

We Are Not Solid Beings: Presence in Butoh, Buddhism, and Phenomenology

Sondra Fraleigh

This reflective essay emanates from Zen Buddhism and phenomenology in theory and spirit, integrating the somatic theory of Nagatomo Shigenori with its basis in Dōgen Zen. It invites readers to explore an eco-somatic approach to butoh, a metamorphic and now global form of dance that evolved in Japan in the shadow of ecological and social crisis after World War II. In its descent toward emptiness and acceptance of weakness, butoh is not a progressive dance form. Akin to Buddhism, it admits suffering. Like Buddhism and phenomenology, butoh attempts to clear the mind, particularly through examples discussed in this essay. Buddhism tends toward “no mind” or the unperturbed mind of meditation; phenomenology attempts to clear away habitual predispositions of mind, while the unhurried mind of butoh transforms in evanescence. One of the first female butohists, Nakajima Natsu, teaches presence as a practice: how to “become nothing,” to disappear and reappear in butoh, as I explain further. This essay stems from my involvement in butoh as a student, performer, and scholar since 1985, from my university teaching of dance and somatics, and from my investigations of phenomenology and Buddhism in philosophy. It is not a critical essay, but like phenomenology is descriptive, performative, and concerned with first-person “lived experience,” including how qualities of experience appear and transform in consciousness. The methods of phenomenology are connective and heuristic, aiming more toward discovery than claims about objective reality.

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As Though Nothing

We travel in dreams and thought, becoming porous when we dance and speak. We sound a presence seeming real when we appear out of nowhere. Our bones contend and hum the minute our chests waken and rattle. Through sound, we fly out of rooms and speak beyond flesh, while echoes bring bodies back to somewhere here. Moving here and now, we live space and vanish freely as we let go the struggle of muscle, replacing this with the patience of suchness in letting be, sounding in color or music or bodily movement or prose or poetry or anything expressive and dynamic by nature. Human beings are not suspended solids dancing in space—we exist space. Morphing through figure and feature, we sound a vague and passing presence, just as dancers vanish, step by step, in butoh.

Suchness in The Live Present: An Introduction

This essay emanates from Zen Buddhism and phenomenology in theory and spirit, integrating the somatic theory of Nagatomo Shigenori with its basis in Dōgen Zen (Nagatomo 1992). It invites readers to explore an eco-somatic approach to butoh, a metamorphic and now global form of dance that evolved in Japan in the shadow of ecological and social crisis after World War II. I write extensively about butoh in previous works (Fraleigh 1999, 2004, 2010, 2016; Fraleigh and Nakamura 2006). As a genre, butoh is not one thing but many. It addresses crisis obliquely, as theatre often does when it moves beyond first glance toward a larger picture.

Here, my writing spans from the theoretic to the personal. I emphasize butoh's *somatic suchness* as crucible, passage, and transformation in this two-part essay. Part I, *Being Not Solid*, is divided into three sections: *Being Body*, *Being in Doing*, and *Being Sound*, which contains a performative episode for readers *to do*. Part II, *Becoming Other*, explains butoh morphology and the predicament of "becoming other" in three sections: *Becoming Water and Flowers*, *Passing in Between*, and *Kinesthetic Affinities*—my personal journey.

In its descent toward emptiness, butoh is not a progressive art, nor is it a victim art; it often passes through bewildering states of being, transforming in appearance and disappearance. In performing

ecologies, butoh dancers attune to site-specific environments, and they connect with them through neutrality, nonjudgment, and awareness of place. Alive to the moment, butoh, like Buddhism and phenomenology, attempts to clear the mind. Buddhism tends toward “no mind” or the unperturbed, awakened mind of meditation; phenomenology attempts to recognize and clear away the habitual predispositions of mind, while the slow unhurried mind of butoh passes through obstacles and all kinds of otherness, morphing toward evanescence. One of the original female butohists, Nakajima Natsu (b. 1943) explains how to “become nothing,” to disappear and reappear in dance with butoh imagery (Nakajima in Fraleigh and Nakamura 2006: 105–112). Eternally slow pacing aids this intersubjective group dance process, as I first experienced with Nakajima (Fraleigh 1999: 87–96). From an equally mysterious angle, “Ash Pillar,” as explained by butohist Waguri Yukio (1952–2017), is a motivating dance image (butoh-fu) for diaphanous uncertainty and cutting, explosive disintegration based on the dance notation system of the founder of butoh, Hijikata Tatsumi (1928–1986).¹

The central aim of the present work is to bring understanding to the arcane topics of butoh, Buddhism, and phenomenology, and to amplify common features across these distinct subjects. As essay themes narrow to “suchness,” we study this as a nondualistic principle spanning several kinds of Buddhism. Simply put, suchness is perceptual oneness, experiential and direct knowledge of phenomena arising through meditative or neutral attention going beyond attachment and need. In performance, suchness signals an attentive, nonjudgmental presence in presentation and witnessing. Nagatomo writes of nondual awareness through Dōgen Zen as “casting off (the everyday sense of) the body and the mind” (1992: 153, original parenthesis). In butoh, a related phenomenon is sometimes called “shedding,” shedding the body that has been “robbed” (culturally conditioned, maimed, tamed, and more). Similarly, phenomenology brackets habits of thinking and doing, setting them aside as biases of perceptual conditioning. Butoh dancers cast off known dance techniques to become more aware in the moment and awake to movement and place: whether gliding, turning, crawling, crouching, twitching, standing still, or waiting with wobbly uncertainty.

Ohno Yoshito’s solo theatre work, *Kuu* (Emptiness), epitomizes nameless qualities of suchness (through presence).² Nearly five decades before his New York premiere of *Kuu* in 2007, Ohno Yoshito danced with Hijikata Tatsumi in *Kinjiki* (Forbidden Colors, 1959), the dance that launched butoh.³ Yoshito (1938–2020) is the son of the legendary Ohno Kazuo (1906–2010). Thus from the very outset, Ohno

the elder and his son Yoshito in partnership with Hijikata became pioneers of a new genre of dance. I became acquainted with the Ohnos at their studio in Yokohama beginning in 1986. The younger Ohno danced duets with his father for many years before developing his own style. In his teaching, Yoshito emphasizes *shin* as the center of the body, explaining that *shin* means oneness most basically, and is also a patient orchid *shinpijimu* (Cymbidium) that takes seven years to grow (Ohno in Fraleigh and Nakamura 2006: 114–115). His unwavering method inspires my use of the word *shin* in teaching butoh as a morphological somatic process at my Eastwest Somatics Institute. *Shin* relates to “the flowing live present,” the elusive experience of present time that the founder of phenomenology Edmund Husserl wrote of in his mature years (quoted by Bruzina 1995: xiv). Butoh is creative and thus has diversified considerably since the mid-twentieth century, evolving many styles and teaching approaches globally. Still, there are originating aesthetic principles that identify it.

Discussions of butoh introduced here address the morphic, impermanent, and unseen you, rather than the harried you. They speak of “the body that becomes” in butoh (Fraleigh 2010: 37–62). This is a metamorphic matter, typically, of becoming creature, becoming other animals and objects, becoming elements of earth or atmospheres, and becoming nature as inhering in nature. *Becoming* in butoh is a process that acknowledges pain and lets it transform. *Becoming* is about impermanence and change, not about mirroring or imitation. Neither does one become a character in order to stay in character, as is common in much theatre; rather, one moves immanently inside specific morphing images. To morph in butoh is to let be and transform, passing with difficulty or ease through one image into another, often moving in micro steps and sometimes slanting or flickering in reverse.

I write in the belief that somatic dance practices can actively engage with *the environmental world*: a rising area of social concern for interdisciplinary studies in performance, as explored extensively in recent publications: *Dancing on Earth* (LaMothe, ed. 2017), *Performing Ecologies in a World in Crisis* (Bingham and Fraleigh, eds. 2018), and *Back to the Dance Itself* (Fraleigh, ed. with other contributors 2018). Movement somatics is often projected toward the improvement of skills and performance but is more broadly concerned with quests of embodiment—how we engage emotional health, ethical awareness, and empathy directly through movement experience.⁴ Movement for self-cultivation and environmental connectivity is a matter of perceptual attunement in Japanese phenomenology, as we just saw with Nagatomo, and can be considered a perceptual stratum of butoh and Buddhism. Still further, a phenomenologist would say that self is

known relative to others and otherness. Human life is conditioned by other life in a cultural and enviroing world “constantly in motion” (Husserl [1932] 1995: 192).

The ecology of this essay holds that we humans *inhere* in nature as nature, even as we are also involved interactively with the environment, a perspective that Simon James articulates in his study of phenomenology and environmental philosophy, *The Presence of Nature* (2009: 16–37). In the Japanese phenomenology of Ichikawa Hiroshi, the body is conceived beyond its material manifestations,⁵ much like the soma of butoh, which identifies the body with a plethora of nature and change. As in Japanese phenomenology, butoh, and Zen, this essay does not split the human body from the natural world. It regards nature in light of presence, suchness, and letting be, three related principles we consider next. We humans play crucial roles in attending to nature, and now more than ever, we need to perform our parts well. When we dance in gratitude for the earth, we are not likely to exploit it.

Being Not Solid

BEING BODY

Phenomenology has its own way into suchness (“is-ness”), particularly through nondual descriptions of being body. Our body is not in space; it belongs to space, as Merleau-Ponty asserts: “I am not in space and time, nor do I conceive space and time; I belong to them, my body combines with them and includes them” ([1945] 2002: 162). Preceding Merleau-Ponty, Edmund Husserl, the enduring root of phenomenology, wrote of reciprocal interactions of body, psyche and the natural world, describing the body as “a point of conversion” ([1952] 1989: 297–299). He first penciled this in *Ideas* in 1912. This key work was published posthumously in 1952 and translated into English in 1989. Husserl died in 1938, and as a Jew, accomplished his final works under the censure of Nazi doctrine. His foundational phenomenology explained human lively matter in its causal possibilities: “If we apprehend the body as a real thing, it is because we find it integrated into the causal nexus of material nature” (1989: 167). Husserl’s process of “bracketing” strips away the labels of accepted beliefs in order to move past biases of solidified ego. He sheds and casts away the taken-for-granted, his transcendental philosophy tending toward zero and new beginnings like the emptiness of Zen.

Through Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, I understand my flowing part in the ever-streaming world, and how ego (the solid sense of self) binds me to its material manifestations. Husserl’s philosophy holds that “the world is not only the *external world* but the inclusional unity of

immanence *and* transcendence” (Fink and Husserl 1995: 158, original emphasis). He speaks of the environing world and a related cultural world that does not reduce to the subject nor to “*man’s construct*” (Ibid., original emphasis). Husserl’s cultural view is that “human life is *we-life*” (Husserl 1995: 192). What we call “self” is a convenient identification, not a separate, solid state of being. We-life is the inclusive world of nature. We are not alone, not separate, and not in control as ultimate actors. Security is as an illusion as absolute protection and endless ease.

The concrete self wants something more stable. Buddhist teacher Chögyam Trungpa identifies “spiritual materialism” as the struggle to maintain a solid ego and sense of self:

Anything which is created must sooner or later die In the Buddhist tradition, the analogy of the sun appearing from behind the clouds is often used to explain the discovery of enlightenment The struggle to maintain the sense of a solid, continuous self is the action of ego. (2002: 4)

The process of meditation, he explains, brings freedom in *letting be*, giving up any struggle to become free: “seeing the transparency of concepts so that labeling no longer serves as a way of solidifying our world and our image of self” (2002: 11).

Letting be is what nature does so well, and far beyond our limited understanding. Letting be arrives in the suchness of meditation. Letting be as the wholeness of body and world is central to ecological phenomenology (James 2009: 95–96). Husserl and his students Martin Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty set the stage for philosophies of ecology in explaining over several works that how we understand body and world enters into our behavior. Heidegger critiqued vast technologies that exploit nature as “resource” (1996: 330). Veering toward performance and expression, Merleau-Ponty created a phenomenology of the human as an inseparable part of the already expressive world ([1945] 1962: 3–5, 35, 53, 67–68). The phenomenology of performance artist David Abram extends these sources in our century, recently in *Becoming Animal* (2010), while Edward Casey (1997) and John Llewelyn (2003) also develop rich ecological perspectives in phenomenology and critique the human conceit of being above, and in conquest of nature as resource.

The eco-friendly Japanese philosophy of Yasuo Yuasa explains the human as issuing from nature. He envisions the human as integral to the ecosystem, “for the human being is originally a being born out of nature” (1993: 188). Yuasa’s book, *The Body, Self-Cultivation & Ki-Energy* (1993), does not oppose mind and material but presents them through their embodied oneness as moved by *ki* (universal energy). *Ki*

permeates and connects us to everything, just as the Buddha mind is everywhere.

BEING IN DOING

Evaporation is part of the suchness and morphology of butoh. Thus, the dancer learns to value the experience of simply having the experience, letting each moment arrive and disappear in letting be. In Western terms, this phenomenon can be described as autotelic. Autotelic activities and performances are done for their own sake, not for audience interaction, remuneration, notoriety, or achievement. As in the yoga of work and in Zen, work becomes work and play becomes play. The autotelic performance is empty of extrinsic purpose. Acts become intrinsic acts with experiential values at their heart. Emptiness and self-forgetting enter into performance in such ways, erasing expectations for outcomes, as in many somatic contexts.

We can become what we do with or without an audience. In somatic work, I sometimes ask my students to become present to their own movement and voice in an attitude of emptiness; this elicits a special kind of performance. Students find dance and voice as latent potential waiting to emerge, having perhaps been suppressed. My challenge as a somatics teacher is to facilitate improvisations toward vitality of sense and experience.

How, then, does suchness apply to artistry? Or does it? Can we be intentionally mindful of theatre performances as spheres for cultivating personal potentials while also encouraging artistry and expertise? In her extensive study on expertise, Barbara Montero shows how change toward expertise is the result of “deliberate practice and the desire to improve” (Montero 2016: 64). We might see that the improvement and expertise she writes of will contain the suchness of our practice: In a word, the result will echo the process. Are we ambitious and self-deprecating as we progress, or do we progress with patience toward others and ourselves? Do we progress with humor? These are invisible potentials at the heart of suchness—and they manifest in the present time of performance.

For dancers whose understanding of performance was first shaped through a tradition, or through presentational modern dance and ballet, butoh offers another model. Butoh performances have an array of possible manifestations, all of which are significant in their temporal suchness. From site-specific environmental work to highly theatrical choreography, *evanescence is a global butoh quality*. The riddle of *emptiness* sustains butoh’s manifestations and global continuity. Like Zen, butoh is not presentationally solid; it is ever an empty form to be filled and let fade. So like Zen, it continues. In *Zen Past and Present*, Eric

Cunningham views “the fluidity” of Zen as its staying power under so many different historical circumstances. Zen and butoh both question solidity: “Zen looks at the fixed pronouncements of objective reality and says there’s more than meets the eye” (Cunningham 2011: 68).

Butoh makes “the more” appear to the eye, if only momentarily. In Zen and butoh, one does not cling to form; rather, one finds affective interval and flow. I discussed this perspective with professor of theatre Jerry Gardner, an African American butoh performer and Tibetan Rinpoche who studied butoh and other movement forms for twelve years in Japan. He spoke through the lens of butoh and his Buddhist lineage: “Butoh performances allow dancers to reveal a common human ancestry not bound by cultural forms. In butoh, we illuminate the emptiness. We dissolve in mists and shadows through the ancestry of our bones” (Gardner, Lama Thupten Rinpoche, September 2018).

As part of “being in doing,” all of the arts find flow in their own way. There is seldom a stable narrative in butoh, only continual refreshment of experience. The experiential somatics of butoh, in particular, allows the effects of pain and euphoria to interact and transform. Thus, we find that *transformation is also a global butoh trait*. Butoh is spacious, often episodic and everyday pedestrian. In his early butoh, Tanaka Min (b. 1945) sometimes finished his works with dancers facing the audience and sitting in silence for long periods, as I witnessed in a performance of *Tree IV Installation* in Tokyo (June 2, 1990). This gave the audience and dancers the opportunity to study faces and facings without judgment. We look at faces every day, so this seemed unremarkable at first, and yet, the simple act of looking, seeing, and being seen, as such, made everything new over time.

Performances that let affective differences happen activate transformative potentials of art and life, and butoh does this in particular. Its mercurial dances proffer a generous sentient history. Butoh can be chaotic and spastic, and it is often dark, but states of darkness are not where most of us want to live. The darkness of butoh is dark so that it can shed light. Butoh holds many basic purposes in common with the human impulse to dance. Moving consciously, letting go of control while being able, and sharing in community are some intrinsic purposes of dance that also motivate transformation in butoh. For all its seeming strangeness, butoh like other dance can be sublime, as is the large-scale theatricality of the *Sankai Juku* dance company. But at its core, butoh invites vulnerabilities and indeterminacy.

BEING SOUND

As a dancer and researcher, I try to use my bodily intelligence as a source of discovery, and quite often I land in the vicinity of sound.

Sound is ubiquitous as a feature of performance in theatre, dance, and music. More broadly, we experience it through presence and participation in the flowing life of the world. Sound is affective, animating insects, birds, and animals—also human animals, canyons, and mountains—deserts, flowers, and water. Odd sounds stir us, while familiar sounds can soothe or bore us, and sometimes remind us of what we fear. In life as in theatre, we make sound through voicing, and hopefully, we listen. Voice is what you say and how you say it; what you sing and how you sing it; what and how you write. Like movement, sound flows into the live present and out into the world. As a pedestrian experiment in morphology that anyone can do, I invite the reader to try the eco-somatic butoh exploration indented below, as I originally mapped it for my students. I think of it as butoh, but it could also be interpreted simply as a somatic experiment.

Shifting through Sound — *Go out* into the natural environment beyond four walls with a group or a friend. This might be a favorite place you decide on or someplace new. It might be a beautiful spot or a desolate one. Sometimes, I like to go to construction sites to experience the interface of nature with unfinished, human-built environments coming into being. Let your intuition guide you and travel away from your usual circumstances.

Go, and when you find your destination, settle there: be quiet together, and in the spirit of meditation, listen without getting involved in the sounds. Then venture into the environment by yourself in the direction of a sound, not interpreting it. Sound is not difficult to find; rather it surrounds and moves through us. Sound is impermanent, not solid, and so you might become perceptually aware of movement and change. (Are you changing, or is the sound changing?)

Become absorbed in sound or sounds. Can you take a neutral attitude as you listen? *Let the sounds be* without needing to act on them. Allow them to become part of your spacious being. In this, sound might animate your body and voice. Can you remain curious in the shifting sound, allowing change and presence to guide you? Explore the movements and sounds of your own body in relation to the environment for about 20 or 30 minutes. Make sounds. Then rest for a while.

Return to your partner or the group, clapping your hands together a few times as you go. The clapping becomes a signal for everyone to return. Wait for everyone; then sit in stillness until everyone settles.

Finally, for those who want to, *improvise* by moving and sounding together. Or be still if this seems right. You might play with *call and*



FIGURE 1. *Sharing Sound* in Snow Canyon, Amber Olpin-Watkins and Sarah Jeffreys. Photograph by Sondra Fraleigh 2018.

response as a simple way to begin. Then, let your improvisation develop naturally in its suchness. It does not have to be anything but itself. Those who choose can be an audience, and performers might at times become part of the audience. In this way, improvisers can change places. These instructions are simply a guide. Let them go as you find your way into the sound. The actual performance is less important than your experience. In summary, share something of your experience in words if you want to.

In becoming sound, I like to listen to stones, large and small, to hear the moist voices of water in rock and resonate with the hum of history. My students have become particles of air; the murky slosh of



FIGURE 2. *Shifting through Sound* in Snow Canyon. Somatics students, left to right: Sarah Jeffreys (dancer and somatics student), Amber Olpin-Watkins (dancer and teacher), Lilei Edwards (singer and student of Buddhism and Hawaiian culture), and Marybeth Brunt (interior designer and student of somatics and psychology). Photograph by Sondra Fraleigh 2018.

dampness in twigs; metal grinding in pipes; slick or velvet sounds of wet leaves; percussive flows in wind; and sometimes the cruelty and sharpness of wind. Sounds in nature stir memories, and can also clear a path forward in a creative project or an interpersonal relationship.

Why do this? This practice is not intended to improve performance or expertise, as somatic practices in dance and theatre often do. Rather it aims toward appreciation through an expansive experience of nature and the enviroing world. It is not about the solid



FIGURE 3. *Sounding Earth Butoh* in Snow Canyon performed by dancer Robert Bingham. Photograph and music video by Sondra Fraleigh 2018: YouTube, <https://youtu.be/Es2xZIR7aFQ>.

you, but it is performative. It has potential value in spurring personal growth through performative means of movement and sound. In my somatic practice, I often teach dedicated performers along with a general community of participants. The mix is a challenge, but always rewarding.

Shifting through Sound has potential benefits in engaging mindfulness—freeing the imagination, practicing the enviroing voice, stepping into the courage of bodily movement, and sounding with others. This is for any participant, whether motivated by performance or those joining for autotelic reasons. Photographic examples are shown in Figures 1, 2 and 3.

Becoming Other

BECOMING WATER AND FLOWERS

Attentiveness to nature without expectation can clear away the clutter of everyday concerns through merging with nature in meditative attunement, an aspect of aesthetic transformation, both East and West. There is a precedent in the West for selfless attention to nature and the environment, particularly through philosophers Simone Weil ([1952] 2002; [1970] 2015) and Iris Murdoch (1993) who understand attention as a moral virtue. Weil's biographer E. O. Springsted (2010) writes of Weil as one of the few spiritual thinkers in the West to see suffering as part of life and a way to overcome the self-centered ego. In giving attention to our inheritance of nature and the more-than-human-world, we can move toward health for the planet and ourselves. Weil believes that expansive attention cultivates humility. She writes, "humility is above all one of the qualities of attention" (2015: 351). Weil views the arts as one of the ways we attend to the world: "A true painter through paying attention becomes what he looks at. And while he is in this state his hand moves, with the brush attached" (2015: 361).

Attention is more than looking. And selfless attention is still more. Selfless attention to nature evokes meditative suchness and letting be, and relative to this, *chiasm*, a symbiotic term from the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty that indicates a crossing over and return. In the space between, the seer is seen and the knower becomes known, or "doubled" (1968: 264). This symbiotic play animates qualities of presence and oneness (Ibid.: 214–215). *When I go out into the natural world to perform with my students*, we match the character and tone of elements we find there. We dance in an attitude of *shin* or oneness, not to be impressive or for an audience, but to explore the influences of non-human nature as our own. Our task is to shed what we think we know to experience a deeper truth in bodily attunement and potential. The world in its worlding presence mingles with and surrounds us, as we cross over and move under and in between.

Nagatomo explains somatic attunement through Zen in the chapter "Dōgen and the Body in Transformation" of his *Attunement through the Body* (1992: 131–154). He conceives of affective transformation in somatic awareness as "felt inner resonance," an attunement or harmony arising through a change in the assumed body image through "casting off the body and mind," as stated in Dōgen Zen. Our everyday body image is lived from within "the boundary of the skin," Nagatomo says, but is not limited to this. Transformation occurs through a somatic act, casting off the everyday body and mind. This is "a somatic



FIGURE 4. Being Water, Wind, and Wood. Ashley Meeder. Photograph © 2016, courtesy of Ashley Meeder. *Levitation Water Dance*, Sondra Fraleigh’s music video on Ashley Meeder’s dance: <https://youtu.be/yfkTv-L2n78>.

achievement” according to Nagatomo, “a lived feeling which expands beyond the physical delineation of the skin to embrace the shaped things of the natural world” (1992: 153). He could well be describing mindful transformation in butoh.

Butoh transformation joins commonalities across dissimilarities. Of the many “things” I have become in butoh, I remember being a water bag, crouching old woman, grinning insect, seed, crone to beauty, flower, moth, fetus, lightning, chicken, ice, ash pillar, peacock wearing high heels, whale, and much more—all ready to crumble with an uncertainty especially appreciated in Buddhism. In Figure 4, Ashley Meeder attunes to water, wind, and wood under a bright sky on Holbox Island in Mexico. In sharing her metamorphic water butoh, I include a music video of the photographs and video footage she sent me of her experience. Ashley is one of my Eastwest Shin Somatics students and teaches our work in Mexico.

My butoh mentor Ohno Kazuo-sensei thought flowers the most perfect form of being and often danced in the image of flowers. “There is enough ugliness in the world,” Ohno liked to say. I am infinitely grateful to have seen him perform in Yokohama. He epitomized compassion and transformation in his butoh, evading the butoh penchant for wry ugliness. Ohno was conscripted as a soldier for Japan beginning in 1938, serving before and for the duration of World War II. He was also a prisoner of war for a year in New Guinea. When I visited the Ohnos in 2006, Yoshito told me that his father’s war experiences



FIGURE 5. Takenouchi's butoh presence with flowers and ancient ruins on the island of Corsica. Photograph © 2018 by Komiya Hiroko, courtesy of Komiya Hiroko.

helped shape his dance and expand his worldview. "When I dance, I carry all the dead with me," Ohno-sensei said in workshops. But this does not manifest as weight. Quite the opposite.

Ohno carries audiences into the flower he dances in *Water Lilies* (Suiiren 1987). Based on Claude Monet's Water Lily paintings of his pond garden in Giverny, this is one of Kazuo's many duets with Yoshito. When I experience the Ohnos dancing together, their weave unburdens me. *Water Lilies* moves on several temporal planes, troubling the waters of Monet's calm lily pond. Yoshito's jerky movements to the music of Pink Floyd morph from tension and shuddering force toward the lotus lilies of Buddhist tranquility, as gradually over time he becomes a lotus goddess. To clinch the collage at the finish, Ohno (the elder) changes his feminine gown for a tuxedo, and dances freely through space, exuding charm.⁶ Basking in the tradition of the Ohnos, Takenouchi Atsushi, a disciple of Ohno Kazuo, dances amid flowers in Figure 5.

At the Ohno studio in Yokohama, students continue to dance the essence of flowers through the encouragement of Ohno Yoshito. In our recent conversation, theater professor Jerry Gardner and I recall our butoh studies with the Ohnos. Gardner describes the gentle flower appeals of the Ohnos this way: "You are the flower, feel the molecular structure, be the fragrance, embody the totality. Become the flower of space and luminosity. You are the flower of no-mind." Gardner is also Lama Thupten Rinpoche, seen in Figures 8 and 9. In his butoh classes,



FIGURE 6. *Of Water and Presence*. Butoh student in a performance project with professor Jerry Gardner (Lama Thupten Rinpoche) at the University of Utah. Photograph © 2014, courtesy of Jerry Gardner.

he encourages students to dance beyond concepts, to discover the truth of their own dance. As a butohist and Buddhist, he teaches, “we dance to elevate our humanity” (Gardner, September 2018). Figure 6 shows a butoh project Gardner facilitated in the environment.

PASSING IN BETWEEN

Butoh is unpredictable and still in process, changing toward new forms, often called by other names. It is historical by now as an ideational and murky art with roots in mid-twentieth century Japan; but still, it continues to translate across cultures through individually crafted works and practices, morphing into rust, vines and flowers, insects, or found objects and organisms. Performing weakness, faltering on purpose or accidentally, butoh can also revive and lift. Its tendency toward dissolution is not based on steps, but rather on images, atmospheric change, and disappearance/reappearance. Like all dance, it does not stand still, does not last, and is not solid. More innovatively, its transitional methods mark the animal nature of humans and possible becomings of humans becoming other in dance. It does this through sublimating the material body while extending the body’s liminal, intermediate states. Butoh’s improvisational processes and morphic choreographies travel easily across cultural boundaries,

but the glue that holds butoh close to Japan is not always easy for Western participants to grasp. This is its *ma*. In this, it shines the dark.

Ma is a Japanese and Zen word for evanescent spacetime or *the inexpressible aliveness in space in between things*. There is no direct translation into English, but *ma* accords roughly with *liminal transitional space* or *indeterminate time*. In her article “Being *Ma*: Moonlight Peeping through the Doorway,” Christine Bellerose shows how *ma* inhabits butoh (Bellerose 2018). As in Zen, *ma* comes and goes through diaphanous evanescence or suchness. Like light, it just *is*. The aesthetic of butoh transforms through *ma*, like the flow of nature itself; just as we also in our human nature change through time, and like flowers, grow old and die. As Hijikata taught, butoh is the “weak body” and does not deny disease. It lives in the margins. *Leprosy* (1973), a dance of cautious trembling, was his last solo.⁷

In his butoh, Endo Tadashi, a disciple of Ohno Kazuo, dances *ma* as a sensory precipice, shifting between antique-weathered images and animal illusions in his work titled *MA* (1991). I have described his particular *ma* fully in another text (2010: 167–171). In Japanese mythology and cosmology, spirits known as *kami* enter special objects to animate their *ma*. *Kami* favor conical sand piles, plum blossoms and bamboo shoots, round boulders, waterfalls, and other special phenomena in nature. *Kami* expressively enters the flow of dance and dancers. In butoh, *ma* is both metaphysical philosophy and essence. “*Ma* permeates the cosmological flow of Shintō Zen divinities’ order, and it enters the contemporary dance philosophy of butoh as embodied flow” (Bellerose 2018: 162).

Yoshioka Yumiko has recently completed durational butoh that evokes *ma* through empathy with monsters and otherworldly curiosity. She performed her solo *One Hundred Light Years of Solitude* in North America in 2018. The photograph in Figure 7 shows the imaginary animal and faceless creature she becomes, molting and morphing between self and other to some unknown end while sipping from a watering bowl in trickles through her hands. In time, the dancer senses her eternal solitude and desperately grasps and eats her own tail, both human vestige and fantasy. Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* inspires Yoshioka’s dance.

She dances the life of a unique creature, born on a planet 100 light years away from ours, as she told me. Imagining that this creature is the only one of its species on that planet, the dancer enjoys unfolding its life, until she realizes the creature’s destiny is to exist in solitude (Email, May 17, 2018). Yoshioka makes sounds without express meaning; rather they differ according to the state of her creature being. At one time, the creature comes close to humming and tries to



FIGURE 7. Yoshioka Yumiko in *One Hundred Light Years of Solitude* (2016), premiere in Porto Portugal at Armazem 22. Photograph © 2017 by Edgar Gutiérrez Calvillo in San Luis Potosi, Mexico. Photograph, courtesy of Yoshioka Yumiko.

sing a song, but cannot pronounce the lyrics. Yoshioka says further in her notes on the dance: “In my childhood, the imaginary creatures and monsters of fairy tales always fascinated me. Butoh, a dance of metamorphosis, helps me to explore this imaginary world, and make something invisible visible” (Ibid.). Yoshioka’s works surpass ego through transmogrification—by moving slowly through strange and specious images. Most simply, a whole range of odd affects belonging to nonrationality in butoh (and art in general) can disrupt a solid sense of self, as Zen riddles also do. Crazy can make us smile, sigh, and shine. Nonrationality in art comports with nonrationality in Zen, as Suzuki Daisetz says in *Zen and Japanese Culture* (1959). Zen has more in common with art than with regulations of morality “because art impulses are more primitive or more innate than those of morality” (p. 24). Effective art urges us past our normalized self. As in phenomenology, it “brackets” self and sets it aside for a while, like Yoshioka ever moving into strange terrain, wearing unlikely costumes of “otherness” that become an integral part of her shining alchemy (see Figure 7).

KINESTHETIC AFFINITIES

When I discovered butoh in 1985,⁸ my university career as a teacher and scholar of modern/postmodern dance was already mature. So why my kinship with this seemingly remote form of dance and its extensive unfolding in my life and work? I believe that phenomenology and Zen prepared me for it, and my kinesthetic affinity for somatically affective theatre also played a part. Butoh makes the ordinary fascinating, and for many, it also heals through its ethos of human and ecological connectivity. The butoh of Kasai Akira is a good case in point, especially his prompting of “the community body,” as the body we share in dance and his belief that butoh in the current century has ecological and intercultural purposes (Kasai in classes and interviews, Fraleigh 1999: 228–241, 247–249). I find through metamorphosis that *butoh is lifelike*, and so it includes me. I have also wanted to trace its growth and global implications.

In a collaborative research effort, Tamah Nakamura and I traced back to the origins of butoh in *Hijikata Tatsumi and Ohno Kazuo* (2006), detailing current butoh techniques of nine prominent butoh artists who studied with Hijikata and Ohno. We quoted distinct butoh techniques from our interviews and workshops with the artists (2006: 101–143), including female founders of butoh, Nakajima Natsu and Yoshioka Yumiko, who are also part of the present essay. When I first met Ohno Kazuo in 1986, he told me that his butoh was “the dance of everyday life.” He used music from different genres, and from the West as well as the East. One of his favorites was Elvis Presley. Ohno’s music, like his dances and costumes, transformed in history, gender, and culture.

The term “butoh” has several meanings in Japanese. “Ancient dance” is the oldest meaning that Hijikata first evoked (Fraleigh 2010: 12). Takenouchi Atsushi (shown in Figure 6) says this in another way: “butoh is the ancient dance already happening in your body” (Interview, August 2003). Takenouchi performs around the globe to heal nature and place. “Butoh doesn’t come from culture; it comes from our ancient ancestral body and collective unconscious,” says Jerry Gardner (Interview, August 2018). He quotes this from his studies with Ohno Kazuo and his son Yoshio. Recently, Gardner and I spoke of our dance studies with the Ohnos in Yokohama, remembering the welcoming generosity of our mentors (see Figure 8). Gardner has since performed his butoh in several countries; he is also a Lama and Buddhist teacher (see Figure 9).

The Ohnos teach that butoh stems from the human body we all have in common, as their many international students have



FIGURE 8. Butohist Jerry Gardner (upper center) with his daughter during a visit with Ohno Kazuo on his 100th birthday in 2006. Yoshito Ohno (left) and Ohno Kazuo-sensei extending his hands in dance (below). Photograph, courtesy of Jerry Gardner.



FIGURE 9. Lama Thupten Rinpoche (Jerry Gardner). Photograph, courtesy of Gardner.

experienced. Contextually, however, butoh does not escape culture. Its many examples mix diverse cultural influences. Western sources inform butoh through the early expressionist dance that Hijikata and Ohno had studied with several Japanese adepts in the German lineage of Rudolph von Laban (1879–1958), Mary Wigman (1886–1973), and Harald Kreutzberg (1902–1968). Eastern sources abide through *ma* (as we have just explored) and historical influences of kabuki and noh theatre. To that, we could add butoh's affinity to Buddhism in its meditative qualities, its compassionate embrace of pain, respect for nature, and tendency toward emptiness.

Because butoh is not traditional art, it is not easy to judge by settled aesthetic standards. Its nebulosity allows it to migrate easily across cultures in a globally connected world where ideas and goods travel more freely than at any other time. Who will own anything over time? Will globalization eventually erase cultural identities? Will butoh become diluted until it is no more? Perhaps ownership is anathema in the case of butoh? Or some might ask whether non-Japanese who participate in butoh's globalization are appropriating it—"stealing art"? I suspect that every art differs in matters of cultural appropriation. My experiences of butoh have been in the spirit of sharing through dance, as one of the most permeable ways we can connect empathically. Dance, in particular, is shared directly through the body in wordless, kinesthetic affinities. The Dalai Lama says: "The many factors which divide us are actually much more superficial than those we share. Despite all of the things that differentiate us—race, language, religion, gender, wealth and so on—we are all equal concerning our fundamental humanity" (2018). Butoh has been taught and shared widely across cultural boundaries by Japanese artists and other teachers in and beyond Japan. The quality of sharing depends to a large extent on the commitment and attitude of teachers and participants. Not all butoh is equal to me. The darkness of butoh is not an excuse to be vulgar; rather, butoh evokes darkness as the chthonic depth of earthy and natural things and sometimes sparks surreal and resistive aesthetic developments. Like his hero, French dramatist and activist, Jean Genet, Hijikata in his early life was a vagabond and petty criminal, and similarly, rose to artistic prominence through surrealist tactics. Surrealism in butoh often comes in the guise of dream and illogical collage, as a way for the unconscious to express itself. One can find all of this in *Summer Storm*, Hijikata's anti-war work of 1973, performed by his company at the Westside Auditorium of the University of Kyoto. In the spoken text of his dance, Hijikata wishes for a kind wind to bring "one thousand days of sunshine and peace." In writing and research via film, I describe the six parts of this concert-length work that

marked a gentle, reflective side of Hijikata and his maturation as a choreographer (2010: 81–90).

As someone who has often crossed cultural boundaries through study and participation in movement arts and dance, I believe it is fundamental to human survival to learn from and appreciate others who represent a cultural difference. Participation in the arts is one of the ways we learn about the world beyond our immediate grasp, and in this, we should also be vigilant. In cross-cultural sharing and writing, documentation of sources is imperative, and so is reciprocity in crediting and assisting the work of those we write and teach about. My teaching of somatic movement arts would not be what it is had I never encountered *butoh*. For this, I have my Japanese mentors and international friends in *butoh* to thank.

I have said that like Buddhism, *butoh* acknowledges pain and suffering, not denying these or narrating them. This is one of *butoh*'s attractions for me. I examine this matter and how *butoh* moves into the future in a recent article, “*Butoh translations and the suffering of nature*” (2016). In challenging the solidity of being in the present essay, I once again reference *butoh* in light of Buddhism, even as I realize that *butoh* artists seldom speak of Buddhism directly. As in most art, interpretations can differ, and *butoh* remains enigmatic. After its 70-year development, it is still not widely recognized in Japan, except in arts identified circles. In Japan as in the West, *butoh* is not a form of dance easily stumbled upon.

When I was studying with Zen teacher and calligraphy master, Shodō Akane in Japan in the 1990s, he said he did not know what *butoh* was, but when I shared with him my *haiku* definition of dance, *Stone Still Body/There is nothing/That is not moving*, he rose to his feet suddenly and said, “same mind”—meaning the same as a Buddhist mind. He always asked me what I was dancing about and saw me through the poesis of dance. He gave me the name of “Bright Road Friend,” and once placed a small red flower in my buttonhole saying: “This is Zen” (1999: 166–170). I noticed how he interpreted the world through symbolism, particularly that of calligraphy and nature. His name, Shodō, is an honorific title given to master calligraphers.

Ohno Kazuo seemed to take Buddhism for granted in his life. There was a Buddhist altar in his home that I saw in one of the quiet rooms with tatami mat floor and a futon bed when I visited him in Yokohama in 2006 in his 100th year. I was offered the futon in case I needed to rest. There was a ticket on the altar that Yoshito, Ohno's son and now his care-taker, told me was a lottery ticket, “for good luck.” Having converted to Christianity early in life, Ohno had an altar that held a gold and blue portrait of Mary. This altar was placed at the foot of

his private bed where he rested and welcomed occasional visitors. The day I visited, he was in bed, holding and blessing a newborn infant. Ohno's teeth were out, and his face was shining.

In a similar way, spirit became unworldliness in Ohno's dancing. Ultimately, he was more than a butohist or a modernist; Ohno danced beyond categories. From his middle years into old age, Ohno played Santa Claus for children in Yokohama. He danced spontaneously on the asking, under trees, in Zen temples, or in living rooms and in his studio for students and guests. He also traveled widely as a theatre performer beginning at age seventy-three, when many dancers would have long since retired. Through Ohno's example, I continue to dance and teach toward my eightieth birthday, and I dance whenever anyone asks.

I began my study of butoh with the Ohnos and others in Japan in 1986, which also gave me the opportunity to visit and meditate in Zen temples. I wrote about Zen and butoh initially because my Zen teacher Shodō Akane told me to write about Zen and dance. When I told him I did not feel qualified, he said, "write a thousand words and send them to me; then you will write more." I did, and then I wrote more, which resulted several years later in *Dancing into Darkness: Butoh, Zen, and Japan* (1999). Akane-sensei illustrated my book with his calligraphy. Because of him and the example of Ohno-sensei, this chapter continues my writing and study, now through *Butoh, Buddhism, Phenomenology, and Ecology*.

The spiritual story behind this study began in Nepal in India nearly 2500 years ago. Zen master Shodō Akane writes of Shakyamuni Buddha in his long journey at the foot of the Himalayan Mountains: "Buddha climbed the Divine Vulture Peak again and again, and he preached the precious teachings of the Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Dharma" (Akane 2006). Until today, the Himalayas are still standing, pure and shining in their suchness and white with snow.

NOTES

1. Waguri gave an impromptu demonstration of *Ash Pillar* using the image of an atomic bomb—as barely there, then sheering and explosive (CAVE New York Butoh Festival 2007). He was the main dancer in Hijikata's works and codified his imagery in *Butoh-Kaden* CD-Rom. For more on Waguri, see Fraleigh and Nakamura 2006: 143–144.

2. The New York premiere of *Kuu* (27 October 2007) is described more fully in *BUTOH* (Fraleigh 2010: 216–225).

3. *Kinjiki* is named after a famous book titled *Kinjiki* (1951) by Mishima Yukio (1925–1970).

4. Prominent examples of somatic movement practices in Western contexts are “The Feldenkrais Method,” “the Alexander Technique,” “Body-Mind Centering,” and “Authentic Movement Practice.”

5. Ichikawa’s work has not been translated into English but is presented through the work of Nagatomo (1992).

6. See the full description of *Suiren* and the backgrounds of this dance in Fraleigh and Nakamura, *Hijikata Tatsumi and Ohno Kazuo* (2006: 94–98).

7. Hijikata’s *Leprosy* (1973) is described more fully in *BUTOH: Metamorphic Dance* (Fraleigh 2010: 87–90).

8. My first glimpse of butoh was seeing Nakajima Natsu perform *Niwa* (The Garden) in 1985 in Montreal, Canada. Her dance had a profound effect on me, and I sent her my description of it. She later assisted my studies of butoh in Japan and visited me in America at the State University of New York campus, where I sponsored her teaching.

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