Beware the Word: Butoh, Ethnotheatre, and the Limits of Speech

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In my earliest ventures into Japanese butoh research as not just a student of dance, but more frustratingly as a student of rhetoric many years ago, I remember becoming physically ill at the keyboard trying to define butoh. The challenge: how to write about something I, as a dancer, experience and care for deeply, but which, in countless ways, resists its own discourse? In my research I had encountered the words of Chicago-based butoh artist Adam Rose that have continued to haunt and provoke me since: "The World does not need to be saved, and neither does Dance. Beware those who force Dance to Speech. Beware the Word."[1]

I approach these words now less as a rhetorician and more as a theatre-maker. What I once read in the word "beware" as a warning to avoid language in my work with butoh, I reread now as a call to watch it, to witness it with a different level of care and awareness and, perhaps, methodological perspective.[2]

In their introduction to the recently published *Routledge Companion to Butoh Performance*, editors Bruce Baird and Rosemary Candelario attend to what they call the "vectors and tensions of butoh practices and discourses" that inform what they describe as a "constellation of contemporary butoh."[2] They note that the eclecticism that characterizes this constellation may be attributed to the fact that "butoh specifically developed as a physical performance intentionally overladen with strata of gestures, images, and text that was meant to resist interpretation."[3] In "Burn Butoh, Start Again," the concluding chapter in the volume, Shinichi Iova-Koga begins by reflecting on discussions with fellow choreographers at eX…it!—the German-based International Butoh dance exchange and performance festival, in 1999. In recalling he says "Our discussions led us to this agreement: "Butoh is life, life is butoh." We agreed on nothing else, arguing incessantly about the form, intent, spirit, and validity of any one particular dancer's definition of butoh."[4]

I have always particularly enjoyed butoh artist Dan Leod's description of the form as a "halted, reverberating picture of our muted struggle to be human."[5] We might say butoh is fundamentally rooted in and animated by the ineffable and the inarticulate. I myself join many scholars and artists who are interested in this tension, emanating from an incessant insistence to define butoh and the inevitable failures that result from such efforts

to paradoxically formally contain, by way of verbal articulation, butoh's particularly elusive ineffable quality.

This paper is motivated by an ongoing intellectual curiosity and communicative struggle around what happens when we force butoh dance into speech. It is also deeply informed with my own experience as an artist and scholar, of trying to reconcile conflicting modes of understanding. As both an object of study and as a modality of practice, my orientation to butoh has always been a dance of struggle with and through and against language as much as it has been with and through and against the body.

I propose that we consider ethnotheatre methods as one way of engaging this struggle. Ethnotheatre is an arts-based methodology combining ethnographic methods with theatre craft and techniques to produce an ethnotheatre performance. It is also often referred to as ethnodrama, interview theatre, or verbatim theatre. It involves, at its core, the work of conducting, transcribing, editing and compiling interview data into a script for the purpose of performance. Ethnotheatre is popularly associated with Anna Deveare Smith, known for her one-woman works *Fires in The Mirror* and *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, as well as other verbatim artists and playwrights whose works utilize interview excerpts from ethnographic fieldwork that had been gathered, transcribed, edited and compiled into a script for verbatim performance.

In the pages to follow, I will first briefly situate the notion of using ethnotheatre methods towards butoh research within a web of discourse around dance and writing. I will then describe what an ethnotheatre project as butoh research might entail and what it might do. While an unlikely approach, my hope is that by examining ethnotheatre methods to investigate the experiences of practitioners as they struggle to verbalize their understanding of butoh, I will suggest how ethnotheatre-based research can utilize language to foreground its limits, how it might salvage and serve up meaning from the symptoms of its failures.

The subject of dance and its relationship to writing is not new and presents its own "constellation of vectors and tensions."[6] Like Adam Rose's warning around forcing dance to speech, many dance scholars have insisted on the incompatibility between dance and language. Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, for instance, argued very clearly that "[T]he lived experience of dance is ineffable: it has no kinesthetic equivalents any more than it has any verbal equivalents."[7] There has been much debate around notation and documentation in

dance practice and in performance more broadly. Peggy Phelan, for instance, famously argued that

> Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance. To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology. Performance's being... becomes itself through disappearance.[8]

Documentation, in its reproducibility, "betrays and lessens" performance's ephemeral temporal nature."[9] Butoh artist and teacher Vangeline prefaces her recently published handbook *Butoh: Cradling Empty Space* with this very notion, insisting that like most dance forms, butoh is "only alive in the body of its dancers for short bursts of time during live performance."[10] She cautions that her own efforts at systematizing the practice in text is but an "attempt to circumscribe its experience" as butoh will always, by design, refuse and exceed stagnant determination. In the same spirit, butoh artist and teacher Yokko frequently evokes Zeami's metaphor of the flower, or *hana,* in training, insisting that one's dance is alive only insofar that it remains mysterious and transient; "If it is hidden, there is a flower," she reminds her students, "if it is not hidden, there is no flower."[11]

Dance and performance scholars have noted that the relationship between the body and verbal discourse is more complex and requires that we acknowledge the ways in which the body "speaks" within, against and across embedded structures of verbal understanding. In this vein, performance scholar Petra Kuppers states that, while our bodies remain embedded in verbal structures, performance allows bodies to be more than mere semantic sign-holders by facilitating imprecise but interdependent "translations between embodiment, phenomenological experience, narratives of self…[and] cultural context."[9]

A significant shift in dance studies over the last decade has involved thinking through the activity of dance subjectively, from the perspective of the dancer as an experiencing body. In this mode of thinking, value is placed on *speaking from* the bodily experience rather than *about it*.[10] We also see a marked shift toward the subject of embodiment, with interest in how practitioners communicate the stories of their embodied experiences. Out of this context we begin to understand "dance writing" as a subjective, embodied experience. As dance artist Miranda Tufnell insists, "we cannot separate and ignore what we sense, know and understand, from the body through which we feel."[11]

In *Writing Dancing Together*, Valerie Briginshaw and Ramsay Burt demonstrate a "shift away from a concern with what the dancing body represents" towards "recogiz[ing] the need to develop ways of articulating the experience of dancing."[12] Dance ethnographer Brenda Farnell argues that speech "must enter the research agenda, not because spoken language should act as a model for theories of body movement, but because human beings are language users, and the mind that uses spoken language does not somehow switch off when it comes to moving."[13]

Ethnotheatre takes dance ethnography to another level, into the realm of practice-as-research and performing knowledge. It is motivated by a belief that we can create new ways to understand and share artistic process, meaning, and significance by exploring alternative methods for engaging text within movement practices. Through the labor of creating a script for performance, it offers a new method of textual engagement within movement practice, one that gives data a body through which to "speak" or express meaning. For the purposes of butoh research, its formal processes allow us to bring the silences and struggles with language into greater relief, even foreground them, in a performance context.

My training in ethnotheatre methods under Joe Salvatore, a former student of Anna Deveare Smith and current director of New York University's Verbatim Performance Lab, planted the seed for me to consider the merits of revisiting my research on butoh through ethnotheatre as a way to "beware the word" with a form through which "the word" can show and be seen as what ethnotheatre scholar-practitioner Johnny Saldaña signals as "reality—not realism, but reality."[14]

Presuming, now, some merit to the idea that ethnotheatre may be a potentially useful method for butoh research, I would now like to offer a sense of what the beginnings of such a project might look like. I'll begin with a brief outline of what it would entail methodologically, and then conclude by suggesting how it might enact performatively as ethnochoreography.

Ethnotheatre is an arts-based research methodology. It begins with a question. And so that is where we would begin. One potential guiding research question to investigate: *What happens when butoh artists encounter moments of impossibility at the boundaries of speech?*

To answer this question following an ethnotheatre approach, we would use data from qualitative interviews, attending to words spoken as much as the space between words, foregrounding the silences, breath, and guttural soundings that fill the space. Goals for this project would be threefold:

1. To create an aesthetically captivating and affectively charged piece of theatre that foregrounds the eventfulness of the theatrical medium (rather than the content of its textuality)

2. To experiment with ethnotheatre as a multidisciplinary hybrid form through thoughtful selections of spoken and unspoken language in dialogue with staging possibilities that include choreographed episodes of movement and stillness

3. To create a space for an audience of artists and scholars to encounter struggle and failure central to a process of knowledge production and dissemination.

Ethnotheatre methods roughly involve selecting interview participants, conducting interviews, transcribing from interview recordings, editing and arranging data into a script, and a performance. To begin the data collecting process, we would first carefully establish particular criteria for butoh artists to interview with consideration to access and availability, as well as consideration into how the chosen criteria would significantly inform and particularize the research question and its findings. We would consider the implications of our criteria for selection and revise our research question as necessary. We might consider proximity to the work and degrees of commitment or alignment with the work, for example the differences in how a second generation butoh teacher of over twenty years might struggle to articulate versus a young butoh practitioner in New York City who counts butoh as one significant training practice among multiple dance and theatre training practices in their expressive toolbox. We might consider the unique kind of absences or struggles in language that one may attribute to a speaker answering questions in native languages or in English as a second language. We might also consider different struggles with verbalizing butoh experiences as a Japanese practitioner versus the kinds of struggles in verbalization that emerge in data collected from western butoh artists encountering the form in Europe and the United States. This is by no means an extensive list, but these kinds of questions

are worth noting as both a moment for thinking about a variety of possible findings through different executions of the method, but also a moment for critique of its limitations and reflexivity about the inherent biases and subjective evaluations embedded in the choices made by the researcher.

Selected participants would be interviewed in person alone for approximately one hour. Given the significance of the body in support of speech attempts in the piece, we would not conduct any interviews over the phone or via webcam. All participants would be asked the same series of questions or prompts. These may include:

> What is butoh?
> What is a butoh dancer?
> What were the circumstances surrounding your first experience of butoh?
> Describe a significant experience you had as a butoh student.
> How and when did you come to describe your work as butoh?
> How do you know you are dancing butoh?
> How do you know that someone else is dancing butoh?
> How do you create a butoh performance?
> Describe a significant experience you had performing butoh.
> Why do you dance butoh?
> What does butoh do?
> How does one teach butoh?

Each interview would be recorded, with understanding established prior as to the purposes of the data collection and explicit written consent as to its intended usage in verbatim performance.

All interviews would be transcribed from the audio recordings following Anna Deavere Smith's formatting style, utilizing a "hard return" at each pause or discontinuity in the participant's speech, and continuing with a new line of text. This infuses the resulting transcription with a poetic structure that helps performers discover speech patterns as well as create and inhabit the character of a given interviewed participant. Such a process also marks or sculpts absence or struggle in articulation.

I recognize a powerful affinity between my interests in the boundaries of language and the connection between language and identity that Anna Deavere Smith positions at the center of her work in *Talk to Me: Listening Between the Lines*.[15] Describing her process of selecting material from interviews, she emphasizes the significance of what is discovered "in the very moment that [participants] have to be more creative than they

would have imagined in order to communicate…the very moment when they have to dig deeper than the surface to find words" while "at the same time, want[ing] to communicate very badly."[16] Like Smith, I am drawn to the indeterminate but dynamic in-between spaces, spaces of tension and friction where urgent impossibility-the failure of language-gives rise to possibility and meaning.

Last month I interviewed a fellow New York City butoh artist as I was thinking through the possibilities of this project. When analyzing the transcript from our interview, the moments in which he struggles to speak are pronounced. For example, after asking how he knows when he is doing butoh, the transcript notes an audible sigh and then reads:

> that's a
> -
> -
> that's frankly a
> -
> -
> uhm
> -
> I feel like when I personally am
> doing
> butoh when I'm
> in it
> uhm
> I f--eel to a c---ertain extent like I
> personally like I my ego me
> [*name redacted*] kind of goes away
> and is replaced by
> something
> else
> uhm
> -
> you know it sounds grandiose and
> to me not very accurate to say
> a spirit
> but
> -
> -
> subjectively thats thats kind of how it feels it feels it feels like I'm
> rather than being me I am
> I am
> a
> -

-
language is so hard isn't it?
-
I I just feel like I'll just put it in bald terms that uhm
something else
is
is
m--moving
not just me
uhm
call it a s--spirit call it a higher power call it some
connection to the numinous uhm
some people have described it as a trance state but I don't think that's correct
        because trances typically involve going away going to some other place it
feels like
an absolute hyper focus and reality that the world that we live in actually is
for lack of a better term
a deeply mystical place
uhm
-
a deeply mysterious place and that's the world that we inhabit all of the time
and in that moment when I feel like I'm doing butoh
I feel like everything else is stripped away and just that
primal
sort of
-
light remains
-
-
-
you know?[17]

The hard return transcription formatting style causes these moments to stand out from the page and suggest places where the tensions and paradoxes in the work of butoh reside for him, places where, were I to expand this project in the future, I would want to focus my attention. This method of transcription gives body and movement to the data, not only to the words themselves, but the spaces between the words. Supplied equally by the spoken and unspoken, seen and unseen, known and unknown dimensions of practitioners' experience and understanding, this data takes on a dramaturgical force capable of moving and shaping one's thinking around the subject of butoh in new, exciting, and more precise ways.

After collecting and transcribing all interviews, we would begin the process of assembling a performance script by selecting significant thematic findings across the data and creating a kind of collage of lines spoken and pauses taken, connecting and interspersing sections of the transcripts from different interview subjects as it serves the script poetically, at times creating dialogue between the different subjects as characters, at other times sculpting segments that might resemble a monologue or even a chorus. The nature of the script would be contingent on what emerges from the data. We can begin at this stage too to imagine how the data, finding its form in the script, might begin to suggest stage directions.

After finalizing the script, steps would be taken to put it on stage, including production concerns from finding actors to finding an appropriate space for the performance. Following Smith's interview theatre acting process, each actor will use the original audio recordings to create and inhabit characters by listening to and then reproducing speech patterns verbatim in performance. There are many aesthetic choices to be made at this stage which would be inspired by the actual findings in the research. Of course we can begin to imagine how we might introduce butoh into the performance space aesthetically, however I believe these decisions would best be made in dialogue with discoveries from the research process. Part of the value of taking an aesthetic approach that bases lighting, sound, costume, and scenic design choices in the data is that it avoids the superimposition of formulaic visual tropes that would constitute a rather singular and superficial vision for what butoh is supposed to look like, the mere suggestion of which is antithetical to the history and spirit of butoh as a rejection of form and notions of purity.[18]

Such an approach to design would further support the aims of the production as research which seeks to inductively express the actual multiplicity and contradiction that characterizes contemporary butoh practice. For example, one practitioner's expression of butoh as being encountered in the gap between what is "everything else...stripped away" and the "primal, sort of...light [that] remains" might involve a single ghost light on an otherwise dark stage, accompanied by a soft ambient tone tuned to the Solfeggio frequency 963Hz. Contrastingly, another practitioner who described their butoh practice as "regenerative...phoenix-like...a flash mood of being obliterated, incinerated, and then of reassembling, transforming, rising from the ashes...epic destruction, the horror of death,

but also the moment of return...death and birth...polar things together at the same time" might be supported in the production with a blinding white light flooding the stage and pulsing like a flash grenade with each pause or gap in speech, set against the cacophonous sounds of a choir of infants crying upon taking in their first breath.[19] While these examples gesture towards the different kinds of aesthetic decisions that may arise from the data, a more thorough and meaningful dramaturgical explication of the actual performance of the research would warrant more time and a separate paper.

Design aside, I would, however, like to suggest that consideration be made to introduce an ethnochoreographic quality to the performance of this data. By this I mean an explicit, intentional incorporation of movement and dance in the performance of, around, and between words presented verbatim on stage. I could envision movement to include citational choreography, moments of movement derived and cited from the bodies of the interviewees within their struggle to verbalize their experience and understanding of butoh, as expressed consciously or otherwise during the interview process.Choreographed movements would stem from the physical expressions of the bodies of the interview subjects, "cited" onstage along with/coterminously with the words spoken. In performance, the words, the space between words, and the body, moving and resisting movement, would be translated verbatim by the voices *and* bodies of performers.

What distinguishes such a project as a different research approach is that findings are presented as a fully scripted, rehearsed and produced piece of theatre. Rather than using interview excerpts to construct a linear argument followed by a conclusion, interview recordings and transcripts are used to create a script that would then be performed with other actors. The arrangement of the script in tandem with interstitial movement episodes would juxtapose real vocalized and physicalized experiences of butoh artists, and might allow us to communicate an interpretation of meaning from the data as an argument-by-exposure within what Donna Haraway has called a "dance of encounters" that engages the cognitive, affective and visceral sensibilities of the audience and allows for polyvalent understanding.[18]

Saldaña's vision of an ethnotheatre aesthetic as that which "emerges from theatre artists' application of available and new theatrical forms, genres, styles, elements, and media on the ethnodramatic play and its production" includes dance and movement and

other creative "hybrids of performative ontologies" in its purview.[19]   He notes "the aesthetic possibilities of ethnotheatre are extended further if we can make our productions even more multidisciplinary." While many artists have incorporated dance and other expressive forms in their theatrical staging, no one to my knowledge is using interview-based ethnotheatre as methodology and presentational form for the study of butoh dance itself.

Following Judith Butler's work on the interplay between framing and conditions for intelligibility and apprehension, the impetus for my proposal to use ethnotheatre for the study of butoh "concerns not only what it shows, but also how it shows what it shows," for it is the 'how' that not only organizes the art itself as a visual to be witnessed and taken in, "but works to organize our perception and thinking as well."[20] Butoh's ineffable essence and force "itself cannot be properly recognized. It can be apprehended, taken in, encountered, and it can be presupposed by certain norms of recognition just as it can be refused by such norms."[21] It is this concept that first prompted me to begin exploring the idea of creating an ethnotheatre piece where the voices of butoh artists in their struggle with language would provide captivating insight into the art of butoh, as well as yield a different kind of evidence of or living testimony to the operative force of language and the creative possibilities of failure, refusal, and struggle.

Ethnotheatre offers an intermediary research process capable of "preserving simultaneities shared across expressive modalities as they occur in performed cultural events," not only attending to but foregrounding both language and the places where language fails through and of the body.[22] Following Farnell's model, an ethnotheatre approach to the study of dance allows us to create or make space for (1) a cultural site of "simultaneities," "where speech and action integrate," and (2) a hybrid movement text that records action-signs and spoken-signs of butoh "in its own terms and according to ethnographically centered principles," using the actual words and movements of butoh artists to creatively bridge theoretical arguments about what butoh is and what it does for/to/through the dancer's body with the "reality" of the butoh experience always-already situated within verbal structures.

Editors Bruce Baird and Rosemary Candelario position the *Routledge Companion to Butoh Performance* as a testament to understanding butoh as "no longer a unitary

movement, but a vibrant and ever-shifting art form performed by a set of keen, ever-questing, caterwauling artists who seek to find their way forward into the future while vigorously debating butoh's past and present."[23] My attempts to reimagine method for study aligns with their argument that "rather than being an impediment, the tension between these factions and their paradoxical aims has only served to enrich and sustain butoh into its sixth decade and beyond."[24]

By taking an ethnotheatre approach to the study of butoh, we may be able to position this tension front and center, attending to the ineffability that radiates meaning at the boundaries of language as an object for inquiry itself. As an arts-based method, it may allow us a means of evidencing, symptomatically, this powerful, moving, unspeakable "spirit" of butoh as, along, with and across its various trembling but transformative thresholds.

[1] Sandrine Schaefer, "Rough Trade II Interviews: Sandy Huckleberry and Adam Rose," The Present Tense, October 8, 2012. http://thepresenttense.org/archive/?p=1268

[2] This essay is concerned with the use of language in butoh research, that is, language about butoh, rather than the use of language within the training or devising process. The use of language in butoh training has a long history that traces back to Tatsumi Hijikata's poetic butoh-fu and Kazuo Ohno's workshop words. For more on the historical role of language use in the context of butoh training and performance-making, see Megan Nicely, "Protean Knowledge: On Researching while Studying with Sherwood Chen," *PARtake: The Journal of Performance as Research* 3, no. 2 (2021).

[3] Bruce Baird and Rosemary Candelario, eds. *The Routledge Companion to Butoh Performance*, (New York: Routledge, 2019), 12.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Shinichi Iova-Koga, "Burn Butoh, Start Again," in *The Routledge Companion to Butoh Performance*, eds. Bruce Baird and Rosemary Candelario (New York: Routledge, 2019), 533.

[6] Don McLeod, "History of Butoh: An Art Form in Transition," Zen Butoh, 2002, http://www.zenbutoh.com/history.

[7] Baird and Candelario, *The Routledge Companion*, 12.

[8] Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, *The Phenomenology of Dance* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1966).

[9] Peggy Phalen, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 146.

[10] Dance and butoh scholar Megan Nicely has reflected on the struggle of using language in dance in such a way that "neither resolves what we are doing, nor needs to be relegated to a place outside dance," explaining that "language's benefit is that it makes concrete, while its downside is that it fixes things." Megan Nicely, "Megan Nicely Reviews Rewriting Dance," Hope Mohr Dance, December 4, 2015. http://www.hopemohr.org/blog/2015/12/4/megan-nicely-reviews-rewriting-dance

[11] Petra Kuppers, "Moving Bodily Fantasies: Medical Performances and Modes of Communication," *Dance Research Journal* 37, no. 2 (2005): 73.

[12] Vangeline, *Butoh: Cradling Empty Space* (New York: New York Butoh Institute, 2020), ix.

[13] Jasmine Ulmer, "Embodied Writing: Choreographic Composition as Methodology," *Research in Dance Education* 16, no.1 (2015): 33-50; Betsy Cooper, "Embodied Writing: A Tool for Teaching and Writing in Dance," *Journal of Dance Education* 11, no.2 (2011), 53-7.

[14] See Zeami, "Teachings on Style and the Flower (Fūshikaden)" in Masakazu Yamazaki and J. Thomas Rimer, *On the Art of the No Drama: The Major Treatises of Zeami* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 3-63.

[15] Miranda Tufnell, "Beneath Our Words," in *What Dancers Do That Other Health Workers Don't,* ed. Penny Greenland (Leeds: Jabadao, 2000), 23.

[16] Valerie Briginshaw and Ramsay Burt, eds. *Writing Dancing Together* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 224.

[17] Brenda Farnell, "It Goes Without Saying — But Not Always," in *Dance in the Field: Theory, Methods and Issues in Dance Ethnography,* ed. Theresa Buckland (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), 147.

[18] Johnny Saldaña, *Ethnotheatre: Research From Page to Stage* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2011), 14.

[19] Anna Deveare Smith, *Talk to Me: Listening Between the Lines* (New York: Random House, 2000).

[20] Ibid, 53.

[21] Interview with author in Brooklyn, New York, September 17, 2019.

[22] Hijikata himself is famously quoted for insisting that "There are as many types of butoh as there are butoh choreographers."

[23] Interview with author in Meadville, Pennsylvania, April 21, 2014.

[24] Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

[25] Saldaña, *Ethnotheatre,* 205-206.

[26] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable* (New York: Verso, 2009), 71.

[27] Ibid, 13.

[28] Farnell, "It Goes Without Saying," 151.

[29] Baird and Candelario, *The Routledge Companion,* 21.

[30] Ibid.