

From Voodoo to Butoh: Katherine Dunham, Hijikata Tatsumi, and Trajal Harrell's Transcultural Refashioning of "Blackness"

I said black is . . . an' black ain't . . . Black will git you . . . an' black won't. [. . .] Black will make you . . . or black will unmake you.

– Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952)

I remember Hijikata's body—a northern body, the skin very white, the hair standing out very black against it.

– Donald Richie, "On Tatsumi Hijikata" (1987)

Introduction: What Would Have Happened if Hijikata Tatsumi Had Not Seen Katherine Dunham in 1957?

Like a skilled designer who duly respects the traditions, but is never afraid of pushing the boundaries of the fashion world, Trajal Harrell fascinates and provokes his audience by tailoring seemingly disparate materials from near and far to his own eclectic choreography. Take, for instance, *Twenty Looks or Paris Is Burning at the Judson Church*. Harrell's critically acclaimed series has presented an alternative history of American dance in the early 1960s, in which "voguing"—a fabulous spectacle developed by African American and Hispanic non-professional performers in Harlem—is retrospectively juxtaposed with a style that later came to be known as "postmodern"—a determinately anti-dramatic, minimalist school of dance developed by formally trained white dancers at the Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village. Leaping and sashaying along and across the color line, and simultaneously bending and stretching gender, sexual, and class identities, Harrell's choreographic interracialism has performatively re-imagined the segregated past, and playfully integrated the two historically separate dance traditions in the United States.

After bridging and blurring socially and geographically constructed boundaries within the U.S. for over a decade, this globetrotting hunter of usable kinesthetic archives has embarked upon a new exploration, a research adventure into Tatsumi Hijikata (1928–1986), the legendary cofounder of *butoh*. Beyond his admittedly thin ancestral connection—Harrell's grandmother's grandmother was an immigrant from Japan to the American South¹—what aesthetic and technical affinities or possibilities does this contemporary choreographer/dancer—who identifies himself as an "Ivy League-educated, Rem Koolhaas-referencing... baby boy born from the union of Yvonne Rainer and Lucinda Childs who grew up to have a crush on Steve Paxton,"³—see in *butoh*, a style that was born more or less contemporaneously with postmodern dance and voguing, but seems to have so little in common with either?⁴

Used, Abused, and Hung Out to Dry (2013), the first of Harrell's playful and yet quite serious experiments to

By Michio Arimitsu

put *butoh* aesthetics and techniques in dialogue with those of voguing, has given us a tantalizing glimpse of what's to come.⁵ Rather than directly engaging with Harrell's ongoing refashioning of *butoh*, I want to underscore the cultural significance of his endeavor by situating it in the history of Afro-Asian performative exchange across the Pacific. More specifically, however, I want to shed a new light on an encounter between Hijikata and Katherine Dunham (1909–2006), the pioneering African American modern dancer, at a decisive moment before Hijikata's "dance of darkness/blackness" was born. As I argue, Dunham's voodoo-inspired performance, along with torrential imports of other African American/Afro-Caribbean images and cultural forms into post-WWII Japan, had a much more crucial role in the early aesthetics of *butoh* than has been generally recognized. Taking a cue from Harrell's provocative intervention into the standard history of American dance—"What would have happened in 1963 if someone from the voguing ballroom scene in Harlem had come downtown to perform alongside the early postmoderns at Judson Church?"—I would therefore like to venture a hypothetical question of my own: What would have happened if Hijikata Tatsumi had not witnessed Katherine Dunham perform her Afro-Caribbean dance and music in Tokyo in 1957?

How Butoh Became "White": Excavation of Early Hijikata's "Blackness"

The impact of Afro-diasporic cultures on the birth of *butoh* has been largely forgotten due to the "whiteface" that Hijikata began in the early 1960s (literally painting his and his dancers' faces and bodies in white), which in turn seems to have triggered a more metaphorical,



Figure 1. "Kinjiki Studio Performance" (1959). By Ōtsuji Kiyoji. Courtesy of the Hijikata Tatsumi Archive, Keio Art Center

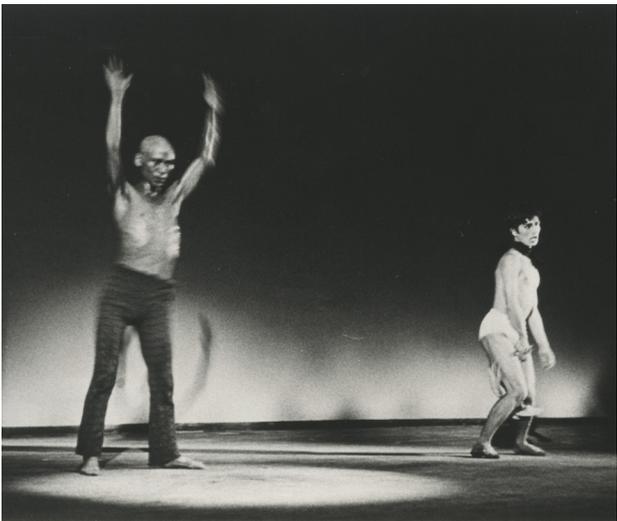
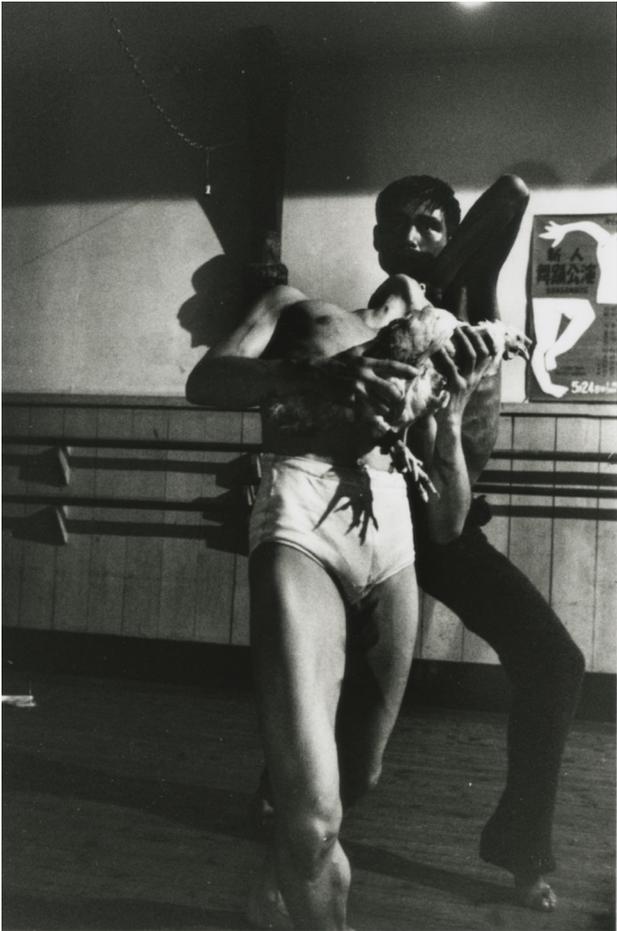


Figure 2. “*Kinjiki* Studio Performance” (1959). By Ōtsuji Kiyoji. Courtesy of the Hijikata Tatsumi Archive, Keio University

Figure 3. Hijikata Tatumi (left) and Ōno Yoshito (right) in *Kinjiki*, during “All Japan Art Dance Association: Sixth Newcomers Dance Recital” (1959). By Ōtsuji Kiyoji. Courtesy of the Hijikata Tatsumi Archive

retrospective whitewashing of its earlier form and background.⁶ As a matter of fact, the white makeup, which is generally considered today as the hallmark of butoh, was conspicuously absent in Hijikata’s early performances from 1957 to 1961, including *Kinjiki* [Forbidden colors], the epoch-making piece recognized (by Hijikata as well as by others) as inaugurating butoh in 1959.⁷ As Motofuji Akiko, his second wife and manager, distinctly remembers that, instead of the whiteface, “Hijikata’s naked body” was “painted with black greasepaint spread thin with olive oil.”⁸ Indeed, in photographs taken during the studio rehearsal and actual performance of *Kinjiki*, Hijikata’s darkly painted face and torso draw a sharp contrast with the pale skin of Ōno Yoshito.⁹ Moreover, Hijikata and Ōno danced to the “faintly bluesy tune of a harmonica [composed by Yasuda Shugo],”¹⁰ which added a “black” touch to the performance.

According to Wakamatsu Miki, an avant-garde choreographer/dancer who regularly performed with him at the time, Hijikata began wearing the black makeup after watching Katherine Dunham’s company perform their Afro-Caribbean show in Tokyo in 1957. In all likelihood Hijikata and Dunham’s paths crossed when Dunham used Ando Mitsuko’s dance studio for her rehearsals at the time, Hijikata was Ando’s student and regularly took lessons there. At the very least, it is certain that Hijikata saw Dunham’s performance as an audience member, and was “strongly influenced by Dunham’s shows that explored the ways in which voodoo rituals represented female sexuality” (Wakamatsu qtd. in Inata 61).

The dance critic Gōda Nario also recalls that the “blackfacing” butoh continued till the early 1960s:

The black butoh with greasepaint, which had shocked the dance world from 1959 till then [when *Anma* (the Masseur) was performed in November of 1963], was gradually replaced with white butoh, which has since become the standard. It was then that the male butoh, which had boasted of the grotesque beauty of the black shining body [. . .] shifted into a white, powdery, feminine dance. This opened butoh’s way into the fantastic realm of androgyny.¹¹

Gōda’s observation is significant for two reasons. First of all, Hijikata specialists have long examined his aesthetics of “darkness/blackness,” which flaunted intense corporeality, sexual transgression, criminality, and the grotesque and the abject, by looking extensively at the European literary influence of Jean Genet, Georges Bataille, Comte de Lautréamont, Marquis de Sade, and Antonin Artaud, whose erotic, subversive, or surrealist writings were introduced to Hijikata through Mishima Yukio, Shibusawa Eiichi, and Takiguchi Shuzō.¹² However,

Gōda's remark, combined with Wakamatsu's testimony of Dunham's influence on Hijikata, compels us to revise the very meaning of his early investment in "blackness," and, to put it in its properly racialized context. Moreover, if it was his encounter with Dunham that led him to literally blacken up on stage, Hijikata's interest in her performative exploration of black female sexuality seems also to have prefigured, or may even have played a pivotal role in, butoh's subsequent shift from the masculine to the feminine.¹³ Put another way, Dunham might well have been a transcultural godmother of butoh, not only when it was conceived as a dance of "darkness/blackness," but even after it underwent a further chromatic transformation and became "white."¹⁴

Even more interesting, however, is an echo of Dunham's voodoo-inspired performance in Hijikata's early works. At the climax of *Kinjiki* (1959), Ōno Yoshito notoriously placed a white chicken between his thighs and seemingly smothered it. Many in the audience, thinking that the bird had just been killed right in front of their eyes, were either shocked or thrilled at the sudden act of violence. Others breathlessly interpreted this scene as a symbolic enactment of bestiality. In either case, this sensational performance, in addition to the explicit display of homoeroticism between the two male dancers, was what earned Hijikata his reputation as an enfant terrible of the modern dance scene in Japan. Upon watching *Kinjiki*, Mishima Yukio published "Gendai no muma: 'Kinjiki' wo odoru zenei shodan" [Today's Nightmare: The Avant-Garde Group that Performs *Forbidden Colors*], effusively praising Hijikata's performance, which borrowed the title, if not the substance, of his own novel. In this otherwise highly abstract compliment on Hijikata's avant-garde dance,¹⁵ Mishima explicitly recognized the early butoh's affinity with voodoo, if not the former's appropriation of the latter: "The sacrificial black chicken used in the West Indian voodoo ritual has been transformed into the white chicken embraced by the white-skinned boy [Ōno Yoshito]." Mishima went on to describe Hijikata and Ōno on stage as "the voodoo priest and the priestess lying on top of each other on the floor." "What impressed me so much," Mishima enthused, "was that these dances [of Hijikata and Wakamatsu, whose performance, *The Black Spot*, he also applauded in the text] had exuded a ritualistic *nioi* [smell], which is rare in contemporary art. The continuity of discontinuity characterizes every festive ritual in the world, and these two choreographers seemed to be seriously worshipping the horrible nightmare that is the modern day" (qtd. in Inata 67; translation mine). As Inata has noted, Mishima strongly emphasized the "smell" of the "primitive" in Hijikata's performance, which was amplified by the ritualistic killing of the chicken on stage.

Mishima's comparison of *Kinjiki* to the voodoo ritual was informed by his firsthand observation of both performances', as he had just taken a tour around the world from July 1957 to January 1958, which included a short stop in Haiti.¹⁶ It was roughly around the time when Mishima saw the voodoo ritual in the Caribbean that Hijikata, who was never to go abroad in his life, must have seen Dunham's artistic representation of it in Tokyo, which featured *Afrique, Bel Congo*, and *Rites des Passage* [translated as *Ningen no issho*], along with *Shango* (premiered in 1945), a piece that prominently featured the sacrificial killing of a chicken. The following is Halife Osumare's verbal reconstruction of the performance:

The High Priest ceremonially carries a prop that looks like a white chicken in a basket across downstage center. This processional path is accompanied by presumably a "traditional" Afro-Caribbean song with strong accents, the last of which brings the knife of the Priest's attendant symbolically down to kill the chicken. The role of High Priest (like the *ougan* who officiated the Haitian ceremonies she witnessed and participated in) was played by the Cuban drummer, Joe Sirca, who had participated in *santeria* ceremonies in his homeland of Cuba. Thus Dunham starts the ballet with the sacred nexus of life and death that animal sacrifice in African-based religions represents, giving the Western audience an immediate sense of African religion that was prevalent in Haiti and other Caribbean islands during her fieldwork.¹⁷

A review article published in *Asahi Newspaper's* evening edition on September 29 gave a detailed account of Dunham's entire show in Tokyo and admired the "robust, sensual, energetic, and thrilling dance with its ingenious use of the distinct



Figure 4. "The Elegance of the Authentic: Sensual and Powerful." *The Asahi Shimbun* (evening ed.), September 29, 1957. Courtesy of The Asahi Shimbun

Figure 5. “Katherine Dunham and Her Company of Dancers, Singers, Musicians.” *The Yomiuri Shimbun* (evening ed.), September 9, 1957. Courtesy of The Yomiuri Shimbun/Yomidias Rekishikan

Figure 6. “Ms. Dunham, A Dancer of a Different Color: A Black Dance Company to Visit Japan.” *The Mainichi Shimbun* (evening ed.), September 10, 1957. Courtesy of The Mainichi Shimbun

Figure 7. “Dunham Dance Company to Tour Japan.” *The Asahi Shimbun*, September 9, 1957. Courtesy of The Asahi Shimbun

movements of the shoulder and the hip, which are peculiar to the Negro dance.” The author described *Shango* as “an intense folk dance which strongly smelled of tribalism.” “With a huge jungle tree constituting the background,” the article continued, “the most primitive, ritualistic, and incredibly dynamic dance unfolded mystically to the rhythm of the drums and to the shouts of the dancers” (see figure 4). In the midst of twelve stage performances, which ran twice a day from the end of September to the early October, Dunham and her company also danced live for half an hour on nationally broadcast primetime TV.¹⁸

Hijikata himself never explicitly admitted his debts to Dunham or to voodoo, but the testimony provided by Wakamatsu, together with Mishima’s identification of these two performances, makes it difficult not to see the obvious connection. It is true that Hijikata’s obsession with chicken goes back to his childhood,¹⁹ and that he may even have attempted (and failed) to stage a show in August of 1957 in which a chicken was to be choked; even earlier than that, he may or may not have toyed with the idea of “releasing 50

birds and stepping on them to death” (Ando Mitsuko qtd. in Inata 49–50). Whether or not Hijikata did indeed come up with the sacrificial performance on his own, Mishima’s influential review must have indelibly inscribed, in the minds of those who saw *Kinjiki* in person as well as those who only heard of Hijikata’s subversive spectacle through the grapevine, the affinity between his *butoh* and Dunham’s voodoo-inspired performance.

Let us also recall that when Haniya Yutaka famously argued that Hijikata’s dance was “neither like white nor black,” that is, neither like the Western nor the Afro-Caribbean dance, he made a point of referring specifically to Katherine Dunham, obviously responded to Mishima’s earlier comparison of *butoh* to voodoo. To emphasize the uniqueness of Hijikata’s choreography, Haniya sought to show how different Hijikata’s dance was from Dunham’s.²⁰ Ironically, the fact that he even felt it necessary to refute the association of Hijikata and voodoo in and of itself reinforces the already-established trans-Pacific affinity between the two performative styles.

Proliferation of “Blackness” in Post-WWII Japan

The newspaper coverage of Dunham’s tour confirms the multilayered meanings attached to “blackness” in Japan during the late 1950s and the early 1960s. These articles demonstrate that diverse interests that many Japanese took in “blackness” were a mixture of a fetishistic desire for the “primitive” and the “exotic” and a genuine fascination with the cultures of the African diaspora. An illustrated advertisement of Dunham’s upcoming show, for instance, read as follows: “The intense primitive beauty! The world’s best folk dance. A group of over 50 [sic.] black artists to visit Japan” (see figure 5).²¹ The entertainment section of *Mainichi Newspaper’s* evening edition similarly reported, “A black dancing troupe arrives from the United States. Ms. Dunham, a unique dancer [*ishoku no dansa*; literally “a dancer of a different color”]” (see figure 6). This article also highlighted Dunham’s anthropological training at the University of Chicago and quotes her as saying, “If one wants to learn about a people, the best way to know them is to learn their traditional dance.” The author applauds Dunham “for having created a new art with its basis on the black dance and on the tropical rhythm”.²¹ In addition to recognizing Dunham’s multifaceted talent as a director, choreographer, dancer, singer, and drummer, the article also commended her for dedicating herself to the promotion and education of arts and culture (also see figure 7).

“Blackness” seems to have served simultaneously as a fantastic, racialized symbol of the hip and the cool²² and a powerful source of what Paul Gilroy has called a “counter-culture of [Eurocentric] modernity particularly in Hijikata’s avant-gardist circle.”²³ Let us once again recall *Kinjiki* with its blackface performance. The piece was presented at the “All Japan Art Dance Association: Sixth Newcomers Dance Recital” in 1959. Just a few hours before, Hijikata had also performed in Nagata Noriko’s *Poinciana: Beginning of the Summer that Will Freeze and Wane in the Non-Melodic Metropolis*, which was set to the Afro-Cuban rhythm of bongos (Baird 16-17; Kuniyoshi 180).²⁴ Just like the bluesy tune in *Kinjiki*, Nagata’s choice of music in *Poinciana* was iconoclastic. As Motofuji reminds us, before *Kinjiki* and *Poinciana*, most modern dancers in Japan would not have dared to use anything other than the Western classical music composed by the likes of Listz and Chopin (56). In other words, the insertion of “blackness” was Hijikata and Nagata’s strategy of challenging the unabashedly Eurocentric modern dance establishment in Japan. That their rebellion was more or less successful was ironically confirmed when Hijikata and those who sympathized with him were immediately kicked out of—or voluntarily left—the association.

Similarly, in 1960, when Hosoe Eiko, a close collaborator of Hijikata’s, began working on a book of

photography to be published under the title *Men and Women* (1961), Motofuji remembers Hosoe dousing Hijikata and others “with black greasepaint spread thin with olive oil so they would look like black people” (61), while Art Blakey blasted in the background.

In July of the same year, Hijikata also danced in *Niguro to Kawa* [The Negro and the river] (written and codirected by Ikemiya Nobuo; produced, choreographed, and codirected by Fujii Kunio), with an English subtitle: “Modern Dance on Negro Document ’61” (see figure 8). According to Inata’s reconstruction of the performance, *Niguro to Kawa* consisted of three acts, and dealt with “a deeply social theme, as it responded to the on-going struggles of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States” (106). Ikemiya and Fujii’s work was actually inspired by Langston Hughes’s brilliant epic poem, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” As it turns out, *Niguro to Kawa* took its title from the Japanese translation of Hughes’s anthology, *Weary Blues* (1926), which had just come out in 1958 (see figure 9).²⁵ According to Motofuji, who also danced in this piece, Fujii used Dixieland jazz, which was also very popular in Japan at the time. Applying a choreography that reminded Motofuji of “a slow-motion film-like version of modern dance technique” (107), Hijikata appeared in

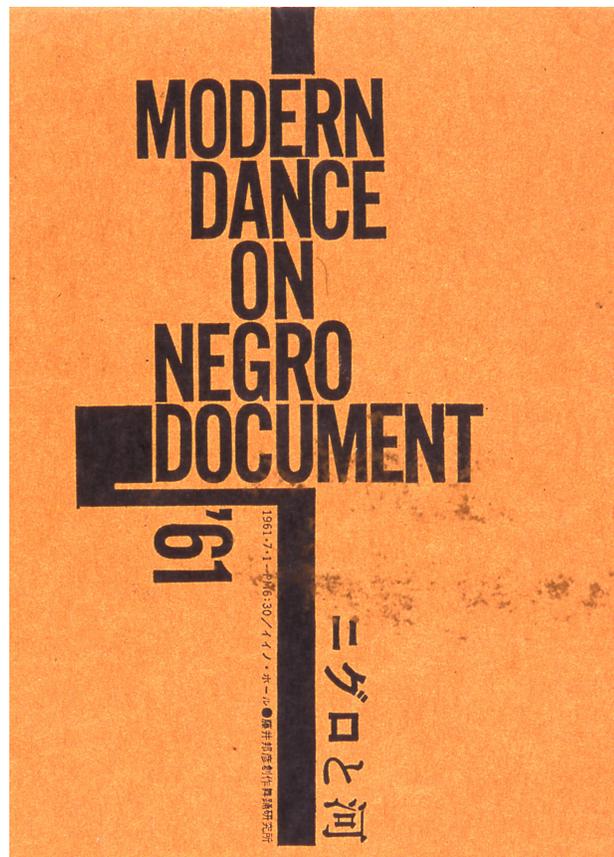


Figure 8. A program for *Niguro to Kawa* (1961)



Figure 9. Cover illustration of *Niguro to Kawa* (Tokyo: Kokubunsha, 1958) [a translation of Langston Hughes's *Weary Blues* (1926) by Saitō Tadatoshi]

an African American funeral scene, where he danced at the front of the marching procession, presumably in blackface, with a white parasol in hand (107). Motofuji also performed as an African American washerwoman; perhaps this was an homage to Dunham's *Bel Congo*, which was a comic dance about Haitian washerwomen.

In the same month, Hijikata also organized “Hijikata Tatsumi Dance Experience Association,” and again appeared on stage with a black makeup. Motofuji recalls Hijikata's bare, oily skin as reminiscent of a “black person's body” (90). Fascination with “blackness” is also confirmed by Motofuji's creation of a new dance team, *Dancing Gorgui*, named after a black character in Jean Genet's *Our Lady of the Flowers*. On March 3, 1959, Hijikata also took part in a group dance titled *Strange Fruit* (with music by Yura Kazuo and art by Kanamori Kaoru), which was clearly inspired by Billie Holiday's famous tune about lynching. To cite one last example, when Hijikata and Motofuji produced *Three Phases of Leda* in 1962, tungsten bulbs to be used for lighting were comically personified and referred to in the program as “Tungsten M. Hughes.” As Baird has already pointed out, this was obviously a playful allusion to Langston Hughes (63).

With so much evidence to show how implicitly or explicitly Hijikata associated himself—or was associated by others—with “blackness,” it is perhaps no wonder that after watching *Hijikata Tatsumi and*

Japanese People: The Revolt of the Body (1968), an audience recalled Hijikata's appearance, with his long, curly hair, as an “*afro no yo na* [Afro-like, black-like] Christ,” even though he was no longer blackfacing.²⁷ Despite what I've called a retrospective “whitewashing” of the tradition, which has sought to explain early butoh by looking exclusively at how it negotiated the creative tension between the European (the foreign) and the Japanese (the indigenous), and thus completely ignored the impact of the black images and cultural forms on Hijikata, this anecdote confirms that early butoh and blackness (in the racialized sense of that term) had, by then, become intimately intertwined.

Given the fraught history of Japan's interaction with the West and of its modernization since the arrival of Commodore Perry's “Black Ships” in 1853, not to mention the breakneck speed with which the Americanization of its society and culture took place after its defeat in WWII, it should come as no surprise that Hijikata found, in Dunham's Afro-diasporic alternative to white modernity, relatable techniques and aesthetics—more specifically, a powerful vernacular body language of “primitivism”²⁸—that he could borrow or emulate to contest the modern Western disciplining of the body, which was typified in the rigid training of (European) ballet and of (American) modern dance, in the mechanic movements of the body in military marches, and in the streamlining of manual labor in large factories.²⁹

Katherine Dunham's One-Year “Vacation” in Tokyo

The newspaper coverage of Dunham's visit to Japan moreover suggests that the flow of cultural forms and aesthetic values between Japan and the Black diaspora was not so unidirectional as it might seem from the previous discussion—though the transactions were not always conducted in equal terms or measure. Before bringing her company in mid-September of 1957, Dunham had in fact been to Japan on her own. In May of 1956, she made a quick stopover in Tokyo (on her way to Australia) in preparation for her future shows there. In an interview with *Mainichi Newspaper*, Dunham was reported as explaining the characteristics of her dance in the following terms (see figure 10):

My dance is what you might call “primitive.” We use a lot of simple drumbeats as an accompaniment. Compared to Ms. Martha Graham's, mine is a popular dance more intimately connected to the everyday and to the human emotions. Ms. Graham's is more restrained. Because every single motion of the body, the eyes, the fingers has a meaning and creates an atmosphere, I think mine has much in common with Japanese and other Eastern dramas. I have seen *azuma kabuki*.³⁰ It is a noble and delicate drama. More than anything else, I

was very impressed by the fact that no motion was wasted. I think American dance in general is still too careless when it comes to the economy of movement. I think we have a lot to learn from *azuma kabuki*. (emphasis original; translation mine)³¹

To underscore her point, the article reprinted Dunham's remark "I want to learn the economy of the movement" in a larger font and placed it at the center.

This was no mere lip service on the part of Dunham. As she later recalled, "Even before we got to Australia, Japan, and into the Far East, I had become interested in Japanese music and customs. Therefore, in getting ready to tour Japan, I decided to have a Japanese dressing room."³² When she did arrive in Japan, the country became a much more important place than she could ever have imagined. After her final stage in Tokyo was over, Dunham suddenly announced that she was disbanding her company, citing the stress and strain of keeping the group together for the previous two decades.³³ Instead of going home, Dunham stayed in Japan (after briefly touring Australia once again) for one whole year—"a vacation it could be called," as she put it.³⁴ Once settled in Tokyo, she began working on a manuscript for her future autobiography. There is not much record of her "vacation" in Japan, but it appears that she had her ups and downs—actually, more downs than ups at the beginning: "What has been hard has been a personal adjustment to a lack of the audience, and I missed the company terribly at first. When I went to Japan and wrote a book of the first eighteen years of my life, I wept for the first two weeks."³⁵ Like many of her counterparts, such as Richard Wright, who left the U.S. to live in Europe, Dunham ever the less seems to have found a temporary refuge in Japan. As one of her biographers puts it, "Half the time she was laughing and half the time she was crying, but one thing was certain. Writing about her life was doing Katherine a lot of good. She wrote to a friend that leaving the dance company and writing her memoirs was 'the only way to save the battered remnants of a self that I never actually even knew.'³⁶ Unfortunately, Dunham soon found out that she had no way of supporting herself in Japan after her prospective publisher rejected her finished manuscript. They asked her to revise the manuscript so that it would feature more gossip and celebrities, but she refused. Eventually, Dunham took an offer to choreograph for the upcoming film *Green Mansions*, and returned home (Donloe 145).

Even after she left Japan, Dunham's love affair with the country continued. When she renovated Habitation Leclerc, her mansion in Haiti, in 1961, she made sure to install what her biographer describes as the "Japanese-style bar" (O'Connor 78). More importantly, by the time she reconvened her company to tour Europe in 1959, Dunham had a new

repertoire, a Japan-themed performance called "Baby San." According to an illustrated review published by a Japanese newspaper, Dunham and her all-black crew wore Japanese wigs and kimono and danced with large fans in their hands. As many musical scores of Japanese folk songs are found in the Katherine Dunham Papers,³⁷ the performance may have featured some of the vernacular songs. Much more research is needed to take a full account of this piece, as it has rarely, if ever, received any critical attention. Though it might turn out to be just shallow Orientalist fare, "Baby San" has a unique value as a product of Dunham's deep self-reflection on her identity as a black woman, embodying her newly refashioned "blackness," which had been expanded, deepened, or diversified during her sojourn in Japan. "Baby San," at the very least, challenges and complicates our current understanding of Dunham, which casts her primarily and exclusively as an African American female dancer who dedicated herself to the recuperation/innovation of Afro-diasporic expressive cultures.

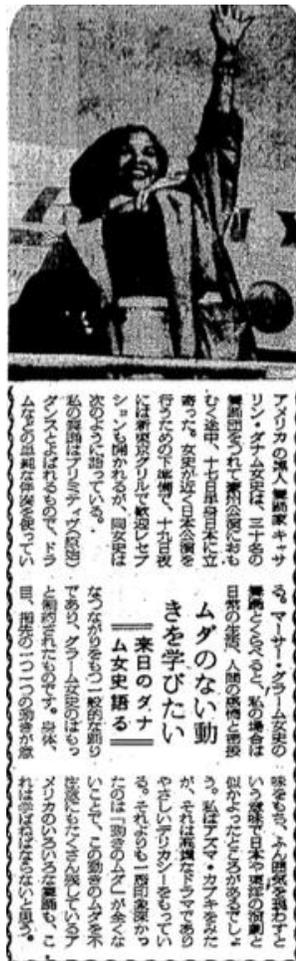


Figure 10. "I Want to Learn the Economy of Movement." *The Mainichi Shimbun* (evening ed.), May 19, 1956. Courtesy of The Mainichi Shimbun

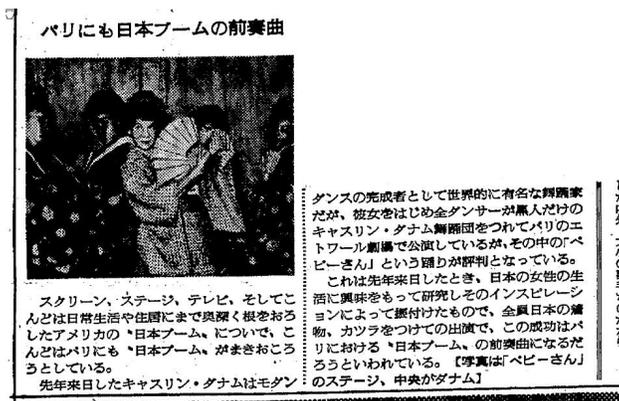


Figure 11. “A Prelude to a Japan Boom Also in Paris” [Dunham at the center in “Baby San”]. *The Yomiuri Shimbun* (morning ed.), September 20, 1959. Courtesy of The Yomiuri Shimbun/Yomidias Rekishikan

Conclusion: From Voodoo to Butoh, and Then What?

To go back to Hijikata one last time, according to most accounts of the tradition, Hijikata’s “white” butoh in the 1960s embodied a performative rejection of the West and modernization, or more specifically, the decolonization of the Japanese in the face of rapid Americanization, which then led to his imaginary return, after *Hijikata Tatsumi and the Japanese People* (1968), to the mythic “Tohoku” (North-Eastern region of the country where he was born)—and by extension to a pre-modern Japan. These typical accounts tend to uncritically essentialize “Tohoku” and “Japan” in butoh, as Inata and Miryam Sas, among others, have pointed out.³⁸ In addition to contesting such essentialization in Hijikata’s late years, my argument so far has been that we must also challenge the “whitewashing” of his early performance as well. Given the undeniable influence of Afro-diasporic cultures on Hijikata’s avant-garde circle in the late 1950s and 1960s, it is about time that a properly racialized meaning of “blackness” in Hijikata’s early aesthetic be recognized. If Hijikata “returned” to his supposed “roots” in the 1970s, we should also remember that his journey had taken him

to many other places, through various “routes” (to borrow James Clifford’s familiar formulation), including some that were distinctly “black,” before he could arrive at his final destination.

If Hijikata Tatsumi had not witnessed Katherine Dunham perform her Afro-Caribbean dance and music in Tokyo in 1957, nobody knows what would have happened to butoh. This is my rather unimaginative answer to one of the questions with which I began. As for the other question, “What affinities and possibilities does Trajal Harrell see in butoh?,” let us wait and see. Will Harrell literally “vogue Hijikata” or will he find some other ways of “blackening butoh” once again? Whatever happens, I, for one, will be asking what the “blackness of blackness”³⁹ of that performance might possibly mean, with all the history of Afro-Asian encounters behind its back.

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1 “Trajal Harrell, Eiko Otake, and Sam Miller in Conversation.” The Museum of Modern Art, NY. Jan. 15, 2015.
 2 Julie Chae. “Trajal Harrell: The Next Martha Graham Has Arrived!” *Huffpost Arts & Culture*. October 11, 2012; Web August 31, 2015
 3 Ibid.
 4 In 1964, Merce Cunningham brought his dance company to Japan, accompanied by John Cage, David Tudor, and Robert Rauschenberg. Toward the end of their two-week stay, Rauschenberg, Steve Paxton, Alex Hay, Deborah Hay, and Barbara Lloyd met with a group of

Japanese avant-garde (modern as well as ballet) dancers, including Hijikata and Atsugi Bondo (Inata 177–78). At the time, Hijikata seems to have been interested in “happening” and “chance operation,” but his dance style since then evolved in a different direction from those of Cunningham and his students. As Inata points out, Hijikata and Cunningham were similar in the sense that they sought to move beyond the modern dance of Martha Graham, but that they were quite different in terms of the methods they chose to do it (134–36).
 5 Harrell’s research into Hijikata, and his current two-year residency at MoMA, all started with this important piece.

- 6 Hijikata's cultural indebtedness to the African diaspora remains almost invisible even though some scholars have recently touched on the subject. That is largely because their treatment of Hijikata's relationship with "blackness" has been either too general, too brief, or both. See Stephen Barber, *Hijikata: Revolt of the Body*. 2005. Elektron Ebooks, 2012; and Bruce Baird, *Hijikata Tatsumi and Butoh: Dancing in a Pool of Gray Grits*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.
- In a chapter entitled "Asbestos and the Colour Black," for instance, Barber briefly suggests that Hijikata's "blackness" may have derived partly from his interest in African Americans:
- Like many young Japanese of his age, Hijikata was passionate about American jazz, and his insurgent dance of blackness attempted to articulate an oblique solidarity with the segregated oppressed black population of the USA which generated jazz's outstanding performances, despite their own total oblivion even of the existence of Hijikata's performance art; Hijikata became fascinated by the impudent attitude of the young black Americans he saw carousing in the sex-club districts of Tokyo and the nearby naval-base town of Yokosuka (n. pag.)
- Was Hijikata's "dance of darkness/blackness" really a demonstration of "an oblique solidarity" with African Americans fighting for their civil rights? If so, why did the solidarity with black people have to be so "oblique"? And, how do we know that Hijikata's dance was really a sign of "fascination" with "the impudent attitude" of some black soldiers stationed in Japan? As Barber provides no source or citation for his claims, his interpretation of early Hijikata's "blackness" offers more questions than answers. Put another way, we still need to ask through what imaginary or personal encounters Hijikata actually arrived at his understanding and appreciation of "blackness," in the racialized sense of that term.
- Baird has also mentioned Hijikata's blackface in his work, though he does not register any racial implication (17; 161). The fact that even a U.S.-based scholar like Baird, whom one would imagine to be familiar with the fraught history behind this controversial practice of racial masquerade, fails to recognize the racial implication of Hijikata's blackface speaks amply about the uncritically assumed dichotomy of the West and Japan in Hijikata scholarship. This is telling especially because Baird meticulously and insightfully close-reads Hijikata's performance in *Kinjiki* and debunks many previous readings of the piece as egregious misinterpretations. After pointing out that "Hijikata had applied some greasepaint diluted with olive oil to his torso to make himself look darker" (161), Baird goes on to read the piece as an allegory of social inequality, even citing David Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of American Working Class*, an influential text that analyzes the construction of whiteness and the maintenance of racial inequality in the United States, but he somehow manages to leave race out of his own interpretation of Hijikata's "blackness."
- An important exception in Hijikata scholarship that resists the general oblivion to the black influence on early butoh is Inata Naomi's *Hijikata Tatsumi: Zetsugo no Shintai*. [Hijikata Tatsumi: The Body after Death]. Tokyo: Nihon Hosō Shuppan Kyōkai, 2008. Inata's comprehensive and well-balanced research recognizes certain Afro-diasporic influence on Hijikata (61). In my view, however, Inata does not emphasize the significance of her own findings enough. This article therefore seeks to build on and expand Inata's crucial work and to radically revise the meaning of the "darkness/blackness" in Hijikata's early aesthetic.
- 7 *Kinjiki* was Hijikata's adaptation of Jean Genet's writings; its title was borrowed from Mishima Yukio's sensational novel that celebrated homosexuality as a transgressive means of social critique. For an in-depth analysis of this piece, see Inata 56–82; Baird 15–58.
- 8 *Hijikata Tatsumi to Tomoni* [With Hijikata Tatsumi]. Tokyo: Chikuma Shōbō, 1990. 56.
- 9 See figures 1–3. For more details on the costume, see Baird 17–18.
- 10 Both Inata and Baird reconstruct the performance through the memories of Gōda Nario and Motofuji Akiko. See Inata 60; Baird 15–58.
- 11 Aida qtd. in Yoshida Minoru, *The Song of Hijikata Tatsumi*. Tokyo: Chikumashōbō, 1987. 108–09. As multiple sources confirm, Gōda is not being quite accurate here. Hijikata covered his dancers with searing white plaster in 1961 during *Mid-afternoon Secret Ceremony of a Hermaphrodite: Three Chapters*. This idea was provided by the neo-Dada artist Yoshimura Masunobu, when he was asked by Hijikata to come up with a costume design for the performance. Hijikata used plaster of Paris, which had a side-effect of making the dancers contort in pain, a few more times (in *Anma* of 1963 and *Rose-colored Dance: A LA MAISON DE M. CHIVECAWA* of 1965) before moving on to white paint. See Barber, n. pag.; Baird 62, 121; Inata 109.
- 12 See, for instance, the introduction to butoh at the HP of the Hijikata Archive at Keio University. <http://www.art-c.keio.ac.jp/old-website/archive/hijikata/about/butoh.html>. Also see Inata 103, 114. As for Surrealism and Artaud's "theatre of cruelty," Hijikata encountered them through his friendship with Takiguchi in the 1970s, that is, much later than the early period I am dealing with here.
- 13 Hijikata stopped dancing himself after 1968. From 1972 onward, he began to give female dancers, particularly Ashikawa Yoko, increasingly prominent roles in his productions. As Uchino Tadashi has suggested in a personal correspondence with the author (Sept. 24, 2015), this shift in gender might be better understood more as a change from the masculine to the emasculated, as Hijikata was apparently rocked by the suicide of his friend/mentor Mishima in 1970, and by the miserable, violent, and anticlimactic endings that awaited radical groups such as the Red Army Faction and the United Red Army. The bathetic failures of these revolutionaries put off many of those who had once identified with radicalism—both political and cultural—in Japan by the early 1970s (Inata 350). If Japanese men felt politically emasculated, the disappointment in political revolutions nevertheless led some radical women to continue their struggle in women's liberation movement (see Ueno Chizuko, "*Nihon no ribu: sono shiso to haikai*" [Women's Liberation Movement in Japan: Its Philosophy and Background]. In Inoue Teruko, Ueno Chizuko, Ehara Yumiko, eds. *Ribu to feminizumu*. Tokyo: Iwanami, 1994. 1–32).
- 14 For an account of how the name *ankoku butoh* [the dance of darkness/blackness] came into being, see Motofuji 140 and Inata 504.
- 15 Mishima's oft-quoted article sought to articulate the unique choreography of Hijikata's *Kinjiki*, along with Wakamatsu's *The Black Spot*, by comparing and contrasting their performance to "circus, gymnastics, and sports," as well as to classical and other kinds of "modern dance." What surprised Mishima most about Hijikata and Wakamatsu's dance was "the way the sudden movements of the body, or the sudden shouts did not correspond to any of our everyday expectations, but rather deliberately betrayed our purposive consciousness." Equally important for Mishima was the "truly musical" interaction of movements and ideas, which was enacted by the sheer presence of "half-awake, half-dreaming, sweaty bodies" on stage (Mishima qtd. in Inata 64–66). Partial English translation is provided by Baird, see 39–41.
- 16 Mishima Yukio. *Bi ni sakarau mono* [That which defies beauty]. In *Complete Works of Mishima Yukio*. vol. 30. Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1975. 76.
- 17 "Dancing the Black Atlantic: Katherine Dunham's Research-to-Performance Method." *AmeriQuest* 7.1 (Spring 2010): 9.
- 18 "Kyoku Dayori" [A Correspondence from the Station]. *Yomiuri Newspaper* (morning ed.), September 21, 1957.

- 19 In another sense, the figure of the chicken was there from the very beginning of Hijikata's dance career. In Imai Shigeyuki's production *Haniwa no Mai* [The Dance of the Burial Mound Figurine] (1958), Hijikata was invited as a guest to choreograph and perform a solo dance in a brief section called "Motion." This performance officially marked the beginning of his career as "Hijikata Tatsumi"—before then, he had appeared under his real name, Yoneyama Kunio. On this occasion, Hijikata allegedly choked a chicken to death for the first time on stage (Baird 28; Inata also mentions the use of chicken in the performance, but does not confirm whether the animal was smothered or not. See 53–54). On this subject, also see Harada Hiromi, *Butoh daizen: ankoku to hikari no okoku* 46–48; Inata 49–50.
- 20 "Seito do no rizumu" [On the rhythm of motion and stillness]. In *Complete Works of Haniya Yutaka*. vol. 5. Tokyo: Kodansha, 1998. 111–17. The essay was later revised and reprinted as "Tainai meiso ni tsuite" [On the Meditation in the Womb]. In *Complete Works of Haniya Yutaka*. vol. 9. Tokyo: Kodansha, 1999. 597–601.
- 21 *Yomiuri Newspaper*. September 9, 1957.
- 22 *Mainichi Newspaper*. September 10, 1957.
- 23 Norman Mailer's "white Negro" (1957), a skewed celebration of "blackness" as a means of counteracting the middle-class ennui that Mailer saw as pervading the United States in the post-WWII era, was exported and translated into Japanese as early as in 1962. Mailer's pervert celebration of "blackness" as a form of "hip" social deviancy and an envied embodiment of the "primitive" and "childlike" abundance (348, 354) found a ready audience in post-WWII Japan, which was rapidly being Americanized. Joe Wood's more recent idea of the "Yellow Negro" is a key to understanding Hijikata's anti-modern, anti-middle-class, subversive performance, which he explicitly associated with the supposed intransigency of "blackness." See "The Yellow Negro." *Transition* 73. (1997): 44–66. On the subject of literal and metaphorical blackfacing in Japan, also see a series of insightful articles by John G. Russell. Among others, "Consuming Passions: Spectacle, Self-Transformation, and the Commodification of Blackness in Japan." *positions* 6. (1998): 113–177; "Race and Reflexivity: The Black Other in Contemporary Japanese Mass Culture." *Cultural Anthropology*. 6.1 (1991): 3–25. Nina Cornyetz's "Fetishized Blackness: Hip Hop and Racial Desire in Contemporary Japan." *Social Text* 12 (1994) and Ian Condry's "Yellow B-Boys, Black Culture, and Hip-Hop in Japan: Toward a Transnational Cultural Politics of Race." *positions* 15.3 (2007) also provide useful information and perspectives on this topic. *Traveling Texts and the Work of Afro-Japanese Cultural Production: Two Haiku and a Microphone* (Ed. William H. Bridges and Nina Cornyetz. New York: Lexington Books, 2015) also provides a number of fascinating examples of cultural hybridization born out of personal and textual exchanges between the Japanese and the people of African descent.
- 24 *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993. Print.
- 25 <http://www.art-c.keio.ac.jp/old-website/archive/hijikata/about/chronology.html>
- 26 A copy of the eight-page program of the show apparently ended up in Langston Hughes's personal library. The copy is now kept at Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, Yale University.
- 27 Inata 57.
- 28 "For an insightful analysis of the complexity and ambivalence in Dunham's strategic use of "primitivism," see Stephanie Leigh Bastite, *Darkening Mirrors: Imperial Representations in Depression-Era African American Performance* (Durham: Duke UP 2011), esp. Ch.4 "Lens/Body: Anthropology's Methodologies and Spaces of Reflection."
- 29 Harada 32.
- 30 On the Westernization/industrialization of the body, see Inada 14–18. For a more theoretical, Foucauldian approach, see Baird 6–10.
- 31 In "Disruptions, Failures: two 'nationalistic' moments and Japan's dance culture" (Centre National de la Danse. *Cultural Identities, Artistic Identities*. January 14, 2006), Uchino Tadashi has argued that though Japan "had never been officially colonized," "we can assume Hijikata [after *Kinjiki*] was, consciously or unconsciously, involved in the process of de-colonization—in his case, de-colonization of the body, therefore cultural in nature—from the West, or more precisely, 'things Western,' which meant at the time 'things American.'" 4–5
- 32 Azuma Tokuho (1909–1998), the pioneering female head of the revived Azuma school of *kabuki*, toured around Europe and North America from 1954 to 1956. As Barbara E. Thornbury has compellingly shown, this tour, the first of *kabuki* production in the United States in the post-WWII era, deliberately re-invented the tradition for foreign export—for instance, Azuma, being a woman, had never been allowed on stage in Japan. In fact, Azuma, with the help of the producers, chose a medley of spectacular pieces that (the producers thought) would specifically appeal to the American taste, instead of a full-scale production of Grand *kabuki*. See "America's *Kabuki*-Japan, 1952-1960: Image Building, Myth Making, and Cultural Exchange." *Asian Theatre Journal* 25.2 (Fall 2008): 222.
- 33 *Mainichi Newspaper* (evening edition). September 19, 1956. Translation mine
- 34 Qtd. in Ruth Beckford, *Katherine Dunham: A Biography*. New York: M. Dekker, 1979. 107.
- 35 For a fascinating account of Dunham's fluctuating reputation and the State Department's assessment of her viability as a "government export," Naima Prevots, *Dance for Export: Cultural Diplomacy and the Cold War*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1998. 101–05.
- 36 *Island Possessed*. New York: Doubleday, 1969.
- 37 Qtd. in Aschenbrenner 156. Darlene Donloe also calls attention to her mounting debts and scuffle with the IRS in *Katherine Dunham: Dancer, Choreographer*. Los Angeles: Melrose Square Publishing, 1993. 143–45.
- 38 Barbara O'Connor. *Katherine Dunham: Pioneer of Black Dance*. Minneapolis: Carolrhoda Books, 2000. 75.
- 39 Dunham's collection of Japanese folk songs is quite large, including such titles as "Cherry Blossoms," "Lullaby," "Oedo Nihon-bashi," "Songs of Oshima," "Bon Song of Chichibu," "Coal-Miner's Songs of Joban," "Cattle Driver's Song of Nambu," and many more. The rest of the list can be found on the HP of Southern Illinois University, where her papers are kept: <http://archives.lib.siu.edu/?p=collections/findingaid&id=6&q=>
- 40 See Inata 528–30, 541–44; Miryam Sas, *Experimental Arts in Postwar Japan: Moments of Encounter, Engagement, and Imagined Return*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Asia Center, 2011.
- 41 In *Invisible Man* (1952), Ralph Ellison famously mused on the "blackness of blackness," parodying Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, which explored the West's obsession with "the whiteness of whiteness." As one of the epigraphs I used at the beginning suggests, for Harrell and for many other African Americans today, "blackness" is a multifaceted, self-reflexive performance whose (sometimes contradictory) meanings are constantly being updated, reprised, and revised. Far from being a monolithic entity to begin with, "blackness" is becoming more and more expansive and diversified in the post-Civil Rights era.