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40

BUTOH BEYOND THE BODY

An interview with Shakina Nayfack on transition, evolution, and the spirit at war

Jacquelyn Marie Shannon

The following is extracted from a series of interviews with the butoh practitioner, theatre director, performing artist, and trans-activist Shakina Nayfack. She is author of the book *Butoh Ritual Mexicano/ Alchemy Is Dancing* (2010), a transfeminist, transborder, and transhistorical ethnographic analysis of her experience training under Diego Piñón in Tlalpujahua, Mexico.¹ As we spoke about the connection between her transition as a transgender woman and her work with Piñón, our conversation moved us beyond the body and into the realm of alterity, spirit, and magic – a critical consideration, we agreed, for understanding the transformative power of butoh work. We both addressed the impossibility of talking about both butoh and the transgender experience in a linear academic format. Butoh is the dance of the ineffable – that which cannot be spoken but must be encountered, witnessed within the dance. As Shakina put it, “butoh is the kind of thing that reveals itself in poetry more than prose.” As a “magical process, there is something really third about it, really other, something beyond conventional understanding, beyond an easily graspable form of language.” The ways in which Shakina’s transition experience corresponds with her butoh journey is itself a kind of living poetry that transcends form. Here I offer verbal fragments for encounter, attempting to do justice to Shakina’s experience and beliefs, and to butoh more broadly, by resisting notions of fixedness, totality, and linearity while still foregrounding her voice and transfeminist, trans-butoh spirit.

The borderlands of form and spirit

JACQUELYN SHANNON: How did butoh factor into the development of your trans identity?

SHAKINA NAYFACK: I saw the first 10–15 minutes of *Body on the Edge of Crisis* in high school . . . a time where I was out as gay and fighting a lot of discrimination, feeling very volatile and radical.² When I saw Dairakudakan’s *Sea-Dappled Horse*—bodies writhing and throbbing against the rope with their tongues out – that was how I felt inside. When I was 20, entering graduate school, another student passed [the film] along. I put it on [and] into the first 10 minutes I ran my hand through the ashes in my incense tray, smeared [them] on my face and started dancing in my apartment.

(. . .)

My trans identity and work as a butoh artist were really defined by 9/11. I was searching for a way to stay in the moment of 9/11 and mourn what I was seeing and also resist the war cry.

Butoh made a lot of sense for me in that way politically because of its origin in Japan . . . I felt that we too were experiencing in our country this great loss, this experience of becoming other, this terrifying death from the sky, and an overwhelming sense of . . . oppressive patriotism. Butoh seemed to me to be a way to move through that, to dance beyond gender, beyond my body.

(. . .)

With butoh I could enter . . . a state of transcendent liberation where I no longer felt bound by [social and cultural] constructs. No matter how much in my waking life I would be conflicted by my maleness or my body size and shape, there was a way in the dance that I could experience a kind of freedom. I used my body to get out of my head, but I also felt like I was getting out of body, moving beyond limitations I had placed on my body.

Revolution of the flesh

JS: I want to talk a little bit about *Revolution of the Flesh* (2011) with Raul Pizzaro (Figure 40.1).

You connected over feeling betrayed by your bodies and “needing to transcend physical form through art.”

SN: Raul is this incredibly gifted painter who has a rare form of muscular dystrophy that, while increasingly degenerative, has allowed him to live to be 40 years old . . . We both had bodies that didn’t do what we wanted them to do. His was decomposing and mine was . . . a trapped encasement that was false in relationship to my spirit and identity. Raul turned to painting as a means of expression for him to not be trapped inside his skin. For me, dance and theatre at the time, singing also, became these vehicles to express myself in a way that got me out of my body . . . We did a collaboration together . . . Diego was visiting at the time, it was just the three of us in Raul’s studio. We pulled out canvases and paintings [that dealt] with Raul’s relationship to the aesthetics and beauty of the physical form and the gay male body. We called it *Revolution of the Flesh* – inspired by *Revolt of the Flesh*.

Exorcism

JS: There is a lot of focus on form in public trans-discourse. People are curious about the body and less about spirit or essence. You talk about negotiating your “transgender spirit” with your body in the dance. What is it about butoh that lends itself to this kind of transcendent experience?

SN: Spiritually, it has a lot to do with communicating with the dead . . . If you read the messages of the early dancers, all the way to Ohno really, there’s a lot of talk about ancestry and spirits and ghosts . . . In all the ensemble work exploring 9/11, we really felt we were accessing a different plane and . . . communicating with the other side. That became really bolstered by my work with Diego in Mexico, in a town that had suffered a tremendous catastrophe³ . . . It was a haunted landscape we were dancing on. Communicating with the dead through dance . . . has, for me, always been part of the reality of what a butoh practice is.

JS: Haunted landscapes – of place but also of the body – were foundational to how I came into butoh as well and remain central to my dance as ghostly-practice.

SN: I was really inspired by Min Tanaka’s *Hyperdance* . . . “I don’t dance in the place, I dance the place.”⁴ There was a time where I would stop whenever a site felt powerful to me, drop everything and dance . . . It felt like some kind of exorcism, moving the spirit out of the place and through my body into the world.



Figure 40.1 *Revolution of the Flesh* (2011), photograph and artwork by Raul Pizarro.

JS: Can you talk more about dancing the dead and experiences of self, particularly in the process of transitioning? Is there integration that happens alongside release? What does the dead become when you dance it?

SN: A lot of my dancing is releasing pain—my own and of the landscape of a place, or a spirit that haunts that place. I'm thinking right now of experiences where I was improvising in water . . . what happened to me at the point of submersion . . . the moment descending into the water and fully submerging myself and feeling . . . how easy it could be in that moment to let go . . . and to leave my body . . . or to almost let go of a piece of myself, a piece of me being washed away, a little death to myself, a killing off.

JS: This spiritual imagery of baptism – it implies a rebirth.

SN: Yes! *De la muerte viene la vida*. From death comes life.

(. . .)

In the film [*Death Drive* (2014)]⁵ I do an improvised dance in Joshua Tree with a giant dried Joshua Tree stump, rocks, a piece of fabric, and a staff. I take these earthen, phallic symbols and try to . . . reflect the incongruence of self-formation that leads to a quest of destruction . . . this terrible drive to annihilate oneself. I appear again a couple times in the film as a dream guide. In the end [it] launches into this really aggressive gang-bang [with] sexual partners as demons – butoh dancers inspired by Dairakudakan's *Sea-Dappled Horse*. You see this sort of butoh symbology in porn stars who I choreographed to have this breaking free, this release – not a sexual release but a spiritual release . . . It was a really powerful use of butoh, the truest butoh that I know how to do.

(. . .)

Death Drive is an investigation into the gay male impulse to self-destruct, which I identified with . . . and was still processing as I leaned toward my transition. You could argue, in a Freudian sense, the cutting off of my penis was the ultimate suicide of my gay maleness. We filmed the same week I announced the crowd-funding for gender confirmation surgery. It was my last act, my farewell to my maleness artistically.

(. . .)

All of my dances have had this sacrificial element . . . a sacrificial sense of the body in which I am giving myself-my physical self-up, for the sake of whatever spiritual energy I'm hoping to move through me. It's very challenging and it's why I don't do it often, but also why I feel called to do it at times. It's a necessity to make that offering, to lay oneself down and allow these complex energies of the universe to move through us in a way that's cleansing and purifying and liberating. Exorcism. Processing-out dark energy . . . using your body, using the dance to free and expel that energy.



Figure 40.2 *Death Drive* (still from extended dance segment) (2014), photograph by L. E. Salas.



Figure 40.3 *Death Drive* (still from extended dance segment) (2014), photograph by L. E. Salas.

Dancing the spirit of a landscape

JS: Can you talk a little about how dancing the landscape and the spirit was a part of your piece *Arena y Sangre, Blood & Sand* (2004)?⁶

SN: I collaborated with visual artist Rigo Maldonado and designer Miguel Barragan, and we went to El Paso, Texas, for V-Day the year that *The Vagina Monologues* were going to be done in Ciudad, Juarez, across the border, which is where, at the time, over 400 women had gone missing, had been killed. There was a massive demonstration that started in El Paso and went across the border to Mexico . . . We had with us a chain of fabric over 400 feet long, a panel for every woman that had been missing, tied together in this long chain. We used it in the march. People carried it all along the procession . . . The next morning we went to Lote Bravo, a place, a ditch, where the bodies of eight women had been found brutally mutilated. We laid the fabric in the ditch and I danced in [it], collecting the fabric as if I was collecting these souls . . . I was covered in mud and collecting this fabric – It was very, very heavy, probably close to 80 pounds – and then danced with all of that sort of on top of me. The mud we had put on my body was freezing on my skin . . . [And] this place was so present with the heaviness of these women’s deaths . . . Afterwards I was sobbing and Miguel was pouring water on me to try and thaw the mud that had frozen to me.

JS: How did you experience your flesh in that dance, specifically? Your form . . .

SN: One of the things that’s so heavy for me and has been hard for me to acknowledge in reflecting on this whole era of my life is that fundamentally I hated my body. And myself. Fundamentally. Because no matter what I tried to dance beyond or escape from or transcend, I felt trapped because I was in a male body . . . I was committed for years to trying to use the dance to free myself from the pressures of physical form. And I told myself that physical form was fleeting, and that if I allowed form to dictate my gender then I wasn’t really transcending the binary that I hoped to shatter. Through all of this, there’s this underlying current of a transgender spirit, trapped in a male body.

Sacrifice and alchemy

JS: What is the relationship between sacrifice and alchemy?

SN: In the alchemical processes of butoh, as I have been trained beneath Diego, seemingly disparate elements are brought together, integrated and refined to create gold. That gold is your impeccable offering as a dance. The most true distilled and enlightened presentation and offering that you can make as a dance. The process to refine that is demanding, and demands, in part, a physical sacrifice. It's very challenging to push your body to that extent, to actually arrive at a place where you can be achieving that level of energetic integrity. It's also sacrificial emotionally . . . to encounter trauma, your own and others, in order to release whatever it is that you're attempting to unleash.

JS: Part of your book that really stood out to me was your reflection on your experience training with Diego in 2006 during a workshop, which he themed the sacrifice of the feminine heart.

SN: What he was getting at was that independent of body, and a gendered system that ties gender to body, we all have a feminine heart, or aspect of our heart that is feminine energy . . . The sacrifice isn't about giving that up – but it's the fact that that aspect is accustomed to being sacrificial – to putting others needs before [its] own – Oh my god – which is a gendered concept, but it's also been made true inasmuch that it has been enacted for centuries across cultures.

JS: In talking about the exercises Diego asked you to do that summer, you said that there was a sense in which they relied on the binary between the archetypal feminine and masculine elements to encounter the impossibility of the binary. And also to dance beyond that impossibility. It relied on the binary in order to get beyond it. This sounds similar to your using the body to get beyond the body through the dance. What is it about butoh work that is conducive to transcendence?

SN: I feel like I live my life in a way that's rooted in philosophies of butoh and my choices as an artist, as an activist, and as a human are rooted in those principles. There is nowhere this is more evident for me than in my choice to travel to Thailand alone for gender confirmation surgery, which I really framed as a pilgrimage. The process before, during, and after that surgery was for me kind of my ultimate sacrifice, the giving of my flesh in that way . . . I don't know if there's a way that butoh can bring you to a permanent place of transcendence, but for me the butoh path is punctuated with experiences of transcendence that then make the path worth it . . . inspiring enough to continue on with. You have proof . . . because you've lived it, felt it, seen it, experienced it in the dance-proof that there is a world beyond the veil . . . moments of liberation that are just human enough to keep you going on this planet.

JS: In your story of going to Thailand as pilgrimage, you spoke about living butoh principles in life. In your book you reflect on "Real Butoh," a term Diego used in describing someone's experience crossing the border. During your transition, you also committed to a kind of crossing – a risky physical and emotional journey of pilgrimage. Is this your "Real Butoh?" Do you view your pilgrimage itself as being a kind of dance?

SN: Oh, yeah! 100%. The whole trip was my butoh.

JS: Getting ready for it . . . the rituals of anticipation and preparation.

SN: My transition overall is like a butoh dance . . . the way that I've chosen to do it publically. Every procedure and process medically is part of that accumulation and distillation and sacrifice to arrive at some sort of pristine offering, the being that I hope to create within myself and express and offer through my art.



Figure 40.4 *Arena y Sangre, Blood & Sand* (2004), photograph by Rigo Maldonado.

JS: In your book you quote Diego as saying: “Opening is always painful and it always implies sacrifice. That is the gift of butoh. It is a path to walk to open the sacrifice. When you can open you can receive. It can happen on the stage if you deserve the energy of the collective. And it can happen in life at any moment. That is the real power of butoh, and when you have it, you realize it is not for you.” I’m thinking about this idea of the dance as an offering, to bring it back to your transition, that your life itself, as your dance, is also an offering to the collective experience. You are a trans-activist who has very vulnerably put your personal story out in public – even brought your show on tour to share your experience. How do

you recognize your story as a dance, as a public offering? What is its relationship to you as a trans-activist?

SN: Diego and I talk a lot, still, about what it means for me to be an actress and getting an increasingly high profile in the media . . . what I must do with that platform to deserve it . . . to make use of it in a noble way. Because it's not for me. It's not . . . The goal is to transmit healing, as broadly and deeply as I can as an artist, and I feel that I'm capable of doing this through the training in butoh – the ways I'm able to access my body, whether it's on stage or on camera. I hope that it's powerful for people . . . that they can feel and receive it.

JS: In witnessing butoh, many people sense a kind of mimetic, affective transference that happens. There is a healing that occurs simply by witnessing someone going through a process. I sense a parallel here in the way that you're dancing your life's dance publically, as a kind of sacrificial offering too, creates that kind of mimetic transference for people witnessing you – trans and otherwise.

SN: I think you're right. People tell me that that's what they receive from what I'm doing. And I feel capable of doing it because of my training. I wouldn't be able to be out there as publically about my transition, my politics, my artwork, if I did not have the foundation in cultivating and exchanging energy with consciousness that butoh provides.

Alterity and transgression

JS: What is the relationship between how you understand butoh, the border, and gender identity?

SN: In my book I talk about . . . trying to look through a transfeminist lens, which also implies a transborder, transhistorical, and transgender lens . . . There's something really valuable in looking at how borders are crossed whether they are bodily, geopolitical, or rhetorical. I'm passionate about challenging preconceived notions of boundary and alterity . . . the notion of inside and outside . . . binaries that don't serve our evolution as a species.

(. . .)

SN: We're also at a crucial time in terms of the evolution of the planet and . . . of the species. We're looking toward the ascension of everyday spiritual warriors in our midst. Looking for ways to strengthen our reserves and fortify our toolbox for not only our own healing and strengthening and deepening of our communities, but also for spiritual warfare. There's a brilliant cross-pollination happening now because of what's been afforded us through globalization . . . opportunities to learn each others' approaches to spiritual truth . . . There's a . . . universality in that, which is problematic if you're only talking about politics and bodies and borders, but it's also essential to talking about spiritual evolution. You can't separate them – the complexities and intersections of spiritual truths from [those] of economics [and] politics . . . butoh rides this thin line, but offers so much more in terms of the holistic, the spiritual, and the contributions toward that kind of social evolution which is . . . always going to be connected to political revolution and political evolution . . . butoh as a ritual art form is always going to be politicized and butoh as a political protest is always going to be ritualized.

JS: What of the ways border-crossing occurs in/through butoh along lines of gender?

SN: Hijikata changed his pronouns and only wore women's kimonos in the last years of his life. Kazuo Ohno only danced as a woman.⁷ There was this porous relationship to the veil of gender, just as there was to any other veil that butoh tries to see through. As the dance found its way across its different borders, encountering it personally through Mexico because of my master's connection to Japan, at a time when I was figuring out how to live with my gender identity and body, the dance gave me tools to deal with the trauma of physical form and the

illusion of fixedness. That same trauma of physical form and illusion of fixedness is what holds our geopolitical map together. There are divisive lines . . . drawn by man through what was once a connected landscape. Through those divides [we've] separated people and economies and created systems of exploitation and oppression, just like we've done with the imaginary line of gender. Butoh offers us a way – experientially, in the doing of it and in the propagation of the form – to move beyond those limitations.

(. . .)

SN: A rigorous exploration of one's own . . . perceived limitations can reveal much greater potential, much deeper truths than you might ordinarily have access too. Rigorous exploration offered by butoh can contribute to a lived understanding of a world beyond borders – geopolitical, gendered, and otherwise . . . The more people have this lived experience of transcending that which we take for granted as fixed, the more we can evolve as a species because we understand the potential, the greater possibility of human connection.

JS: Is butoh a queer or trans art?

SN: There is queerness . . . in the foundation of the dance. Many practitioners flock to it because it allows for playfulness beyond [gender] boundaries. But you could also re-inscribe hegemony with butoh . . . even if you thought you were transcending it.

Spiritual warfare

JS: How has butoh come to bear on your daily life?

SN: Living in New York City as someone who has cultivated . . . higher levels of empathy is challenging . . . And requires spiritual armor on a daily basis . . . butoh was my boot camp . . . to be a spiritual warrior.

(. . .)

It's a sacrificial task to move through society with a fully awakened spiritual awareness of suffering, which I think butoh asks you to do . . . There's a proposal that we are intended to contribute to the evolution of the species by disrupting old habits, forms, and ways of recycling energy that aren't ultimately productive . . . To transform . . . you have to be willing to detach . . . from a lot of societal expectations and pressures. That resulting isolation or solitude is painful and a big part of the sacrifice.

JS: You talk about transformative work in butoh as a “magical process.” Could you expand on that and talk about how you are using the term “magic?”

SN: One of the key elements of my doctoral work was tracing the “Political Economy of Magic,” which gets to that question you were asking earlier about globalization, the spiritual and the political.⁸ Magic is a very real thing . . . if you are believer in it. Magic is also a very . . . commodified word and concept. One reason I wrote about it was because for those of us who dance butoh, we feel an undeniable magic to the work. There is something really third about it, really other, something beyond conventional understanding, beyond an easily graspable form of language. Magic is one of those words that relates to the alchemical process. There are supernatural forces at work in butoh, and words like “ritual” and “magic” and “alchemy” are all found circling the dance because its practitioners know that we're onto something sacred.

(. . .)

In order to get the most out of butoh work, you have to believe that magic is real. That is the first leap of faith in engaging with ritual practice . . . I really believe that our resistance to mysticism is a roadblock to our spiritual and emotional and intellectual and physical evolution.

JS: There is a quote by Sondra Fraleigh that says “Butoh is form coming into being.”⁹

SN: You could also say that butoh is form revealing essence.

JS: What would it be to call butoh the practice of spirit coming into being? Is there a place where spirit and form meet in the dance?

SN: Science fiction movies where you see demons being exorcised, or aliens embodying other forms and being cast out of them, Jedi mind tricks and light-sabers and all that . . . I just feel like if you live life as a butoh practitioner, that is not future-fantasy. That’s present-reality. It got me in a lot of trouble in graduate school because academically, essence is problematic.
(. . .)

I had a really hard time in my graduate work trying to vouch for these things that I just fundamentally believe . . . through experience. Things I’ve seen and gone through in my spiritual journey, which parallels my gender journey, which parallels my dance journey. There are just certain truths that, for me, are actual . . . and really high stakes. Spiritual warfare . . . butoh was the dance of darkness, but then we learned that from that darkness comes light. As a practice of spiritual warfare, living a life rooted in butoh means embracing the darkness, venturing into the darkness, engaging with darkness, all in the hopes of transforming it into light.

Notes

- 1 Shakina Nayfack, *Butoh Ritual Mexicano / Alchemy Is Dancing* (Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2010) (out of print). PDF download available at shakina.nyc/butoh.
- 2 Michael Blackwood (Producer), *Butoh: Body on the Edge of Crisis*, Documentary Film (New York, NY: Michael Blackwood Productions, 1990), Video recording.
- 3 Tlalpujahua de Rayón was once a booming mining town and a central player in the international mining industry in Mexico. It was wealthy, diversely populated, and employed over 5,000 workers to sustain the mines and the wealth it generated. On May 27, 1939, the town was completely buried by a catastrophic land-slide induced by heavy rains and the mass displacement of earth from the mines.
- 4 Tanaka has been known to say both “I dance the place” and “I dance the space,” either because he himself worded the phrase differently in English, or his words have been translated differently into English. See, for example, Tanaka Min, *Bodyprint* (Tokyo: Media Information, 1981) and Tess de Quincey and Stuart Lynch, “Dancing the City,” *Realtime* 11 (February–March 1996) www.realtimearts.net/article/issue131/6033. (E-mail to editors from Zack Fuller, May 31, 2017).
- 5 *Death Drive*, Dance Edit, directed by L. E. Salas, choreographed and performed by Shakina Nayfack (2014).
- 6 *Arena y Sangre/Blood and Sand*, video excerpt, Performed by Shakina Nayfack, Video by Rigo Maldonado (2004) Digital.
- 7 While Ohno Kazuo often dressed as a woman on stage, in costume which evoked feminine roles to portray a range of female types, there are dances in which he dressed like a man and explored masculine roles on stage as well. Ohno believed that everyone contains both feminine and masculine energies and much of his play with gender on stage can be attributed to his interest in origin and true nature, “before birth, neither man or woman” (as he explores in his piece *Room*, Tokyo 1966). See also “Femininity” and “Masculinity” in Kazuo Ohno and Yoshito Ohno, *Kazuo Ohno’s World: From Without and Within*, translated by John Barrett (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 76–85.
- 8 Shakina Nayfack, “The Political Economy of Magic,” in *Butoh Ritual Mexicano / Alchemy is Dancing* (Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2010), 65–75.
- 9 Sondra Horton Fraleigh, *Dancing Into Darkness: Butoh, Zen, and Japan* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999), 34. “Butoh shows form coming into being.”

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Arena y Sangre/ Blood and Sand. Video excerpt. Performed by Shakina Nayfack Video by Rigo Maldonado, 2004. www.youtube.com/watch?v=7SyM_kIXgfw&t=4s

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