

## Empire of Prisons: Reading Roland Barthes and Hijikata Tatsumi in the animus of laughter

Michael Sakamoto

*This essay is a speculative autoethnography, tracing subtexts of the Western gaze, Orientalist exoticification, culturalist resistance, and the “body in crisis” in the author’s subjective experience of, and research on, butoh performance. Filtering his scholarly-artistic praxis through his intellectually reflexive, dancing body, the author performs an embodied reading/desecration of two seminal texts in Japanese, performance, and cultural studies, and particularly the visual archive of their most circulated published versions in English: Hill and Wang’s 1982 publication of Roland Barthes’s book, Empire of Signs (1970), and The Drama Review’s 2000 publication of Hijikata Tatsumi’s essay, “To Prison” (1961). The author frames his approach to manifesting butoh expression as a potential strategy for—and portrait of—the multicultural practitioner navigating the binary minefield of East-West, intercultural politics in contemporary global performance.*

Keywords: butoh, Japan, absurdity, crisis, Barthes, Hijikata, universal

**Michael Sakamoto** is a scholar, artist, curator, and educator active in dance, theatre, photography, and media, whose works have been presented in 15 countries worldwide. He is former Assistant Professor of Dance at University of Iowa and Co-Program Director of the MFA in Interdisciplinary Arts at Goddard College. Michael currently directs performing arts programming at the University of Massachusetts Fine Arts Center. His book, *An Empty Room: Butoh Performance and the Social Body in Crisis*, is forthcoming from Wesleyan University Press. He earned his MFA in Dance and PhD in Culture and Performance at UCLA's Department of World Arts and Cultures/Dance.

Michael's reading and writing is that of a novice. He imagines his words burning down a house, in the way that Barthes's and Hijikata's words burn him.<sup>1</sup>

I live here.

One can only laugh.



Close to laughing

## Sign and Sight

“Some say that it’s an American complex, like trauma. Maybe not only America, but including Europe. Maybe it’s a contradictory idea to white people. Like anti-white.”

— Ohno Yoshito on the use of dark makeup in the first  
butoh performances (2019)

December 2016 and May 2019. I bring the book, *Empire of Signs* (1970), by Roland Barthes, with me to Japan as I research and perform as a butoh dancer. Both times, I take out the book to read on the train from Narita airport to Tokyo, but immediately put it away for the remainder of the trip. In Barthes’s final book, *Camera Lucida* (1980), his sentimental prose (purposely?) undermines his Sisyphean goal of crafting universalist intellectual statements out of the subjective trauma of his mother’s death. *Empire of Signs*, however, was written a decade earlier, years previous to this crisis. Filling the book with terse, quippy reflections on “the Japanese” in word and image, the author manages his idealized inquiry about a real-world system, “Japan”, as abstract object.

That object also happens to be a large part of my family’s identity and the root culture of butoh, the artistic and philosophical practice and scholarly subject to which I’ve dedicated much of my life. In refusing *Empire of Signs*, I resist my ambivalent desire, as a Western-trained scholar-artist, for its intellectual-poetic *punctum* in me, and my capacity to prick or wound—to retraumatize—myself “in country” in the name of “critical inquiry.”

Yet another text that weighs on my mind each time I walk the streets of Tokyo is “To Prison,” written in 1961 by butoh founder Hijikata Tatsumi as a surreal, polemic tract and artistic manifesto. Hijikata metaphorically posits a criminal dance that would marginalize and send him behind bars, where he can behave authentically and mold an army of misfit dance soldiers as a “dreaming lethal weapon” against postwar Japan’s Westernized culture (2000: 48). More than any other text in butoh’s early years, “To Prison” declares a precise, utopic vision for Hijikata’s art.

Fast forward six decades, however, to an early 21st century Tokyo that has realized projections of the simulacrum or society of the spectacle beyond Baudrillard or Debord’s wildest dreams (1994, 1995), and even *To Prison* cuts too close to the bone for me to fully contemplate while in Japan. For both texts, I can only read the words after my return to the USA, where my heart possesses “critical distance,” and instigate, through this *punctum* and its consequent reflexes (tears) and gestures (laughter), a deeper investigation: to become the words themselves.

## Imagining an Empire

“I would have to descend deeper into myself to find the evidence of Photography, that thing which is seen by anyone looking at a photograph and which distinguishes it in his eyes from any other image. I would have to make my recantation, my palinode.”

— *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes (60)

*I would have to descend deeper into myself to find the evidence of butoh dance and Japanese American culture, those things which are seen by some people looking at my performance and which distinguishes it in their eyes from any other image. I would have to disclose my conflict of interest and self-corroboration/restoration.*

The other me in every reading, not the assumed, employed, paraded object, but a sentient being, like the one that lived with and then mourned Barthes's mother.

“The text does not “gloss” the images, which do not “illustrate” the text. For me, each has been no more than the onset of a kind of visual uncertainty, analogous perhaps to that *loss of meaning* Zen calls a *satori*. Text and image, interlacing, seek to ensure the circulation and exchange of signifiers; body, face, writing; and in them to read the retreat of signs.”

— *Empire of Signs*, Roland Barthes (unpaginated)

*Barthes wants his text to signify that which does not. His text does not need to gloss the chosen images as its underlying gloss on Japan is a given. The images cannot illustrate the text as they signify nothing but Barthes's desire. This is the only uncertainty; not a visual one, but the loss of meaning between this writer and an-other culture that postcolonialism calls privilege. In a text and image system of the body, i.e. a living culture of a real place that I experience as Japan, meaning is not interlaced with, but rather is, body, face, and writing. Nothing retreats except the need for individual expression.*

Barthes's “Orient” is “a matter of indifference” to manipulate and entertain, with an unnamed Occident “someday” reflecting “the density of our narcissism” (1982: 3-4), just as “we” Americans replete with whiteness advocate for “diversity.” Barthes waits for Said in the way that sympathetic liberals waited for Obama.<sup>2</sup>

*Hijikata's butoh-fu (butoh words) were a practical matter, a stand-in for everything he imagined inside and out of his dancers, especially as each performance drew nearer. As a butoh practitioner, therefore, my text should not gloss its images, which cannot illustrate the text because they are the text. Each image refers to the onset of a kind of visual-corporeal potential, analogous perhaps to a perennial meaning/not-meaning in the body that Zen calls kensho. Text and image, each a provocation, not in equivalency, but in integrated dialogue, as image-word, seek to ensure the circulation and propagation of imbalances; body, face, writing, blood, sweat, tears; and in them to read the desire for signs as needed.*

Neither meaning nor loss of meaning, *satori* is Barthes's goal, so not *satori*. It is as Barthes always already is. *Kensho* is concomitant experience with and without intention or desire.

Our bodies are at risk.

Sending hysterical works to the theatre has great significance these days. We have the right to ask for a guarantee of actuality among

the random noise and bad taste that are the equivalent of almost raw materials. The sublime asceticism of crime. A totally empty face which endures torture. Young people who have cleverly acquired a nonsensical vitality. The pure despair that emerges before hope is crushed. My task is to organize these into a dance group and to make them into naked soldiers.

— From “To Prison”, Hijikata Tatsumi (2000: 47)

*Hijikata’s violent anxiety and corporeal materialism reveals the postmodern condition. His antidote is to eviscerate good sense, equating humor and truth. He wants audiences to laugh in the face of their own desires, stricken with capitalism’s spiritual poverty. He starts with himself, banishing his body to the margins.*

*Thus, I begin with myself.*

*Writing hysterical texts in academia has great significance these days. We can no longer trust in the guarantee of actuality among the positivist din and lack of flavor that are the same as they have always been. The sublime asceticism of critical bodies. A totally empty portfolio which endures torture. Naïve skills who have stealthily acquired a multilateral vitality. The peace of mind that emerges before peer review. My task is to organize these into a dance lexicon and to make them into paradoxical lovers.*

As I said.

## **Butoh Face**

Fall 2011. I'm teaching a "butoh master class" for theatre students in Jogjakarta, Indonesia. At the end of class, we gather for a final discussion, exhausted but sated. The host professor asks for a group photo, so the students gather around me, and we smile for the camera. Then, as so often happens around the globe at the end of class with a visiting butoh artist, we are prompted to pose in a "butoh" manner for the camera as well. Spontaneously, nearly all the students curl and twist their fingers, limbs, torsos, and faces into some humorously grotesque image. I do this as well. We leave the session on a high note of positive energy. I think to myself that this is how it should be.

Except for one thing.

That last photo. I hate myself for participating in it. Moreover, I hate myself for even allowing it to happen.

In fact, I always feel this way.

Years later, looking back at this photo while writing this essay, I notice that the one white person in the class sits at the outside edge of the group, leaning her head on her hand, seemingly nonchalant, in complete contrast to every other person. Is she resisting the entreaty to grotesquerie, to butoh's trope-like revelation of "the inner self" that exposes one's contradictions? Does she think we're ridiculous?



They are trying to dance, they don't know it, and this is seen



## Absurd

“The current situation is that a whole family finds recovery in an anal disease suffered by a six-year-old in a one-crop area of poor soil. The hands of parents are connected to hands that tease the gods. This phenomenon makes a design from a laughably black humor and that seems to me to be a mysterious dance.”

— From “To Prison”, Hijikata Tatsumi (2000: 47-48)

### The absurd in butoh

a seemingly happenstance defusing of the mind

a bewildering effect that reveals the cause

an unfiltered unpacking of shared premises underlying body, space, and time

that which we struggle to know

perfection

an antidote to absolution



Hiroshima, August 6, 2010

The Post-Nuclear City as ideogram:  
some texts invade

## Happy/Sad

“The awkwardness of being caught between a laugh and a cry is made acute in a performance that rattles internally with cultural distances.”

- Rosa von Hensbergen on the butoh group, Tatoeba-théâtre Danse Groteque (2018: 280)

*As a young man in the city, keen and hungry, I stared at a book containing two bodies.<sup>3</sup>*

*One, described as a man-angel, a believer, searching for God his entire life. Performance as communion. The authors label him, “The Soul of Butoh.”*

*Another, bleeding terror from every pore, each glance a dare to remove one shoe and run offstage. Dance as crisis. Dancers as the fallen. “The Architect of Butoh.”*

*Every day I returned, to take home another lesson in clutching my chest. The Architect told me that I never finished art school, a dish still cooking after five years. The Soul reminds me it’s never too late, his deep gashes of wrinkles an unmade bed from which one cannot rise.*

*A year later, I saw this broken desire, in lace and white, rise from the audience in the Japan America Theatre, and became my five year-old self to the sound of bandoneon and organ.<sup>4</sup> I returned the next day to steal his image. I have since stared at his crooked hands and eyes, his happy/sad mouth, for a quarter century.<sup>5</sup>*

*Eighteen months later, in a falling down room of tired eyes, a dancer stumbled through the seasons, tearing at his clothes and skin.<sup>6</sup> At the end of the dance, he threw a rainstorm from a bucket and smiled devastatingly. I have been searching for this smile around the world ever since.*

*The next day, I began taking class. My teacher was a gyroscope with an umbrella trailing the typhoon inside his body.<sup>7</sup> Watching him dance was like trying to solve an impossible Rubik’s Cube. “One dancer can bring everyone up, or bring them all down,” he told me. The work was quite serious, but late at night there were bad jokes, saké, and too much food. Our stomachs almost burst as we rolled in silent laughter at the moon.*

## The Master

I first used the word *sensei* when I was eight for my Japanese language teachers. My mother told me that it meant they were in charge. To question a *sensei* is to subvert the notion of *kata*, form, that subsumes most formal and even informal learning in Japan.

When I arrived in Japan and took class with Ohno Kazuo, he was Kazuo-sensei, and his son was Yoshito-sensei. In America, each one is often referred to in the dance world as a “butoh master.”

A master embodies a student’s highest or fondest desire. To claim status as a student of a master is to declare legitimacy for the pursuit and proof of one’s own potential mastery. Without masters—and their historical corollary, lineage—a practice is often seen as merely an occupation or vocation: an action sign devoid of substance.

A master is a marked object, designed to satisfy that which is internalized as dominance; reification and proof in one elegant package of hierarchy, of that paradigm which speaks for everyone. “The master will speak now.”

A Japanese will not refer to me, an American without a clear “butoh” lineage, as *sensei*. They will ask who my teacher is. An American also will not call me, another American, a butoh master. They will ask what style I practice. They may label Martha Graham or Merce Cunningham as Modern Dance masters, but not tirelessly default to the wording in every reference. Yvonne Rainer, Lucinda Childs, Trisha Brown, William Forsythe, and others are postmodern/contemporary dance masters in the qualitative, but not perennially in the titular. Their practices are not simply un-exotic; they refuse other-ness. Despite these artists’ rejection of classicism, the carnal body cannot be found within the practice of those who have mastered cultural paradigms that deny its necessity or primacy.

Ohno Kazuo, Waguri Yukio, Murobushi Ko, Kasai Akira, Amagatsu Ushio, Maro Akaji, Tamano Koichi and Hiroko, Yoshioka Yumiko, Katsura Kan, Takenouchi Atsushi, and many others, have functioned as “butoh masters,” circulating the globe, giving annual master classes for countless students, many of whom perceive a performance of butoh-ness to which they intend for themselves as much as prophesy from the master.

Hijikata Tatsumi was the originator-leader of butoh, but he never left Japan. He is therefore not a “butoh master” in the same sense as the others. His use value as an object with global capital in the butoh lineage marketplace is as a historical figurehead; a touchstone or flash-point. He is, for all intents and purposes, butoh itself.

In a May 2019 Google news search in English for “butoh”, out of 284 hits from 2004-2019, 20% contain references to “butoh master.” A November 2020 Google search for “butoh master” returns over five dozen webpage references.

Whiteness is a matter of mind. Every paradigm has its selves and others. To be exotic in Western dance, one’s beauty is a specter under threat of assimilation. In a white body, such as Ruth St. Denis, it is an other to be mastered. In a non-white and foreign body, mastery of self is allowed within the vernacular of other-ness. In a non-white domestic body, it is to be admired at arm’s length, visible from all sides, behind lock and key. My career is a panopticon.

April 2014. Madison, Wisconsin. At a post-performance reception, a university student asks me, “Are you a butoh master?”

I laugh.

## Smile/Frown

Fall 1998. “The Look of Love” is my second performance in a trilogy taking on tropes of Asian-ness in competing historical narratives of international cinema. In the first work, I created a dream environment replete with wistfully androgynous characters, like Japanese bastard children of Andrey Tarkovsky and Chris Marker. The work felt successful, but precious. I need a shot of irony, so I turn to pop culture.

I title the new show after a 1960s hit song, endlessly playing Dusty Springfield on repeat throughout rehearsals as well as Serge Gainsbourg. Masculin Féminin, cheap and easy. In a Silver Lake vintage shop, I unearth a faded smoking jacket and a short Sixties dress with rainbow sherbet trim, and suddenly I have my opening scene and finale.

Onstage, I complement the jacket with misbuttoned shirt, threadbare tie, and wrinkled fedora; the poorest excuse for a hipster cigarette ad. My axis sways left, stumbles right, every joint a vain attempt to match the loping rhythm as my very cis male character tries in vain to keep what little cool he never possessed.

For the previous years, in Body Weather Laboratory class with Oguri and Roxanne Steinberg, I learn to invent infinite movement permutations within limited vocabularies, character lexica of surreal, contradictory, and absurd images: a tree bending into and out of itself; a monkey unable to stand or sit; a cow standing in a river pissing into the wind. I come to simultaneously reflect extreme opposites within my psycho-physical state: passive/active, light/dark, smile/frown, giggle/cry, and so on. A dichotomous whole became my default as a dancer.

And now, I end my show looking like a teenage Asian Phyllis Diller, go-go dancing poolside for the kaiju gods in a Toho movie spectacular on Monster Island circa 1965. The audience, a mix of hipsters, dance fans, and a few art mavens who have never seen “butoh” before, follow me with their eyes, holding me up with their smiles as the music ends and I very slowly back upstage through a sheer curtain as the lights fade.

Since that day, across 15 countries and 22 years, I’ve wanted every audience to laugh and cry, because there is no more logical response to the world as viewed by a Japanese American dance theater artist conceived in the California Summer of Love, raised on soul, funk, and new wave, who came of age and body in the heady brew of postmodern identity politics, and now fumbles through an early 21st century call to black and brown sisterly, lives-mattering, discourse-spitting, beats-thumping butoh in the streets across the Pacific Rim, where he has made his home for half a century.

## Hands

“Yet where did that dancer get his hands, unlike any I have ever seen? They were the hands of Maldoror.”

— Hijikata Tatsumi on seeing Ohno Kazuo dance for the first time (2000: 36)

1959. Harumi wharves, Tokyo. Hijikata Tatsumi and four dancers photographed by Hosoe Eikoh. In numerous images with performers anonymous in tight black shorts and hoods, their hands are the clearest markers of subjecthood: crooked, each finger hooking and tearing at space itself.

1960. Ohno Kazuo photographed by Hosoe in studio and on the street. In each image—cheap necklaces, spangled panties, a flower dress around Ohno’s head, or crawling on a sidewalk, rigidly flexing his body inward, limbs pretzeled beyond recognition—one constant remains: Ohno’s hands, crumpled, but also intentionally gnarled and hard, grasping at the air and themselves.

That same year, Hosoe also films Hijikata, Ohno Yoshito, and three other dancers in the short film, *Navel and A-bomb*. Their hands seen in real time, flailing anxiously at skin, sky, water, an apple, and a cow.

1961. In “The Relationship between Avant-Garde Dance and Things,” an essay by Mishima Yukio that appeared in the program booklet for Hijikata’s Dance Experience concert in September, the author quotes Hijikata describing the chaotic hand movements of a paralyzed child as those which he is attempting to teach in resistance to normal physical behaviors (2018: 54-55). Mishima and Hijikata agree that functional hand movements are a mindless “falsehood,” a product of social engineering to control the body, “a momentary glossing over of the fearful and strict relationship between humans and things, through the performance of a kind of collusive ceremony by everyday movements under the veil of collusion” (54).

From the earliest days of butoh, our hands have never been our hands. But who is clawing at what? Does it depend on the bodies doing the clawing?

*Onstage, there’s the matter of sadness. The dancers are doing push-ups with their legs and their inability to stand. They should grab the floor with their toes and fling it to the ceiling so they can walk right side up while facing the audience sideways. Everyone should experience this dance some time in their lives.*



Turn the image left to right: everything.



## Written Face/Whiteface

“In our daily lives, we are individuals, we have individuality, but as Sankai Juku, we shave our heads and paint ourselves white. In a way, it is to remove ourselves from the ordinary and sort of erase our personalities. We do so in order to go back to simply being a human.”

— Amagatsu Ushio on Sankai Juku (2014)

“The white of the face seems to have as its function, not to denature the flesh tints or to caricature them (as with our clowns, whose white flour and greasepaint are only an incitation to daub the face), but exclusively to erase all anterior trace of the features, to transform the countenance to the blank extent of a matte stuff which no natural substance (flour, paste, plaster, or silk) metaphorically enlivens with a texture, a softness, or a highlight.”

— From *Empire of Signs*, Roland Barthes on Japanese theatrical makeup (1982: 88)

*When the Japanese American goes to Japan to perform, he is asked, “Will you wear white makeup?”<sup>8</sup> The question is a standard inquiry made of butoh artists, not so much out of the pragmatic needs of stage management, but rather out of a cross-cultural politesse, as if to indicate that the dressing room, lighting design, and crew members will accommodate this custom as given, even (especially?) for Westerners.*

*The Japanese American wonders back at a 60-year lineage in his mind’s eye: “Why would I want to appear white?”*

“This Western lecturer, as soon as he is “cited” by the *Kobe Shinbun*, finds himself “Japanned,” eyes elongated, pupils blackened by Nipponese typography.”

— From *Empire of Signs*, Roland Barthes commenting on his photo in a Japanese newspaper (1982: 90)

*The author, as soon as his activism “sites” a “Western lecturer” within Western poetic typography, finds himself “Orientalized” by certain readers, eyes shortened, lenses enlightened by positivist discourse.<sup>9</sup>*

*The lecturer (an autobiographical frame that he objectifies while subtly mobilizing his subjectivity as predicated within the larger frame of Western academic discourse) is symbol and critique. Symbol in his alleged “Japanization” by a Japanese newspaper that sets him adrift and untethered from recognizable (to Western eyes) signs of Western identity within the seeming abyss of Japanese typography. Critique in his implication that Western observers will not necessarily see him “colored” in this way, and why not?*

In childhood, he reflected on the phrase, “the whites of their eyes,” wondering, “What if our eyes are not white?”

An object, negativity, or hypothesis; in short, a disciplinary tool. What else is allowed?

*The lecturer takes possession of his Japan, his beloved “system,” and consumes its concomitant double, his assertions assuming the same Western, universalist position he so astutely criticizes at other points throughout his book (indeed, throughout his oeuvre). He claims, for example, the same emptiness beyond impassivity, “rinsed of meaning” (91) and “with no possible adjective” (94), that he finds in the whiteface of Nob and Kabuki is also found in the photographed faces of a general and his wife on the day before they commit suicide, their faces “sited” by the lecturer within “Nipponese” (an antiquating term) costume and spatial typography.*

As there is no universal meaning for a sign without cultural context (as in the socio-cultural-historical context of “Japan” that the author admires), neither can a universal meaning of the evisceration of meaning be assumed.

Or he could inquire as to how the general and his wife may have actually felt.

Written faces, indeed.

In Barthes’s Japan, “Femininity is presented to read, not to see” (53), and all by male performers, making “woman” the face of abjection, and the male its master.

In the original spirit of butoh, white is rough, cracked, muddied, “the color of punishment for the sin of treachery”, and “abnormally enveloped with the scent of repression” (Gunji 2018: 81), making dance the face of abjection.

In “The Written Face” (1995),<sup>10</sup> by Daniel Schmid, a documentary on the premiere Japanese kabuki onnagata, Tamasaburo Bando, two scenes feature Ohno Kazuo at 88 years old, costumed and dancing in female drag. He is readable in multiple valences as affirmation, denial, and alternative to Barthes’s notion. His face holds a whisper of a smile in every scene, while his gestures indicate his body breaking down.

In the film, Ohno is included with three other venerable Japanese female performance masters who supposedly incarnate essential aspects of femininity and womanhood. He is both symbol and metaphor for this lineage, yet his butoh body, crumpling under the emotional weight of his own idiosyncratic subjectivity, speaks for only itself/himself as much as, if not more than, the culturally-desired essence of “woman”. Ohno’s drag character is Divine, Jean Genet’s male prostitute from *Our Lady of the Flowers* (1943), danced for decades from 1959 onward at the instigation of Hijikata, who also choreographed Ohno in the role. Ohno’s fractured smile and desperate grasping gestures and breaths are rooted in his character’s existential crisis as an interstitially gendered entity at least as much as they derive from “Japan.”

Moreover, this depiction is inherently absurd, situated between a performative act and a state of being. Unlike Tamasaburo or the women in the film, Ohno is neither embodying nor signifying a female, but simply, by channeling character through his own identity, *being* a male traumatized by his irretrievable desire and loss of dignity.<sup>11</sup> Ohno is never anything more or less than Ohno.

## Whiteface/Yellowface

“Hijikata went back to Akita three years after (*Kinjiki*)<sup>12</sup>, then one day he came back to Tokyo. When I saw him, I found him so skinny. I asked, “What’s up?” Hijikata answered because Akita people are very poor, he couldn’t eat well. And then Hijikata started to paint himself white.”

— Ohno Yoshito (2019)

June 2012. In *White Screen*, Thai dancer Waewdao Sirisook and I perform to a live music score by Amy Knoles. Inspired by the whiteness (not blank or neutral; just white) of Japanese screens before they are painted (projected upon), I wear patchy whiteface makeup and dive into a series of visceral body images. I rattle through dark and absurd facial expressions during the climax at a hellish tempo, like hitting fast forward on a video catalog of theatre masks.

Preparing backstage for another piece, *Flash*, a butoh/hip-hop dance theater duet with Rennie Harris, I remove every trace of white from my face. We walk onstage as “ourselves,” two guys from East LA and North Philly, popping, locking, climbing, crawling, and “breaking down,” or, as Rennie later terms our shared dance style, “butoh funk”.

That night onstage, I thought about my family in concentration camp. I thought about the kids in my hood who didn’t make it. I thought about Rachel Rosenthal teaching me to perform through her stories of escaping Nazis as a Russian-French-Jewish teenager. I thought about all the masks that I’d painted—*written*—on my face for 18 years as a performer. I thought...that’s some real shit.

Since that night, for eight years, I have not used makeup.

Ah te ya woi ya hwing te ya hoy we hoy yao to ye to uh  
Ow ow!  
To yung do do te dong dong yu  
Yo aht ah to yung do u ah do yow du yay a ah du yow dow weh  
Owi to yeh  
Ow do yu!  
Ow u og to yu hong no to yo  
Yo lo tu ya fong chow  
Oh low! Oh low!  
Yowa tung po la  
Oh low! Oh low!  
Isa la tu tung uh

— From the song, “Chin Chin Chinaman”, John T. Powers (1898, translation and transcription by author)

Performing butoh in the early 21st century against the whiteness of five centuries of oppression in “The New World” is different than dancing in 1960s, post-imperial Japan against post-Occupation, American imperialism. The legacy of minstrel whiteface/yellowface marks me onstage, not as “Asian American”, but “Asian”, a body controlled by the state with complicity from popular culture from the mid-1800s through World War Two to the mid-1960s, just before I was born.<sup>13</sup> A half century later, we are still mostly allowed mainstream media representations only as: in need of a white savior or

white male enablers (*Good Morning, Vietnam, Miss Saigon, Pacific Rim*); domesticated and semi-passive (*Fresh off the Boat*)<sup>14</sup>; aspirational to bourgeois, capitalist whiteness (*Crazy Rich Asians*); powerful only in subordination (the *Hawaii Five-O* reboot); or still the oldest tropes of foolish caricature (*The Hangover* movies, *Crazy Rich Asians, Da 5 Bloods*).

I wonder if butoh for Asian Westerners possesses agency, akin to a yellowface minstrelsy never allowed to Asians in America in the 19th Century, a code-switched inversion smiling in the face of oppression, with tears and daggers streaming forth beneath the surface of projected and internalized Orientalist tropes.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps we are perennially suspended in motion, between escape and evisceration, between the rootless quandary of maintaining our dignity in the margins while always knowing our subjectivity is invisibilized at any moment we attempt to engage the center, a maneuver always on *their* terms because *they* define what is considered the center, i.e. what is.

“The white make-up of butoh was originally a manifestation of your will to become something else—metamorphosis of no clear destination. It was rough, coarse, and pieces of plaster or flour would peel off. But now, even butoh make-up is finely done in white. No different from Kabuki. I find no particular significance in it any more.”

— Tanaka Min (Kim 2006)

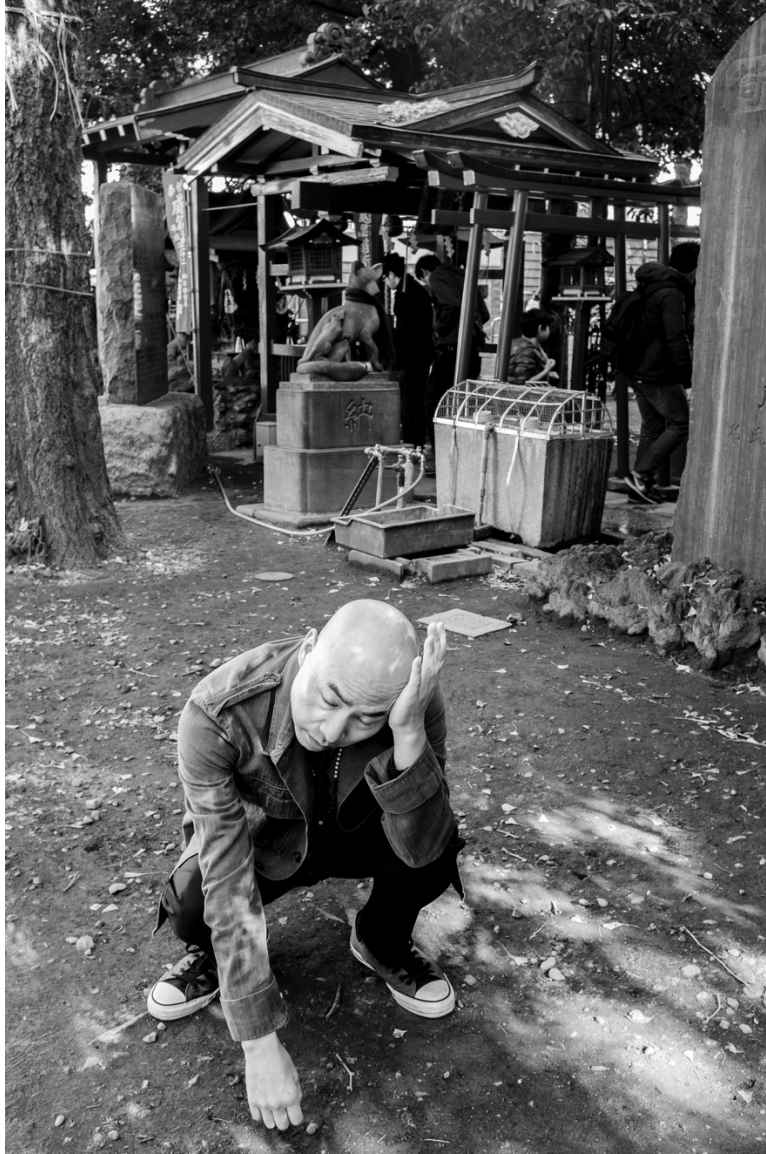
Leaving behind white makeup, Tanaka Min opted instead for a range of earth tones to approximate the color and feeling of “the natural world” (Kim 2006). Because this refusal, however, resists not only cultural stereotypes connoted by white makeup in Japanese dance, but also individuality, it accedes to yet another impersonal, universalist paradigm undergirding the traditionalist practice that Tanaka critiques. The impossibility, then, of neutralizing the self, of achieving emptiness, no identity, for not only do neutrality and universality inherently elude, they oppress as well through the desire for their attainment.

Having experienced this style of training, artist-scholar Gretel Taylor points to the necessity, not of “dancing the place” itself as Tanaka often describes, i.e. letting an environment infuse your being, but instead dancing *in relation* to place. Her strategy is to acknowledge any and all aspects of identity, both of the dancer and the environment, within culture, gender, sexuality, language, history, and politics. Taylor highlights the fact, for example, that she can’t escape her status as a privileged member of the settler class in Australia when dancing on that raped and stolen land (2010). In other words, the manner and agency with which one attempts any task reflects their individual qualities. No two people attempt any action in exactly the same existential state.

I also trained in Tanaka’s Body Weather Laboratory lineage for three years, though I did not experience the work as universalizing, per sé. I believe this was largely because, while simultaneously training for six years in Rachel Rosenthal’s Doing by Doing methodology,<sup>16</sup> which foregrounded methods of performance devised from personal experience, my observational filters were already focused on noticing gestural, visual, and verbal indicators of subjective expressivity. Moreover, my main dance teacher, Oguri, was and still is a phenomenally prodigious mover with a magnetically idiosyncratic stage presence that audiences and reviewers have cited as the kind of dancer you cannot help but watch. In performance, Oguri is always, somehow, Oguri, and my awareness of this fact has always urged me towards an emotionally unfiltered approach to dancing.

Thus, who am I when and where I dance? I can never escape my Asian/Japanese/Nikkei/Japanese American/Angelino/American-ness when I dance, especially in the USA or Japan, where I often perform. Elsewhere, I have written on how I attempt to dance my complicated, sometimes irreconcilable, wholeness, from collaborations with African American hip-hop (*Flash*) and postmodern (*Brown and Black*) artists, to Southeast Asian migration narratives (*Soil*), to personal family history and the legacy of colonialism, and the exotifying Western gaze in the USA, Japan, and Europe

(*MuNK*) (Sakamoto 2016, 2017, 2019; Sakamoto and Schleitwiler 2019). But taking that next step deeper, into my own gaze, my own tongue. To step at all. How is it even possible?



Who is Orientalizing whom?

## The Butoh Dancer

“Japan is my life, but I’m not Japanese. Whereas you’re American, and that is your identity. And you’re also Nikkei, and you’ve got this Japanese side, so you’ve got more of a problem.”

— Writer Alex Kerr in “Nikkei-Chan” (2019)

"Through movement evoking a martial arts and street dance background, he relentlessly pursues the theme of Nikkei through various character transformations. A collaboration with the Japan expert writer Alex Kerr, looking closely at the matter of transforming himself, society, and identity, a quiet struggle to devise an original butoh is witnessed."

— Review of “Nikkei-Chan” by dance critic Shiga Nobuo (2019)

May 2019. I’m in Tokyo premiering “Nikkei-Chan,” an autobiographical dance theater work about my cultural identity in relation to Japan, and researching performance and scholarly projects. For the first time in nine visits to Japan, I fail to visit the photography and dance sections of Kinokuniya bookstore, perhaps because the spirit I sought from those perusals is now firmly ensconced in my psyche.

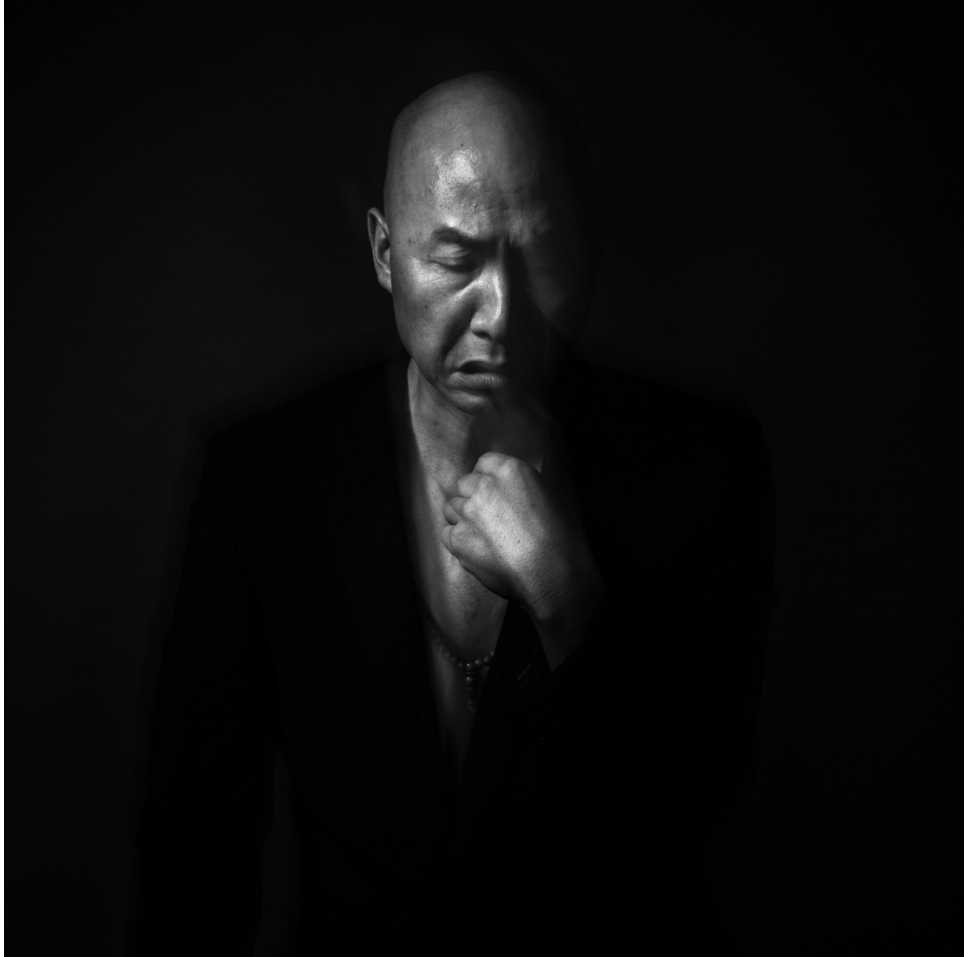
*Twenty-eight years since my encounter with a kazedaruma in Kinokuniya Los Angeles.<sup>17</sup> After that poison injection, I wandered on the sides of my feet for decades. Last Spring, stepping into Tokyo Babylon as a kazedaruma blowing into the house of butoh,<sup>18</sup> My dance was a telegram harvested from the California soil of my grandfather’s sweat.<sup>19</sup> John Steinbeck told me his labor was noble, but he never named him, so I was cast alone in that grade school play of my life, my first directing job. As a boy, I played everything onstage for laughs, but I cried as I ate the watermelon and candy they gave us as a reward for good behavior. This is what the post-structuralists call my spectacle, and my dance is built on these words.*

The butoh dancer is his own sign. His body, full of contortions, snags, warping, garbling, and perversion beyond and within recognition, constructs a syntax of corporeal personae in place and time. His face, replete with smiles, frowns, giggles, scowls, grimaces, sneers, tears, and prayers, writes itself. He knows the audience is watching.

Where is she, who danced second (the boy with the chicken, the prostitute with the hat, the girl with missing teeth)?<sup>20</sup> When is their historical moment?

I end the performance by piling my costumes and props center stage, unwrapping an *an-pan* (red bean pastry), and holding it in my teeth as I stare at the items.

The audience laughs. I do not.



Why does the writing begin?  
Where does the body end?



As a Western intellectual, Michael is in search for the body that, as a self-reflexive Westerner of color, he always already occupies, that invisible object of fascination and derision, the image of which stands inherently as a framed antidote to its own trauma, and the reality of which lies twisted and spent, laughing frenetically at its own contradictions.

If Michael were a woman, he would be “hysterical”. If he were white, he would be “concerned with diversity.” Instead, he is merely an anachronism.

I laugh.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> French scholar Roland Barthes (1915-1980) and Japanese dancer Hijikata Tatsumi (1928-1986).

<sup>2</sup> For a concise illustration of how Orientalism has developed and shifted in recent decades, from the mid-20th century of Said's and Hijikata's experiences, to the postmodern, neoliberal condition within the early 21st century, late capitalism navigated by the author's scholar-artist body, see Adam Shatz, "Orientalism', Then and Now", *New York Review of Books*, 5/20/2019, <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2019/05/20/orientalism-then-and-now/>.

<sup>3</sup> "Butoh: Shades of Darkness" (1987) by Jean Viala and Nourit Masson-Sekine.

<sup>4</sup> The performance was "Admiring La Argentina" (1977) by Ohno Kazuo, choreographed by Hijikata Tatsumi, on tour in the USA in Fall 1993.

<sup>5</sup> I stole the poster from the theater lobby and have hung it over my desk ever since.

<sup>6</sup> Tanaka Min performing his solo, "Seasons," at La Boca performance space, Los Angeles, California, May 1995.

<sup>7</sup> My teachers were Oguri and Roxanne Steinberg, though here I refer to Oguri's solo in "Onami/Menami" at Highways Performance Space, May 1995.

<sup>8</sup> From a conversation between the author and the co-curator of the Tokyo International Butoh Festival in May 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Accompanied by a press clipping image from the *Kobe Shinbun* of a photo of Barthes surrounded by Japanese text, Barthes's original text from *Empire of Signs* reads: "This Western lecturer, as soon as he is "cited" by the *Kobe Shinbun*, finds himself, "Japanned," eyes elongated, pupils blackened by Nipponese typography." (1982: 90)

<sup>10</sup> This is the same title as the chapter on theatrical makeup and whiteface in *Empire of Signs*.

<sup>11</sup> To be fair, Schmid's film somewhat complicates the issue. He points to the value of individual style and personality, not simply persona, by highlighting the unique skill and energetic quality of three senior female performers (especially geisha and dancer Takehara Han and film actor Sugimura Haruko). He also, however, repeatedly frames their comments within a patriarchal view of incompleteness in those same females' supposed lack of ability to portray idealized emotional and behavioral archetypes of their own identities as women.

<sup>12</sup> Choreographed by Hijikata Tatsumi and performed on May 24, 1959 by Hijikata and Ohno Yoshito, *Kinjiki* (Forbidden Colors) is considered the first performance in the historical development of butoh.

<sup>13</sup> Laws such as the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882), Immigration Act (1924), and Executive order 9066 (1942) severely limited and/or excluded immigration and civil rights for US residents and citizens of Chinese and Japanese descent.

<sup>14</sup> For a rundown of whitewashing critiques leveled at the show by Eddie Huang, the author of the autobiographical book on which the series is based, see <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/susancheng/eddie-huang-says-he-doesnt-watch-fresh-off-the-boat>.

<sup>15</sup> Hijikata devised a butoh imaginary, based on his rural home region of Tohoku, that resonated with the postcolonial urge for identity reformation where colonization has meant external control of the subjugated entity's identity, body, and resources and the reification of static modes of encounter. Decolonization requires continuously renewed self-manifestation, or what Gayatri Spivak refers to as a process of both the "colonial subject detaching itself from the Native Informant" and a "postcolonial subject...recoding the colonial subject and appropriating the Native Informant's position" (1999: ix).

<sup>16</sup> What I remember most about Rachel as a teacher was her ability, as I like to articulate it, to guide each student, many of whom like myself had no previous performance training, to become a virtuoso on an instrument of their own making and which only they can play. She also frequently stated, “There are no mistakes; only bad follow-through.” For more information, see the artist’s website at <http://www.rachelrosenthal.org>.

<sup>17</sup> I encountered Hijikata’s essay, “Kazedaruma,” in the book, *Butoh: Dance of the Dark Soul* (1987), when I first saw the book in 1991 at Kinokuniya bookstore in Los Angeles.

<sup>18</sup> “Nikkei-Chan” was presented at Tokyo Babylon Theater.

<sup>19</sup> My paternal grandfather was a migrant farmworker in California during the Great Depression.

<sup>20</sup> Referring to Ohno Yoshito in both versions of *Kinjiki* (1959), Ohno Kazuo in the second version of *Kinjiki* (1959) and many other works through the 1990s, and Ashikawa Yoko, who bared her gapped teeth to audiences (Stein 1986; Loke 1987). Across Hijikata’s oeuvre, I read abjection not simply of performers, but of females and femininity. Hijikata’s legacy of sexualization and commodification of women’s bodies, and butoh’s continued masculinization, beg deeper examination. For an introduction to gendering and apprenticeship in butoh, see Mezur (2018) and Coker (2018).

## Illustrations

Page 3: The author performing “Flash Mixtape” at Nyoba-Kan International Butoh Festival, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 2011. Photo: Waling C.

Page 8: Post-workshop group photo, ISI Jogjakarta, Indonesia, 2011. Photo: Rossa Rosadi.

Page 10: International peace offerings for 65th Anniversary of the first atomic bombing, Hiroshima, Japan, 2010. Photo: Michael Sakamoto.

Page 16: Ohno Yoshito, 2017. Photo: Michael Sakamoto.

Page 22: Hanzomon Jinja, Tokyo, Japan, 2017. Photo: Michael Sakamoto, assisted by Tillie Sakamoto.

Page 24: Portrait, Bangkok, 2016. Photo: Cedric Arnold.

## Works Cited

Amagatsu, Ushio, Edith Podesta, and Azumi. 2014. “AAPPAC Singapore Conference X Conversations 2014: Interview Transcript – The Heart of Sankai Juku”. Original conversation, 4/28/14. Downloaded 6/4/19. <https://www.esplanade.com/discover-and-learn/insight/~media/8ec2303dabec4371a7b957dea28172cc.ashx?mw=1920>

Barthes, Roland

— 1981. *Camera Lucida*. Richard Howard, trans. New York: Hill and Wang.

— 1982. *Empire of Signs*. Richard Howard, trans. New York: Hill and Wang.

Baudrillard, Jean. 1994. *Simulacra and Simulation*, Sheila Faria Glaser, trans. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

- Coker, Caitlin. 2018. "The daily practice of Hijikata Tatsumi's apprentices from 1969 to 1978", in *The Routledge Companion to Butoh Performance*, edited by Bruce Baird and Rosemary Candelario, 409-417. London and New York: Routledge.
- Debord, Guy. 1995. *The Society of the Spectacle*, Donald Nicholson-Smith, trans. New York: Zone Books.
- Geoffroy, Camila and Eduardo Oliveira, dirs. 2018. *Dancing in Between: A Portrait of Butoh with Tadashi Endo*. 28 minutes.
- Gunji, Masakatsu. 2019. "Butoh and Taboo", in *The Routledge Companion to Butoh Performance*, edited by Bruce Baird and Rosemary Candelario, 81-84. London and New York: Routledge.
- Hijikata, Tatsumi.  
 — 2000. "Inner Material/Material" in *The Drama Review* 44:1, 36-42. New York and Cambridge: New York University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology.  
 — 2000. "To Prison" in *The Drama Review*, Vol. 44.1. 43-48. New York and Cambridge: New York University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- Iwaki, Kyoko. 2018. "Oscillation and regeneration: the temporal aesthetics of Sankai Juku", in *The Routledge Companion to Butoh Performance*, edited by Bruce Baird and Rosemary Candelario, 237-242. London and New York: Routledge.
- Kim, Jiae. 2006. "Min Tanaka's Butoh" in *Theme*. Kazue Kobata, trans. Issue 7, Fall 2006. Accessed 5/20/10, <http://www.thememagazine.com/stories/min-tanaka/>.
- Loke, Margaret. 1987. "Butoh: Dance of Darkness" in *The New York Times*, 12/1/87. Accessed 5/29/19. <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/11/01/magazine/butoh-dance-of-darkness.html>.
- Mezur, Katherine. 2018. "Butoh's genders: men in dresses and girl-like women", in *The Routledge Companion to Butoh Performance*, edited by Bruce Baird and Rosemary Candelario, 361-370. London and New York: Routledge.
- Ohno, Yoshito. 2019. Interview with the author, Ishimoto Kae, trans. Yokohama, Japan. 5/7/19.
- Pavlić, Ed. 2016. *Who Can Afford to Improvise?* New York: Fordham University Press.
- Sakamoto, Michael.  
 — 2016. "Soil", *Performance Research*, 21:3, 103-114. Aberystwyth: Center for Performance Research.  
 — 2017. "Flash: Butoh, Hip-Hop, and Performing the Urban Body in Crisis", *Performing Utopias*, 71-86. London: Palgrave MacMillan.  
 — 2019. "Brown and Black: Performing Transmission in Trisha Brown's *Locus* and Hosoe Eikoh and Hijikata Tatsumi's *Kamaitachi*", *The Body, the Dance, and the Text: Essays on Performance and the Margins of History*, 202-218. Jefferson: McFarland and Company.

- Sakamoto, Michael and Vince Schleitwiler. 2019. "MuNK: Loving the Non-Alien." *Global Performance Studies* 3:1. <https://doi.org/10.33303/gpsv3n1a3>.
- Schmid, Daniel, dir. 1995. *The Written Face*. New York: Icarus Films. 89 minutes.
- Spivak, Gayatri. 1999. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press.
- Stein, Bonnie Sue. 1986. "Twenty Years Ago, We Were, Crazy, Dirty, and Mad" in *The Drama Review*. 30:2. 107-126. New York and Cambridge: New York University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- Taylor, Gretel. 2010. "Empty? A critique of the notion of 'emptiness' in Butoh and Body Weather training" in *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*, 1:1, 72-87.



*This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike International 4.0 License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>; or, (b) send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 2nd Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA*

