

Butoh: Sex and Gender Deconstructed in Brazilian Body Practices

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Abstract

The following paper elaborates an analysis of the Butoh practice. Butoh's aesthetics and body knowledge have become part of the cultural studies. Many artists and performers today use Butoh as a dissent practice of gender and sexuality. It is intended to present the work of the Brazilian artist Mogli Saura, creator of Kaos Butoh: a tropical interpretation of the influence of Japanese body art. In addition, it seeks to bring together human knowledge through technology and globalization. To support the discussion the concept of the body is studied in the works of Christine Greiner, Kunichi Uno. Finally, it intends to expose how the artistic practices of the Japanese Butoh master Tatsumi Hijikata elevates the Brazilian body art to strange and disruptive levels and promoted the creation of artworks on culture, gender, and sexuality.

Keywords: Butoh, Kaos, Performance, Performativity, Gender, Sexuality

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Introduction

I do not seek to define or answer the questions that have been following me as an artist, throughout the studies on artistic poiesis through this text. I intend, in a brief way, to address the questions that surround the theme of Butoh towards the body without organs of Artaud and the western philosophical studies of Deleuze and Guattari. Such piercing issues eventually docked in Brazilian harbor. How the Kasato-maru¹ would come to deliver on our beaches, hundreds of thousands of Japanese lives, fleeing from recession and war, in search of work in Brazilian fields.

As it is impossible to dissociate my practice as an artist from the writing I propose to build, this article is written on first-person pronouns. I am, like the sick body of Tatsumi Hijikata, feverish of art and poetics, so unbalanced and sickened by the rules and norms of academic and social, sexual, and gender conduct, that I already find in my becoming-Butoh (GREINER, 2018), a Kaos Butoh (SAURA, 2012), in harmonious imbalance.

The performative memories unfold in spiral narratives that are necessary as starting points for the reflection anchored within this author. I am an intersex and autistic individual whose self-perception has never been fully embodied. While it is easy to feel as alive as a river or a gale (KRENAK), I often question my identity as a human being, as a sentient being, whose organs serve a Western, ableist, Christian-based, conservative, straight-cis-white-skinned medical taxonomy centered on a Fordist format of capitalist consumption and production.

I, as a Jewish, transgender, non-binary individual, with short stature and a larger body, carry within my being floods of mourning emotions. I remember the first time I witnessed a Butoh performance, when the artist Atsushi Takenouchi and the musician Hiroko Komiya presented the show “Thousands of Drops, Thousands of Flowers” at the ‘Mosaico Cultural Center’ in Brasília, Brazil.

The underground theater that hosted the performance had a grandstand with no more than four rows closely stacked against a wall, creating a dark, icy atmosphere nestled in the red and barren earth of the central plateau. A soft light illuminated Takenouchi's body as he single-handedly performed his dance of shadows and death for two straight hours.

In the final minutes of this memory, I felt tears welling up in my eyes, flowing fast and cunning like the artist's body, although heavy and painful. He picked up a white lily and reached out towards me... From this gesture, anachronistically, amidst all the previous movements, the essence of Butoh contaminated me.

¹ 笠戸丸 the name of the first ship carrying Japanese immigrants that disembarked in Brazil in 1908 as a consequence of an immigration agreement and cooperation between both countries, aimed at providing labor for the coffee industry.



Image 1: Author's archive. 2017.

I was in the front row, and I knew from the beginning, at the source of this memory-river-of-tears, that this gesture was not only going to happen but also transfigure me. During the following week, with an intense workshop led by Tatsumi's disciple, Hijikata, I was torn between translating one word or another from Japanese through the practices of Butoh. A leaden gray sky interspersed with the heavy night of Brasília accompanied the nighttime practices in the bars. We discussed why a nuclear disaster in Fukushima, which had been the proposition for this performance, had triggered emotions of subjugation and survival amalgamated in the bodies of Brazilians.

Chi As the Vital Energy of the Undead Being

Butoh transcends language barriers and defies Western categorizations of the body and its mechanical functions. Writing about Butoh is an immersion in sensations of pleasure and pain, intertwined with blood, sweat, and tears. Tatsumi Hijikata's Butoh embodies “seeking singular ways to challenge all that has become habitual, standardized, and numb...” (GREINER, 2018, p. 20).

By fostering interdisciplinary research across the realms of arts, philosophy, and semiotics, one can conceive Mogli Saura's performative body as an embodiment of Latin American subalternity, with Kaos Butoh serving as a response to the "becoming-child from the perspective of the body in its current state" (GREINER, 2018, p. 19). According to Christine

Greiner (2018), Hijikata left behind writings that alluded to a "vortex of sonorities, words, thoughts, and images that continually deterritorialize" (Ibid). The Becoming-Butoh of Hijikata proposes a disbalance of the body, yet in Brazil, we inhabit a body denied and imbalanced.

Becoming-Butoh might signify a rejection of the body's annihilation. However, in this context, the performance emerging from the fusion with Butoh reveals singularly vital bodily experiences, infused with "chi," often accompanied by "borderline states of crisis in thought and language" (KUNIICHI, 2018, p. 17).

Furthermore, inhabiting the role of both the "monster that speaks to you" (PRECIADO, 2020, translated by the author) and the researcher, who is also the subject of research, provides me with an imaginative framework for conceptualizing Kaos Butoh as an appropriation through proximity to diverse experiences. Mogli Saura, a non-binary, transgender, and Black artist, embodies a body in crisis: between the realms of death and grief.

The distinctiveness of Brazil in comparison to Japan can be attributed to policies that historically undermine the poor and Black communities in the country, reminiscent of its colonial history as an export colony. It is essential to acknowledge that the Japanese state has also inflicted harm upon vulnerable segments of its population in the past, a parallel to Brazil's own history. This included the endorsement of eugenics practices such as mass sterilization of its disabled population (SITCAWITCH, 1998).

Dissident bodies encompassing varied dimensions of sex, gender, race, age, ability, indigeneity, and refugee status are often excluded from the definition of the Brazilian people, and are subjected to overt necropolitics (MBEMBE, 2018) as a mechanism of control and subjugation. Deprived of the right to mourn (BUTLER, 2015), one of the segments existing as the "undead" within the population is the LGBTQIAPN+ community, of which Mogli Saura is a member. Consequently, Kaos Butoh can be seen as the protective shield (aegis) of a self-reemerging as "chi," a vitality transcending the inert body - a performer in the guise of a zombie.

Through movements, images and words, a state of extreme precariousness is established that announces what a life can provoke and activate, even after it has departed this world (...) Butoh is not a safety net, let alone a shelter. It is closer to an ambiguous perception of the risks that can at the same time put everything to lose or guarantee the insurrection of our dreams (GREINER Apud UNO, 2019, p. 20).

The LGBTQIAPN+ body engaged in Butoh dances within a semiotics of monstrosity, a semiotics that fervently seeks validation. It resides within the nightmares of those encountering this art form and, through dreams, transforms the signs assigned to gender and sexuality, intensifying experiences of vulnerability and unconventional embodiments.

Certain symbolic representations of the monstrous in Japan are more readily accepted and deeply ingrained within their culture than in the colonized West (GREINER, 2017). The potential for identification and the significance of these symbols of aberration as animated entities resonate within Japanese body practices (Ibid). However, in Latin American territories, the power of an art form that defies categorization elevates our understanding of the body to different planes and extracts of comprehension.

Attempting to grasp the art created by Hijikata through the lens of dichotomous and binary frameworks is a futile endeavor. "If the body is not an object or a set of organs, it appears immediately as a fundamental question of what life and vitality are" (UNO, 2017, p. 14-15). Furthermore, Hijikata did not perceive the body as distinct from thought; the performer gave form to ideas through gestures and transcended divisions between West and East, rural and urban (Ibid, p. 31). Thus, on the opposite side of the globe, its seed germinated amidst the challenges of neoliberalism, assuming an unexpected and new configuration: the embodiment of queer "artivism".

Butoh art, as a disruptive and fundamentally counter-paradigmatic force designed to contest control over the body, might appear incompatible with a neoliberal global regime (GREINER, 2017). Nevertheless, in this context, it has discovered fertile soil for its dissemination, functioning as both a language and a source of empowerment for bodies that resist on the outskirts and margins of the capitalist periphery (MBEMBE, 2018).

Flesh and Corpses

Japanese Butoh resonates with me as an almost concentrated tempest of white and red fluids, intoxicating and sweet, simultaneously voracious and delicate. Furthermore, it resembles a tree with numerous branches, as evidenced by one of Tatsumi Hijikata's most renowned performances: "The Revolt of the Flesh". In the selection of its title, a deliberate choice was made to employ the kanji for "carnal," encapsulating the essence of the corporeal form portrayed on the stage. This corporeal form, as interpreted by Kuniichi Uno, emerges as a profoundly mechanical yet inherently emotional "Chimera" (2017).

In addition to the term *nikutai*, there were also other names such as *karada* (体) and *shintai* (身体). In the pre-war period, *shintai* was usually used, but always with many nuances. (...) the *Nihon kokugo daijiten* dictionary defined *nikutai* as the body composed of flesh/muscle and offered *karada* as a possible synonym; but, at the same time, he qualified *nikutai* as "*karada* of sexual desire" (GREINER, 2015 p. 57).

Similar language-oriented subtleties also occur in Brazil. In this instance, *Kaos Butoh* introduces a neologism derived from the term "chaos," grounded in the principle of linguistic decolonization. In the creations of *Mogli Saura*, certain characteristics, which may have become commonplace in the aesthetics of Butoh dancers, are deliberately omitted. Brazilian performances are unrefined and more voracious. The body bears distinct imprints of colonization and ethnic-racial memories, simultaneously contrasting with and drawing parallels to Tatsumi Hijikata's work.

Decolonization of a body-space in (a)temporal fragmentation.

Time of immanence - of the event - in constant density.

Time that entangles the past and its (im)possibilities of re-existence in a type of ancestry without origin - with elements both concrete of one culture/history as well as delusional, and no less concrete due to this, of others.

Time in permanent updating, which also brings as a concrete (im)possibility the virtuality of one (or several) future(s), also present(s), in the body.

Future without destiny as a possibility of a "being" yet to come, unmade, unknown, and paradoxically present, just as it is happening, in the body.

Body in dysrhythmia of movements, expansion/contraction with variable axis, off-center and mobile.

Body without defined boundary between within and outside, which by experiencing this specific time (ritual density) dances movements that represent itself on a complexity that embodies politics, history, subjectivity, territory and life as phenomena, which, each in its own way and with its own connections exposes and affirms its difference - in a state of game-dance between life and death - of flows, movements, rhythms, meaning, and existence. (Mogli Saura. Access in: <https://mutha.com.br/2021/05/02/mogli-saura/>)

While many of Hijikata's disciples argue that it is presently unfeasible to practice Butoh within a neoliberal regime (GREINER, 2017), Mogli Saura invokes the monstrous Kaos of the body-cyborg (HARAWAY, 2009) as a possibility of radicalizing the body even within this regime. Moreover, although we acknowledge the evident connection between Artaud and Hijikata, there exists something that extends beyond the notion of the body without organs. Butoh transcends both Western biological taxonomy and Taoist "chi." It embodies a profusion of intersecting paths and crossroads, asterisks and dots, vertices and folds, representing a dysfunctional flesh teeming with vitality even amidst affliction.

Like a seminal itch that fertilizes and contaminates everything, the Butoh Kaos has proven indomitable: a flowing fluid, as vibrant as the rivers of the Krenak people (KRENAK, 2022), and a formidable LGBTQIAPN+ virus. This body remains fragile yet possesses a metallic fortitude, flowing like mercury at room temperature, bearing a dystopian and apocalyptic quality reminiscent of the deep-sea monsters in the Japanese ocean—profoundly irreverent and tragic.

Conclusion

Many of the concepts articulated by Mogli Saura, Tatsumi Hijikata, and their Brazilian and Japanese disciples find their roots in the works of philosophers who share similar concerns. These concerns can be traced back to the writings of Ailton Krenak and Artaud, Deleuze and Guattari, authors who have centered their discourse on vulnerability and the deconstruction of colonialist notions that delineated borders and upheld a white civilization as the vanguard of human progress (KRENAK, 2020).

Contemplating the concept of becoming-Butoh (GREINER apud UNO, 2018) as an intrinsic aspect of a performing body in its primordial state, divorced from human boundaries and norms, may introduce a new perspective on living beings - one that transcends current definitions of humanity and animacy. If we wish to continue existing as a species, it may be necessary to either explore new forms of identification or embrace non-human identifications, in order to redefine our understanding of existence.

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