



Title of the article: Challenge the Act of “Seeing” Technology and the East Asian Woman’s Body on Stage

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Abstract.

In Spring 2021, Yukina Sato, a Japanese-native dance artist, and Yujie Chen, a Chinese-native dance scholar, created a dance piece titled “*Body Negative*.” This project was an intermedia live dance performance that premiered at the Motion Lab at Ohio State University. It utilized video projections, soundscapes, and live camera captures. This collaborative embodiment research examined the burden of representing the Japanese female body on stage. Through technology, we explored the expectation of stereotyped East Asian-ness and how the dancer challenges this gaze. Throughout the process, we asked ourselves, "How do we reveal the lived experiences of East Asian women in the United States through dance and technology?"

Keywords: dance, performance, technology, cultural identity, Asian-ness, auto-ethnography, Labanotation

Biography

Yukina Sato is a Japanese dancer, choreographer, and filmmaker whose work explores movement and storytelling through cultural hybridity. Her projects reflect the experience of living between cultures and often incorporate live performance. She has collaborated with acclaimed artists including Abby Zbikowski, Curl Flink, Crystal Perkins, and Bebe Miller. As co-founder of YY Dance+Media, she creates multimedia performances. Her work *Motion of Seeing* premiered at the Detroit Dance City Festival and received the 2023 National Exchange Award. Yukina holds an MFA in Dance from The Ohio State University and currently serves as Assistant Professor of Dance at Minnesota State University, Mankato.

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Introduction

Growing up in Japan, the people around me spoke the same language, have same color of skin and eyes, and spend similar lifestyles in the country. But when I arrived in Edmond, Oklahoma in 2016, I became “the” Japanese, the only international/Asian/East Asian/Japanese student in the dance department of my undergraduate program at that time. I was asked many questions about my ethnicity and culture, as though I was representing my country and everyone in it. For example, peers would ask, “Could you show me 'Japanese dance'?” When I answered “No,” they were surprised. I would explain that “Japanese dance” is an oversimplified term, indeed, there are various kinds and styles of “Japanese” dances. Additionally, I had to clarify that my movement training is rooted in ballet and contemporary dance.

These interactions spurred me to ask, if I dance, does it count as 'Japanese' dance? Or does “Japanese dance” entail specific expectations or assumptions about cultural authenticity and tradition? This set of questions followed me everywhere through my time in undergraduate to graduate and lead to the project “*Body Negative*,” a multi-media live performance, that a Chinese dance scholar Yujie Chen and I co-created. The performance evokes the challenges with the representation of East Asian-ness in the United States and how does it interplay to the dancer on the stage. In the following sections, I break down the creative process into three stages: *ethnographic fieldwork*, *embodiment*, and *scaffolding the performance*. I explain each stage and how the project shifted in certain directions. Furthermore, I discuss how my collaborator, Yujie Chen and I are moving forward with the project following its realization in a performance at the Motion Lab at Ohio State University.

Auto-Ethnographic Fieldwork in New York City

In the Spring of 2021, I began to examine what is viewed as 'Japanese' in dancing from the United States perspectives and how it is embodied in dance performances and choreography. I started to search dance makers who born in Japan, migrated to the U.S. and embodied 'Japanese-ness' through dancing and choreographing. As a case study, I researched Saeko Ichinohe (1936-2020), an artistic director of Saeko Ichinohe Dance Company. She was a Japanese female dance artist who blended Western concert dance techniques and Nihon Buyo, a Japanese traditional dance. Ichinohe immigrated to the U.S. in the 1960s and attended Julliard School in New York City; she founded Saeko Ichinohe Dance Company in 1970, where she worked for almost 40 years as the artistic director. I found her work first at the online archive list of Dance Notation Bureau, then tracked down an archive of her work at The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts (NYPL). I visited her archive at the library for a week of March 2021, and read her movement notes, newspaper articles, and her documentation of her dance company repertoires (Fig. 1. and 2.) as much time allows me to. I visited all of her dance company locations and performance venues that was recorded in documents as well. I was hoped to trace her creative process and her presence, imagining Ichinohe walking around the town to rehearse, dance, and create. Also, I contacted a couple of her former dance company members about her dance-making process and what impact she was creating through the dance.

From this fieldwork, I learned that many of Ichinohe's works were inspired by ancient Japanese folktales and literature such as *Genji Monogatari*, and set choreography to many songs played by koto (string instrument) that evoke the style and aesthetics of 11th century Japan. Dancers were often asked to wear kimonos (traditional attire) to perform her works. I came to

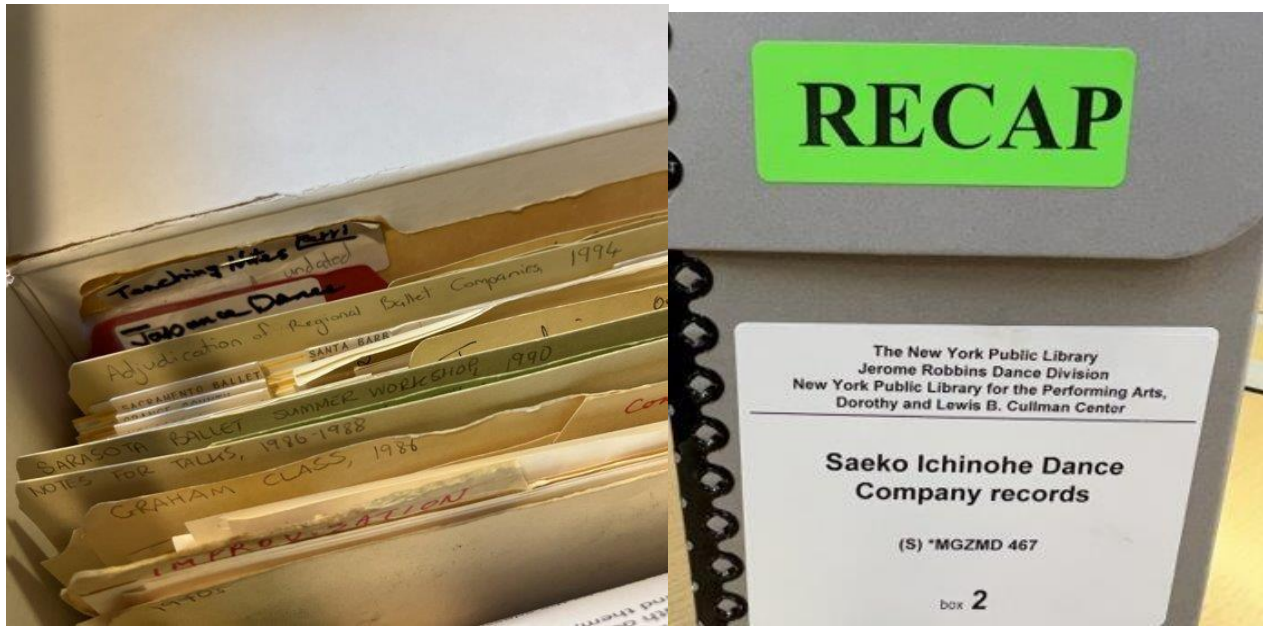


Fig 1. and 2. Saeko Ichinohe Dance Company records file from New York Public Library for the Performing Arts

conclude that Ichinohe utilized the traditional image of Japanese culture, and identified the aesthetics and styles to strengthen her artistic voice. She aimed to embody "Japanese-ness" as a transcending element in performance recalling ancient Japan. I learned that the enactment of Western perspective of "Japanese-ness" could be reminiscent of ancient Japan through movement, costume (especially kimono), and music.

Embodiment Process

After the fieldwork at the archives, I returned to my graduate program at the Ohio State University and decided to continue embodied research on one of Ichinohe's dance works. I proceeded to embody and restage the excerpt from *Chidori* (1972) a duet featuring a female and male dancer that depicts a love story between a fisherman and a bird (Chidori). This duet was danced by American Ballet Dancers and incorporated the ballet terminology and Nihon Buyoh. This duet was accessible to me via Labanotation scores, which are similar to music scores, recording choreography using a complex system of characters and shapes (Fig. 3.). To decipher a five-minute segment of the score (25 pages of

Labanotation), I met weekly for three months with my duet partner, Forrest Hershy, and Labanotation notator, Dr. Valarie Williams (Fig. 4.).

The embodiment process of the duet was challenging. With no video documentation available, we relied on Labanotation and just two photographs. When we encountered difficulties in understanding the score, we interpreted and imagined what Ichinohe would do based on the information provided in the score. We discussed the movement patterns and tendencies of the choreography as we decoded the notations.

The significant finding from the embodiment process was the movement conflict. I realized Ichinohe's choreography was challenged by the movement restriction of the kimono. The female dancer wore a kimono and ballet shoes to perform the duet. The movement vocabulary was based on ballet, which tends to move beyond and elongate body parts, such as the long extension of the legs and arms. The architecture of the kimono interfered with the expansive movement. For instance, if I wanted to extend my leg higher than 90 degrees, the kimono that was wrapped around my leg stopped the movement or restricted the leg extension. Or

if I brought my arms higher than my head, the sleeves smacked my face. The more I tried to achieve accuracy in choreography, the more I felt confined inside the kimono. I found the similarity of this physical dilemma as being 'the' Japanese person in the United States. I am often frustrated by being confined, categorized as a cultural representation, and trapped in the gap between expectations and reality. Similar to the kimono, the more I attempted to shed my cultural identity, the more it confined me.

Through this embodiment process, I wanted to examine this physical dilemma through my own choreography. I became curious to utilize the kimono, including the strings and band that support the kimono to stay in place on the body, as a metaphor of 'Japanese-ness.'



Fig. 3. Labanotation score of *Chidori*; Fig. 4. Rehearsal process with Forrest Hersey and Columbus Koto Ensemble

Scaffolding the Performance

While I was exploring the process of embodiment of Japanese-ness through the kimono, Yujie Chen researched the framework of our project, "*Body Negative*". We both were inspired by Rachel Lee's *The Exquisite Corpse of Asian America: Biopolitics, Biosociality, and Posthuman Ecologies* (2014). In her book, Lee describes the refusal to be essentialized as just "Asian" or "American" as using the term "fragmented body." We echoed Lee's description of the hybridity of existing in a liminal space, and this concept became an important pillar for our project.

In order to achieve the idea of 'fragmenting the performer's body, not only looking into the movement but also utilizing technology. Yujie Chen introduced me to the negative mode of the film camera. It was directly inspired by the Chinese photographer, Xu Yong's documentation of the Tiananmen Square protests using negative film (1989). In Yong's interactive exhibits, visitors would be encouraged to use their own cameras on their phones to invert the negative images. Utilizing the negative mode gives the audience the freedom and agency to switch between different viewing experiences. Utilizing the negative mode offers the opportunity for the audience to reflect on what they see and what they do not see.

With that technology and theory framework, we enact my solo with kimono and technology. Yujie utilized two web cameras to record my solo in real-time and manipulated it with the graphic programming software - Isadora. This software records the movement, inverts the video footage to negative mode, and repeats it like an old tape recorder. We angled the camera to capture my movement by focusing on specific body parts in a fragmented manner, and Yujie projected that video footage on screens behind my body. Intersecting live body and video footage creates multiple dimensions in a performance space and challenges the audience's viewing experience. There were multiple projections surrounding my dancing body, and recorded voices echoed in space.

As same as Yong's exhibition that mentioned earlier, we also encouraged the audience to use their phone camera and turn on the inverted mode. Through their camera, the audience could see my live body in negative mode, while the projected video is in colour. Our hope to include the interactive aspect of viewing was to

allow the audience to consider the translation happening through seeing.

Body Negative premiered in Motion Lab at the Ohio State University in April 2021. Yujie Chen and I received much feedback regarding navigating the



Fig. 5: Rehearsal process of “Body Project” with Yujie Chen audience's gaze and layers of culture that were revealed via choreography and real-time projections. One audience member shared their experiences of the physical and mental weight of viewing the performance through a phone camera. They mentioned that the weight of the phone was translated to the symbolism of the burden that the dancer was carrying to meet stereotypical expectations. Yujie's framework proved effective in questioning the audience's act of “seeing.” Also, my usage of a kimono as a prop in the performance, not attire, was a significant difference, which departed from my embodiment process of Saeko Ichinohe's dance work to examine “Japanese-ness.”

This project served as a starting point for us to dig deeper into aspects of “-ness” or representation of the cultural body in the USA. Yujie and I began to produce a multimedia performance aimed at sharing the perspectives of East Asian female dance artists in the USA. We co-launched YY Dance + Media to continue our collaborative efforts. *Body Negative* was iterated into “Motion of Seeing,” which premiered at the Detroit City Dance Festival in September 2023. We were honored to receive the National Exchange Award, which led us to another performance opportunity at the Regional Alternative Dance Festival in March 2024. We aim to continue evolving this project through different iterations, using artistic practice to explore our life experiences and questions at the intersections of dance and technology.

Conclusion

I had a journey in understanding the idea of what amounts to stereotyped imagery or ideas of “Japanese-ness” that I embodied, or which others recognized in me. It was planted during my time as an undergraduate, and I sought it throughout my graduate program. It started with ethnographic fieldwork of studying the Japanese-born dance artist in the USA, Saeko Ichinohe, who intertwined ballet and Nihon Buyoh to live in between West and East in her artistic process. From fieldwork to embodiment research, I have discovered a contradiction in the body that tries to move beyond the culturally labeled body, which I found in the confinement of the kimono. With Yujie Chen's theoretical approach, we have now discovered the way of revealing the layers of labels that bodies carry, and how technology and movement could show the possibility for the audience to rethink their preconceived idea about culture and body.

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