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メタデータ	言語: eng 出版者: 公開日: 2015-05-29 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): 作成者: 中村, テーマ, NAKAMURA, Tamah メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	https://chikushi-u.repo.nii.ac.jp/records/436

Contemporary Social Identities: Human Development and Butoh

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Introduction

Transitions in the development of butoh can be captured in the five decades since its inception:

- 1959-1968 – the founders Hijikata and Ohno created “Dance Experiences” culminating in the term “Ankoku Butoh” in 1968
- 1968-1977 – Hijikata and Ohno experienced separate reflective periods
- 1977-1986 – Hijikata director/choreographer and Ohno as dancer; international butoh
- 1986-2006 – butoh is many-faceted
 - A dance genre
 - Prescribed methods developed by Hijikata disciples
 - Integration into movement therapy work, and research methods
 - A modality for dancers, singers, actors, artists to create imagery
 - A proliferation of improvisational butoh dance

This paper will look at the development of butoh in contemporary society from its beginnings in Japan to its international activities. The interaction of society and the individual will be explored through feminist and social theories on identity. Human development is discussed through the development of butoh as an identity in a contemporary social setting.

Butoh Beginnings

During the 1960s in Japan, butoh dance emerged as a counter culture movement based in street theater (Kara Juro and the Red Tent) and dance activities. Today it has become a global contemporary dance genre. Perhaps best described as a global social movement, butoh dance was created in 1959 in Japan as a critical response to Western

cultural and political dominance at a time of violent social protests against the Japan-US Security Treaty (AMPO: Nichibei Anzen Hoshojoyaku), the treaty allowing U.S. military bases on Japanese soil renewed in June of 1960. Hijikata Tatsumi, the original architect of butoh, saw the West contributing to a fragmentation of self-identity and a loss of relationship between humans and nature (Kurihara, 1996; Klein, 1988). An aesthetic form of avant-garde movement, a dance (*bu*) step (*toh*) that challenged and extended both Western dance and Kabuki and Noh theatre of the period, butoh explored body movement through transformative imagery contributing to the process of subverting and deconstructing the national body - a mentality formed by the aesthetic construction of Kabuki and other forms of traditional theatre (Lee, 2002; Tschudin, 1999).

To understand any creation we need to look at the history and politics of the original setting and the personality and philosophy of the creators. Butoh was born because two men of very different personalities and philosophies met in a social and political environment of unrest allowing the fermentation of 'dance experiences'. Hijikata belongs to the world of form; Ohno belongs to the world of spirit. He and Hijikata eventually developed divergent philosophies of form in dance. Hijikata believes that "life catches up with form" so that when there is structure, content will naturally follow. Ohno, however, feels that "form comes by itself," if initially there is spiritual content (Ohno and Ohno, 2004, 94).

Hijikata Tatsumi

Hijikata grew up in rural Tohoku in the rustic Akita prefecture of the northern region of Japan's main island of Honshu. He died in 1986 of liver disease at the age of fifty-seven, having dedicated his life to dance. He had created not only a new form of dance, but also a wide circle of artistic associates with whom he enjoyed a lively social life, and he had inspired a generation of students who remained fiercely dedicated to him. Hijikata first became exposed to Western culture at age eighteen when he began studying *Neue Tanz*, the German dance movement that began early in the twentieth century with the work of Laban and Wigman among others. Eventually, he came into contact with Western surrealist literature and poetry and the techniques of classical ballet.

Yoneyama Kunio in 1958 took the stage name of Hijikata Tatsumi, one year before his radical butoh performance of *Kinjiki*. The title "Forbidden Colors" was taken from a novel by Mishima Yukio, one of Hijikata's artistic associates. His first experiment in butoh, *Kinjiki*, performed for the Japanese Dance Association 'New Face Performance' in 1959 in Tokyo, featured Ohno Yoshito, the very young son of Ohno Kazuo. The stage was dark and the dance was short, but it shocked the All Japan Art Dance Association

(the name was later changed to Japan Dance Association). Some accounts say Hijikata was expelled from the association over this dance, but in fact he voluntarily resigned along with Ohno and their friend Tsuda. Hijikata's early subversive themes were drawn from the writings of Jean Genet. He even performed for a while under the stage name of Hijikata Genet. In his one program note for *Kinjiki*, Hijikata says, "I studied under Ando Mitsuko, consider Ohno Kazuo a brother, and adore Saint Genet" (Hijikata, 1959, 2000).

He married Motofuji Akiko, a dancer trained in classical ballet, in 1968 and took her last name, changing his legal name to Motofuji Kunio. This was the same year that he choreographed his signature work *Revolt of the Flesh* (Nikutai no hanran) as forerunner to *Ankoku Butoh*. His last performance before beginning to choreograph extensively for others was *Summer Storm* in 1973; by then his work had matured considerably and he had established his dance company. In October of 1974, he choreographed *Ankoku butoh ebisuya ocho* (The Utter Darkness Butoh Ocho at House of Ebisu) for the formal opening of Asbestos Hall Theater. *Ankoku* was taken from popular French movies at the time -- the "film noir," which is *Ankoku Eiga* (Black Film) in Japanese. Hijikata named his new form of dance *Ankoku Butoh*.

Ten years later in 1985 he helped organize the Tokyo Butoh Festival which was the first organized butoh dance festival. Western photographers published glossy picture books of the event creating static identity of butoh in the west - white painted bodies, dancers wearing only loincloth, eyes rolled back showing the whites, tongues hanging out, bodies shaped in distorted movements stilled by the camera.

Ohno Kazuo

During a visit to Tokyo in 1948-9, the twenty-one-year-old Hijikata saw a dance recital given by Ohno Kazuo at *Kanda Kodo Kyoritsu* Hall that moved him profoundly. This was after Ohno's return home from nine years as a soldier in World War II, the last two years spent as a prisoner of war in New Guinea. As aesthetic associates, Hijikata and Ohno represent two opposites of a yin/yang magnetic polarity. While Hijikata celebrates the negative in his themes of death and sacrifice, in ugly beauty, and in mud, Ohno also spirals downward, but with a fluid spirituality.

Ohno was born in Hakodate City, Hokkaido, in 1906. Upon graduation from the Japan Athletic College, he began working as a physical education teacher at high school. After seeing a performance in 1928 by the Spanish dancer Antonia Mercé known as La Argentina, he was so impressed that he decided to dedicate his life to dance. He began

training with two of Japan's modern dance pioneers, Ishii Baku and Eguchi Takaya. His interest in this period was in modern expressionist dance. Ohno's conversion to Christianity was a major influence in his life and on his dances with their recurring themes of life, death, and rebirth. Other influences were his beliefs as a non-church pacifist who was forced to fight in the war, his mother and other important women such as La Argentina.

1960-1968 Ohno and Hijikata Collaboration

In 1954 the young Hijikata began a lifetime collaboration with Ohno who was already middle-aged and a leader of modern dance in Japan. After Hijikata and Ohno started working closely together, Ohno's dance radically changed. His dances had been full of life (*sei*) but soon he began reflecting on the question of death (*shi*), which became the focus for his creative process. *Shi to sei* (death and life) become the two prominent themes around which Ohno's performances evolve. In 1960, the production of *Divine* marked the beginning of an intense working relationship between Ohno and Hijikata that lasted eight years. Then they parted company for about ten years from 1968 until 1977.

1968-1977 Reflective Period

Yoshito says the hiatus was not out of animosity, and that their work together naturally came to a close in this phase. Each of them went through a period of inner reflection. Hijikata's *Ankoku butoh-ha* group performed for the last time in 1966. Then he and photographer Hosoe Eikoh returned home to look for their common roots in Tohoku. Hijikata and Hosoe sought to capture the spirit of the *kamaitachi*, literally "sickle-weasel," also referring to a cut on the skin caused by a mythical whirlwind that creates a vacuum of air. Hosoe, who had lived in northern Tohoku as a child, won the 1970 "Ministry of Education Arts Encouragement Prize" for *Kamaitachi* (1969), his book of photographs of Hijikata, immortalizing butoh in portraits of the dancer, Hijikata, in the countryside.

Ohno went through an identity crisis filled with self-searching during this hiatus and could not perform in front of an audience. He may never have gone back to dancing if he had not had time for exploration, synthesis, and healing. In a chance visit to an art gallery, he saw an abstract painting of geometrical curves painted on a zinc sheet by Nakanishi Natsuyuki that inspired him to make a dance dedicated to Antonia Mercé-- a Spanish dancer born in 1890 in Buenos Aires and known as La Argentina. As a young

man of about twenty-three, Ohno saw her dance at the Imperial Theatre in Tokyo.

“I could feel her presence,” Ohno said on remembering her through the painting, “I could see her there dancing among those flowing curves.” This inspiration brought him back to the stage in an intimate autobiographical dance, and he dedicated his comeback performance to La Argentina's memory in *Admiring La Argentina* (1977).

1977-1986 Hijikata and Ohno Re-enter Partnership

In 1977 Hijikata again directed Ohno, this time in the performance of *Admiring Argentina*, one of Ohno's signature works. Beginning with Hijikata's direction of *Admiring Argentina*, Ohno became an even greater dancer in the decade in which he and Hijikata reconnected. Ohno, in his early seventies, blossomed into a collaboration with Hijikata from 1977 to 1986 in which they choreographed dances that could be recreated on stage. This was a shift from their former experimental “Dance Experiences” (as they called them) that were ephemeral one-time performances created in the moment. Most of the dances that became part of Ohno's repertoire were from this late period of collaboration -- with the younger Hijikata as director and the elder Ohno as dancer.

Butoh Identities: World of Form; World of Spirit; World of the Ordinary

In a similar approach as Ohno, Kasai Akira used improvisational movement in his group Tenshikan (House of Angels). He believes in butoh as “community body” (Fraleigh, 1999, p. 229). He thinks that butoh can change and renew the participant and the society as it is relational in terms of connection to moving to inner images, which then are manifested through increased self-awareness in our connection to the other movers.

The most significant difference lies in improvisation by Ohno and Kasai while one of the most significant characteristics of Ankoku Butoh of Hijikata is spectacle, or as it may be called, form. To Hijikata and groups under the influence of Hijikata, the Tenshikan improvisational style was not butoh. Mikami (1993), a Hijikata's disciple reports that Hijikata said to them,

“You have to leave your community, friends, the existing world in order to do Butoh. You have to throw it all away/give it all away in order to focus and concentrate on and make Butoh everything” (p. 15).

Harada Nobuo who danced with Kasai in Tenshikan from 1973-1979 extends Kasai's concept of the community body in Fukuoka Seiryukai group. When Tenshikan disbanded in 1979, Harada founded and led Tokyo Butoh Seiryukai until his return to his

birthplace in Yanagawa, Kyushu in 1985. Married, with two children, Harada took over his obligations as the eldest son of his father's household. He experienced a nine-year hiatus from butoh until he founded Fukuoka Butoh Seiryukai in 1994. Describing his attitude to butoh when he was in Tokyo, and then his transformation on his return to Kyushu, he says:

It was like going to war. I was thinking only to explode my body and the society. Images that I had were destruction or beating. I used to do terrorist butoh to my body by pounding the training into it so that I could perform in ways of expression against society. *Butoh was everything* (author's italics). After I left Tokyo and returned to Fukuoka, I had time to reflect since I stopped butoh for nine years as an ordinary person who has to live, not as an artist, but as a member of the society. I didn't choose to die. I didn't choose to live like an ordinary person, either. I was searching for the way to do both. I knew I had to find a way to do butoh so that I could connect my body to society so I found that the philosophy of *everything is butoh* (author's italics) which helped me realize that everything we do everyday is butoh. I realized that being ordinary is not in fact ordinary. Miracles don't happen on special occasions but take place in the very ordinary lives of very ordinary people. For instance, as an ordinary father I go on a picnic with my child and climb a mountain hand in hand feeling the warmth of my child or scent of grass on the mountain road. I take those things into my body and have a dialogue between my body and my mind in that kind of ordinary situation.

(Nakamura, interview, March 2, 2004)

Thus Harada's concept of "everything is butoh" was born. Butoh begins from daily life experiences, observing self, and doubting every stereotype. One of the themes of Butoh Seiryukai is to grasp new relationships between the individual and the community in daily life. In this way, transforming somatic identity of the individual becomes the purpose of participating in butoh activities. The somatic aspects of butoh will be explained in a later section of this paper.

Essential and Discursive Identities

Nicholson (1998), in feminist theory, outlines two approaches to the definition of gender identity:

- a. essentialist: woman has a common, universal meaning which works toward minimalizing understandings of differences among women;

- b. web-like: male/female distinctions across cultures are “a complex web of distinctions evidencing threads of overlap within a field of discontinuities” (p. 297).

Kondo (1997) suggests two parameters for thinking about identity.

- a. traditional (static): “Identities are viewed as fixed, bounded entities containing some essence or substance, expressed in distinctive attributes” (p. 35)
- b. discursive (fluid): Identity is a location in a field of shifting power relations, “opening out the inner spaces of true gender identity to cultural and historical forces” (p. 43).

Therefore, identity is neither “an essential inner truth, or external biological equipment” (Kondo, p. 43) but complex ambiguities, different cultural possibilities, blurred boundaries, and rearrangements of power (Kondo, p. 44).

Butler (1999) defines woman (human) as the state of permanent openness and resignifiability. This is her constructed internal substance re-produced through corporeal signs. It seems to have much in common with Kondo's discursive definition which maintains the boundaries as flexible and suggests possibilities of shifts meaning of self through power variation shifts. Nicholson's web-like, Kondo's discursive, Butler's state of openness and resignifiability, all support the social agent who embodies collective thought processes with interpretation on the individual, internal level.

M. Rosaldo's social theoretical definition of identity is hermeneutic: “We are first social persons; the self shaped through the medium of cultural terms, which shape the understandings of reflective actors” (2003, p. 150). My understanding of Rosaldo's interpretive concept of culture is that it is a continuum of thought, culture patterns, and cultural history. Emotions are part of our cognitive life; they are thoughts embodied. Culture is associative chains and images and suggests what connects to what. Humans give meaning to cultural symbols through embodiment (our intuitive interpretation) through the whole self, the body, self, identity. Culture meaning cannot be derived from artifacts, rules, or schema alone. The embodiment of cultural meaning through our histories emits an energy such that the collective symbols acquire meaning. “A grasp of individuality requires a grasp of cultural form” (Rosaldo, 2003, p. 141).

Orientalization: Essentialist Identity Internationalized

Ohno achieved world renown at the age of seventy-four, a time when most dancers have long since retired, Ohno became the leading international representative of butoh.

While the 1985 *Tokyo Butoh Festival* introduced butoh to the mainstream in Japan, Ohno had already introduced it to the world outside. After Ohno premiered his comeback performance, *La Argentina Sho* (Admiring Argentina) in 1977 in Japan, he performed this same work in 1980 at the 14th *International Theatre Festival* in Nancy, France. Even though Sankai Juku and other butoh performers were part of the festival, Ohno's performance represented butoh's introduction to the world stage. He continued his international tour at this time with performances in Strasbourg, London, Stuttgart, Paris and Stockholm. Sankai Juku, an artistic dance theater group based in Paris, was one of the groups to perform at the Nancy Festival, too. They remained in Paris and now perform in Japan as 'returned artists' (gyaku yunyu) and command main venues in Japan.

An aspect of culture becomes orientalized when the West sees it as oriental. In the case of Orientalism, what started as a literary genre eventually emerged as a way of thinking for the White Man to eventually control "uncivilized" or "lesser civilized" nations. It "provided a rationale for western imperialism which could be described as the redemption of a degenerate world" (Windshuttle, 1999, pp. 30-31). However, a more insidious concept is that Orientalism functions as a model for all western discourses on the "other", that is, "knowledges of Africans, Native Americans have been constructed to distort their systems of thought" (Said, 1978, p. 345) and to maintain a myth which perpetuates racism.

Sankai Juku is an example of becoming "Re-Orientalized" or the model working in reverse. The butoh group, Sankai Juku, based itself in Paris in the mid 1980s and is now world famous as being aesthetically oriental in stage setting, the clothes they wear (a kind of hemp monk's robe with slits up the sides and hemp belts swinging), the music they play, the lighting they use, and the movements are all very clean and pure (not the ugly type of Butoh dancing). This group has Re-Orientalized itself for marketing purposes in the west. After they became popular in the west, they were always able to sell out when they perform in Japan. They are the only butoh group to perform in mainstream venues in Japan. Most butoh groups dance in fringe festival activities or small bars or underground halls.

Western and Japanese discourses in the English and Japanese media over the past forty-five years have held butoh in an image of resistance through deconstruction, death, and grotesque body forms. In Japanese performance reviews over four decades (1961-2003), butoh is described using terms such as *ankoku* (darkness), *zen-ei* (avant-garde), *waizatsu* (chaotic, vulgar), *angura* (underground), *kimi no warusa* (creepy), *kitanasa*

(dirty), *boryoku-sei* (violent), *erotisizumu* (erotic), *konton* (chaotic), *anaakii* (anarchistic), *hikei* (deformed), *igyo* (uncanny), *tosaku-teki* (transvestite), *keiren* (trembling), *shinpiteki* (mysterious). Butoh reviews first began appearing in the New York Times around 1984 after groups such as *Sankai Juku* and *Dai Rakuda Kan* performed abroad. Butoh is commonly described in the New York Times and other USA-based newspapers as grotesque, hallucinatory, painful, decaying, startling, destructive, insane, and dislocating. These discourses framed butoh identity as ‘the other’, that is, not a Japanese aesthetic art, but as ugly, dark, and evil.

The socio-cultural re-creation of Japanese essential identity occurs through the power differential of the orientalized ‘other’ both in media representation of static butoh images and words in the USA, and, in turn, those images are re-orientalized by the Japanese themselves who have bought into the Orientalist model of thinking by elevating external value systems above their own.

Re-creating an Essential Butoh Identity

An Old Woman

Bent back, crouching *Knees bent, back lowered, and feet grounded low into the floor, gnarled arms bent hanging down in front of you.*

Eyes unseeing *Eyes are covered with cataracts; vision blurs and pupil appears white.*

Desire to walk forward *The image and feeling of attempting to reach for a pencil just out of reach on the floor in front of you.*

To create the quality of an old woman in the dancers' movement, these instructions present increasing levels of abstraction from physical to imagistic. The above example of a *butoh-fu* from a workshop by Kobayashi Saga in which Tamah Nakamura participated on November 26, 2003 illustrates the form and movement element of Hijikata's method. Kobayashi, who joined Hijikata in 1969, presented as an original member of *Asbestos-kan* and part of the *Hijikata Tatsumi Exhibition* at the Okamoto Taro Museum that included workshops by Hijikata's disciples. In Hijikata's *butoh-fu* (written journal), there are numerous variations of arbitrary forms as identified by Baird's (2005) analysis. Based on the overlap of commentary of Hijikata's dancers on the structure of his later dances and the release of Hijikata's notebooks, an arbitrary methodology emerges including elements such as instructions, forms or movements, character-types, and narratives.

Waguri Yukio produced a CD-ROM of butoh dance methods gleaned from his notebooks as a student of Hijikata's (1998). Mikami Kayo published a book describing her

life and practice with Hijikata, her teacher (1993). Former students' notebooks were on display at the first Butoh exhibition in Japan at the Okamoto Taro Museum Hijikata Exhibition from October to November 2003 (Taro Okamoto, 2004). At the Keio University Research Center for the Arts and Arts Administration - Hijikata Tatsumi Archives, pictures, written materials, and Hijikata's *butoh-fu* notebooks are preserved for the scholarly study of butoh.

The establishment of prescribed methods by the Hijikata's disciples from the 1990s through the present suggests a trend toward creating a static identity to define Hijikata's pure butoh, and therefore re-create an essential identity for butoh as well as for those who do butoh. However, butoh in Japan and the world has developed in ways beyond the prescriptive to improvisational, independent butoh performers. There are individuals and dance groups who incorporate butoh with other forms of modern and popular dance such as hip-hop. More women than men are doing butoh in the period from 1990 to the present. These types of practices and performances are marginalized from the butoh world prescribed by Hijikata's former students, and take butoh into new creative forms of expression as described in the next section.

Somatic Identities Beyond Body and Societal Borders

We begin by standing up and holding the lost feeling of not knowing how to move. Seiryukai's improvisational exercises in dance class typically begin with painstakingly slow, careful steps as if petrified in a tight corner. We imagine carrying a delicate, precious object across the room to give to an imaginary person. We slowly cross the stage, a mountain, a river, the sea, calmly, alone, and together. We then discover a way to move alone and together. Momentary discoveries of reality occur through a connection of the inner force with bodily form. (Nakamura, fieldnotes, November 2, 2001)

Exploration of the somatic identity through self discovery and internal transformation of one's images is the purpose of Butoh Seiryukai Dance group (Nakamura, 2007). The soma is the body as perceived from within by first person perception (Hanna, 2003). Our own experience of our own body, that is, first-person observation provides us with factual information that the third-person observer does not have access to. Our bodies communicate information to us about our intersubjective relationships with the world around us and with others. Therefore, instead of considering the body as simply an object of study, or a text on which social reality is inscribed, it also becomes a process of "somatic modes of attention" particular to certain cultural

practices (Csordas, 1990, 2002). Butoh movements, for example, are not shaped by technique-oriented instruction or exercises but by 'metamorphic explorations' (Fraleigh and Nakamura, 2006, p. 101) in which dancer and audience transform through the experience of the event. In this sense, butoh is not a theatre or performance study, but a somatic study focusing on the first person experience of how you perceive your soma-self in changing states of being, and not how others see you (Nakamura, 2006b). Observed by witnesses or audience, it becomes a shared interpersonal experience. Butoh, then, in this perspective, becomes a mode of transformation through somatic reflection.

Butoh as a Somatic Modality

Using principles of somatic movement, butoh is being integrated into movement therapy work both in Japan and other countries. Harada Nobuo has produced various works *Hiraku* (Awakening) for children with Down's Syndrome and adults with psychological disorders, and *Keiko no kotoba* (Workshop Words) for the community at large. Developing butoh as therapy, Morita Itto, a butoh performer and practicing psychologist, and Takeuchi Mika, who performs with him, have opened a *Takeuchi Mika Butoh Institute* in Sapporo, Japan that offers butoh classes and stress reduction techniques through their Butoh Dance Therapy Method. In Gottingen, Germany, Endo Tadashi includes people with disabilities in his workshops, mainstreaming them with experienced dancers. Butoh has found its way into the USA movement therapy world where American Dance Movement Therapy Association practitioners incorporate butoh orientations into their therapy work. Nakamura & Williams (2002) co-created and facilitated a butoh and therapeutic drama workshop to help participants raise awareness of internally held structures of oppression. Butoh has also emerged as an orientation of the body in artistic research methods particularly in reference to researcher reflexivity and identity (Nakamura, 2006a, 2008).

Integration of somatic aspects of butoh is extended to the aesthetic. There is a proliferation of both improvisational butoh individuals and groups independent of form based on methods established in Japan. Lani Weissbach is an American butoh teacher who uses butoh as a modality for modern dancers to create imagery internalizing images for aesthetic purposes. In this way butoh is used as a transformational orientation for singers, dancers, actors, artists. Marjorie Malone, founder of THE CENTRE, performance art/culture medicine, Taos, New Mexico notes that her experience of butoh practice is beyond physical form:

I encountered butoh as a traditional Sun Dancer, with an understanding of the

possibility of accessing a continuous and reciprocal flow between spirit and matter through dance. I have observed that butoh practice tends to invite opportunities for such an experience, and does so, across cultures (at least in my experiences sharing the practice in India, Egypt, the Americas, and Europe)--free from limiting social and cultural constrictions while freely accessing across cultures--hybridization in third space.

(Marjorie Malone, Personal communication, September 2006)

As I have noted, USA media images of butoh portray an orientalization of the physical butoh body. However, butoh is actually being used as a form of somatic education movement and in many cases is not performance oriented. Individual re-creation of discursive identities through somatic third space transformation is occurring across global arenas.

Final Remarks

Rather I would like to argue that an analytic framework that equates “self or individual” with such things as spontaneity, genuine feeling, privacy, uniqueness, constancy, the “inner life” and then opposes those to the “persons” or “personae” shaped by mask, role, rule or context, is a reflection of dichotomies that constitute the modern Western self. Our concern with the individual and their inner hidden selves may well be features of OUR world and belief - itself to be examined and not assumed as the foundation for cross-cultural study (Rosaldo, 1993, p. 147).

R. Rosaldo (1993) suggests that the researcher begin by examining her own assumptions. By holding ambiguity and not accepting the mainstream media image of butoh's grotesque identity and essential Japanese body image, in this paper I have presented butoh as an entity in contemporary global society to be discursive. It is not only a structured form of essential Japanese identity. It discursively and fluidly shifts and changes across time and location blurring its boundaries and re-creating itself in interaction with the needs of human social agents.

Acknowledgments

This paper is an expanded version of Tamah Nakamura's lecture titled “Butoh Now” at the Institut Franco-Japonaise du Kyushu on April 20, 2007.

(本稿は、2007年4月20日に九州日仏学館においておこなった講演『舞踏の現在』に加筆したものです。)

I am grateful to have been a recipient of the Chikushi Jogakuen University Special Research Grant in 2006 which contributed to findings in this paper.

(本稿は、筑紫女学園大学の「2006年度特別研究助成費」の助成を得ておこなった研究に基づくものであることを感謝と共に特記しておきます。)

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