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June Watanabe's Translation/ Transformation of Japanese *Nō* in Contemporary Practice

Judy Halebsky

*This paper considers a 2004 performance of *Nō Project II 'Can't' is 'Night,'* a collaboration of Japanese American dancer June Watanabe, Japanese *nō* master and Intangible Cultural Treasure of Japan Uchida Anshin, composer Pauline Oliveros, and poet Leslie Scalapino. The project, spearheaded by Watanabe, translated *nō* for a contemporary San Francisco audience, imbuing it with social and political meaning for California viewers. Watanabe translated *nō*'s internal concentration into a collaborative process she calls "being in the moment." The performance became a way for collaborators and audience to examine values in art making and sociopolitical practice.*

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June Watanabe's *Nō Project II 'Can't' is 'Night'* came out of a collaborative process with poet Leslie Scalapino, composer Pauline Oliveros, and *nō* master and Intangible Cultural Treasure of Japan Uchida Anshin. It was performed in May 2004 at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco and is a contemporary North American performance drawing from *nō* scenes and technique and American modern dance, poetry, and new music. Watanabe's working process focuses on the collaborators entering into what she calls "being in the moment" and letting this focus on the present guide improvisations into a developed performance work. The artists engaged in this process see art practice as a means of social change. Watanabe's work is distinct from collaborations where artists work individually and then combine their

efforts, as was the method, for example, of Cage, Rauschenberg, and Cunningham in the 1950s, where individual creations found correspondence in the eye of the beholder by chance juxtaposition. In Watanabe's process the artists working in different media come together in a more connected way, because they make the work in unison, responding to each other. While the concept of a "being in the moment" improvisation with artists from other genres or cultures is not part of Japanese *nō*, the result of Watanabe's work was a cultural translation that opened up *nō* for San Francisco viewers.

Nō, of course, is a theatre that integrates poetry, stage space, music, and dance/acting. The interdisciplinarity of *nō* has some similarity to modern Western opera, which is not just Bel Canto singing but a fusion of visual and aural arts.¹ The *nō* audience comes to the play with a shared knowledge, so the story is not fully illustrated in the performance; rather, the play explores emotional circumstances. The chanted text is a combination of dialog and poetic lyric, which evokes famous literature through allusion. The literary references were well known to the court audience for fifteenth to seventeenth century *nō*, and today a Japanese audience will bring specific knowledge via study of the play or the program notes. A troupe consists of a chorus of eight to ten actors, four instrumentalists playing flute, *kotsuzumi* (shoulder drum), *ōtsuzumi* (hip drum) and *taiko* (stick drum); a *shite* (lead actor); a *waki* (supporting actor); and, depending on the play, a small number of subsidiary actors.

In *Nō Project II* Watanabe was striving for a similar fusion of poetry, space, music, chanting, and dance/acting, so required collaborators with expertise in each of these areas. She also wanted the audience to bring shared cultural knowledge to access the emotional circumstance of her performance. As this connective tissue she used the political events and U.S. military action since 9/11 explored through Leslie Scalapino's poem "'Can't' is 'Night.'"²

The performance, somber and intense, lived in fragmentary details from the text, the stark stage space, the haunting dance, and illusive but compelling *nō shimai* (dance). The lack of both a time-based frame in the music and a developing narrative structure contributed to the performance creating a dreamlike suspension of time. It did not pull the audience in through narrative action or character development, but rather required the individual audience members to focus their attention and step into the performance.³ In *Nō Project II*, *nō*'s chorus is replaced mainly by Scalapino's solo voice. The smallness of the performers on the large and sparse stage created a sense of vast emptiness that was accentuated by the focused attention to silence and stillness. From the back of the stage, the musicians watched and

played their instruments at moments they deemed appropriate. Watanabe danced sweeping, round movements to spoken text and music and Uchida performed selected *shimai* to his recorded song. These elements sometimes overlapped and interacted, while at other times seemed to be in isolation. During the eighty minutes all performers remained onstage and, as in *nō*, there were no blackouts or scene changes.

Scalapino's allusive text quotes journalists' reports and commentaries and interviews with soldiers (2003). The performance drew on a shared audience knowledge of U.S. military action in Iraq and critiques of the war accessible to a San Francisco audience. By giving conflicting quotes, the poem unraveled the idea that truth is singular: understanding of events changes depending on who is looking and from where. Scalapino illustrates this through a metaphor of night in the United States and night in Iraq as being different points in time that are never simulations and thus continually relative. Typically, in *nō* the chorus kneels in two rows along stage left. Scalapino began the performance sitting in the *nō* chorus area but then moved to different parts of the stage to emphasize the disparate points of view in the text.



FIGURE 1. The ensemble of June Watanabe's "Can't is 'Night.'" From left to right, front row: Pauline Oliveros, Toyoji Tomita. Back row: Shoko Hikage, June Watanabe, Leslie Scalapino, Philip Gelb, and Uchida Anshin. (Photo: Andy Mogg www.dancingimages.com)

At one point Scalapino moved into center stage, physical expression inflexibly upright, confronting Watanabe face to face, saying, "To reverse 'our' language's reverse of nights night-boundless-ness or movement of/in." Watanabe answered, "One's—disintegrating also—skin that's movement only *then* 'can't' is 'night.'" Watanabe swung away with arms and body circling. Scalapino continued "'2 Iraqis sat in despair.' after their dead coincide with night. . . ."⁴ There are multiple references to "reverse" in the text, highlighting the contradictions of bounded opposites such as war being a means to create peace and night being the opposite of day.

Scalapino is working in relation to a tradition of formalism in contemporary poetry that disrupts formal qualities of language, such as grammar and punctuation, to construct meaning and to subvert established rules of writing. The title, "'Can't' is 'Night'" has single quotation marks to foreground the multiplicity of meanings that can be read in a particular word. "Can't" alludes to a fixed idea of truth that Scalapino is arguing against in suggesting potential liminality in the line "to reverse 'our' language's reverse of nights night-boundless-ness." Here there is a sifting as to which group is "ours" when the language is reversed and a foregrounding of language as a set of symbols to which meaning is assigned and relative. These multiple reversals point out the problems of understanding a political or social situation through fixed viewpoints or categories, as argued in the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq, as either right or wrong, good or evil.

Stage space was influenced by the *nō* stage, which is distinguished by a bridgelike walkway from stage right called the *hashigakari*. The walkway holds power as a place of transformation, and in walking down the *hashigakari* actors become ghosts, the dead return to life, and dreams become real (Ortolani 1990: 145). The *hashigakari* as a transformative space is employed in *Nō Project II*. All the performers with the exception of Uchida entered the stage from the back corner. In *nō* the musicians and the chorus enter and exit through a small door in the back corner while the *shite*, *waki*, and other performers use the *hashigakari*. Watanabe entered from the musician's entrance point, emphasizing her difference from Uchida's *shite*. Uchida alone made the transformative journey along the *hashigakari* area, were this a real *nō* stage. This emphasized his journey both physically, in the distance he covered between San Francisco and Tokyo, and metaphorically, as a practitioner of traditional *nō* performing in a contemporary work. The *hashigakari* in this performance was a space of translation.

Pauline Oliveros, who was responsible for the music direction, intentionally does not mark herself as the composer. She structured a situation in which musicians could collaboratively create a soundscape

instead of composing the music or conducting the other musicians. In *nō* the four musicians sit along the back of the stage, and here four musicians playing *shakuhachi*, *koto*, trombone, and accordion sat in a similar location (see Fig. 2). The music was improvised through Oliveros's process of "deep listening." She makes a distinction between listening and hearing. Hearing happens passively, whereas listening requires an intentional engagement (Oliveros 2004). In deep listening, rather than marking some sounds as musical and other sounds as noise, all sounds are musical.

The revaluing of which sounds can be considered music is an attempt to subvert the existing power structures that define and control music. Oliveros writes, "all societies exercise some form of control over music in order to serve their ends. Music which opposes or challenges certain values is often suppressed either consciously or unconsciously by those who have powers of control in societies" (1998: 60). A central mechanism in this structure is the alienation of individuals in the creative process. Oliveros endeavors to disrupt the active cre-



FIGURE 2. The musicians sat along the back of the stage in the area *nō* musicians would use. (Photo: Andy Mogg)

ator and passive receiver paradigm by creating interactive sound environments where the listeners are also the creators of the musical experience (Maus and Oliveros 1994: 189). This musicians' interaction with Watanabe and Uchida's movements and Scalapino's text led to rich, long tones of sound and high crisp notes that had very dense, high-intensity sections and slow, sparse sections.

In traditional *nō*, Uchida's lead role as *shite* and Watanabe's supporting role as *waki* would communicate characters and events through dance, acting, text, and costume. In *Nō Project II* Watanabe was not enacting a specific character, but there was a context for her movements, informed by Scalapino's text and by the formal aspects of joining *nō* with contemporary dance, poetry, and music. For this collaboration Uchida excerpted scenes from different plays, taking them out of context and creating a contrast to how these scenes are performed traditionally.

Uchida choose excerpts from *Yoroboshi* (The Priest with the Faltering Thread), *Tadanori*, and *Aoi no Ue* (The Lady Aoi) because they relate the emotional cost of aggression not only to the victims but also to the perpetrators. In *Yoroboshi* a father cruelly banishes his son and later is regretful of this actions. When they are reunited he discovers that his son has become blind (see Fig. 3). Uchida performed the blind son with a walking stick, searching alone for his way in the world. From *Tadanori* he performed the ghost of a warrior killed in battle who was identified by a poem that was found in his sword case (O'Neill 1953: 177).

Uchida and Watanabe performed a duet together from *Hagoromo* (The Feather Mantle), a story about an angel who negotiates to perform a dance for a fisherman in exchange for the return of her robe (Tyler 1992: 96–107; see Fig. 4). The *Hagoromo* duet was the only time that Watanabe danced closer to traditional *nō shimai*. However, Watanabe's modern dance movements developed out of and were informed by the *shimai* as she danced behind and to the side of Uchida, mirroring his movements like a shadow. Here Watanabe's movements develop from small, angular controlled *nō* dance, to larger, more robust versions of Uchida's movement, to improvisational American modern dance technique. Watanabe's movements created a dialog with Uchida's movements, serving as an image of cultural migration from the traditional *nō* to contemporary dance.

The broader context of the *nō* characters in *Nō Project II* was not communicated to this San Francisco audience. A knowledgeable viewer would have been able to recognize the dances and reflect on the significance of those plays in relation to Scalapino's text confronting U.S. military action. Viewers unfamiliar with *nō* would not be able to

access the narrative significance; however, they could read into the *shimai* through the modern dance, spoken text, and music. The *nō* viewer saw one scene and people familiar with Watanabe's modern dance accessed the same scene from its different language.

Watanabe endeavored to value the music, dance, text, and *nō* equally in developing the performance. A general plan for the performance developed through a rehearsal process of experimentation and exploration. While much of the piece was improvised, Scalapino came to the collaboration process with a finished text. The only significant change in the text during development/rehearsal process was to separate it into sections to make room for the other parts of the performance. Scenes Uchida performed from *nō* plays were fixed in that each had defined movement and chanting. However, Uchida's energy and concentration were responding to the other elements of the performance, thus he was collaboratively creating the performance on stage in reaction to the other performers.⁵ The sections of text and *shi-*



FIGURE 3. Uchida Anshin performed dances from selected *nō* plays as part of the collaborative project. In this image he performs a scene from the *nō* play *Yoroboshi*. (Photo: Andy Mogg)

mai were concrete building blocks for the overall structure. By experimenting with a structure such as Watanabe dancing solo followed by a particular *shimai* and then an isolated music section, collaborators evaluated visual images, movement among forms, and changes of intensity and focus. The result was an established framework that specified when sections of poetry and *shimai* would be performed in terms of the dance and music sections.

Watanabe developed this form of collaboration through many years of improvisational modern dance training in both Graham and Cunningham dance techniques. She later trained in traditional *nō* with Uchida Anshin in Japan, which was a starting point for their ongoing creative collaboration. Watanabe's "being in the moment" is related to the internal concentration central to the art *nō*.⁶ This involves a change of state within the individual where regular minute-to-minute concerns are quieted and everyday thoughts are dislocated by concentration on the moment. Watanabe connects the internal concentration of *nō* with



FIGURE 4. Uchida Anshin and June Watanabe dance a *Hagoromo* duet. (Photo: Andy Mogg)

her upbringing in a Buddhist family and community and with her training in *nō*. Promotional material for the performance reads “an interdisciplinary performance work . . . through the varied Buddhist minds of the artists.”⁷ Scalapino, introduced to multiple strands of Eastern philosophy early in life, maintains an ongoing Zen Buddhist practice (Frost and Scalpino 1996: 2). Oliveros has explored various traditions including *zazen*, *t'ai chi ch'uan*, *shotokan karate*, Tibetan Buddhist shine practice, and *chi kung* (Oliveros 2005: 93). Part of the translation of *nō* in this context is how multiple strands of philosophy and practice from various parts of Asia and the American understandings of these philosophies and traditions have informed the art practice of these collaborators and contribute to the ways these artists access *nō*.

In Watanabe's first *Nō Project* in 1996, *nō* and modern dance were juxtaposed as old and the new. *Nō Project II* shows *nō* as part of Watanabe's contemporary dance (see Fig. 5). We are watching the translation, development, and reinterpretation of *nō* through Watanabe's experience of multiple traditions and forms. Watanabe's father trained in *nō*, but she rejected *nō* in her youth as being “other.” *Nō* was Japanese and would hinder her being a fully assimilated American, so instead she practiced first ballet and then modern dance. Eventually, she confronted her family history of migration, assimilation, and discrimination. Her 2001 work, *The Last Dance*, addressed the internment of the Japanese American community during World War II. The experience of being American and being “othered” in *The Last Dance*, and the contrast between American modern dance and Japanese *nō* in *Nō Project I*, give way in *Nō Project II* to liminality in form, location, and tradition. The experience she embraces here is not either/or, but both/and. In *Nō Project II* Watanabe is performing with and from the multiple, entwined languages that communicate a migration, which is both her life story and her creative journey.

Watanabe argues that social change is made possible through art by involving the audience in an exercise of compassion that she articulates as “making the audience feel.” In *The Last Dance*, narrative content was a means of insight for the audience, whereas in *Nō Project II* similar goals were reached by changing how the audience engages with the work. Watanabe argues that art practice can evoke insight into injustice: “To make change we have to make people feel. How to you get people to feel? Through art because people can experience what you are trying to do. It is about raising consciousness but you can't just see something intellectually . . . it means nothing until your audience can feel it . . . It may not be overtly political but it's tapping that part of people” (Watanabe 24 May 2005).

Watanabe associates the attentiveness that is fostered in the collaboration process as a skill for cultural attentiveness and the practice

of collaboration becomes a means of nourishing equality and diversity. In *Nō Project II* the practice and philosophy of *nō* are translated and transformed in such a way as to engage with and enrich the social concerns of these collaborators in San Francisco.

The dance peaked, at the performance I saw on 5 May 2004, when Watanabe spun into a rugged crane position, perched on one leg with her body parallel to the floor, her other leg in a slightly bent extension back and her arms and head forward. There was a low drone from the accordion and high notes from the *koto* strings. The text created images of a forest at night. She held this position, perched and still in a crisp breath of light, so that the audience collectively held that moment with her. There was a sense of being at the very edge, that the details of our lives are laid bare and our emotional situation is revealed. The dance went from communicating a personal history of cultural migration and an attempt at translation of form across distinct cultures to bringing us into the present moment. Here at the top of this modern pirouette, having addressed the past, we are thrust into the immediate present. This is a shared moment of focused attention cre-



FIGURE 5. June Watanabe's modern dance vocabulary is juxtaposed with Uchida's *nō*. (Photo: Andy Mogg)

ated through the process of collaboration of dancer with music, text, movement, and rapt audience.

The music and Watanabe's dance were not fixed, rehearsed, and repeated; they were improvised onstage at each performance. In the rehearsal process the performers developed a shared attention to the energy and dynamic. As Watanabe explains, "The material was changing all the time, but the nature and the feeling of it didn't" (Watanabe 23 June 2005).

As she assumed the rugged crane, the musicians were attuned to Watanabe's dance. When the energy lifted into a peak moment, the music froze. This silence came out of the musicians "being in the moment" with the dance. Rather than making a strict plan for the performance, the rehearsals aimed to develop a shared space of concentration and enabled the artists to bring this focus into a live performance.

The "being in the moment" of the performance is created by the unification of performers and the audience. Watanabe intentionally aims for a specific focus of attention on the part of the audience to enable them to enter the performance. She explains: "[The audience] really had to let go. It required so much of them to be able to stop trying to be informed but to allow themselves to participate in a particular way, otherwise they would not get anything out of the piece. The structure was formed in such a way that it made the audience do that; people eventually had to begin letting go and then they would find the piece" (Watanabe 24 June 2005). The performance required the audience like the artists to have a conscious, focused attention to the energy, details, and nuance of the present moment.

Nō Project II was influenced by aspects of *nō* philosophy and tradition but employed very few of the formal and structural qualities *nō*. The costumes in *Nō Project II* were basic and muted, different from the elaborate *nō* costumes that are lavish and often communicate gender, age, and character. In contrast to traditional *nō* the dance did not have specific characters that explore a particular memory, dream, or event, but the piece explored the human condition in relation to multiple issues relevant to the San Francisco community, most directly, U.S. military action and migration and identity. *Nō* plays are generally structured into two scenes separated by a comedic *kyogen* scene. *Nō Project II* shifted focus between different elements of the collaboration but was not divided into scenes and did not have any comedic elements. Most significant, is the difference between the formalized music and dance of traditional *nō* and this new work that based its artistic expression on exploration and discovery rather than a mastery of a set technique. This contemporary translation of *nō* shared an inner concentration

lying and very controlled sense of energy, a kind of constant yet quiet tension, is basic to *nō*. As one who has studied *nō* largely in its physical aspects of performance, its movement and music, I feel that it is the physical aspects and their creation of a level of energy that builds and subsides but is always maintained which make *nō*, *J nō*" (1997: 25).

7. Publicity for the performance describes the project as "An interdisciplinary performance work, [that] illuminates the metaphysical dualities of life, war and aesthetic thought through the varied Buddhist minds of the artists." Published in postcards advertising the performance and on the *June Watanabe in Company* website (2004).

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