

## Performance Matters

# On the Path of No-Character: Zeami's Traces Walked Back and Forward

Álvaro Iván Hernández Rodríguez

Volume 10, numéro 1, 2024

(Re)sounding Bodies East and West: Embodied Engagements with Japanese Traditions

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1110552ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1110552ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Institute for Performance Studies, Simon Fraser University

ISSN

2369-2537 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Hernández Rodríguez, Á. (2024). On the Path of No-Character: Zeami's Traces Walked Back and Forward. *Performance Matters*, 10(1), 61–71. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1110552ar>

Résumé de l'article

This essay thinks through the journey of being and becoming a character, as it is repeated over decades, focusing on the experience of the author performing his monologue *Los Nueve Monstruos* (itself based on a poem by Cesar Vallejo). The repeated performance of this monologue over three decades becomes a way of feeling and registering the change of the body and self through the iterative taking-form of a character. The essay reflects upon the changes produced in both the character and the performer during those many encounters over the years, first in Putumayo with the Kamentsa Indigenous peoples, then over the Andes to Colombia's capital city of Bogotá, and across both the Atlantic and Pacific to Europe and Asia. Embodied encounters of the performer/author with the Noh tradition of Japan and Zeami's philosophical approach to performance transforms *Los Nueve Monstruos*—moving from the approximation of the idea of a character to the notion of no-character, a concept of transition that focuses on the vibratory quality and sounding experience of “in-provisation.”

© Álvaro Iván Hernández Rodríguez, 2024



Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

**é**rudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

## On the Path of No-Character: Zeami's Traces Walked Back and Forward

Álvaro Iván Hernández Rodríguez

Zeami Motokiyo's texts, drawings, and at some point, the practice of *noh* Japanese theatre have become fundamental during a journey that has not come to an end, my journey as performer in the process of "flowering." In search of a character along the way, instead of finding unity, the performer learns in their encounter with Japanese *noh* to become multiple, dissolved, dilated, to come together and apart through the practice of what I call "in-provisation": a walking and sounding that repeats and gradually begins to connect worlds and nurture the process of becoming no-character. This essay is the story of my experience preparing for the character in my performance of *Los Nueve Monstruos* and his passage through Japan and back. It tells of the process of becoming no-character through in-provisation,

This is a practice-as-research *ensayo*. In Spanish, the word *ensayo* stands for both essay and rehearsal; this means, here, that this is a thinkingfeeling experiment; the words you are about to read are grounded in the experience of the doing and becoming of what I call no-character, involving the traces, particular stories, places, and occurrences that come to give form to its history. In this sense, the essay is also an unfinished rehearsal, just like the performance of *Los Nueve Monstruos*, bringing together what it was and will have been, its changes over time, and tracing its encounters across bodies and cultures.

This rehearsal/essay connects and collects the experiences already put in motion for the idea of no-character central to this piece. The experience of finding no-character was something initiated before my journey to Japan; however, the training in Japanese *noh* theatre allowed me to encounter a vocabulary for it and also led me to experience a heightened awareness that gives presence to a particular relation and way of understanding, sensing, and feeling a character. This way runs up against existing methods and structures for "building a character" and eschews them, instead seeking a movement of in-provisation. My experience in Japan radically changed what I was doing as a performer, and yet what I was doing before Japan as a performer was already nurturing this understanding and practice.

This is not an essay about the expertise of a performer in Japanese *noh*; rather, it relates the process of getting lost in the training of an irreducible practice and thus working on finding ways for this training to become rhythmic, sonic, tactile, in-provisational, something to change with, to become with. Rather than telling what was learned by a Western performer during a brief experience with Japanese *noh*, this essay provides an account of my experience of losing and loosing myself in *noh* to experience what a character could do and be otherwise.

---

**Álvaro Iván Hernández Rodríguez** is a professor in the Faculty of Arts, ASAB Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas in performing arts and the master's and doctoral programs in artistic studies. Hernández is a transdisciplinary art maker who has worked uninterruptedly for more than two decades as an actor, performer, director, playwright, dramaturge, activist, trainer, researcher, and academic. Hernández has a doctorate in performance studies from the University of California, Davis, and a master's in creative writing from the National University of Colombia.

Walking and sounding become practices for feeling a radical relationality enabling the surfacing and becoming of the world's interdependence. It is in walking and sounding that the performer comes to feel the tangle of worlds, even if those worlds (Asia and the Americas) are separated by an ocean. The flower (*hana*) of Zeami's theories on the practice of *noh* is here also a way to think of the reactivation of an anatomy of relationality and constant change that puts us in contact, connects us in rhizomes, hyphae, mycelium, vibrations. In the step by step, the walk tells us about the passing and transit between material and immaterial worlds, much like the transit of a performer of *noh* along the *hashigakari*, or bridgeway, and about the opening of a body in the ecology of no-character. It is a walk from learning to move to becoming moved.

### **It All Comes with a Walk**

Sometime at the beginning of the 1990s, I visited el Valle del Sibundoy, a region in the southern part of Colombia at the end of three large mountain chains that traverse the country from north to south, and at the beginning of the Amazon region. The region is said to have two rainbows, one from the Andes and another from the Amazon, a convergence of a double geography, a double history of intersected and divergent stories. The region is home to two Indigenous communities, the Kamentsá and the Inga, whose origins and languages are completely different.

The reason for my visit, as a theatre actor, was to participate in research directed by a senior student of anthropology and textile design about the weaving techniques and symbolism of the fabric designs of the Kamentsá—also spelled Camentsá or Camsá—community of the Sibundoy Valley. My personal motivation was to take every opportunity to learn from and about the performance traditions of the Kamentsá peoples.

Every day we walked several kilometres to reach the houses of the weavers who were teaching us the techniques of vertical loom weaving. As they were weaving, they were telling stories and weaving those stories into the collective practice embedded and embodied in each piece of fabric. Into a special piece of fabric, *el chumbe* or *Tšombiach*—a girdle that can stretch several metres in length and that women wrap around their waists—they wove geometric shapes and designs that carried the stories told in their oral tradition, knotting together the elements that move through the living tradition of their community: the bear, the sun, the moon, the orchard (or *chagra*). Each one of these designs unfolded in the telling of the weaver. There was no “character” that could be taken up in the way that traditional Western drama offers characters rooted in a text for actors to inhabit. Instead, the stories were filled with a process of becoming-character as the people worked through their weaving and walking.

Over a few weeks, it all started to come together. After our daily visits to someone's home, I walked most days with a few women to the village, and on the way, the telling kept being told. On the way back to the house where I was staying, I would meet up with someone for the walk, usually one of the old men from the community who had become a friend, and he would tell me about the planting, or the cycles of the moon, or other stories of his childhood. And in between the tellings, I would learn about the textures woven into the warp of this valley. The stories walked also involved the many forms of violence that the Kamentsá and Inga peoples had experienced, how dangerous it was for the women to walk alone through the valley, the rapes by the settlers who came to the area, and the violence involving guerrillas or *paramilitars*.

Through the walkings and weavings, everyone learned I was an actor and stories began to come together. We were invited to a meeting at the bilingual school (Spanish and Kamentsá) where important leaders of the community assisted, and I was asked if I could work with them. Thus, we all came to walk and weave. The weavers working with us researchers, now much more confident, knowing we were also sharing and working with them, invited us to participate in their daily weaving practice as they told us the stories of each weaving and the weaving of the stories. I became fascinated by every detail of the weaving, the bodily co-composition of weaving and the unfolding of the telling, the mesh of the warp holding the walk of what is being told. Many people became involved. The women told the stories to the younger ones, and they in turn told them to all of us when we gathered at the school. Some Elders of the community attended and told details and other versions of the stories. Children, teenagers, and adults of all ages came together, and we all talked and rehearsed elements finding ways to tell and weave these stories.

At the end, we all came together in the weaving (netting) of a *chumbe*. During the performance, or what I saw of it, the women weavers were actually weaving with their looms and developing the warp on which the performance would literally unfold. Everyone else, with their practices and experiences, came to unwind the netting of these stories and tradition. Masks, objects, costumes, music, dances, and their own language were used in this performance, which was not really about acting out the stories for an audience. Although this gathering would perform for audiences—many of them white, *colonos*, authorities—the performance was mainly about themselves and the strength and vitality of the community, the changes they had gone through, especially as the younger generations were becoming less interested in their own traditions—the process was mainly directed at them. Every walk and every weaving were a lesson of a performance that was becoming, or rather of performance as a process of becoming (Min-Ha 2010).

After four months, and just a week before the performance of this collective gathering of practices, we had to leave and never saw what happened, learning only through stories told in messages and phone calls how it went, what it became.

### **Crece a treinta minutos por segundo, paso a paso / It grows thirty minutes a second, step by step<sup>1</sup>**

After returning to Bogota, the capital of Colombia, where I lived, my director, Juan Monsalve, with whom I had been working for years, brought me a poem by the Peruvian poet Cesar Vallejo entitled “Los nueve monstruos” (The nine monsters), and proposed that I perform a solo piece based on it. The solo would be part of an experimental work exploring ideas about the locations of memory. Whatever the piece became, it was to be performed in a transparent cube—only the back side was to be covered—of three-by-three metres, that in time we actually built. When we did, each wooden post of the cube was about fifty centimetres thick, and the pieces could be assembled and disassembled. It looked like a reduced version of the main area of a *noh* stage, but the back panel, instead of a pine tree, was a pale and aged piece of fabric treated with colour by a painter.

The poem was a double fence (*cerco*) and a double groove (*surco*) of pain. Pain folded into everything and unwrapping in all things, double pain, pain twice, for the other as for me in the junction of a tangled pain, two times, doubling and coming together into the world’s action. Pain in “el vaso, en la carniceria, en la aritmetica” (Vallejo [1959] 2014, 38; in the glass, in the butcher’s shop, in the arithmetic), growing everywhere, in every direction, in any form, anchored to all things, (in)forming

all processes, seizing us all. And yet, in spite of all this, there is only doing. Action must take place, said Vallejo, at the end.

While in the Sibundoy Valley, our main concern was how to find ways for the stories to be told; here, there was no story, nor something that could be called a character, and when the poem was read in its entirety at normal speed, its duration was a maximum of five minutes. Besides, the place of the performance was already determined: the cube, which even though it could be moved from one place to another, was still a three-by-three-meter cube. The first time I read the poem, I was completely fascinated, and I immediately accepted Monsalve's proposition, however complex it would be to interpret it as a solo performance. I was an actor, but perhaps in the weaving and telling I had recently experienced, I would learn how not to be one.

A "felt thought" (Hernandez 2020) began to emerge in the practice. I became interested in the weaving of the warp and the process of weaving and becoming woven that I had learned with the Kamentsá. My interest thus moved from the telling of a story, or the need to tell a story, to the becoming-woven, the languagelessness coming from a primary grammar unfolding in the deep fabric of the process or poem. That is, a poetics of excess, the more-than-words of the pain exuding from the poem. In it, every word was pain, and yet no words could carry the unfolding affective mesh.

I began to practise with the loom and began to walk with an Indigenous friend from the Arhuaco community who studied at the same university. After classes we took together, we often walked across the university, and during our walks, we talked. During one conversation, he told me how some people, who are chosen from birth, prepare to become attuned to *Aluma*, or the source of life. In their preparation, which lasts for years (nine or eighteen, some sources say), they are deprived of light, made to spend their days in the dark in special caves, emerging only during the night. The process trains them to perceive and experience reality's deep connections.

At some point, the cube became a cave, not the one that my friend had told me about, but one I was creating to experience the limit, or the experience of the limit, the sense of deprivation and restraint of life on the borders of the sociocultural, and in such experience, "pain" should arise. What we called *pain* was for me a sense of place emerging from an affective tonality texturizing every word.

During these rehearsings, I was reading, and I found a Spanish translation of Zeami's *Fūshikaden*, and some terms stuck with me: *hana*, *yugen*, *santai*. I took a look at the *Dictionary of Theater Anthropology*—I was looking at the 1998 Spanish edition, but I quote here from the 2005 English edition—because I remembered that I had seen in it some of Zeami's drawings, and there I found definitions and descriptions of three role types: the old man, the woman, and the warrior (Barba and Savarese 2005, 86–87). Before reading about the roles, I had heard from my Arhuaco friend, or I might have imagined it, that the old wise man or woman, the *mamos*, went into caves in the highest parts of the mountains of their territory to prepare to die. That might not be true, but it was a true image that always came to me. From that image, I began to see the path that took me along the process of becoming a no-character.

The *Dictionary of Theater Anthropology* contained Zeami's drawing of the old man role, which it explains in the following terms: "It is interesting to note that in the drawing of the old person, who is leaning on a cane, Zeami takes care to indicate the upward position of the character's gaze. This is in contrast to the bent posture of an individual who is so weak that he must lean on a cane. A tension is thus created in the neck and the upper part of the spinal column" (Barba and Savarese

2005, 87). The explanation is accompanied by a quotation of Zeami: “One must study assiduously the precept: portray an old man while still possessing the Flower. The results should resemble that of an old tree that puts forth flower” (87). The *mamos* in the cave of the high mountains, and the distant gaze of Zeami’s drawing always stayed with me, both closer to heaven and yet grounded on earth. When it came to the work, there was a deep sense of being grounded emanating from the feet, and the voice elevating from there and filling the body. The space that would emerge from this grounded elevation of voice was a beginning for the sounding of Vallejo’s poem, and for finding the old man—Vallejo himself perhaps.

Repetition of a word, sometimes two, or of a complete line of the poem began to create a dissonant sound. As Monslave and I played with the word, simultaneously reciting parts of the poem, the meaning of the text started to fade, giving way to, becoming, a sound arising from the deep entanglements of a dark territory, the cave. Even if my director or the audience saw an actual place, for me it was none: the cave was a darkness, sounding intensive commotion until its exhaustion. Even if the director or the audience saw a character, for me there was none: instead, there was a body modulated by the flow of sound coming from the feet—almost stuck to the ground, elevating and expanding until the space was filled, and suddenly emptied. The old man was a gaze with the strength of time, ineffable, passing. Sometimes a word was extended until the breath was empty, and it got activated again and again, each time with a different duration. “It grows at thirty minutes by a second, step by step,” says a line of the poem, and each step in his-my walking was the unearthing of a buried tongue that can no longer name.

I never understood how people could sustain their attention until the end of the performance. “Vallejo,” the name collaborators gave to the performance as it was being rehearsed, grew in length until it ended up lasting forty-five to fifty minutes. But sometimes it lasted an hour, and on one occasion it lasted about an hour and a half. The time depended on the interactions between the voice of the director, who occasionally repeated some parts of the text at some important moments from a place outside the cube, and my responses to his interventions. The voice outside and the voice inside the cube affected each other, they diverged. One escaped the other, taking its own route, escaping the repetitions, and finding other ways to reiterate, extend, and expand the double sound of voice over voice. In some parts, the two voices would come together into a single text, but the unison created a kind of dissonant echo in which the sound did not find a coupling.

*Los Nueve Monstruos* was performed more than fifty times in Colombia in the year of its premiere. Since the cube was the only limit to the spacetime of the performance, it could be presented almost anywhere the cube fit. It was performed in corridors, patios, open spaces, basements, bookstores, libraries, plazas, auditoriums, and theatres, and in each space, *Los Nueve Monstruos* achieved a different relationship with the audience. On one occasion, it was performed in a theatre with a capacity of 1,500 people, with at least half of the seats occupied, and in the centre of this immense theatre was the small cube and the fragile old man sounding in the tonal affectivity of Vallejo’s pain. As the performance grew, the voice from within took up more space, sounding louder, resonating in a wider spectrum of modulations, and as it swelled, the meaning of the text dissolved. The thought accompanying the gaze of the old man in Zeami’s drawing always walked with me, as well as the image of his disappearance in the high peaks of the Colombian Sierra.

As the voice inside the cube grew, the voice outside vanished, until it was finally eradicated. Now it was just the cube and its inside pressing the force of the outside. At that moment, I left Colombia, after the performance won several awards, carrying a suitcase with the necessary items to carry the

poem. I took *The Nine Monsters* to Europe, where I performed it without the cube, inside a square outlined with the same dimensions, then in Boston, New York, Taiwan, and finally in Japan where a new Vallejo story began.

### **Arriving: *El ojo es visto y esta oreja oída / The eye is seen and this ear heard*<sup>2</sup>**

I came to Tokyo after living for a while in a Beijing opera school in Taipei, where I had performed *Los Nueve Monstruos*, and before that in several cities in Taiwan. At the Beijing opera school in Taipei, I lived and trained every day for extended periods of time with children and teenagers who, even at their young age, were already experts in acrobatics, martial arts, singing, stage combat, and so on. Compared to them, I was terrible. Besides, I did not understand Chinese at all, and there was no time to learn it. I was overwhelmed by the level of discipline and rigour, and the incredible skills cultivated throughout this learning. When I felt the need to be with adults, I would visit one of the teachers during his training hours and he would let me sit and watch him. He played the character of the monkey king and practised virtuoso acrobatics that I watched in silence and complete amazement. At times he would stop and explain in English what he was doing and tell stories about the opera. On the last day, after having participated in a performance organized by the school, I went to say goodbye to my friend and my main teacher, who offered a final piece of advice about the old man in the performance and about silence and attention that remains with me now and forever. That same night I left for Tokyo.

I had been invited to participate in a noh theatre workshop led by Kanze Hideo and his troupe. My flight landed at the Tokyo airport at 9 p.m., and once I got to the city, I found myself completely lost, walking again in a country I did not know. This immediate experience of not knowing was a foreknowledge of what I felt with noh.

The next day, I arrived about five minutes early to the workshop. When I entered the theatre, I crossed into a whole different world. I had never been to Japan and I did not speak Japanese; however, in less than two hours, we were already working on some basics of movement and chanting. The idea I had in mind of that old man from the drawings of Zeami and my thoughts about noh just went away. I was there on an actual noh stage, doing, without having an idea of what I was doing. Yet I was there feeling for myself what this was for the first time. I felt shocked in so many ways. Everything I had been doing at the school in Taipei had no place here, so I had to quiet my body, pay careful attention to every movement. Again, as I had done when I was at the Beijing opera school in Taipei, I slowed down. I had to learn to sit differently, and let my knees feel it until they got used to it, realizing the ways I had sat, and, of course, the ways I had walked. Again, there were my feet to ground me in this moment of complete disorientation.

For the next two weeks, the participants of this workshop worked the entire day of every day putting together fragments of two noh plays, *Kanawa* and *Hagoromo*, using the costumes, the masks, and everything else necessary to perform them. After the workshop, I stayed in Japan learning what I could, and later on, I won a scholarship and came back and stayed for some years. During that time, I continued to study noh, and also *kabuki buyō* and *butōh*. But this is not the story of my apprenticeship in Japan, it is the story of the character from the performance *Los Nueve Monstruos* and his passage through Japan and back.

***Y es una inundación con propios líquidos, con propio barro, y propia nube sólida / And it is a flood with its own liquids, with its own mud and its own solid cloud*<sup>3</sup>**

**From Improvisation to In-provisation**

While training in Japan, the character of the performance *Los Nueve Monstruos* became more and more moved by the internal sound resonating inside the cube. In Japan, I was learning again to move differently. The precision of each movement and the clumsiness of a body that does not know the noh technique created a feeling of constant mismatch. To learn each *kata*, or form, was also to breathe each *kata* in a different way, as one of the masters said, which is to achieve the singular flow of each movement. But for a movement to become itself, it has to become absent to itself. This is how I see what a noh performer does. Learning the detail of each movement, coming to feel, sense, what it does, and letting it go so to be let go of by it. Letting go is the sense, or state, of being absent to itself. Movement outside of itself moving.

The learning of a noh sequence of movement, organized in *katas*, is a slow process that creates a deep embodiment that awakens a state of mind, which is a “state of ‘no-mind’ and Noh mind,” as Trinh Min-Ha writes (2010, 88). She also writes that “the highly mystified ‘presence’ of the artist is both a presence and an absence to one-self.” (88). From learning to move to becoming moved, there is a gap, a distance that can take years to travel. This is how I now understand the long training and learning experience of a noh actor. Of course, the time I spent in Japan was just a step on the path to closing this gap. I was not in Japan to become a noh actor, but just to learn how to walk along this path that I already had begun in my own way, and that I keep walking.

The character of *Los Nueve Monstruos* learned over the years to improvise his movements by following and being guided by sound, moved by the sound. The character’s actions always changed according to the emergent tonality from each new encounter with the sound. Sound was a mode of engagement to find the texture materializing the text. The first sound (vocal sound) in the performance was the sound of the letter *i* in Spanish, close to the sound of the letter *e* in English. The sound was repeated and extended for several minutes, but it was somehow a way to become attuned to the vibratory quality that each performance would begin to set into motion. When I was in Japan, I learned to in-provise rather than improvise. By *in-provise*, I mean to sustain change within the repetition of the same form, to put in motion a flow that moves within the same form and yet unexpectedly and indeterminately changes each repetition in invisible ways by the openness of the body to the deep and minute relationality of the ecology of happening. The repetition of the same form is not so much a problem as it is a “taking,” the emergence of the experience of each movement becoming or taking-form. Such feeling of the flow, that is a sense of time and a time out of itself, and out of self, is what I call dance. That might be what Zeami called no-mind, emptiness of mind; this is not action in formlessness but rather moving in the state in which “emptiness is form,” as Yasuo Yuasa writes (1987, 108), with emptiness here referring to the “mind” (108). In such a state, the mind “is being emptied such that one’s awareness disappears” (108).

The movement of the character in *Los Nueve Monstruos* became more and more tied to a defined score. It became a sequence of movements, or a sequence of actions fixed yet moved by the sound. But sound in this sense is the whole experience of being and becoming affected by the vibratory quality of sounding. The movement of the character changed from improvisation to in-provisation. The problem was now to let go and go along the body in the unbroken chain of actions. To go along means to be absent in the presence of time felt. This problem has been worked upon by,



among many others, the Polish director Jerzy Grotowski and Eugenio Barba, the director of Odin Teatret. For both, actions are defined and moved along a chain. I was well aware of the way Barba and Grotowski worked,<sup>4</sup> but I did not fully realize how it felt until I was in Japan. Their methods underline the copresence of mind in the practice. The question of actions in series, or action in chains, is also central to the pragmatism of William James. David Lapoujade (2019) formulates the question, in his explanation of James's pragmatism, like this: the question is not, he says, "Why do we act?" (which would lead us back to searching for the general reason for a first action), but "Why do actions unfurl into actions" (loc. 1177–78). That is also the problem for the performer. If actions are chained, there is no way to know what action unfolds as action moves into its nextness and becomes by the movement of its pastness. The problem for a performer is thus to go along, and to let go movement to be moved. The body is a flood of the excess of its own liquids, paraphrasing Vallejo.

### **Dilation in In-provisation: *invierte el sufrimiento posiciones / suffering inverts positions*<sup>5</sup>**

#### **Sounding and Moving**

On account of in-provisation, of this felt flow of actions in chaining, a negation of the character arose. A character is usually a unity, an idea of a single being, a self-contradiction of internal narrative and external formation. And yet character could be otherwise. Once the body accomplishes going along in the movement of actions enchained, what is left is change. The entity called a character dilates, that is, it turns porous and opens to the experience of change. It came to be presence suspended in its own awareness of being absent, a becoming presence that was a tendential line toward not-knowing.

This experience of action moving is an excess of action unfolding and affecting beyond what could be possibly known. The precise chain of actions only unfolds by way of being moved in the activity of its past becoming nextness, and this passing is only felt when it happens. It is a passing that dilates the body in its indeterminate multiplicity. This indeterminate passing, that in this case comes once one is capable of abandoning oneself, and being out-of-self, is self-becoming, self-blossoming, the process of obtaining the flower (*hana*) in noh. A process that in the case of noh is possible only by means of "long perennial training" (Yuasa 1987, 108), which is "a mental readiness for training in accordance to one's age, from childhood to one's late years" (108), as Yuasa explains in his reading of Zeami. Hana is not a moment but a process accomplished with hard labour and work. With the practice of noh, the words of my sensei, the readings about it, I came to pay close attention to the process of transformation and change in in-provisation that entails the flowering of one's self in the continuous work in process that is life. For me, the multiple phases of transformation of the performance *Los Nueve Monstruos* were a process of cultivation, gardening for an emergence of the tonal affectivity of Vallejo's poem echoing suffering. The performance was in itself also a process of transformation in the taking and mobilizing of sound suffering deep down through the tissues of the performance and the performer's body.

I gave up thinking of a character in the performance of *Los Nueve Monstruos* and focused on the possibilities of the entanglement of sound moving action. The cave-cube came back to me. As I did not know Japanese, most of the time I had no idea what I was saying when learning the chanting. I repeated as anybody else until I learned it, but through in-provisation I became used to experiencing the words of the text as a vibratory experience rather than a signifying one. Stripped of the

possibility to make sense of the words, to rationalize, to understand the story—by my own lack of Japanese language understanding—I learned to attune to the vibratory quality of the chanting across the movement of the body. The body was in the modulations of its own vibration. Chanting, and by extension voice, became for me ways to connect to that vibratory quality emerging in the experience of activity. From then on, building on something that I had already been working through with Vallejo, I emphasized and put forward that experience in the performance of *Los Nueve Monstruos*. As Mark Nearman (1982) explains in a reading and translation of Zeami’s treatise of acting, *Kakyō*, that I used to read when I was in Japan: “Recitation in Noh, unlike that customarily found in Western theatre, incorporates a vibratory theory. . . . This concept is encapsulated in the character for ‘sound’ which represents an utterance arising from the heart or mind through the open mouth. As this character implies, sound is regarded as not simply a phenomenon experienced by human hearing but as something created by an action. . . . Sound, like wind, was recognized as an invisible force capable of effective movement” (338).

Through noh, I came to finding, with *Los Nueve Monstruos*, an experience of the materiality of text within the experience of sounding. The positions inverted, as the poem of Vallejo says, the body inverted by means of voice vibrating and becoming the experience of suffering. But this character, now dissolved in the experience of its own materiality, did not ever show suffering or pain. It became fragile, soft, and even more then/after. It did find its walking and its ground even more then/after. I did find along the walk, and in the course of my experience of in-provisation in Japan, this no-character: character-less, in-personal, in-personage, unfinished, and existing only as material and materiality unfolding.

In my experience learning noh in Japan, I began to experience with joy the subtle and yet powerful energy mobilized by the feet. The groundedness of feet in noh was (and remains) of a completely different kind from what I had experienced before. It was a sort of unceasing attaining of attunement and intimacy with the floor and deep (literally) embodiment of the soil below. The step-by-step walking of noh is a concrete practice of slowing down and being attuned entirely to the sensory and vibratory qualities surfacing in the contact, a touch without touching happening in the encounter of feet-floor. Even though one of the most precious things to see when watching noh is the feet of the performers, one cannot see them detached from what they are doing with the floor, materializing the energy coming from the ground in such a way that the floor loses its presence and what is left is the flow, flying feet floating and emanating the specific quality of energy brought forth by each character. The most subtle changes in the feet bring with them a completely different energy.

Feet in noh are an event, they constitute, in my view, the experience of life, the flow of life of the “no-character,” they are grounded without being ground, they are sliding, making the surface and surfacing of the stage erupt. In a way, to experience noh is to experience the feet in an undefined eluding of gravity. Feet working in noh are a subtle and refined expression of energy flowing. To walk, in noh, is to in-provise. To experience what I am saying: actually doing noh is probably one of the most difficult things, at least in my experience. I did not accomplish such a thing, and still today I keep doing it as part of my training, persisting in having the feeling of such an experience. I did learn from it, and kept working in this: the fragile, soft, and yet strong and grounded connection with the floor. The performance of *Los Nueve Monstruos* began to transform into a subtle dance of energy modulations moved by the deep entanglement of feet bringing up and tuning the space in the midst of pain vibration.

The deep embodiment of suffering in Vallejo's performance was an inquiry into the locus, and loci, of territories of memory, of the forgotten, and their possibility. William James spoke of the firm territories one can find to be rooted, and those that come from our *faith*, a word James used to speak of the uncertainty of action: "the zone of formative processes, the dynamic belt of quivering uncertainty, the line where past and future meet" (Lapoujade 2019, loc. 1208). The Indigenous peoples I walked with in Sibundoy, later down in the Amazon, or up in the Sierras of Colombia, have been walking for centuries in the midst of the suffering inflicted on their communities, their ways of living and knowing, and their permanent struggle to keep their practices alive and enlivening their territories. The steps taken, and those to come, are a quest for firmness and flexibility as well, survival and sustaining of land entanglements with their living practices and practices of living, weaving together the dynamic encounters of life emergence and nourishment in contact zones. Those steps are also a refusal of the persistence embedded in the practices settling man over nature and land. The rooted feet that I had found to encounter the sound in the cube of Vallejo in Colombia came from my experience of walking-with in the midst of encounters with some native peoples and non-native as well and the daily residual violence transfiguring and refiguring the work.<sup>6</sup>

### **And Back: *Hay muchísimo que hacer* / There is so much to do<sup>7</sup>**

And *Los Nueve Monstruos* did not stop, it was performed with more accuracy and awareness in an attempt to, as Min-Ha (2010) writes, convey "performance as becoming rather than making" (87), a mutual becoming of vibration and vibratory presence, through sounding and moving, chanting and walking. In the years after my experience in Japan, *Los Nueve Monstruos* became a symphony. I came back to my country and returned to the cube-cave, but this time with the memory of the four pillars holding the noh stage. The first time I performed it again I was working with a soprano singer, a cellist, and a violinist, whose instruments incessantly repeated a simple dissonant harmony that echoed the words-sound coming from inside the cube and reverberated through the whole space. The performance became a vibratory experience, or it brought the "vibratory quality of performance" (Zarrilli 2013, 123). The performance and performer became softer, and the character became a moving, a no-character, doubling the affect of pain, a double fold of sadness and joy, weakness and strength, flourishing and perishing, an affective dissonance resounding in the bodily contours of a neverending journey, what the poem refers to in the line "y el bien de ser, dolernos doblemente" (and the good of being, pain us doubly; Vallejo [1959] 2014, 38).

While I am writing these words, I have been thinking, what will have become of *Los Nueve Monstruos*, what will it become? I am sure there is something moving in this writing, sounding, announcing for something to come. This essay is a repetition that walks the performance again, in-provises with its resonance, finds its ground in the happening of a new ecology; the experience behind it, the rehearsing of it carries its traces, the places it had passed, the singular and multiple events that reform and inform what had been of a character that was not.

### **Notes**

1. From the poem "Los nueve monstruos" by Cesar Vallejo ([1959] 2014, 38). Translations of the poem are mine.
2. Vallejo ([1959] 2014, 39).
3. Vallejo ([1959] 2014, 38–39).

4. I have participated in workshops with Barba, been part of sessions of the International School of Theater Anthropology directed by Barba, and also been part of works directed by him. The works of Grotowski and Barba have similarities, including defined, repeatable forms.
5. Vallejo ([1959] 2014, 30).
6. This performance began to take shape and developed in the 1990s, a decade of genocides, massacres, bombings, and disappearances in Colombia. Walking saved many people.
7. Vallejo ([1959] 2014, 40).

## References

- Barba, Eugenio, and Nicola Savarese. 2005. *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology: The Secret Art of the Performer*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.
- Hernandez, Alvaro. 2020. "Emergent Ecologies of Dramaturgying." PhD diss., University of California, Davis.
- Lapoujade, David. 2019. *William James: Empiricism and Pragmatism*. Translated by Thomas Lamarre. Kindle ed. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Minh-Ha, Trinh T. 2010. *Elsewhere, Within Here*. London: Routledge.
- Nearman, Mark J. 1982. "Kakyō: Zeami's Fundamental Principles of Acting." *Monumenta Nipponica* 37 (3): 333–42. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2384389>.
- Vallejo, César. (1959) 2014. "Los nueve monstruos." In *Poemas humanos*, 38–40. Barcelona: Lenguas.
- Yuasa, Yasuo. 1987. *The Body: Toward an Eastern Mind-Body Theory*. Translated by Thomas P. Kasulis and Shigenori Nagatomo. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Zarrilli, Phillip. 2013. "Psychophysical Acting in Japan." In *Acting: Psychophysical Phenomenon and Process*, by Zarrilli, Phillip, Jerri Daboo, and Rebecca Loukes, 95–157. Basingstoke, UK: Red Globe Press.