginative content drawn from global-historical traditions. Thus, Spirit/Dance explicitly rejects any psychological view that reduces experience to the property of a disembodied mind, that minimizes the importance, productivity, and creativity of the imagination, or that reductively defines behavior in a historical-political vacuum. Overall, the point of Spirit/Dance's psychology is that the psyche/soul is open, dynamic, creative, and perpetually amenable to the reconstructive agency of self and others.

Turning from Spirit/Dance's required two theoretical disciplines to an example of two freely-chosen practical disciplines, the latter are essentially artforms (broadly construed) through which a mage channels their understanding and compassion, their worldview and therapeutics, into concrete, shareable, actionable performance for members of their communities. As for my

own two practical disciplines, poetry and dance, I think about them as follows. Poetry in Spirit/Dance, at the most abstract level, might be understood as an improvisational verbal art form used to preserve (through adapting) traditions of ritualized expression, by renaming the world and its aspects for a community. And dance, similarly abstractly, could function as an improvisational nonverbal art form used to provide structure, gracefulness, and joy for old and new ways of moving through the world for a community.

Put more concretely, the poetry of my own that seems to qualify as Spirit/Dance practice might include, not the formal poems published under the name “J.M.Hall” (because they are not improvisational community performances), but rather the deliberately poetic and improvisational speech of my teaching performances and mentoring and counseling sessions. And the main example of dancing that qualifies as a Spirit/Dance practice, in addition to the literal improvisational Latin jazz dancing (including salsa, bachata, and merengue) in the Birmingham social Latin dance scene, and my on-the-floor teaching thereof to first-time dancers, is the figurative “social choreography” that I help create in those weekly events qua improvisational community artworks. This includes recruiting new folks to the scene, making sure to dance with as many different people as possible, especially members of disempowered and underrepresented groups, promoting tolerance and appreciation of queer folks (including by dancing with other men), and encouraging other veteran dancers to join me in all the above.¹⁶

A secondary example of my Spirit/Dance dancing might be my daily walks through Birmingham—a tree-filled metropolis whose official name is “Magic City”—which include a degree of stylization, occasional outright dance (often accompanied by music through my earphones). These walks are intended to be shared with drivers and pedestrian passers-by, in part

¹⁶ For an opposing, pejorative conception of “social choreography,” see Andrew Hewitt, *Social Choreography: Ideology as Performance in Dance in Everyday Movement* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

to exhort through example a greener, healthier, more environmentally sustainable mode of transportation. And the community's appreciation of these efforts is suggested by friends joking about seeing me strolling happily all over the heavily forested city, and even a mention of my ambles in one neighborhood newsletter.

Whatever two practical disciplines are chosen to supplement the two theoretical disciplines of philosophy and psychology, the four disciplines' purpose is to empower Spirit/Dance's central activity. Inspired in part by Marxist analyses of how capitalism fetishizes social activity into a seemingly-magical power of the commodity (replacing what Walter Benjamin calls the "aura" of an object's history of production), and in part by the school of natural language philosophy, I argue for a revival of the politically energizing, yet humbly naturalistic, way that the word "magic" has historically been used in Anglophone spaces. Put formally, *"magic" in Spirit/Dance refers to free interpersonal performative action, which would otherwise appear in the form of involuntary, spontaneous states of flow, inspiration, or dynamism, but which, in the case of "magic" is (1) deliberate, (2) prioritizes empowering others over profit, and (3) requires sacrificing parts of the mage's own being to channel and physically incorporate "spirits."*

As for the latter concept, the spirits in Spirit/Dance are the raw material, power, inspiration, energy, etc., from which a mage creates a magic. They are indefinitely numerous, include dead ancestors (like one's great-grandfather), historical figures (like Kublai Khan), legendary heroes (like Joan of Arc), mythical beings (like water dragons), fictional characters (like a Monster High doll), and anthropomorphized places and abstractions (like the spirit of a named river), and each is representable in infinitely many ways. The only requirements for an entity to qualify as a "spirit" is that it is not currently alive, whether because they are now

deceased, or because they were never biologically born.¹⁷ In sum, magic in Spirit/Dance always means indebtedness to others, and to our shared past, and so it must openly acknowledge, take on, and pay forward this debt to the present and future of our communities.

The most important democratic and egalitarian implication of Spirit/Dance's conception of magic is that, for as long as any person engages in the activity understood here as "magic," they merit the title of "mage." And the more intensively and extensively a person performs magic, the more deserving they become of that title. In other words, this magic can be practiced by anyone who wants to devote the time and energy to it, without any bars to entering the practice based on status, birth, nationality, etc. Accordingly, Spirit/Dance rejects any formal levels of practice, or tiers of practitioners, which would relegate some persons to a higher level (comparable to a clergyperson) and others to a lower level (such as a congregation member).

Retuning to the three criteria for magic in Spirit/Dance, I will now attempt to clarify them using three corresponding counterexamples. First, it often transpires that, without deliberate effort, a person delivers a performance which is immediately enrapturing and memorable for those in its presence, as in a drunken monologue or an uncharacteristic freestyle rap session. Or, secondly, one achieves these amazing and transformative effects through performance deliberately, but in a way that exploits or otherwise harms the audience, as with a greedy televangelist, or a millionaire rockstar singing misogynistic lyrics to crowds of prepubescent boys. And/or, thirdly, this deliberate performance does not require any sacrifice of the self of the performer, who prefers to simply augment their own ego, unjustly relegating to the shadows those who made the performance possible by coming before and inspiring them.

¹⁷ The main reason for this condition is the imperative to avoid the problematic tendency to reify and objectify living persons into a kind of personal spiritual handmaiden (as in the popular line today, "She's my spirit animal"). This is even more problematic given the historical tendency of disproportionately involving women of color, which is arguably racist in its effects (despite an often-admirable conscious intention to affirm the person in question).

While condition (1) strikes me as relatively straightforward, especially in the light of the counterexample above, I can easily imagine readers misinterpreting the intent of condition (2). Though the latter is admittedly ethically value-laden, this ethicality is more of a (welcomed) side effect of that condition, rather than a determining cause thereof. To wit, I am not proposing a definition of magic that violates what philosophers call the “is/ought” distinction, as when a philosopher defines “art” in such a way that something can only be art if it is aesthetically good. On the contrary, for Spirit/Dance, the reason that magic must be good (in this case, ethically) is not because it would be unappealing to have unethical magic, but rather because magic’s signature effects depend on its ability to empower. Thus, when magic fails to empower, it is failing to be powerful, and therefore no longer deserves the title of “magic.”

The most difficult and complex of these three conditions, however, is undoubtedly (3). As in the loosely analogous case of Vodou psychology and its possessed priests, a Spirit/Dance mage can deliberately suspend their self-conscious way of being in favor of channeling and reembodying an entity whom they consider superior in some way. To give a lowly example, if I consider my great-grandmother to be extremely stoic and persistent, then when I find myself in a difficult situation, I can try to choose not to react as I would normally do, and instead pretend that I am her, proceeding to do what I think she would do if she were in that situation. Oversimplifying, this is comparable to the “WWJD” (What Would Jesus Do?) bracelets that continue to be popular among fundamentalist Christians in the U.S. (though in the case of Spirit/Dance, the question is: “What would a small number of personally-chosen spirits do?”).¹⁸

My answer to the latter question amounts to Spirit/Dance’s three ultimate objectives, toward which its multidisciplinary magic aims. The first is “mindfulness,” roughly synonymous

¹⁸ As to the existence of a Supreme Being, Spirit/Dance remains deliberately neutral. Thus, theists, atheists, and agnostics are equally welcome and respected.

with Hannah Arendt's concept of "thoughtfulness" (in brief, that for lack of which one risks becoming a Nazi).¹⁹ It is a virtue primarily of the psyche/soul, especially as the latter is conceptualized in various traditions of philosophy and psychology marginalized by the birth of mainstream academic psychology.²⁰ The second ultimate objective, which builds on the first objective insofar as it applies to (already-) mindful psyches/souls in the community, is "liberation," in the sense of the Latin American "liberation theology" (a neo-Marxist blend of spiritual and political freedom). It is a virtue primarily of the body-mind, translating each embodied psyche/soul into a more free-moving agent and force in their communities. And the third ultimate objective, which builds on both the first and second objectives insofar as it applies to the (already-) liberated, (already-) mindful, embodied psyches/souls, is "social justice." It is a virtue primarily of communities, reweaving many liberated, thoughtful body-minds into more flourishing social bodies, including voluntary associations and the body politic as a whole.

Finally from this second section, I wish to briefly note the inclusion in *Spirit/Dance* of a small group of accoutrements, or tools, which I call "technologies" (in part as a reminder that science and technology are not excluded, but in fact welcomed, in *Spirit/Dance*'s magic). My intent here is to help ground this assemblage of spiritual practices concretely in the world of things and material practices, so it does not get lost in the arid heights of abstraction where most academic philosophers' creations go to die (since most non-academics cannot find purchase or sufficient oxygen there). In my current formulation, each mage is advised to collect four such

¹⁹ For more on this interpretation of Arendt's notion, see Joshua M. Hall, "Twixt Mages and Monsters: Arendt on the Dark Art of Forgiveness," *The Philosophy of Forgiveness, Vol. 2: Dimensions of Forgiveness*, ed. Court Lewis (Wilmington, DE: Vernon, 2016), 215-240.

²⁰ For more on these conceptions of the psyche, see Joshua M. Hall, "Plato's *Phaedrus* after Descartes' *Passions*: Reviving Reason's Political Force," *Lo Sguardo: Journal of Philosophy* 27: 2019, 75-93.

technologies (or identify those which they already possess), which I now present, in an order with no implied ranking.

First, each mage should have a “mantle,” defined as an article of clothing that psychosomatically protects and psycho-socially empowers them, by projecting their reputation to the community. My own mantle, for example, would probably be a dark gray wool overcoat, in which I can almost always be seen wrapped during the colder seasons of my daily walks in Birmingham, especially when paired with a rotating assortment of scarves, which were handknit for me by various loves ones over the years.

Second, a mage’s “charm” is a small item, worn or carried, that empowers self-directed or concentrating magic (as opposed to others-directed or radiating magic). My charm, for certain, is a small steel ring in the style of the signature item of the DC comic-book superhero “Green Lantern.” In that fictional universe, the Lanterns are an intergalactic, multispecies corps of cosmic guardians, each chosen based on personality-fit and virtue, and their power ring represents willpower and imagination, drawing on the material energy of the eponymous lantern during regular charging sessions. What this means to me, viz Spirit/Dance, is that one’s power of creative construction is bounded only by the scope of one’s imagination, the firmness of one’s resolve, one’s fidelity to serving the community in an order of fellow guardians, and one’s regularly attending to recharging one’s material resources (including through sleep, healthy nutrition, and emotionally restorative interactions and relationships).

Third, a mage’s “armament” is a literal or figurative weapon that helps empower world-directed or radiating magic, which thus functions in a kind of mutually empowering or oscillating relationship with the “charm” (which, to repeat, focuses self-directed or concentrating magic). My own armament would probably be my laptop computer, the twenty-first century

analogue of the mightier-than-sword pen. Most important of my laptop-empowered creations would be the uncountably numerous improvised email I have sent over the years to students, former students, mentees, and counseling clients, each one tweak to try to match the needs of the individual in that moment.

And lastly, a mage's "familiar" is a real or imaginary nonhuman animal or plant species with which a mage feels kinship, reminding them of their own animality and inherent connection to their ecosystem. Mine, unquestionably, would be the ever-present Deep South songster, he of many borrowed voices, the beautiful mockingbird. In addition to my activism being partially inspired by the titular mockingbird of Harper Lee's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, and my identifying (qua poet) with the mockingbird's mimicry, I also performed a surprising experiment with member of that species, years ago, that has yielded a new degree of inspiring kinship. As I have explored elsewhere, I composed a little musical phrase and whistled it to mockingbirds in different neighborhoods for several weeks of my daily walks in the evergreen Magic City. Not only did the mockingbirds quickly learned and repeated the little phrase to me, but each has its own distinct variation thereon, and eventually they started singing it at first sight of me, without my even having whistled a single note. Each time it happens, I feel radically more connected to the cosmos, sharing a life between two species whose most recent common ancestor lived roughly 320,000,000 years ago, in a figurative dancing dialogue that stretches back from before we were human, and toward what we may yet be.²¹

²¹ See Joshua M. Hall, "Trans-Religious Dancing Dialogues: Michel Henry on Dionysus and the Crucified," *Culture and Dialogue* 9(2): 2021: 243-264

III. Concluding Clarifications

Understandable fears to the contrary notwithstanding, a cult, by definition, is centered around the figure of a single charismatic leader, whereas the whole point of Spirit/Dance is to empower a maximal number of people to autonomously create their own spiritual practice. Here, the abovementioned indistinction between clergy and parishioners assumes crucial importance. More precisely, each mage's practice is externally limited only by any voluntary associations they choose to create or join with others. These associations would be based on working with a particular spirit, and each mage would choose a small group of spirits whom they most wish to channel in their work, which I call "primary spirits." For example, a mage might create a social media group based on the philosopher Zhuangzi, or join an in-person fan fiction group based on the figure of Jean-Luc Picard, or the hero of the Last Airbender. Thus, rather than Spirit/Dance being built around myself as cult leader, if there is anything cult-like about it, one could say that it is like a metalevel "cult-of-many-cults," which has as many "cult leaders" as practitioners.

To flesh out this idea of primary spirits, I will now offer the example of my own current seven, again in no ranked order. First, the Green Lantern comic book superhero, already discussed above, was originally inspired by Nietzsche's truth-seeking madman with a lantern (in turn inspired by the Cynic Diogenes), and was first drawn by the character's creator (Martin Nodell) in Dionysian theatrical costume. Second, the legendary rebel leader Robin Hood (or Robin of the Hood, where "Hood" means "forest") is the leader of a merry band of misfits, an expert in what is now called guerrilla warfare who fights with the poor against wealthy tyranny, possesses the associated epistemological virtue of wiliness, or "foxiness." Relatedly, in the animated Disney film, is portrayed an androgynous humanoid fox, which further connects him to the similar populist hero Zorro which is Spanish for "fox." Third is the abovementioned

theatrical character Peter Pan, who (like Green Lantern) has the power of magical flight, and like Robin Hood is the leader of childlike merry outcasts rejecting viciously conformist adulthood. An ally to the racially oppressed Indigenous, Pan also has an affinity for the fey/fairies, and is cast is normally cast in theatrical productions with an androgynous ciswoman. Fourth, Marcus Aurelius is an ancient philosopher and Roman emperor, yet also a humble disciple of the enslaved Stoic philosopher Epictetus, and his legendary virtue (especially patience and self-criticism) led him to advocate a dance-inspired political ethics of self-cultivation and civic virtue. Fifth, Wang Yangming is an early modern Chinese theorist, poet, military general, and governor, who infused Daoist and Buddhist poetry into Confucian teachings. For defending his peers against an unjust bureaucrat, he was exiled to a poor, backwards province (populated by an oppressed ethnicity) which he transformed into a center of flourishing. Sixth, Abu Nasr Alfarabi is a medieval Turkish theologian and musicologist who advocated a progressive political theory (including proto-feminist, anti-racist, and queer-positive positions) grounded in scientific materialism and imaginative artistry. He also invented the poetic syllogism in logic, promoted music therapy for mental illness in psychology, and famously wore the traditional cloak of the Sufis, which at the time symbolized radical intellectual freedom. Finally, Gloria Anzaldúa is a twenty-first century Chicana scholar, poet, and activist, who reconstructed mythical and religious figures (including Native American deities), in pursuit of a feminist, antiracist, decolonizing, anti-ableist social justice vision, and claimed a magical power (*la facultad*) inherited from, and perfected with the support of, her Indigenous foremothers.

Note in this example that, in contrast to today's major world religions, where a top-down structure determines most practitioners' basic beliefs and practices (most commonly involves a beginning with one or more highest deities, worship of whom is compulsory), Spirit/Dance

prefers a bottom-up structure, in that each practitioner begins by asking themselves questions along the following lines: “What figures do I love the most, hold most sacred, most wish to emulate, or most wish could be more widely appreciated and instantiated in our communities today?” Put differently, Spirit/Dance valorizes or formalizes existing psychological and sociological systems of adoration, obsession, fandom, etc. To repeat, this does not rule out significant overlap among practitioners. On the contrary, it seems likely that a relatively small cluster of primary spirits could organically emerge and rise to prominence.

To elaborate with a few more examples, these primary spirits might include many charismatic figures of the major world religions (such as Jesus, the Buddha, Kongzi, and Thor) as well as the most enduringly popular fictional beings (such as Sinbad, the Golem, and Quetzalcoatl). In this way, most mages would probably choose multiple spirits who would connect them to multiple associations (belonging, say, to both a Naruto association and a Djinn association). And this could provide not only community for the mages, but also checks and balances against single-minded fanaticism (focusing on just one spirit) and irrelevance (choosing only one spirit that no other mage chooses). For example, there would presumably be many Wonder Woman-spirited mages who were not also Jesus-spirited, thus blunting the potentially overriding or controlling force of the Jesus-spirit on any given mage.

Put historically, most humans (religious or not) seem to have operated on the assumption that there are two possible levels of reality, namely sacred and profane (or religious and secular). As such, the primary question has been whether only the profanely secular level of reality exists, or whether there is also a second, higher lay of reality. Put differently, most have thought that the world is either (a) mostly boring and drab (but with a hidden transcendent layer of magic), or

else (b) entirely boring and drab (with which fact we must make our peace, usually by distracting ourselves with drugs, art, scientific exploration, etc.).

By contrast, Spirit/Dance proposes, not that (a) the sacred layer is merely imaginary (which most agnostics/atheists have long asserted), nor that (b) the sacred layer's imaginariness leads us to misperceive the profane layer as drab and boring (which has also been asserted by agnostics and atheists such as Nietzsche), but rather that (c) the sacred layer is much more similar to, and less distant from, the profane layer. In other words, there are, after all, meaningful referents to traditional religious words and concepts such as "magic," but those referents are not the traditional ones, nor are they as radically different from those traditional referents as most people have believed.

More concretely, the wondrous feeling a person might experience when deeply immersed in, say, an informal "skit" performed with family members and based on their favorite fictional fantasy universe is in fact a subjectively real feeling—which that person might unreflectively call "magical." Moreover, in a slightly altered world, the most accurate name for that experience would indeed be "magic," in part because there is no such thing (in any real world) as the objectively transcendent phenomenon that we have tended to posit, counterfactually, by that name. However, as long as we do not realize the latter truth (namely that there is no conventional magic), the psychosocial dampening field created by the imagined pejorative contrast (between "literal" and "figurative" magic) will prevent that wondrous experience from reaching its maximal intersubjective existence. But if that intersubjective level of existence for magic were to be reached, then we would finally have the chance to construct practices and institutions that could enable the social construction of magic as a newly objective reality. We might, for two

examples, design degrees in magic, or construct new performance spaces and technologies to further enhance such wondrous performances.

Anticipating the objection that of this still seems too abstract and difficult to picture, I now close with a minimal sketch of what a Spirit/Dance event might look like. Although there are no required spaces, neither in term of location nor size, there might be a general preference for the outdoors, and especially meadows and clearings in the woods where available, given the sensibilities of those to whom this practice is likely to be more attractive, as well as the dominance of such motifs in the global religious traditions on which Spirit/Dance draws. For the same reasons, when using indoor spaces instead, it might be helpful to procure as much flora as possible, to at least suggest the wider natural world and cosmos, of which this practice attempts to be ever mindful.

As for the practice of Spirit/Dance itself, the closest analogue in mainstream contemporary Global Northern practice would probably be performance art. A Spirit/Dance performance should be as fully embodied as possible, for both performers and other “beneficiaries” (an alternate term for “audience,” deemphasizing the latter term’s passivity, and emphasizing the performance’s prioritization of its flourishing). This could mean literally dancing with one’s whole body, or figuratively being bodily immersed to the greatest degree possible in the technological media which one is manipulating (images, sounds, virtual reality, etc.). Spirit/Dance performances should also be significantly spontaneous, improvisational, dynamic, and evolving (as opposed to fully controlled, scripted, predetermined, etc.). Perhaps most importantly in this vein, the performance should be flexible enough to vary in according with, and be profoundly implicated and altered by, each instance of performance, with each constellation of beneficiaries.

Turning from the “what” of Spirit/Dance practice to its “how,” the key phrase here is “therapeutic transfiguration.” That is, for both performers and beneficiaries, the performance itself should be a healing experience (and preferably be experienced immediately as such). This healing, more precisely, should include (1) relief of bodily pain, discomfort, weariness and/or impairment; (2) reduction of stress, anxiety, depression, and/or other mood disturbances; and/or (3) imaginative recontextualization of features of the beneficiaries’ community. The purpose of the latter is to yield alternate perspectives, such that beneficiaries re-perceive their lives as less stuck and hopeless, and as more flexible, open, and alive to fulfilling possibilities.

Transitioning from the “how” of Spirit/Dance practice to the “when” of its history, given that it explicitly draws on overlapping traditions of religion, spirituality, mythology, legend, fiction, etc., the spirits inspiring a given mage’s performance will also be part of the heritage of their beneficiaries, and therefore an object of the latter’s psychosocial investment. In other words, a mage should be mindful of the historical context from which their spirits derive, particularly the ways those spirits have been taken up and modified by the most influential interpreters globally (such as when a popular film alters a generation’s understanding of a mythical figure). That way, mages can start from the interpretive and affective positions which their beneficiaries are likely to occupy at the time of a given performance. Moreover, the most powerful mages will presumably craft their own evolving reinterpretations of the spirits in ways that help their beneficiaries tap into their existing passion for those same spirits and adjust their own comportment in flourishing-enhancing ways, as well as suggesting sustainable trajectories for the beneficiaries to pursue in future.

Finally, there is Spirit/Dance’s “why” dimension. In my critique of Global Northern appropriations of shamanism, my central objection was that the appropriators’ dominant motive

tends to be escape into adolescent power fantasies. Or else they seek the kind of status, power, and influence that they wrongly assume Indigenous shaman hold over their tribe members, and crucially without the latter's undergirding responsibility and accountability. Thus, to the question as to why one should pursue magical power, the unthinking visceral response in the Global North has tended to be: "For its own sake, of course." Whereas the actual answer, articulated in virtually every global tradition of Indigenous shamanism, is: "To repair and safeguard the community and its members." Put differently, magic is as much responsibility as it is power; and that responsibility accrues foremost to the members of one's flesh and blood community, the living, breathing beneficiaries of one's Spirit/Dance performances, with whom one shares space and time. With that in mind, I now leave the reader with a blank Spirit/Dance "mage profile," as a resource to get started with developing their own practice, for the sake of themselves and our shared communities, for whom nothing less than at least indirectly empowering political revolution will do.

IV. Appendix

MAGE PROFILE **Name:** _____

PRACTICAL DISCIPLINES

-1) [name]:

-2) [name]:

PRIMARY SPIRITS

-1) [name]:

-2) [name]:

-3) [name]:

-4) [name]:

-5) [name]:

-6) [name]:

-7) [name]:

TECHNOLOGIES

-MANTLE:

-CHARM:

-ARMAMENT:

-FAMILIAR: