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Empty?

A critique of the notion of ‘emptiness’ in Butoh and Body Weather training

Gretel Taylor

Written from an Australian practitioner’s perspective, this article critically discusses the notion of the ‘empty body’ in Japanese Butoh and Body Weather training. Accounts of workshop activities led by Min Tanaka and Frank van de Ven illustrate the usage of ‘emptiness’ in the process of ‘dancing a place.’ The essay draws upon feminist theory to identify problematic connotations inherent in the notion of an empty body. Exposure to Australian postcolonial discourse casts doubt also on the appropriateness of the use of ‘emptiness’ as a starting point for movement in relation to place in the transposition of Butoh and Body Weather practices to the Australian context.

Keywords: Butoh, Body Weather, site-specific performance, postcolonialism

Min Tanaka once famously stated: ‘I do not dance in the place; but I am the place’ (Viala and Masson-Sekine 1988, p. 158). At other times he has been known to speak of ‘dancing the place, not dancing in the place’. High in the spectacular beauty of the French Pyrenees, with vultures circling overhead, Dutch Body Weather proponent Frank van de Ven invited participants of his 2005 workshop to attempt to ‘dance the place, instead of merely dancing in it’.

This semiotic distinction (‘dancing the place’ as opposed to ‘dancing in the place’), though ambiguously open to interpretation, bears a trace of the assumed state of ‘emptiness’ that Butoh and Body Weather practitioners hold as a psycho-physical possibility: if I am dancing ‘in the place’, I am my self there, but if I am ‘dancing the place’, my self is subsumed into the place. Van de Ven’s addition of ‘merely dancing in the place’ presumes other modes of relating to place that may involve a subjective individual inhabitation to be inferior to his (and Tanaka’s) apparently ‘objective’, pre-ego mode. I have come to question not only the use of language around this presumption, but

also, more significantly, the actual practice or intention of 'emptying the body' and its political implications. This article is an outcome of this questioning.

Some background

As an Australian dancer/researcher exploring relationships between the body and place via site-based performance-making processes, I had travelled to participate in Frank van de Ven's Body/Landscape Workshop in Itxassou, France and Bohemiae Rosa, another workshop co-facilitated by van de Ven and visual artist Miloš Šejn in the Czech Republic (2005). Having been a member of Min Tanaka's company Maijuku, Frank van de Ven's methods are based firmly in 'Body Weather', the physical training/research/philosophy developed by Tanaka. My experiences of immersion in Body Weather practices in Europe brought me to reflect also upon Min Tanaka's intensive month-long dance workshops that I had attended at the Body Weather Farm in Hakushu, Japan in 1999 and 2000, and upon the ways in which I have adapted this training to the Australian context.

My interest in the body's sensitivity to its environment and my desire to find a dance in relation to the nuances of a particular place or specific site were initially my motivations to explore Body Weather. Min Tanaka's work has been a major influence on my improvisational movement practice, which I call 'locating', that I have evolved over the past decade since attending his workshops. My locating process begins from a multi-sensorial listening – I focus on my perception of localised sounds, rhythms, textures, movement and smells, as well as visual cues such as the contour and colour of features in my surroundings. These perceptual observations initiate my movement and gradually an exchange develops between my body's gestures and the moment-to-moment 'events' of the chosen site. The locating dance is the relationship between my body and the place: it is simultaneously the seeking of relationship and the expression, enactment or illustration of it.

Being an Australian woman of European ancestry, the performance works I create from this locating practice have focused in recent years on the unsettled and, in some ways, fraught relationship of 'white' Australians to 'our' country, as the colonising race, which still claims the right to governance and border control. This consciousness of cultural inscription upon my body has led me at times to ponder the appropriateness of transposing movement tasks developed by a Japanese dancer to the very different environmental and socio-political terrain of Australia as a means to perceive and relate to place. (I am of course not the only Australian dancer who has done this; Body Weather is relatively widely practised in Australia, its most well-known proponent being Tess de Quincey.) Although many of Tanaka's processes remain useful in opening and sensitising *any* body to *any* terrain, I have felt the need to adapt certain aspects of the work and the language I use to describe it to align more closely with the ethical and political agendas of my performance work in Australia. My attendance at Frank van de Ven's workshops in 2005, in the again different environs of Europe, clarified for me some of the inconsistencies of Body Weather with my own performance practice and enabled a critical analysis of aspects of this



Figure 1 Still Landing, presented in various versions between 2007 and 2009. Photo credits: James Geurts 2006 (videographer). Performed (live and video) and created by Gretel Taylor. Location is Puturlu, remote desert country near Yuendumu in the Northern Territory. The traditional owners of this country, who hosted the author and sang in the soundtrack, are Warlpiri people: Coral Napangardi Gallagher, Gracie Napangardi, Rosie Nangala Fleming, Nellie Nangala Wayne, Liddy Napanangka Walker and Mary Nangala Ross.

work, in particular the notion of an ‘empty body’ that Body Weather has implicitly inherited from Butoh.

Min Tanaka’s Body Weather

Tanaka’s philosophy and physical training engage in rigorous investigation of the body in relation to its environment. His solo works and the group works Tanaka directs for his current company, Tokasan, are often situated in natural environments or non-conventional performance spaces. Min Tanaka was strongly influenced by his teacher and sometimes collaborator, Tatsumi Hijikata, founder of Butoh dance or Ankoko Buto – the ‘dance of utter darkness’ that emerged out of post-war Japan in the 1960s.¹ Whilst Tanaka is adamant that he ‘does not teach Butoh dance’, there are some overlaps between Butoh and Body Weather in physical approaches and underlying philosophies, evidencing Hijikata’s lingering influence on Tanaka. Although Butoh has travelled over the 50 years of its existence, rather like a spirit, to become an international phenomenon that takes almost endless forms, it was developed as a specifically Japanese aesthetic, arising out of the particularly Japanese experience of post-war anti-western sentiment following the unfathomable horror of the atomic bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Unlike Butoh, Body Weather has never been culturally specific – almost from its inception Tanaka surrounded himself with international

1. The history and phenomenon of Butoh has been extensively researched and documented elsewhere (see Klein 1988, Viala and Masson-Sekine 1988, Fraleigh 2003), so I will not elaborate this history in this essay.

dancers – and purports to be an open-ended training for investigation and expansion of *any* body's capacity for movement. Min Tanaka also insists that Body Weather is not a 'technique' or even a style of dance and certainly not an aesthetic or a 'system' (a word he utters with great contempt) of training or movement. He is dedicated to the continual evolvement of research of the body and reacts with disdain to any attempt to solidify his processes into fixed syllabus-like order.

Perhaps the most well known of Body Weather practices is 'MB'. This acronym stands for either *and all of*: Mind-Body, Muscle-Bone or Music-Body. This dancers' version of aerobics comprises a series of exercises sourced from international folk dance and sport, travelling across space to rhythmic music. 'MB' training increases cardiovascular fitness, strength, flexibility, co-ordination and tests and extends the body's capacity to multi-task. Tanaka's 'dance' training also encompasses farm work. He sees tending to the land for food as a fundamental part of the cycle of body and place. Tanaka considers that there are clues in the practical and efficient physicality of farm work to be integrated into our dancing bodies.

Min Tanaka's training that focuses upon the sensory body is perhaps the aspect of Body Weather I find most useful for site-specific practice. The first workshop I attended at the Body Weather Farm (in 1999) comprised a large group of about 45 international participants of varied levels of dance experience, including Tokasan company members. After a gruelling few weeks of lengthy 'MB' sessions, Min marched us up a very steep nearby mountain, asked us all to put on blindfolds, then left us without vision on the icy, rocky pinnacle for an hour, saying 'Experience the sensations!' A more directed exercise that develops haptic perception is 'Stimulations', which Tanaka emphasised the following year when I returned to the Hakushu workshop (when he had drastically reduced the number of participants to 15 more experienced or professional dancers). The Stimulations exercise involves following directions via a partner's touch to move one's body parts in specific directions with varied degrees of energy. Once the recipient has followed several stimulations, returning after each response to a simple standing position, the stimulations are given in overlap: that is, the recipient follows one direction, for example, of her hip on an angle downwards, before another stimulation is given to her left shoulder in a backward direction, followed closely by a stimulation instructing her chin to lift directly up into the air, etc. The recipient must keep the memory of each stimulation's precise direction in her body and continue to follow each to its full extent, as well as eventually returning each individual body part to the standing posture. After many hours pursuing this activity on the open air stage in the forest, with large butterflies wafting through our workspace and occasional interruption by 'killer bee' sightings, the exercise did not become more manageable but rather increasingly complex.

Frank van de Ven's Body/Landscape Workshop

Since working in Japan as a member of Tanaka's company Maijuku (from 1983 to 1991), Frank van de Ven has led 'Body Weather Amsterdam' with partner Katerina Bakatsaki (also ex-Maijuku), developing his interpretations of Tanaka's

teachings in relation to European places. At van de Ven's Body/Landscape workshop in 2005, a group of 18 international dancers – ranging from students to quite renowned professional artists – resided together for 10 warm summer days in the Basque country town of Ixassou, just on the French side of the Pyrenees, bordering Spain. The rural surroundings of rolling green hills interspersed with patches of beech forest and trickling streams local to our accommodation gave way to a landscape of rugged slopes, spectacular views, wild horses and vultures when we ventured further up into the Pyrenees.

In a rather more leisurely mode than Tanaka's approach, Frank van de Ven introduced various perceptual tasks that helped open up our senses to these places. One of these tasks was to move at 'one millimetre per second' amidst some scrubby forest. This activity attuned my focus to carefully control my body's movement at this very slow pace over the course of 10 or 15 minutes (at a time). I became aware of subtleties of sound, airflow against my skin and (almost) sensed the trees and plants 'growing' in close proximity to my body by moving with this intensely slow focus. On another day in a grassy park we observed the movement of specific features of our surroundings and tried to 'acquire' qualities of these movements in various parts of our bodies. My sequence of embodied qualities included: Feet walk on wet slippery stones at the edge of a creek while torso and arms respond to the flickering light of sun shining through the canopy of trees above my head > Lower right arm is bark hanging, flapping from its tree, bark-arm falls to the ground > Elbows echo lilting flight of a pair of butterflies bringing me to standing > Torso reflects the tousling motion of wind in the poplars and face becomes beaming yellow daisy...

On Day 5 of the workshop we hiked up into the Pyrenees to find ourselves atop a mountain where, as earlier mentioned, we were instructed to 'dance the place, instead of merely dancing in it'. Following a discussion about the possible meanings of *dancing the place* instead of *dancing in the place*, Frank van de Ven gave our group of workshop participants the following series of directions: Choose a place and lie down. From lying down, spend two or three minutes 'emptying', then two or three minutes 'perceiving', then 'dance the place'!² He offered a hint to 'start small', just letting one part of the body be affected by one aspect of the place. If it is not 'working', move to another place. Repeat this process three times in different locations around the area. Van de Ven then added a 'joke' that if we were good, well-trained Body Weather dancers, we could 'empty ourselves', perceive all aspects of the place and 'dance the place', and each of us would therefore do exactly the same dance in each place! Our facilitator revealed his own scepticism and interrogation of his process by this joking statement. Although he is an advocate of the enabling possibilities of 'emptiness', he was evidently aware, in this case, of its avoidance of the specificities of individual bodies, the different experience each individual would bring to a place and the infinite gamut of choices available to each dancer in responding to the place.

In discussion with other workshop participants afterwards, I gathered that I was not the only one plagued with inertia in my attempts to undertake the task after this introduction. We were daunted by the task of moving with authenticity and dubious of the arrogance or anthropocentrism of even trying to perceive and dance this place, when we had only

2. This task/practice was borrowed from or inspired by Min Tanaka's 1824-hour Hyperdance Projection project, which comprised improvisations in more than 150 locations in Japan over a three-month period.

spent a few minutes there. Disbelief or doubt in our ability to drop our personalities, backgrounds, gender, age, beliefs, knowledge, etc., within two or three minutes, in order to become empty, open vessels for perceiving and expressing this place with some sort of 'neutral' 'objectivity', was so disabling as to render most of us immobile.

The empty body in Butoh and Body Weather

According to renowned Butoh critic Nario Goda, Tatsumi Hijikata's company Hangi Daito-Kan was based on the idea that 'Buto begins with the abandonment of self' ('On Ankoko Buto', 1986, p. 85, in Klein 1988, p. 34). Susan Blakely Klein recognises that a major objective of Butoh in its formative years (the 1960s and 1970s) was to break through the Western ideal of individualism 'to a collective (or communal) unconscious in order to find a more authentic autonomy of self' (Klein 1988, p. 34). This notion of dispensing with the individual subject has been performed in various ways by Butoh dancers, as represented by the literally stripped-back aesthetic of shaved heads, nakedness and white-painted bodies of 'classic' Butoh.

Another strategy Klein identifies by which Butoh attempts to transcend the individual or self is a process of 'continual metamorphosis to confront the audience with the disappearance of the individual subject by refusing to let any dancer remain a single identifiable character' (p. 32). The metamorphosis Klein refers to is often described as the use of imagery: the transformational becoming or embodiment of forms from the imagination. Hijikata in his later career invented approximately 1000 of these 'images', which he taught to his lead female dancer Yoko Ashikawa and many of which he also taught to Min Tanaka, who in turn passed some of the images on to his students. Some examples of Hijikata's images (as I have learned them from Tanaka) are: ants walk in between your teeth; a moth flutters on your forehead; your internal organs are falling out; horses gallop on your back, which is a paddock; your legs and pelvis are a cow's, pissing; your arms are beckoning to a soul. In relation to place- or site-based work, Butoh and Body Weather artists might invent images derived from specific features of one's environment. Similarly to the collection of 'qualities' gathered in the Itxassou park in Frank van de Ven's workshop, I sometimes use imagery to apply localised textures and qualities of an Australian site to various parts of my body. Images I used in the South Australian desert, for example, included: cracked clay face; spinifex legs; blow-fly elbow.

As well as imagery being a method or strategy for transcending the self, it is considered that *starting* from a state of self-abandonment or emptiness is the ideal corporeal condition upon which to inscribe such images. Butoh and Body Weather practitioners believe that the attempt to empty one's social self – personality, background, memory and even one's mind – accesses a condition of potentiality not otherwise available to the dancer. Many practitioners work with the intention of attaining this state without questioning whether it is indeed possible – many Body Weather and Butoh tasks are not literally achievable, but this is not the point: it is the attempt itself which is interesting and/ or useful as a training for the body. Others may admit that it is of course *impossible* for a person to truly be empty of himself

or herself! They would argue that it is however a useful fiction or aspiration. In my own experience, the imagining that my self-body is vacated of my usual clutter can enable a greater intensity of focus upon a new image or direction introduced by a teacher or choreographer. My response to the image may be more immediate and spontaneously physical, rather than 'intervened' by my cerebral faculties. Similarly, the process of (imagining I am) emptying my body can also enable a state of openness for improvisation, whereby I am able to follow impulses without premeditation or calculation. From this condition of availability, Hijikata advocated that the body can 'speak for itself'.

Hijikata, influenced by the controversial writing of Yukio Mishima,³ which engaged with taboos in post-war Japan, felt a desire to break through the mask of conservative respectability to reveal the 'submerged depths of violence and sexuality' within Japanese society (Klein 1988, p. 25). German expressionist dance of the 1930s, with its ideal of the dancer as a 'pure' or 'purified' 'instrument', was a western influence upon Butoh.⁴ Klein elucidates that the liberation of dancers' 'belief in themselves as a unified subject' was also pursued via methods such as ritualised violence, to 'explore the possibility of our inner fragmentation' (p. 33). Kazuo Ohno, Butoh's other founder, working towards a similar essentialist ideal, but far less aggressively, encouraged a 'gentle amelioration of the cultural body'; a 'clearing of the body's habits, to stimulate new freedoms' (p. 33).

Hijikata described Butoh as 'a dead body standing with his life at risk' (Sayaka 1998) and 'the body that has been robbed', favouring the violent overthrow or 'gestalt transplant' of 'the missing body' (Fraleigh 2003, pp. 63–64). Tanaka breaks down the concept of a unified body and rational self via the rigorous (often militaristic) training of Body Weather, still aiming for a state prior to individual conditioning. 'Let go of Society!' Min would yell at us (workshop participants), as we tried to strip our selves bare of everything we had ever learned, in order to be open to becoming a chicken, or whatever else he demanded (1999).⁵ In a calmer moment, reflecting upon his own performances nude in natural environments, Min Tanaka commented 'It is nature's body and our own nature that Butoh seeks to restore' (Fraleigh 2003, p. 64). This comment infers a belief in (and valuing of) the potential to erase or undo the (social) experiences of the body in a return to an idealised 'purity' or untainted state.

The ideal of emptiness in Butoh and Body Weather includes an implied aspiration to a non-gender-specific body – a kind of blueprint or universal body that exists beneath or before sexual, ethnic, racial, class difference, etc.⁶ Dance theorist Sally Gardner (1996) discusses some (western) postmodern dance and bodywork practices that aspire to a gender 'neutrality' in contrast to classical ballet and many traditional folk and cultural dance forms, which support and perpetuate patriarchal gender positions through their prescribed roles for men and women. A 'neutral body' is not quite the same as an 'empty' one, the notion of neutrality suggesting impartiality and indeterminate content, but not, as empty would suggest, that the body contains *nothing*. However the aspiration to become 'neutral' is similarly unrealistic, as Gardner explicates. Although the postmodern western movement practices Gardner describes and Butoh are divergent forms sprung from vastly different cultural contexts, they do share the employment of processes of de-construction as strategies to

3. *Kinjiki* (Forbidden Colours), Hijikata's first 'Butoh' work in 1959 was based on a novel by Mishima (Sanders 1988, p. 149).

4. Takeya Eguchi had been a student of Mary Wigman, and was instrumental in introducing Neue Tanz to Japan, Kazuo Ohno among his pupils (Holborn 1987, p. 10).

5. This formidable military-like style was typical of Min's teaching in 1999, but in the 2000 workshop he was quieter, and by 2002 when I attended his workshop in Melbourne, he was almost compassionate!

6. Gender is often constructed in deliberate and stylised ways in Butoh performance – gender and sexuality are popular subject matter and often subverted from conventional/socially acceptable models, but I would argue that this is an overlay or re-inscription after the self has been deconstructed, ameliorated by the training.

facilitate 'a body available for re-inscription in "other" ways' (Gardner 1996, p. 51). As Gardner suggests, part of this on-going process of de-inscribing in order to re-inscribe, involves gender. While in postmodern dance practices this is implemented via a discourse of 'neutral' anatomical and spatial information, Min Tanaka's training demands the de-programming of socialised behaviour, which includes gendered behaviour or mannerisms – unconsciously or consciously acquired.

Butoh and certain forms of postmodern dance explore walking as a 'neutral' or neutralising activity, which Gardner (1996, p. 59) describes as a fundamental locomotion of the body in kinaesthetic relation to the ground and its surrounding space – experienced differently yet similarly by both sexes. Gardner (1996, p. 49) observes that in verticality and the two-legged walking gait, all humans share 'with each other but with no other species' a similar relationship to gravity. Sondra Horton Fraleigh (2003, p. 177) claims 'Hokohtai, the impersonal (universalised) "walking body"', is at the root of Butoh. Its grace arises through method in purifying motion of intention, getting rid of or emptying the self'. I surmise that to Frank van de Ven, walking through the forest as a training or study is informed by a similar underpinning philosophy. The Bohemiae Rosa project, co-facilitated by van de Ven and Miloš Šejn, focused on the basic human act of walking, as a group of students and artists traversed the damp, misty beech and mountain ash forests of South Bohemia. Van de Ven talked about how the borders between our bodies and the landscape may be mediated and researched via walking. He suggested a certain openness to change in this liminal zone. He asked 'How does the landscape walk through you?' and proposed that we 'invite' the place into us. Van de Ven's approach is not from the specificities of his own body and identity, but from the notion of an empty body that he believes is the optimum state through which 'the landscape can speak to you'. Walking, he implies, is a mode of attaining or aspiring to this state of availability. The act of walking across the land together had an equalising effect on the group. The commonality of becoming a forest-like collective enabled our bodies to enter the site of the forest less cerebrally, giving way to a strong sensory experience of place that resonated long after the workshop. However this universalising, like the Hokohtai walk, aligns with the philosophy of emptiness, with its associated reductionism and devaluing of the body in its totality and its particularity.

Feminist perspectives

In the years since I trained at the Body Weather Farm, my exposure to (western) poststructuralist theory has led me to question this underlying and pervasive aim of the work. Feminists argue that the assumption of 'neutrality' or universality in bodywork practices is implicitly (if unconsciously) attempting to revert to a blueprint of a male body. Gardner (1996, p. 50), for example, asks 'Is there really an imagined masculine body behind the supposedly "de-constructed" one?' I similarly inquire: is the 'emptied' body of Body Weather and Butoh actually aspiring to a prototype of a male body? In direct contrast to this view, Fraleigh (2003, p. 52) argues that 'Butoh, like the original modern dance, takes its essence from our feminine (yin) body,

the dark symbol of myth, our earth body or the Great Goddess archetype'. The emptiness of Butoh, Fraleigh implies, derives from the transparent, non-judgemental, yielding qualities attributed to the universal feminine. This may have been so for Kazuo Ohno's Butoh, in which he has often danced female or effeminate characters (for example 'My Mother' and 'La Argentina'), but I do not believe this 'feminine body' carries over as the 'essence' of Min Tanaka's *Body Weather*. In any case the 'feminine body' Fraleigh introduces is not the same as the 'female body' and could, in the case of Ohno, even suggest that Butoh's empty body aspires, perhaps unconsciously, to a prototype of a 'feminine' *male* body. Furthermore, the body cannot be devoid of sex, any more than it can be devoid of skin colour, and aspiring to neutrality or emptiness is fictitious, at best, and problematic.

Elizabeth Grosz in her seminal work *Volatile Bodies* (1994) identifies three conceptions of the body in contemporary thought that she suggests 'may be regarded as the heirs of Cartesianism' – a legacy that Grosz proposes feminist theory 'needs to move beyond in order to challenge its own investments in the history of philosophy' (Grosz 1994, p. 8). In the first line of investigation, according to Grosz (1994, pp. 8–9), the body is 'regarded as an object for the natural sciences', secondly it is construed 'as an instrument, a tool, or a machine at the disposal of consciousness' and thirdly the body is considered 'a signifying medium, a vehicle of expression'. The second line of investigation, that construes the body as an instrument or tool requiring discipline and training, is relevant to *Body Weather*, which certainly disciplines and trains the body as if it were an instrument in need of tuning (as distinct from some contemporary [western] approaches to movement that work with the everyday, pedestrian body). It is the third line of investigation, however, that encompasses common thinking about the dancer's body and which is most pertinent to this discussion. Grosz explicates the body-as-expressive-vehicle assumption:

It is through the body that ... [the subject] can receive, code and translate the inputs of the 'external' world. Underlying this view ... is a belief in the fundamental passivity and transparency of the body. Insofar as it can be seen as a medium, carrier or bearer of information that comes from elsewhere ... , the specificity and concreteness of the body must be neutralized, tamed ... If the subject is to gain knowledge about the external world, have any chance of making itself understood by others, ... the body must be seen as an unresistant pliability which minimally distorts information, or at least distorts it in a systematic and comprehensible fashion, so that its effects can be taken into account and information can be correctly retrieved. Its corporeality must be reduced to a predictable, knowable transparency; its constitutive role in forming thoughts, feelings, emotions and psychic representations must be ignored, as must its role as a threshold between the social and the natural. (Grosz 1994, pp. 9–10)

These assumptions, Grosz (1994, p. 10) argues, participate in the 'social devaluing of the body that goes hand in hand with the oppression of women'. The above passage could almost have been written to describe a primary aspect of the philosophy of the body inherent in *Body Weather* and Butoh. Although Hijikata's claim that he intended to let the body 'speak for itself'

would exempt the Butoh body from Grosz's category of the body considered as a 'signifying medium', in practice both Butoh and Body Weather training exhibit many parallels to Grosz's account of this line of thought. Indeed, Min Tanaka used to call his farm in Hakushu the Body Weather Laboratory, a title that suggests a scientific experiment whereby the body's receptors are believed to elicit retrievable and consistent information. Grosz's proposition of the notion of a 'transparent body' is again not precisely synonymous with the 'empty body', however transparency – the ability to easily be seen through, discerned without distortion – nonetheless *implies* a lack of density, substance. The view of the body as transparent and an 'unresistant pliability', which is able to extract comprehensible and systematic data from the external world, would be a necessary premise in van de Ven's 'joke', whereby if we were well-trained Body Weather practitioners, we would all do the same dance in any given place. Although van de Ven was in this instance laughing at his proposition, there is an intrinsic belief in the practice of Body Weather exercises that the individual particularity and past experience of the body must be neutralised, tamed and (ultimately, ideally) *emptied*, in order to accurately perceive and express a place.

Feminist theory insists that the body is always, already, irrevocably marked by sex, gender, ethnicity, race, age, class, etc., as well as inscribed constantly by the changing conditions of our individual worlds. I know that to temporarily, fictitiously suspend these identifying markers via a Butoh process of 'emptying' can enable my attention to be totally focused upon an image, which can be a transformative experience and effective performance tool. However, I also consider those very aspects I am attempting to transcend to be valuable tools for performance. If I am affected by 'Society', as Min Tanaka infers by his command that we 'let go' of it, then I do not want to deny the fact. I believe it important to acknowledge these effects, in accord with my resistant politics, influenced by feminist theorists such as Grosz (1994) and Adrienne Rich (2003, p. 30), who proclaimed the need 'not to transcend this body, but to reclaim it'. If my body is inscribed before I am even born, by such determining markings as skin colour, sex, ethnicity, class, religion, etc., I do not wish to attempt to ignore these influences upon my self-body as a performer and, in my particular area of research, these influences upon my relationship to place. This is not to presume that my self is entirely knowable or controllable, but to propose that choices can be made in performance to (re)present certain aspects of identity and that (attempted) abandonment of the self in relation to place is not necessary for a dance with place.

Back on the French mountain slope, we workshop participants were frustrated at our (failed) attempt to 'empty, perceive and dance the place', but the frustration sparked what became a lively and ongoing debate about the place of identity in this sort of work. Perhaps the most valuable aspect of this workshop was the opportunity to engage in dialogue (verbal and otherwise) with international practitioners, many of whom had evolved both theoretical and physical knowledge of body–place relationships. I presented a paper to the group, which further fuelled the fire begun on the mountain. I offered a proposition of *acquainting with or relating to* a place as opposed to dominating it or submitting to or being consumed by it. When I am moving in relation to a place in my locating process, I explained, I experience the dance

as a reciprocal communication between my self-body and the place. Luce Irigaray in *The Way of Love* (2002) proposes that we have not yet developed a culture of relation to the other (referring to inter-personal relationships) and suggests 'ways to approach the other, to prepare a space of proximity', via gestures, 'including gestures in language' towards the cultivation of nearness (Irigaray 2002, p. ix). I have chosen to shift my emphasis away from the 'empty body' – and therefore away from the notion of 'dancing the place' – and towards the idea that my self-body is dancing *in relation* to place. My proposal of relation to place aligns more closely with Irigaray's 'interweaving of exchanges' and dialogue of 'listening-to' (Irigaray 2002, p. x) than with Butoh and Body Weather's empty-then-absorb approach.

A postcolonial perspective

Part of my reasoning for these choices derives from my realisation that the relationship between my body and a place is inseparable from another factor: cultural identity. As a white Australian woman, my relationship to Australian places is complicated by my knowledge of colonial history, whereby 'my people' came to inhabit this land via processes of invasion, dispossession and genocide of the Indigenous peoples. I feel my attempts to acquaint with this country to be ruptured by this history. The acknowledgement of unending unfoldment inherent in my notion of 'locating' echoes the long-term or ongoing process of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians that we, in 2009, have still barely begun. The site-based performance works I make as outcomes of my locating practice often articulate this struggle or rupture. My performance works explore the implications and potential of 'locating' in relation to the local site as well as treating the specific site as a microcosm for the broader context of contemporary Australia.

In these works, through historical references and symbolism via props, costume, sound and video projection, I acknowledge and bring attention to the particular identity marker of my own white skin. By this decision I intend to remind audiences of the continuing impingement of colonial history upon the present and suggest that this history affects our embodied relation to this country. Reina Lewis and Sara Mills, in *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader* (2003, p. 7), state that: 'the link between past exploitation and present affluence, and indeed the deeds of past colonialists and oneself, is one which white people have found difficult to deal with in constructive ways'. Until very recently, the overwhelming response by white Australia to these pervasive historical links has been denial. Whilst to white people white bodies are so normal as to be seen as almost lacking ethnicity, to Aboriginal Australians the presence of white bodies is a very visible constant reminder that, as Indigenous scholar and activist Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2003, p. 67) notes, 'our lands were invaded and stolen, our ancestors massacred and enslaved, our children taken away and our rights denied, and these acts of terror forged white identity in this country'. White corporeality, Moreton-Robinson continues, 'is thus one of the myriad ways in which relations between the colonising past and present are omnipresent'. Other non-Indigenous Australian



Figure 2 Still Landing, presented in various versions between 2007 and 2009. Photo credits: James Geurts 2006 (videographer). Performed (live and video) and created by Gretel Taylor.

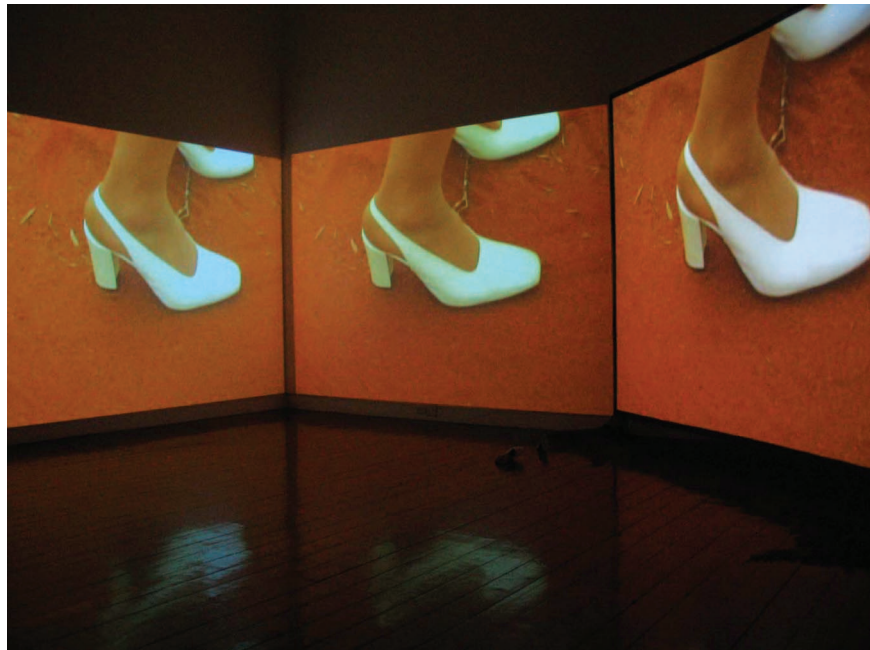


Figure 3 Still Landing, presented in various versions between 2007 and 2009. Photo credits: James Geurts 2006 (videographer). Performed (live and video) and created by Gretel Taylor.

artists working in relation to site have also pondered the challenge of embodiment and representation in the face of colonial cruelties committed by our ancestors for the privilege of our presence upon this land. Philosopher Stuart Grant and Body Weather dancer Tess de Quincey (2006, p. 248) inquire: 'How do I stand in Australia?' Grant, who claims to be 'as Australian as the broad flat vowels that shape [his] mouth', goes on to ask, 'how do I live with the murdered ghosts who speak to me from every glow-worm grotto, every unusual rock formation, every medicinal plant, every storm-cloud?'

'What do I bring to this place?' was the question I proposed to the workshop group that we each ask, as well as listening to the place and inviting its effects upon our bodies. A memorable response from a workshop member was: 'I was struggling to clean out my whole house [in order to let the place in], but maybe I just need to rearrange the furniture!' Frank van de Ven responded to my interrogation of the notion of emptiness with: 'The more you empty of Gretel, the more Gretel will be able to be seen.' From experience, I understand that he meant my spontaneity, intuition and immediacy of expression can more freely emerge when the topsoil of socially constructed 'personality' is pared away, but I believe this spontaneity can be accessed without emptying anything. From my practice and from observing others in my own workshops and classes, the superficial, social layers of self tend to drop away *anyway*, when one is



Figure 4 Still Landing, presented in various versions between 2007 and 2009. Photo credits: James Geurts 2006 (videographer). Performed (live and video) and created by Gretel Taylor.

engaged in embodied listening to a place. By becoming grounded and attentive to one's body's perceptual processes, one is present in the moment, operating from what may be considered intuition or the instinctual aspect of self, without the need for any violent (or otherwise) abandonment of identity.

An alternative approach to emptiness

Peter Snow, an Australian academic in attendance at the Pyrenees workshop, introduced a notion of the body's permeability, which van de Ven also promoted, and which I believe offers an alternative to emptiness. Permeability suggests seepage between my body and the world that surrounds it, a softening of the margins – acknowledging the body's role as a 'threshold between the social and the natural', as Grosz advocates. The notion of permeable borders of the body does not demand that *I* am in any way erased, emptied or indeed, that the place is in any way erased by my presence. The fluid inter-relation between body and its surroundings that this permeability encourages is reminiscent of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological concept of 'flesh': the similarity of substance that softens our perceived separateness from the non-human world. In describing what he understands as the 'intertwining' between the experience of seeing and that which is seen, Merleau-Ponty (1968, p. 135) identifies that we are separated from 'the things' or the features of the exterior physical world by the 'thickness of the look and of the body'. He does not view this 'thickness' as divisive however, but rather as tangibly connective: 'the thickness of flesh between the seer and the thing is constitutive for the thing of its visibility as for the seer of his corporeity; it is not an obstacle between them, it is their means of communication' (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 135). The body's ability to see and perceive the world around it is our means of relating to the world and this relationship – the communication that Merleau-Ponty calls 'flesh' – is what links us to place. It is a fully embodied, deeply perceiving self that results from the awareness of 'flesh', not an identity that is transcended. I do not believe the body must first be 'emptied' to find this sort of fluid inter-relation whilst dancing in or with a place – and it is questionable whether this 'emptiness' is truly achievable in any case. The notion of a permeable body in a process of acquainting with place is perhaps a functional middle ground between the human that presumes s/he is the dominant (and separate) feature in a place and the empty body that believes s/he has overthrown or abandoned the self in order to be inscribed 'purely' by the place.

Back in Australia, I realised, with a gasp, why the issue of emptiness has been so persistent for me. In a country where 'emptiness' has been the false premise underscoring dispossession and genocide, my application of Butoh's empty body as a starting point for perceiving place is problematic, to say the least. In 1835 Richard Bourke, Governor of the colony of New South Wales, implemented the doctrine of *terra nullius*: that Australia was an 'empty land', or a land that belongs to no-one, enforcing a fiction that there were no occupants of this country prior to the British Crown taking possession of it. This legal notion justified ongoing policy and attitudes that denied Australian

Indigenous people (who had lived sustainably on the continent for over 40,000 years), rights to their own land and recognition of their culture; indeed it denied their very existence.

There is a lot at stake in the transposition of one cultural form or training onto another place. Although I still find Body Weather training a rich source of inspiration and knowledge, my practice of these tasks in Australia must entail some shifts in language as well as intention. While to Frank van de Ven, 'emptying' his body is partially a gesture of humility to place, concerned as he is to 'transcend the colonial gaze' (he asks: are you trying to chase, catch, capture aspects of the landscape, or are you open to inviting it to come to you?), as a white Australian dancer of (with) Australian places, this starting point is wholly inappropriate. The amelioration of specificities of one's body-self identity that is encouraged by Body Weather practitioners (overtly or by implication) via physical training, imaging and walking with particular attention or intention, could be seen, at least in Australia, as reiterating the colonial paradigm of erasure. I attempt to bring my whole self-body to meet with the Australian site, aware of the lineage my pale skin bears, the history it holds and the contemporary injustice it may still represent to some. I strive for total presence, not self-evasion or absence – which could be read to parallel the normalising invisibility of whiteness. To start from a state of fictitious emptiness would be to re-enact the blindness to the implications of personal identity my work is seeking to redress. By bringing the legacy of this identity into my own and my audience's conscious awareness and approaching Australian places with an openness and desire to find relation *anyway*, I hope that the fissure starts to heal. In adopting the notion of the body's permeable borders, I enable the transformative possibilities of Butoh's 'empty body', without attempting to overthrow personal identity. My locating dance thus aspires towards fullness, inclusiveness, not emptiness.



Figure 5 Still Landing, presented in various versions between 2007 and 2009. Photo credits: James Geurts 2006 (videographer). Performed (live and video) and created by Gretel Taylor.

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