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Edited by Bruce Baird and Rosemary Candelario

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Bruce Baird, Rosemary Candelario

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Miki Seifert

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CRITICAL BUTOH AND THE COLONIAL MATRIX OF POWER

Miki Seifert

On April 17 and 18, 2009, *He rawe tona kakahu* (She wore a becoming dress) was presented at the Film Archive in Wellington, New Zealand. When the audience entered the theater, the performance was already underway and they immediately became part of the performance. When seated, each audience member had their own unique perspective of not only the stage, the performers and the videos, but of other audience members as well.

Distorted video projections of fashion shows raked on two walls of the theater were playing to the repetitive, pulsating calls from the first minute of Emerson, Lake & Palmer's "Karn Evil 9: 1st Impression, Pt. 1":

Come inside the show's about to start
Guaranteed to blow your head apart
Rest assured you'll get your money's worth
The greatest show in Heaven, Hell, or Earth.

Dominating the space were two silent, motionless other-worldly creatures. Their bodies were encased in golden-hued shell-like cloaks. Their white faces and red lips, emotionless.

Impressive and commanding through the strength of their presence, they beckoned the audience to "come inside," bidding them to question what lies beneath the spectacle, beneath their heavy cloaks – "guaranteed to blow your head apart."

After 10 minutes of stillness, one alien creature began moving down the catwalk. She clearly tried – despite the inappropriateness of her size and shape – to perform the signs of the female human as they were projected on the walls. Meanwhile, the second alien began to crack through her shell gradually and grotesquely emerging, relishing the exposure of her darkness. Despite their similar outer appearance, their bearing and intentions were quite different. One embodied the desire to conform to the external images, while the other determinedly remained alien, embracing her darkness and otherness.

He rawe (Becoming dress) was created and performed by Anahera Gildea, a Māori writer and performer, and me. It was built around the ideas of a fashion show and the matryoshka, or Russian nesting dolls. Anahera and I were both models going down the runway in different fashions and characters acting out their drama on the stage. We began the performance wearing all the fashions/costumes, one piled on top of the other. The removal of each layer was done in full

view of the audience and was not a seamless strip but rather a struggle and challenge to break free. Our fashions/characters were:

<i>Miki</i>	<i>Anahera</i>
Matryoshka	Matryoshka
Miss Texas	Mother
Black Widow	Bride
Executive	Dusky Maiden
French Maid	Ballerina
Dressmaker's Doll	Dressmaker's Doll
Costume-less	Costume-less

He rawe (Becoming dress) delved into the complex relationship between women, fashion, contemporary ideals of beauty, and women's self-image as played out on the real bodies of an American and a Māori woman. It was a public performance of decolonization.

Critical Butoh

While *He rawe* (Becoming dress) was created by Anahera and me, the methodology used to create it was developed by me and William Franco, my long-time collaborator. This methodology, Critical Butoh, grew out of our artistic practice of 30 years that crosses the borders between visual, media, dance, and theater arts, as well as critical and indigenous theory, indigenous spirituality, and humanistic Buddhist philosophy and practice. William and I began our collaboration in San Diego in the 1980s, exploring the relationship between art and decolonization. This exploration was further expanded when we moved to Aotearoa, New Zealand, to work with Māori artists.

A driver for us to use creative practice as the keystone of our decolonizing methodology was the power of the aesthetic, as articulated by art historian and critic Grant Kester who sees the aesthetic as a unique form of knowledge that can visualize and embody both what is and what could be: "these aspects combine to provide the aesthetic with a unique ability to identify and describe the operations of political, social, cultural, and economic power, while at the same time allowing it to think beyond the horizons established by these forms of power" (Kester 1998, 8).

Hijikata Tatsumi and Ohno Kazuo used this power of the aesthetic in their movement investigations called butoh. They were responding to postwar conditions of Japan: the westernization of Japan, the renewal of the security treaty between the United States and Japan, rural poverty, rapid industrialization, societal conformity, the suppression of self, and the rise of a materialistic, consumer-oriented culture.

What is remarkable about what Hijikata and Ohno did is the development of a process that allows the performer to find the hidden levels in her/himself and her/his society – what Toshiharu Kasai calls "butoh's body archaeology." Diego Piñón, founder of Butoh Ritual Mexicano (BRM), calls it "anthropological research on ourselves." From William's and my training with Piñón – workshops in 2003, 2004, 2008, and 2012 – we came to understand butoh as awakening the energy of rebellion and seeking to use this energy as the force to propel a creative, transformative expression that breaks through the confines placed on one's body by one's self, family, education, and society. For us, butoh seeks to liberate the mind from the way it habitually thinks, the body from the way it habitually moves, and the self from how it habitually conceives of itself and its world.

The world that we live in is shaped by colonization. The rise of modern Europe and its subsequent colonization of the world brought into being what Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano calls the colonial matrix of power. Philosopher Santiago Castro-Gómez states that colonization and its colonial matrix of power is not a historical period, but “a technology of power” and “not modernity’s ‘past’ but its other face” (Castro-Gomez 2006, 218). Sociologist Ramón Grosfugel conceives of the colonial matrix of power as “entangled global hierarchies” which permeate every aspect of being human (Grosfugel 2009, 18). Through the hierarchies of knowledge and language, it colonizes the mind. Through the hierarchies of race, sexuality, and gender, it colonizes the body. Through the hierarchy of spirituality, it colonizes the spirit.

William and I saw butoh’s body archaeology as a key to helping individuals transform the colonial matrix of power as it reproduces itself inside them. This is where we found the intersection of butoh and critical theory – hence, Critical Butoh. Critical theory is concerned with an analysis of issues of power and justice and how I as an individual am part of those larger power relations – a microcosmic expression of the macrocosm – and how I not only reflect upon my imperatives and assumptions (Kincheloe and McLaren 2005) but also strive towards a self-criticality to unseat the ways in which these larger relations are inscribed on my being and being-in-the-world.

From this positioning we developed Critical Butoh, a performative research method that uses the power of the aesthetic and butoh’s body archaeology to re-write the colonial matrix of power as it manifests in us as individuals. It offers a physical practice and process to enact this transformation in our bodies as well to communicate this transformation through performance.

He rawe (Becoming dress), the outcome of Anahera’s and my investigation into gender and colonization, is an example of Critical Butoh in practice. Anahera’s and my starting point for the creation of this work was butoh’s body archaeology. In our daily lives, Anahera and I had absorbed the experiences of women we knew, the images and stories of women in the media, and the social constructs of gender as conveyed by them. In creating *He rawe* (Becoming dress) we strove to bring out and examine these “absorptions” that were hindering our ability to live happy and fulfilling lives as a Māori woman and a white American woman. The characters of *He rawe* (Becoming dress) were constructs through which we examined our own distress in response to being women who are part of the colonial matrix of power.

The following discussion of key fashions/characters – the Matryoshka, the pairing of the Mother and Miss Texas, Dressmaker’s Doll, and Costume-less – provides examples of this in practice.

Matryoshka

Drawing from both feminist and postcolonial theorists, as discussed above, the Matryoshkas’ alien-ness was that of being the Other (Said 1995). In her presentation of both recognizable and unrecognizable human features, one possible reading of her encounter with the audience was that of a re-creation of the colonial encounter. In relation to the Matryoshkas, the audience members were the colonists arriving in this new territory. Having purchased their tickets, they arrived with the expectation of ownership, of being able to claim a piece of the territory as their own. However, the environment was unfamiliar and unknown. The usual signs of a concert dance or theater performance were not present. There were no assigned seats nor ushers to show them the way. Even to those who attended other events at the Film Archive, the space would have been unfamiliar. Rows of seats had been unbolted and their orientation changed to accommodate the raised transverse stage.

This “re-enactment” was not merely a historical reference but one of the key underpinnings of the whole performance: as citizens, we participate on a daily basis in the re-creation of

our nations and, therefore, we as performers, in both the private and public sense, are not only responsible for its continuation but are empowered to change it. E. J. Westlake in her work on a Nicaraguan women's theatrical collective finds that national identity is based not only on a shared culture that is transmitted through institutions, but also an imagined shared culture that is transmitted through media, which "shapes the idea of the nation within the imagination of the citizen" and "the drive is to create a seamless sense of one nation, but the performances are inconsistent and fragmentary, leaving openings for the formerly disenfranchised to enter the debate" (Westlake 2005, 22). *He rawe* (Becoming dress) steps into this space and makes an offering about women and the colonial matrix of power.

Because *He rawe* (Becoming dress) was performed in Aotearoa, New Zealand, by an American woman and a Māori woman, we were able to adopt a transnational perspective to examine the relationship between colonizer and colonized, settler and indigenous peoples, in former British settler nations of the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. This transnationality, i.e., not being from the same indigene-colonizer pairing, mitigated the possibility of potential conflicts arising from a shared history and its emotional baggage. The distance provided by this transnational approach benefited not only Anahera and I but possibly the audience as well. We hoped that the American colonization I represented would provide a safe distance to allow the Kiwi audience to engage with what we were saying about settler-indigenous relations in such settler societies. For this reason, it was critical that they could immediately identify me as American, which led to the development of my Miss Texas character.

The other underpinning of the performance and the characters was drawn from the humanist philosophy of Nichiren Buddhism, which Anahera and I (as well as William) practice. An example of this is how we incorporated the Buddhist concept of Bodhisattvas of the Earth into the performance. The Lotus Sutra portrays the emergence of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth from the Earth as a momentous, ground-breaking, ground-shaking event. It describes their appearance as impressive and awe-inspiring: "The bodies of these bodhisattvas were all golden in hue, with the thirty-two features and an immeasurable brightness" (Watson 1993). Our imposing Matryoshkas sought neither confrontation nor conquest with the audience but, grounded in their hidden identities as Bodhisattvas of the Earth, they wished to embrace the audience with compassion and together embark on a non-verbal dialogue of transformation. Drawing upon the writings of Buddhist scholar Daisaku Ikeda, we conceived of the Matryoshkas as Bodhisattvas of the Earth as representing a revolution in consciousness, connectedness, grounded-ness, empowerment, and transformation. As modern-day Bodhisattvas of the Earth, our Matryoshkas willingly took on and sought to transform the trials of their lives into order to encourage others "to seek out their own inherent brilliance" (Ikeda et al. 2001). Through their behavior on stage, the stripping away of layers of costumes, which can be read as delusions, our Matryoshkas revealed their true identities.

Miss Texas and the Mother

The larger than life, aging beauty queen Miss Texas triumphantly emerged from her Matryoshka shell into the pulsating, competitive world of beauty and fashion. Dressed in a cowboy blue jean jacket, a red, white and blue jean skirt that only partially covers the black crinoline beneath, accessorized with white cowgirl gloves, she confidently strutted down the runway accepting imaginary applause and kudos, oblivious to her grotesqueness and misshapen body, unperturbed by her uneven gait caused by a missing white boot. She was the mistress of her world.

Meanwhile the Mother, dressed in a sheer plastic muumuu-housecoat with lacy cuffs, emerged from her shell. Within the Other (the Matryoshka), there was now a new Other. The Mother tentatively found her way out of her Matryoshka shell, carefully taking her first step into Miss



Figure 41.1 Miki Seifert as Miss Texas, photograph by Craig Thomson.

Texas' world. Unsure of herself and her place in this world, she hung back, almost willing herself to remain unseen. She hesitantly echoed the gestures made by Miss Texas, whose demeanor subtly shifted from unassailable confidence to uncertain questioning. A foot dangling in mid-air asked where it should be placed, and soon she found herself face down in a crumpled heap at the end of the runway, the same foot raised behind, again questioning its place. Still, she steadfastly strove to remain in control, walking on the very edge of the runaway like a tightrope performer, passing the Mother, like a ship passing another ship at sea.

As the Mother moved into the limelight, a quiet air of domesticity blanketed the stage. Her hands alternatively carried the imprint of mundane daily household chores, the loving touch of a

mother comforting her baby and the loss of something of great value. She moved with purpose but tried not to draw attention to herself. After she had made her pass down the runway and returned upstage, she turned as if she suddenly remembered she's a woman being looked at, her hand self-consciously reached to check to see if her hair was in order.

The Mother emerged into a world different than who she is. While some differences between Miss Texas and the Mother were obvious, there was another level to this difference. The Mother was Māori, though all of Anahera's characters except for the Dusky Maiden foiled the typically held racialized stereotypes of Māori. Her characters embodied a Māori perspective: the way they see themselves in the world and the way they conceive of the world were constructed through the connection with other women. As a Māori woman, Anahera is never alone: "I have ancestry. It never leaves me. I'm never alone . . . When I die, I will be welcomed into the same spaces as all my ancestors have gone" (Gildea, Anahera. 2009. Rehearsal with author, March 30). When the Mother emerged, it was into the world of Miss Texas, a place of whiteness, individualism, and competition, a place very different than her own which values *whakapapa* (genealogy), *whanaungatanga* (focus on relationships), and *manaakitanga* (looking after people).

While the Matryoshka positioned herself as Other to the audience, the intention of the pairing of Miss Texas and the Mother was to raise the notion that there can be Others within Others, that the positionality of a white American woman is not the same as that of a Māori woman.

Dressmaker's Doll

As Dressmaker's Doll, I walked down the runway modeling my one-piece foundation garment – a pair of unmatched breasts and half a butt sewn from a pink wool blanket – that gave my characters their unnatural size. Anahera walked down and modeled the corset that reduced and constrained her characters. We both stopped mid-way and began removing them: Anahera frantically; I slowly, though both of us expressing sadness, uncertainty, and trepidation. We then were wearing our



Figure 41.2 Miki Seifert as Dressmaker's Doll, photograph by Craig Thomson.

final layer: a one-piece, off-white, short-sleeve, and short-leg one piece jumpsuit, styled to suggest the fabric that covers the mannequin on which dressmakers construct garments. We offered our “distortion” to the other, accepted the offering with care and awe, and explored the “reality” of our Other. I then placed Anahera’s corset on the stage in front of the center stage screen and Anahera wrapped my garment in it. For the first time in the whole performance, we touched and our bodies came together. We danced the Dressmaker’s Doll duet, becoming one, creating shapes that passed away and formed anew until we separated to claim our spot side by side on the runway.

The Dressmaker’s Doll is when we truly see each other for the first time, when we recognize our common humanity. It is the transformative moment that leads to re-connecting with ourselves. It is through our connection with each other that we can start connecting to ourselves. For the first time, both our characters are truly vulnerable, experiencing a vulnerability that comes from a deep acceptance of self. Anahera’s characters find strength to be who they are, while mine find strength to give up control.

Costume-less

Anahera and I, standing mid-way on the runway facing upstage, were shedding our last remaining layer as if crawling out of an alien skin and being re-born. Naked, we walked in unison to the end of the runway and back. By the time we reached the center stage screen, the videos had stopped. There only remained the two of us, side by side.

This performance was a journey. Our goal was to transform our experience of being women and of being woman on different sides of the colonizing relationship. Costume-less was not the culmination of the stripping away of layers of distortions and delusions. Costume-less was finally revealing the true hidden identities of the Matryoshkas as Bodhisattvas of the Earth, which was present from the beginning – just as our common humanity was always present.

Conclusion

He rave (Becoming dress) grew out of Anahera’s and my standpoints as a Māori woman and a white American woman investigating the intersection of gender and colonization. Using Critical Butoh, we interrogated our personal worldviews as they were shaped by the colonial matrix of power. Though *He rave* (Becoming dress) was personal and idiosyncratic, it was, through the power of the aesthetic, suggestive of something larger. It was a public performance where we invited the audience into a universe where questions were raised, ideas contested. It was a lived, shared experience of transforming the experience of being women who are part of the colonial matrix of power.

Credits

Creators and performers: Anahera Gildea and Miki Seifert
Production Designer: William Franco
Costumier: Janet Dunn
Lighting Designer: Bex Weatherhead

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