Bodies in Times of War: A Comparison of Hijikata Tatsumi and Mary Wigman's Use of Dance as Political Statement

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Bodies are at the center of every war. Whether it is from the extreme exertion of fighting, the destruction of human life, or the damage to vital resources such as food, water, and warmth, bodies are the sites where conflict occurs. Survival is a bodily act. How does the shifting, unstable landscape of war and aftermath affect the body's representation and experience? How does the war-beleaguered body move? What are the motivations? Dance can show us a distilled, naked view of changing notions of the body as a physical manifestation of sociocultural norms and taboos.

Within this rather large topic of bodies, war, and manifestations of changing perspectives through dance, my focus in this paper is on the migration of a dance idea from Mary Wigman to Hijikata Tatsumi. Their work spanned nearly a century and straddled two catastrophic international conflicts over culture and territory, which introduced the word "genocide" into common parlance. Through dance, each artist asserts a notion of the body—Hijikata, defiant, and Wigman, sublime—that stands in contrast to a subjugated, defeated body. Wigman is in dialogue with World War I Germany and Hijikata with World War II Japan, and both are in dialogue with the assault of modernity and "progress." Wigman's dance also has a complex relationship with WWII that is fascinating and has been written about elsewhere (see Manning 2006 and Sorrell 1975); however, my focus here is on the inception of Wigman's technique in the early 1900s and crystallization through her school, which opened in Dresden in 1920.

There is actually a directly traceable lineage between these two dancers: Japanese dancer Eguchi Takaya studied at Wigman's school in Germany in 1922 before he formed his own school in Tokyo and became teacher to Ohno Kazuo in 1934. Katsuko Masumura and Mitsuko Ando were two students of Eguchi with whom Hijikata studied and performed. And Hijikata and Ohno were collaborators in close dialogue for nearly 25 years. German dancer Harald Kreutzberg performed in Japan in 1934, and Ohno credits seeing Kreutzberg as one of the primary reasons that Ohno himself began to dance (Blakely Klein 1998, 7); previously he had taught gymnastics, before and after his service in the Japanese military. *Ausdrucktanz*—German expressionist dance—is the most direct dance technique influencing Hijikata's work. (Of course there were many other influences, among them literature, film, visual arts, and cabaret dancing, but *Ausdrucktanz* was the identifiable dance vocabulary underscoring Hijikata's early work.) With the understanding

that *butoh* owes its dance aesthetic in major part to its inheritance from *Ausdrucktanz*, I am interested in how the representation or perspective on the body has changed within and between these two artists' working periods, and how they might have been similarly or differently shaped by their experiences of war.

The war history that brackets their work is WWI (1914–1920), which ended in Germany's (temporary) defeat and nearly as many people dying from malnutrition as from combat due to the British blockade. Subsequently, WWII (1934–1945) ushered in the rise of fascism and Germany and Japan as allies, and ended in utter defeat for these armies. In Japan, not only did the atomic bomb wreak physical devastation, but the nation was also stripped of its army, occupied by the American "victors," and forced to reckon with the Emperor's admission that he was merely human and not divine. The "national body" (*kokutai*) crumbled from within. Out of the wreckage, nearly 15 years after the Japanese defeat in WWII and in the midst of the civil unrest that came to a head during renegotiation of the ANPO Treaty governing American occupation of Japan, Hijikata and Ohno's *butoh* emerged.

Body Culture

To understand the significance of the bodies presented in their dances, it is useful to look at two iterations of "body culture" that inform Wigman and Hijikata's dancing: *Nachtkultur* in Germany and what I will refer to as the *Nikutai* movement in Japan.

Germany

Nachtkultur is, at face value, a nudist movement that began in the 1870s in Germany through which people sought freedom of expression (including sexuality), and a return to Nature (with a capital N). Proponents offered nudity as a healing, nurturing, life-affirming practice. With tuberculosis and malnutrition rampant during WWI, Germans sought an antidote to the war-weary body in the emerging *nachtkultur*.

Nachtanz, or nude dancing, was part of the prescription to cure the "neurasthentic ailments contracted in a decadent urban environment" (Toepfer 1997, 30). Emile Jaques-Dalcroze, a proponent of rhythmic gymnastics and founder of Hellerau—which later became Rudolph Laban and Mary Wigman's creative home—advocated for nude group gymnastic exercises as a hygienic and therapeutic practice. Dalcroze downplayed the erotic implications of nude dancing, emphasizing instead purity of form and classical (Greek) respect for the human body (Toepfer 1997, 29). *Nachtkultur* can be seen as a resurgence or re-affirmation of the body. This is not to say that body culture and nude dancing developed in response to war; however, the popularity of *nachtkultur* can be attributed to the effects of war.

Though none of Wigman's own performances include nudity, she most certainly came into her own through the *nachtkultur* movement at Hellerau, where she had her dance epiphany and chose to make a life in dance. Additionally, there are photos of her dancers posing nude (Toepfer 1997, 70). Wigman espoused a deep connection to nature as a source of inspiration, and promoted a sensuality that was in tune with natural surroundings, i.e., the naked feet walking on soft earth. She choreographed dance pieces in nature, and taught

students to dance with space: to move the energy in the landscape, be it outdoors in nature or concentrated on the stage) Clearly *nachtkultur* was part of her frame of reference vis-à-vis the body.

Wigman's dance turned the body into a sacred object, and showed the nakedness of the body alone (i.e., movement without music) as ecstatic and ritualistic. Art critic and *nachtkultur* enthusiast Werner Suhr called her a "classic" German artist:

> Mary Wigman surrenders in the wildest frenzy to entirely explosive, overflowing movements, her arms fall with power through space . . . her body trembles . . . this apparent lawlessness of her dance reveals a higher law of the soul—her dance is a dionysiac festival, sensual-spiritual joy, ecstasies of body and brain. (in Toepfer 1997, 109)

Wigman was searching for a dignified body image that would mitigate the violent impulse to separate sensuality from the body. in a time of spiritual bankruptcy (Nietzsche famously proclaimed "God is dead"), she sought a new spirituality through dance.

Wigman admired Friedrich Nietzsche and his desire to rescue the body from "Despisers of the Body, who saw the physical body as something to be overcome for the salvation of the soul" (Santos Newhall 2009, 67). Santos Newhall says: "Mary Wigman had been steeped in Nietzsche. She performed with the Dada artists at the Cabaret Voltaire while clutching a copy of *Zarathustra* and reciting from the book as she danced" (2009, 117). Santos Newhall argues that for Wigman, the "sensuous dancing body" that Nietzsche referred to in *Zarathustra* "became the vehicle to an authentic life" (117). Further, "[t]he despair permeating the emotional landscape of a world without God catalyzed a driving need for transcendence even after the dogmatic supernatural was gone" (117). Dance was the vehicle through which Wigman sought transcendence.

Unfortunately, however, it would seem that the very body Wigman promoted—an idealized, spiritualized, mythologized body—was co-opted by the nationalistic, eugenic, fascistic rhetoric to create a pure race and expand German dominance on an international scale. At this time between the two world wars, *Friekorps* free German army espoused extreme nationalism that sought Germany's redemption from the humiliation of defeat. They were a roving misogynistic militia that rounding up prostitutes and other degenerates. Photographs feature fit men in well-tailored clothes and leather riding gear, atop horses. They too were part of the growing body culture in Germany, only their version was not an inclusive one. Looking backward for a foundational mythology that would carry them into the future brought them to the conclusion that racial "purification" would lead toward Germany's true destiny: imperialistic rule. Fueled by bruised pride over loss in WWI, this faction in German society crafted an exclusive rhetoric regarding which bodies mattered and which ones were expendable.

There are many more questions to ask of Wigman's project: was her work intended to be political at all? Is it possible to be apolitical in such a polarized moment in history? Was the sublime dance experience she proposed a strong enough statement to be counterhegemonic, or was it just a way of avoiding commentary on the Nazi "project" of racial

purification? What are the subtleties of Wigman's dance that could be read as creating an a-racial alternate, aimed at rescuing humanity though in denial about the realities of the political situation and the direction of Germany? Or was fascism a natural outcome of her body theories, placing too much emphasis on the individual body rather than the community body? These questions are outside of the scope of this paper, yet interesting for further discussion.

Japan

In the years that interceded WWI and WWII, German and Japanese dance artists cross-pollinated. *Ausdrucktanzer* Harald Kreutzberg performed in Japan, and two Japanese dancers—Ando and Michio Itto—studied with Mary Wigman and Rudolph Steiner in Germany, returning to Japan to establish studios and performing companies. The expressionistic aesthetic migrated across continents, and emerged filtered through the lens of pre- and post-WWII Japanese culture, which was quite conflicted about Western culture.

Here, the emerging post-modern, post-apocalyptic body culture crystallized in literature, film, visual arts, and performance, in what I will refer to as Japan's *nikutai* movement. Japanese studies scholar Douglas Slaymaker traces a major shift in conceptions of the body in 1950s and 1960s Japan vis-à-vis cultural representations of *nikutai* [flesh, carnal/sensual] and *kokutai* [national body]. Slaymaker describes a performance art event staged by a Japanese couple following the end of the war in which the pair performed sadomasochistic sex acts "in the main hall of Shinto shrines," using their "carnal body (*nikutai*) [to] suggest a punning contrast to the national polity (*kokutai*/national body)" (Slaymaker 2004, 2), which had previously equated the individual body with the national entity. Historian Tsurumi Shunsuke explains the primary reason for the dramatic transition as a loss of faith in the national polity: "After the defeat, and after the Emperor's proclamation that he was only a human being, the idea of the national structure also fell off like another layer of dandruff. Then all that finally remained was the body [*nikutai*]" (Tsurumi quoted in Slaymaker 2002, 83).

Author Tamura suggests that only sensation is real, which is in direct contrast to Buddhist teachings. He writes in "*Nikutai ga ningen de aru*" [The fleshly is the human]:

> The distrust of "thought" is complete. We now believe in nothing but our own bodies . . . The body's weariness, the body's desires, the body's anger, the body's intoxications, the body's confusion, the body's fatigue—only these are real. It is because of all these things that we realize, for the first time, that we are alive. (quoted in Slaymaker 2004, 3)

He rejected the spiritual mythology that served as the foundation of the *kokutai*, and instead proposed that in order to "become fully human" the Japanese must "at least once, make their way to the gate that leads to their own bodies," or *nikutai to iu mon* [gate of flesh] (quoted in Slaymaker 2002, 93).

In Slaymaker's assessment, "the disillusion, despair, and anger at the outcome of the war to which so much had been sacrificed, and which had long been a lost cause, left much of the populace with a keen sense of absurdity, anxiety, and angst" (2002, 84). Post-war writers

and artists sought to rescue the individual body from "abstract propaganda and calls for self-sacrifice" (Slaymaker 2004, 13), such as that which had spurred kamikaze pilots toward their own demise. The resultant artistic response was indeed pornographic in its focus on the carnal body; however, the emphasis is on the political critique their work offered. The images of body as *nikutai* [flesh] were "counterhegemonic because [they] defie[d] the primacy of the national body . . . refusal to subordinate individual desires to national projects serve[d] as revolutionary act and protest" (11).

Suzuki Seijin actualized this notion in the 1964 cult film *Gate of Flesh*, featuring a band of prostitutes vying for clients and battling the old stereotypes of security (i.e., marriage) while trying to establish a new order. They are crass, violent (in one scene they beat a prostitute who has sex for free with a man), and equally disgusted with the Japanese men who lost the war and the American ones who have come to take their place in controlling their lives.

Hijikata's contribution to post WWII art was nothing short of a revolt of the flesh. From his first *butoh* performance in 1959—*Kinjiki* or *Forbidden Colors*, which featured a homoerotic relationship and a simulated chicken sacrifice—to *Nikutai no Hanran* (literally, *Revolt of the Flesh*) in 1968, Hijikata experimented with themes of ecstasy through extreme pain and sacrifice (of oneself into an expression of total art), and played quite deliberately with images/concepts from Western avant garde literature, film, and art, including Genet, Duchamp, Bataillle, Artaud, and Sartre, before turning his attention back to Japanese iconography in the latter part of his career.

His writing reveals his body politics: In *Inner/Outer Material*, Hijikata declares, "sacrifice is the source of all work and every dancer is an illegitimate child set free to experience that very quality.. . . Dance for display must be totally abolished" (2000a, 39–40), advocating here for experience over expression. One of Hijikata's dancers, Waguri Yukio, told me that his measure of a good performance was not "I performed the choreography well" but rather "I was alive here" (Waguri 2010).

With *To Prison* (2000b), Hijikata casts his work within a more overtly political arena. He claims to have "spent his youth like a cur" (Hijikata 2000b), referring to himself in several places as a wounded dog, foreshadowing the imagery in *From Being Jealous of a Dog's Vein*. This dog spent its time "sniffing out criminals" (Hijikata 2000b), such as those whose behavior "explicitly flaunts [their] aimlessness in the face of a production-oriented society" (44–5). He explains "in this sense my dance, based on human self-activation, including male homosexuality, crime, and a naïve battle with nature, can naturally be a protest against the "alienation of labor" in capitalist society" (45). He resolves, "I will no longer be cheated by a bad check called democracy" (43). He claims to be a "body shop" in the business of "human rehabilitation." Hijikata invokes George Bataille's "nakedness" as a strategy for moving beyond the confines of self, Jean Genet's "giving song to what was dumb," Frederic Nietzsche's "strip the costume of . . . contemporary civilization" and re-inscribe it with "simple sensual passion," and Herbert Marcuse's "provocation" as a resistance strategy, as he formulates a new image for young people, as naked "lethal weapons that dream" (Hijikata 2000b, 45–7). Hijikata criticizes youth who join the Self-Defense Force as simply "craving to be bound," to which he responds, "my work is to remove toy weapons from the limbs of today's youth, who developed in barren

circumstances, and to finish them as naked soldiers in a naked culture" (47). He denies "victim consciousness" (47), dismisses "the poverty of politics" (48), and instead, through his dances, promotes "primal experiences" (48).

In *Nikutai no hanran* [*Revolt of the Flesh*], for which he prepared by fasting for a month, we see an emaciated body made absurd as it shimmies and vamps in a cumbersome flamenco dress.[1] He is then hoisted over the audience like a sacrificed animal, then attended by a group of men who look as if they are taking Jesus down off the cross, and then reborn, paraded on a teetering palanquin with a fish in his mouth—again a Christian image of the seven loaves and fishes that Jesus produced to feed his starving people.

He closes the essay "From Being Jealous of a Dog's Vein" with "I want to become and be a body with eyes just opened wide, tensed to a snapping point by the strained relationship with the dignified landscape around it" (Hijikata 2006, 23), reiterating his early desire for pure raw experience and his deep connection with "bleeding nature" (Hijikata 2000b, 43). He laments, "I don't [necessarily] think that it is better not to look at my own body in those moments, but my regret at having looked has also gone numb and therefore the bud of my miserable flesh is unable to sprout" (Hijikata 2006, 23–5). Here, to "look" is to objectify, and to "go numb" is to distance. He criticizes dance that is a means of expression as "hot but based on the whole gamut of jealousy and obedience" (25), or dance that simply shows off virtuosity and imitation. Instead, he recommits himself to the experience of being subsumed in violent nature to reorient his view of the body and existence.

Conclusions and Connections

In these brief pages, I have sketched a backdrop for *Ausdrucktanz* and *butoh* that situates the perspective and representation of the human body within epochs of war. One observation I draw from their creative expression is that the body takes on new agency. Movement itself engenders change in social norms. These dancing bodies offer new ways of viewing the individual and of expressing a kind of protest. One thing can be said: the transition that manifested in dance through both Wigman and Hijikata's work—post-WWI Germany and post-WWII Japan—is one from dancing body as *form* to dancing body as *site of experience*. There is a radical shift in the role of the individual throughout this period that manifests at the level of each unique body.

There is much more to research. In the next iteration of this investigation, I intend to connect these two artists' use of space as the technique by which they affect this change from body as form to body as site of experience. Wigman's *Gestalt in Raum* (energy in space) and Hijikata's *Becoming* (resonance with imagery) are linked by their dissolution of individual self for sacrificial or spiritual purposes. My focus will be on contrasting the similarities in their training methods.

Note

1. Ashikawa reports: "A month before, Hijikata prepared his body with a strict diet. He drank just milk and a little weak *miso*, but no tea. He went running every day, even on

the hottest days. He also exposed his skin to artificial lights in order to get a deep tan. He wore no makeup during the performance. The long-term preparation involved physical training, fasting and being alone and avoiding any association with other people. Only at the end of his preparation did he concern himself with the staging of the performance" (Holborn 1987, 16).

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