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A Review of Academic Research on *Butoh* within the United States

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This essay is an overview of the brief development of *butoh* scholarship in the United States. In the United States, academic research on *butoh* is relatively recent, spanning roughly thirty years, and both researchers and publications remain small in number. Beginning in the late 1980s, American scholars have slowly embraced *butoh* as a legitimate topic within dance studies (itself a small field in the United States), theater history, art history, and Japanese studies. A growing body of work is developing, with better ties to Japanese primary sources.

Keywords: *butoh*, dance studies, United States, Hijikata Tatsumi, Ōno Kazuo

“What we now know as *butoh* looks nothing like Hijikata’s first dances. In the early works there was no characteristic white body paint, nor achingly intense and precise choreography.”¹

In 1959, in a small Tokyo performance space, Hijikata Tatsumi and Ōno Yoshito staged *Forbidden Colors*, now described as the first performance of *butoh*. Hijikata, joined by Ōno Kazuo (father of Yoshito), formed a troupe of dancers and created a series of performances between the 1960s and the 1980s. Several of these dancers branched off to create their own expressive versions of this new dance, and some founded companies. Two *butoh* companies, embracing very different interpretations of *butoh*, formed in the 1970s and toured the United States not long afterwards. Maro Akaji who danced with Hijikata’s group formed the company Dairakudakan in 1972, and Amagatsu Ushio, a member of Dairakudakan, created the company Sankai Juku in 1975. In 1984, Sankai Juku was invited by the Olympic Arts Festival to perform in Los Angeles, afterwards staging performances in cities across the United States (including New York City, Boston, and Seattle). Although Ōno Kazuo performed at the MaMa Experimental Theater in New York City in 1981 and the Dairakudakan company at the American Dance Festival in 1982, the Sankai Juku tour served as the first real American exposure to *butoh*. Those interested but unable to attend these performances learned about *butoh* through the pens of newspaper critics, who, lacking the cultural background needed to comprehend it, influenced the American understanding of *butoh*. In July of 1984, the *New York Times* published an article on *butoh* and Sankai Juku in connection with the

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1 Bruce Baird, *Hijikata Tatsumi and Butoh: Dancing in a Pool of Gray Grits*, New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p. 15.

company's first American performance tour. It opened provocatively:

Something dark and definite has stirred in the Japanese dance world and we are just beginning to feel the effect. ... A compound of the grotesque and the beautiful, the nightmarish and the poetic, the erotic and the austere, the streetwise and the spiritual ... What is Butoh? ... Certainly it means dance but it is used in opposition to another Japanese word for dance, Buyo. Butoh, significantly, derives from a word having to do with ancient ritualistic dance. And certainly the prehistoric and the ritualistic are among the prime concerns of Butoh's choreographers.²

Kisselgoff named Hijikata and Ōno as founders but then framed *butoh* (inferring *butoh* companies) and Pina Bausch Theater as the “new and current Expressionism in dance.” A week later, dance critic Julie Dunning reviewed Sankai Juku's performance, reinforcing *butoh* to readers as both largely defined by the Sankai Juku company and tied to German Expressionist dance.³ Sankai Juku performed to enthusiastic full audiences, but the American tour was abruptly halted in 1985 after the Seattle performance resulted in the ropes of dangling performer Takada Yoshiyuku breaking, plunging him six stories to his death. The horror of this performance witnessed by the audience was widely reported by the press and contributed to sensationalizing *butoh* to those largely lacking experiential reference to the art form or historical context. In fact, this was how I learned about *butoh*; I was in high school at the time, and my history teacher paused the usual schedule of lecture content to educate us about the “*butoh* tragedy.”

American scholarship on *butoh* was non-existent until the late 1980s, and thus the American media influenced the perception of *butoh* as largely synonymous with Sankai Juku, characterized by austere, synchronized choreography, and Ōno Kazuo. However, in 1986, editors of the journal *TDR: The Drama Review* devoted half of volume 30 (2) to *butoh*, supplying some of the earliest American scholarship on the subject. Japanese dance scholar Kuniyoshi Kazuko contributed a valuable historical chronology that lists *butoh* performances as well as other important Japanese artistic events, the first of its kind in English.⁴ Bonnie Sue Stein's chapter presented a history of *butoh*, attempting to contextualize it against the broader view of the postwar Japanese avant-garde.⁵ Stein also contributed a transcription of an interview with Tanaka Min in which he describes his personal history with *butoh*, and Tanaka includes his own entry, a dedication to Hijikata.⁶ The other three chapters are devoted to Ōno Kazuo, including an interview with performance studies

2 Anna Kisselgoff, “Japan's New Dance is Darkly Erotic,” *New York Times*, July 15, 1984, sec. 2.

3 Jennifer Dunning, “Japan's Avant-Garde Sankai Juku Arrives,” *New York Times*, July 23, 1984, sec. C.

4 Kuniyoshi Kazuko, “Butoh Chronology: 1959–1984,” *TDR: The Drama Review* vol. 30 (2), 1986, pp. 127–141.

5 Bonnie Sue Stein, “Twenty Years Ago We Were Crazy, Dirty, and Mad,” *TDR: The Drama Review* vol. 30 (2), 1986, pp. 107–126. Stein served as Program Associate of Performing Arts at The Asia Society until 1988.

6 Bonnie Sue Stein and Tanaka Min, “Min Tanaka: Farmer/Dancer or Dancer/Farmer,” *TDR: The Drama Review* vol. 30 (2), 1986, pp. 142–151; Tanaka Min, “From' I Am an Avant-Garde Who Crawls the Earth: Homage to Hijikata Tatsumi,” pp. 153–155.

founder Richard Schechner.⁷

American interest in *butoh* grew throughout the 1980s following the Sankai Juku tour, and in 1987, photographers Mark Holborn and Ethan Hoffman traveled to Japan in order to interview and photograph *butoh* artists. Their collaboration resulted in the first American book on *butoh*. *Butoh: Dance of the Dark Soul* presented stunning, oversized art photographs of *butoh* artists and performances, and included short essays by dancers Ashikawa Yōko, Ōno Kazuo, Tanaka Min, and Maro Akaji. Holborn also contributed an introductory chapter on the history of *butoh*, which included details about Hijikata's *Forbidden Colors*.⁸ While not a scholarly work, the jarringly beautiful photographs and short essays resulted in this book being easily accessed and embraced by non-academics, and it fortified the American fascination with *butoh* and, to some extent, widened the understanding of *butoh* in the United States beyond Sankai Juku and Ōno Kazuo.

The following year, Susan Blakeley Klein published the first American academic work on *butoh*: *Ankoku Butō: The Premodern and Postmodern Influences of the Dance of Utter Darkness*, a revision of her master's thesis.⁹ This still respected small book drew from archival Japanese sources and supplied an intellectually rigorous historical context for *butoh* and of Hijikata's works, detailed biographies of Hijikata Tatsumi and Ōno Kazuo, and proposed more nuanced postmodern frames for understanding Hijikata's *butoh*. She challenged the tendency of American journalists to frame *butoh* as "post-atomic," contextualizing *butoh* more within the broader postwar avant-garde.

Following Klein, dance professor Sondra Fraleigh embraced *butoh* both as dancer and analyst, and in the late 1990s established herself as an academic *butoh* specialist. She published three *butoh* books and several academic articles on *butoh* that influenced many dancers, university students, and what came to be an increasingly growing group of American *butoh* enthusiasts.¹⁰ A student of both Ōno Kazuo and the German expressionist dancer Mary Wigman (an influence for *butoh*), her first work *Dancing into Darkness: Butoh, Zen, and Japan* (1999) is a personal journal, chronicling her approximately twelve-year study of *butoh* and Zen (much of it in Japan).¹¹ In 2006 she collaborated with Tamah Nakamura and published *Hijikata Tatsumi and Ōno Kazuo*, a historical overview of Hijikata and Ōno. The authors provide biographical details about Hijikata and Ōno, discuss the nature of their working relationship, and analyze key works like *Forbidden Colors*, *La Argentina*, *Rose Colored Glasses*, and *Summer Storm*.¹² Her third book, *Butoh: Metamorphic Dance and Global Alchemy* (2010), expands discussion of *butoh* to include non-Japanese performers, and

7 Maehata Noriko, "Selections from the Prose of Kazuo Ōno," *TDR: The Drama Review* vol. 30 (2), 1986, pp. 156–162; Richard Schechner and Ōno Kazuo, "Kazuo Ōno Doesn't Commute: An Interview," pp. 163–169; Ōno Yoshito and Ōno Kazuo, "The Dead Sea Vienna Waltz and Ghost," p. 170.

8 Mark Holborn, "Tatsumi Hijikata and the Origins of Butoh," in Ethan Hoffman et al., *Butoh: Dance of the Dark Soul*, New York, NY: Aperture Foundation, 1987, pp. 8–15.

9 Susan Blakeley Klein, *Ankoku Butō: The Premodern and Postmodern Influences of the Dance of Utter Darkness*, Ithaca, NY: East Asia Program, Cornell University, 1988 (Cornell University East Asian Papers no. 49).

10 Fraleigh is professor emeritus and former head of graduate dance studies at the State University of New York at Brockport.

11 Sondra Horton Fraleigh, *Dancing into Darkness: Butoh, Zen, and Japan*, Pittsburg, PA: University of Pittsburg Press, 1999.

12 Sondra Horton Fraleigh and Tamah Nakamura, *Hijikata Tatsumi and Ōno Kazuo*, New York, NY: Routledge, 2006.

analyzes *butoh* as a universal global dance form, framing it as shamanic, ritual “alchemy.”¹³ All three of Fraleigh’s books contain some problematic frameworks of analysis, and at times inconsistent or inaccurate historical detail. However, they were widely available and written in an unpretentious, personal style that allowed for non-academics to access the material, and many identified with her experiences as a non-Japanese *butoh* performer.

Because of the limitations of these materials, therefore, research on *butoh* in the United States has also relied on the small handful of doctoral dissertations written within university departments of dance, theater, and Japanese studies. Joan Laage’s 1993 dissertation offered a philosophical kinesthetic framework for conceptualizing the *butoh* body, based on two years of participatory field research (*butoh* training) in Japan.¹⁴ In 1996, Kurihara Nanako’s dissertation probed much more deeply into Hijikata Tatsumi and the early history of *butoh*, and this dissertation remains crucial to *butoh* studies in English. Kurihara provided detailed descriptions of works like *Forbidden Colors*, *The Story of Smallpox*, and *Hijikata Tatsumi and the Japanese People: Rebellion of the Body*, incorporating substantial Japanese-language material gleaned from firsthand accounts of rehearsals and training. She also challenged the dualistic debates common in the late 1990s on *butoh* as either a global universalist modern dance or an “indigenous” dance expression.¹⁵ Kurt Würmli’s 2008 dissertation investigated the artistic scrapbooks that Hijikata created and used in tandem with his choreographic processes.¹⁶ This dissertation is particularly important because these scrapbooks are only accessible at the Keio University Art Center in Tokyo. Bruce Baird’s influential dissertation of 2005 examined Hijikata’s work within a network of aesthetic, philosophical, and historical viewpoints.¹⁷ Tanya Calamoneri’s 2012 dissertation offered philosophical insights into *butoh* training and pedagogy.¹⁸

In 2000, the editors of *TDR: The Drama Review* devoted volume 44 (1) to Hijikata Tatsumi, furnishing valuable translations of Hijikata’s written works. Kurihara Nanako contributed a summary of Hijikata’s *butoh-fu* (words used in training and rehearsals), supplied a comprehensive chronology of Hijikata’s works, and provided translations of the important Hijikata essays “Inner

13 Sondra Horton Fraleigh, *Butoh: Metamorphic Dance and Global Alchemy*, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2010. Fraleigh discusses the work of Joan Laage (in the United States), Furukawa Anzu (Japanese, but she and her company Verwandlungsamt were based in Berlin), Denise Fujiwara (in Canada), Tamano Kōichi and Tamano Hiroko and their company Harupin-Ha (in the United States), SU-EN (in Sweden), Ledoh and his company The Salt Farm (originally from Burma, now in the United States), Marie-Gabrielle Roti (in the UK), Takenouchi Atsushi (in Europe), Yoshika Yumiko (in Germany), Frances Barbe (in Australia), Endō Tadashi (in Germany), Lani Weissbach (in the United States), Robert Bingham (in the United States), Diego Piñon (in Mexico), and Eiko and Koma (in the United States).

14 Joan Laage, “Embodying the Spirit: The Significance of the Body in the Japanese Contemporary Dance Movement of Butoh,” PhD dissertation, Texas Woman’s University, 1993.

15 Kurihara Nanako, “The Most Remote Thing in the Universe: Critical Analysis of Hijikata Tatsumi’s Butoh Dance,” PhD dissertation, New York University, 1996.

16 Kurt Würmli, “The Power of Image: Hijikata Tatsumi’s Scrapbooks and the Art of Butō,” PhD dissertation, University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, 2008.

17 Bruce Baird, “Butō and the Burden of History: Hijikata Tatsumi and Nihonjin,” PhD dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2005.

18 Tanya Calamoneri, “Becoming Nothing to Become Something: Methods of Performer Training in Hijikata Tatsumi’s Butō Dance,” PhD dissertation, Temple University, 2012.

Material/Material,” “To Prison,” “Plucking Off the Darkness of the Flesh,” “From Being Jealous of a Dog’s Vein,” “On Material II Fautrier,” “Wind Daruma,” and “Fragments of Glass: A Conversation Between Hijikata Tatsumi and Suzuki Tadashi.” Much like the earlier issue of *TDR*, inclusion of these translations positioned them within the broader fields of American theater and performance studies to reach an academic readership beyond Japanese performing arts specialists.

Bruce Baird then expanded his dissertation and published *Hijikata Tatsumi and Butoh: Dancing in a Pool of Gray Grits* (2012). Baird worked closely with the Keio University Hijikata Tatsumi research archive, the sole repository of artifacts connected to Hijikata Tatsumi, including films, performance programs, journal-notebooks, posters, costumes, and so on. Reflecting on the two decades of discourse on Hijikata and providing evidence from archival materials and contemporaneous documents, Baird fleshed out and deconstructed what has at times been overly simplistic interpretations of Hijikata’s works.¹⁹ Baird meticulously described and contextualized Hijikata’s well-known works such as *Forbidden Colors*, analyzing two separate performances of this work, *Mid-Afternoon Secret Ceremony of a Hermaphrodite: Three Chapters, Three Phases of Leda, Masseur, Rose-Colored Dance, Hijikata Tatsumi and Japanese People: Rebellion of the Body*, and *The Story of Smallpox*, but also discussed lesser known works such as *Dark Body, Seed, Instructional Illustrations for the Study of Divine Favor in Sexual Love: Tomato*, and *Metemotionalphysics*. He included highly detailed biographical material on Hijikata’s life, the social and artistic contexts for Hijikata’s works, quotes from audience members and critics who attended his performances, and valuable discussion of Hijikata’s memoir *Ailing Terpsichore (Yameru Maihime)*, analyzing it as a parallel artwork.

In 2016, dance scholar Rosemary Candelario published *Flowers Cracking Concrete: Eiko & Koma’s Asian/American Choreographies*.²⁰ Eiko and Koma danced with Hijikata’s company for a short time, studied with Ōno Kazuo, and then moved to the United States in the mid-1970s. Candelario’s monograph filled a crucial gap in the inclusion of Eiko and Koma’s contributions to *butoh*-like performance in the United States, clarifying their relationships to, and diversions from, *butoh*. In 2019, Candelario and Baird then collaborated and published the *Routledge Companion to Butoh Performance*, the single most comprehensive American academic source on *butoh* to date, filling gaps in the extant research on *butoh*, offering new insight and interpretations, challenging long-held assumptions, and expanding analysis of *butoh* to a global framework.²¹ The 558-page tome contains fifty-seven chapters written by *butoh* scholars and practitioners internationally. The book is organized in six large sections. Section 1, “Butoh Instigators and Interlocutors,” chronicles the foundations of *butoh*; particularly notable is Arimitsu Michio’s chapter (chapter 2) because it proposes a compelling theory of blackness and the possible influences of Katherine Dunham and the African diaspora on Hijikata. Section 2, “The Second Generation,” discusses the processes in between the founders’ *butoh* and the many dancers of Hijikata’s who branched off to form their own expressions and, in the case of Sankai Juku, connected *butoh* outside of Japan. Section 3,

19 *Hijikata Tatsumi and Butoh* also contains several rare photos of Hijikata’s performances, useful for those unable to journey to the Hijikata Tatsumi Archive.

20 Rosemary Candelario, *Flowers Cracking Concrete: Eiko & Koma’s Asian/American Choreographies*, Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2016.

21 Bruce Baird and Rosemary Candelario, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Butoh Performance*, New York: Routledge, 2019.

“New Sites for Butoh,” marks the internationalization of *butoh* and traces select histories of non-Japanese *butoh*, including *butoh* in Brazil, Mexico, Germany, Italy, France, and Iraq; in particular, the opening chapter written by Rosemary Candelario provides an exploration of decades of international *butoh* and theorizing nation/place, what she coins the *butoh diaspora*. Section 4, “Politics, Gender, Identity,” probes essential issues of gender and politics in *butoh*, and section 5, “Pedagogy and Practice,” provides several firsthand accounts of global *butoh* practice and pedagogy. Section 6, “Beyond Butoh,” looks at select cases of “fringe” *butoh* (*butoh* imported into other art-forms like film, or performers like Tanaka Min who reject identifying with the term). Included are valuable translations of essays by Kuniyoshi Kazuko, Mishima Yukio, Shibusawa Tatsuhiko, Gunji Masakatsu, Uno Kuniichi, Inata Naomi, and Lucia Schwellinger.

In sum, despite a growing interest in *butoh* as a performance art and increased numbers of both publications on *butoh* and *butoh* performers, *butoh* studies have yet to become a central feature in either Japanese studies or dance studies within American academia.

米国における暗黒舞踏の学術研究

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本稿では、米国における暗黒舞踏研究の発展を概観する。その歴史はおおよそ30年と比較的短く、研究者も学術出版物の数も少ないが、1980年代後半から、舞踏がダンス研究（それ自体が米国では研究分野として小規模である）や、演劇史、美術史、日本研究の中で正当なトピックとして徐々に受け入れられてきた。近年、特に日本語の一次資料を踏まえた研究成果が増えつつある。

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