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SanSan Kwan

**EVEN AS WE KEEP TRYING: AN ETHICS OF
INTERCULTURALISM IN JÉRÔME BEL'S *PICHET KLUNCHUN
AND MYSELF***

In 2004, Singaporean presenter Tang Fu Kuen commissioned French avant-garde choreographer Jérôme Bel to create a work in collaboration with classical Thai dancer-choreographer Pichet Klunchun. The resulting piece is unlike most intercultural collaborations. In the world of concert dance, East–West interculturalism takes place in a variety of ways: in costuming or set design, in theme or subject matter, in choreographic structure, in stylings of the body, in energetic impetus, in spatial composition, in philosophical attitude toward art making. Bel's work, titled *Pichet Klunchun and Myself*, does not combine aesthetics in any of these ways. In fact, the piece may more accurately be described not as a dance but as two verbal interviews (first by Bel of Klunchun and then vice versa) performed for an audience and separated by an intermission. There is no actual intermingling of forms—Thai classical dance with European contemporary choreography—in this performance. The intercultural “choreography” here comprises a staged conversation between the artists and some isolated physical demonstrations by each.

In his press material, Bel explains that logistical circumstances in Bangkok, where he traveled to work with Klunchun, necessitated what he terms a “theatrical and choreographic documentary.”¹ I am wondering what was behind the decision not to create a more conventional work of choreography.² Does this piece, which carefully resists an appropriation of form, which literally attempts equal dialogue, manage to avoid the orientalism of so much other East–West intercultural performance? Do the “logistical circumstances” that led to this piece reveal the failure of true intercultural exchange or does the decision to abandon a commingling of

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forms actually suggest a more optimistic acknowledgment that most intercultural work is ultimately unethical? Does Bel, in fact, demonstrate in this piece an attempt to get at intercultural exchange in another way? Does the decision not to dance but to talk offer a more ethical approach to engaging with cultural difference?

INTERCULTURAL PERFORMANCE

The history of Western avant-garde theatre and dance is a history of cultural appropriation. From Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud to Robert Wilson and Julie Taymor, from Ruth St. Denis and Martha Graham to Merce Cunningham and Deborah Hay, Western artists have borrowed from, imagined, and incorporated Eastern aesthetics in their work. For many of these influential artists, encounters with Asia have, in fact, inspired key turning points in the development of their art.

In the case of dance, scholars such as Priya Srinivasan and Yutian Wong have done important historical work to uncover the ways Asian aesthetics have been appropriated in Euro-American concert dance.³ Ruth St. Denis, one of the foremothers of modern dance in the United States, drew much of her inspiration and her choreography from South Asian dance. Likewise, Martha Graham was influenced by a range of East, Southeast, and South Asian aesthetics. These orientalist imaginings lent the choreography of these pioneers of American modern dance an air of the novel, the exotic, the sensual. Later, leaders in postmodern dance similarly looked East: for example, Merce Cunningham drew on Chinese philosophy, and Steve Paxton incorporated Asian martial arts to generate dance material. In all of these cases—and this is just a selection of examples—the choreographers, widely viewed as major innovators in the history of American dance, did not credit any of the people who might have been the sources of their inspiration.⁴ Their appropriation of Asian aesthetics became historicized as the unique creations of individual artists who single-handedly renewed American dance.⁵ As Wong and Srinivasan each argue, if these key figures in the history of American modern and postmodern dance based their choreographic style on fantasies of Asia, then we must account for the ways that orientalism is a constitutive part of the legacy of Euro-American dance.

Interculturalism also has a long history in the theatre. One of the most prolific periods in this history is the 1980s and 1990s, a time when a number of European and American artists engaged in large-scale projects that assimilated Western and Eastern forms, performers, staging conventions, epic stories, *mise-en-scènes*, or texts. Peter Brook's 1985 nine-hour adaptation of the Indian epic *The Mahabharata* was a seminal, and controversial, work of the period. Ariane Mnouchkine's 1987 *L'Indiade* was another. Eugenio Barba's search for "pre-expressive" principles through research in Asian theatre forms and Jerzy Grotowski's study of non-Western ritual marked other experiments in intercultural performance of the era. From Asia, Ong Keng Sen's 1997 *Lear* was a much-discussed East–West production.⁶ The scholarship that arose in response to these works has been plentiful.⁷ In some cases intellectuals and critics proclaimed a promising new trend in which artists were commingling aesthetics across

cultures in ways that dismantled colonial barriers and heralded new forms.⁸ Richard Schechner has been an exuberant champion of intercultural work. In a 1982 article, he welcomes a “culture of choice.”⁹ While he acknowledges the danger of ignoring imbalances of power and cultural chauvinism in cross-cultural relationships, he is ultimately omnivorous: “The more contact among peoples the better. The more we, and everyone else too, can perform our own and other people’s cultures the better.”¹⁰ Other scholars decried the Western arrogance and imperial attitude they saw repeated in so many of these theatrical fusions.¹¹ In multiple books and articles Rustom Bharucha, one of the few scholars of interculturalism who does not write from a position in the West but is an independent scholar based in India, vigorously condemns what he views as the stealing and evisceration of native traditions by condescending European and American artists,¹² and even by Asian artists such as Ong who, Bharucha feels, equally “consume” Asia.¹³ Reviewing the literature of the time, this busy period of intercultural theatre was either a demonstration of the persistence of colonialism or the rich result of a ““promiscuous”” artistic curiosity.¹⁴

I outline a bit of the fraught history of intercultural performance in order to situate *Pichet Klunhoun and Myself* and provide a backdrop for my questions about the ethics and politics of contemporary interculturalism. Why return to these debates of thirty years ago? Where did they ultimately lead? In 2000, Schechner wrote, “One thing is sure, the borrowings and the impositions are not going to stop. The open question is—can there be, ought there to be, rules governing this interplay? If so, what might the rules be? Who would enforce them? Is enforcement something artists and intellectuals want to get into?”¹⁵ It is true that since the 1980s and 1990s, many Western artists have continued to incorporate Asian forms in their works. There may be no satisfying answer to Schechner’s questions, but they are still important to ask. The debates of those decades have caused some contemporary artists to be more conscientious than their forebears about the politics of cross-cultural work. If Mnouchkine was insensitive in her exploitation of “the Orient,” if Brook was tactless in his plundering of Indian tradition, if Barba and Grotowski were naive in their search for a universal theatrical language, artists today who experiment with East–West fusions cannot be as cavalier—and neither can scholars who study this work. Patrice Pavis, a key advocate in the earlier period, returns to the dilemma in “Intercultural Theatre Today (2010)”:

Times have radically changed. The effects of globalization on our way of doing and understanding theatre are increasingly evident. Hence the renewal, or the complete mutation of interculturalism; hence our growing consideration for the phenomena of globalization, our will to think of theatre according to the world which produces and receives it, taking into account its socio-economic and ethical dimensions.¹⁶

Whereas in 1996 Pavis described critiques of interculturalism as “moralistic ‘political correctness,’”¹⁷ here he acknowledges a need for more circumspection, more contextual understanding, and an *ethical* dimension.

Increasing global contact and mobility has made cross-cultural encounter and exchange more and more a part of all forms of cultural practice. I argue that the debates over interculturalism are not over. Certainly the culturally hybrid work that is performed now is different from that of Mnouchkine and Brook. I might characterize it as more effortfully reciprocal. For example, choreographer Margaret Jenkins's *Other Suns* is a piece danced jointly by her American dancers and dancers from the Guangdong Modern Dance Company (GMDC) in China. One section of the dance is choreographed by Jenkins, one by Liu Qi from GMDC, and the last section is a collaboration. Despite these efforts at parity, however, I detect a lingering orientalist prejudice as I read Jenkins's blog of her residency in Guangdong.¹⁸ Bel and Klunchun too labor to make their collaboration fifty-fifty, and compared to earlier intercultural performance, *Pichet Klunchun and Myself* is at once more respectful and more lighthearted about cross-cultural exchange.

At the same time, this shift toward reciprocity does not relieve us of the need to examine continually how cultural exchanges operate. What are the politics inherent in these encounters? Who has the privilege of being perceived as intercultural, and who is merely "modernized"? And does orientalism persist even in the more recent collaborations that earnestly attempt equal exchange and mutual respect? Can cross-cultural sharing help us escape orientalism, or is the notion of the East as absolute other to the West the mechanism that still fuels Western interest in Asian aesthetics?

In our increasing confrontation with and reliance on communities outside our traditional national and cultural borders we must develop strategies of engagement that neither reduce difference to an unspecified, decontextualized relativism nor reify colonial hierarchies and prejudices. A recent anthology in dance studies titled *Worlding Dance* offers us a neologism for thinking about the politics of cultural classification.¹⁹ The book is concerned with dismantling ethnocentric taxonomies of dance that view Western modern dance and ballet as high art while subsuming all non-Western forms within the categories of "traditional" or "folk." To "world" dance is to open up our colonialist perceptions of dance beyond ballet and modern to consider other dance forms as both contemporaneous with Western concert dance and as having their own aesthetic integrity. The interculturalism of the 1980s and 1990s worked in conjunction with a contemporaneous multicultural agenda that, like the intercultural experiments of the period, claimed to celebrate cultural difference but ended up ingesting it like so many indiscriminate exotic fruits. As Lena Hammergren argues in the *Worlding Dance* collection, new perspectives on world dance must recognize Homi Bhabha's distinction between *cultural diversity*, which reduces the multiplicity of cultures to a mere collection of interchangeable tokens, and *cultural difference*, which acknowledges the tensions, antagonisms, and differential levels of access that exist across various cultures.²⁰ We must always remain sensitive to the uneven sociopolitical and economic contexts out of which various dance forms operate, especially if we want to do culturally hybrid work. In Marta Savigliano's concluding chapter in *Worlding Dance*, she suggests that globalization requires us to be "'neighborly,'" to see our mutual cohabitation in the world as offering "instances of proximity—which do not constitute an idyllic relationality, but rather a permanent negotiation."²¹

Interculturalism is a necessary dilemma. We must engage with others. How do we do so with both a healthy curiosity and utmost respect? Does contemporary intercultural performance continue a tradition of exploitation or can it provide instances of neighborliness, of careful but productive negotiation across the unevenness of difference?

PICHET KLUNCHUN AND MYSELF

An examination of Bel and Klunchun's piece might begin by noting that its title, *Pichet Klunchun and Myself*, clearly establishes the speaker as Bel and not Klunchun. Even though this will be a dialogue, Bel is credited as the creator. The performance opens with Bel and Klunchun entering the stage and sitting opposite each other in two simple chairs. Klunchun, stage right, wears black pants and a black T-shirt.²² He is barefoot. Bel, stage left, wears jeans, white sneakers, and a green track jacket. Although this is meant to be a two-way interview, it is notable that whereas Klunchun is barefoot and in dance clothes, Bel wears street clothes and shoes and holds a computer on his lap. The computer does not change hands when the interviewing roles shift, and thus the asymmetrical arrangement of power-knowledge suggested here does not fully equalize either. Bel begins by consulting his laptop and asking Klunchun a series of simple questions: what is your name, where were you born, why did you become a dancer, and so forth.²³ The moment when Klunchun describes how he became a dancer offers an initial indication of the tenor of the piece. Klunchun tells how his mother went to the local temple and prayed to a god of dance for a son. Thus, even before he was born Klunchun's dedication to dance had already begun. Bel is perplexed by this explanation. Indeed, his recurring befuddlement with Klunchun's other matter-of-fact depictions of Thai culture characterize much of the ensuing dialogue. Bel shifts to ask questions about the dance form Klunchun is trained in: *khon*, a Thai masked dance drama. At several points Bel asks, "Can you show me?" Klunchun obliges and demonstrates first the vocabulary of the form, then the different character types, the narrative, the singing, and some excerpts from key scenes in the canon. Klunchun's body is impressive for its liteness, its precision, its technical control. Bel continues to play the uncomprehending questioner: he finds the distinctions across character types too subtle to differentiate, the semiotics of the form elude him, the symbolic depiction of death requires translation. Meanwhile, Klunchun acts out the role of willing informant who agreeably rewinds in order to detail what he originally presumes to be self-evident. The alternating moments of bewilderment and appreciation make for good humor. The audience laughs at the points when Klunchun demonstrates aspects of *khon* that seem clear to him, but are impenetrable to Bel. East-West cultural confusion—the East as unknowable but beautiful in its mystery, the West as boorish but open-minded—becomes a source of good-natured comedy. Throughout the interview Klunchun retains grace and composure, always happy to disseminate his understanding of this tradition, giving it respect and assuming Bel's respect for it in turn. As Bel's understanding of *khon* develops, so does his appreciation for it.

After approximately an hour, the artists switch roles, and Klunchun begins to interview Bel. A moment of culture clash is lodged early when Klunchun expresses disbelief that Bel could have a child without being married. The familiar trope of Asian “family values” gets reinforcement here. The interview continues with Klunchun asking Bel about his work. The key difference is that while Klunchun was asked to explain *khon* as a form, Bel is given the opportunity to describe his *own* work as a choreographer, an independent agent of his own artistic creation—even though Klunchun is a choreographer too.²⁴ Once again, a tired East–West dichotomy emerges: the idea of the East as keeper of tradition and of the West as site of individual artistic innovation. Bel explains that he is “identified” as a choreographer, suggesting that his work in fact doesn’t fit easily into conventional notions of choreography. He stands up to demonstrate an element of his work that he claims is a favorite and is something that he tries to insert in all of his pieces. Bel then casually stands upstage for several minutes simply looking around, listening and waiting. Naturally, Klunchun is bewildered by this demonstration, as Bel has set him (and the audience) up to expect something considerably more dynamic. Bel takes this opportunity to cite Guy Debord’s theory of the “society of the spectacle” and explains that his aim is to disrupt the audience’s expectation that they will be entertained.²⁵ He wishes to dismantle the separation between dancers and viewers, to democratize the relationship. He strives to enliven audience consciousness about the “ontology” of theatre as a live time–space that performers and spectators share. Klunchun gently challenges this idea (but what about the money they have spent on tickets?), but soon comes around to recognizing Bel’s objectives and even cites, in turn, the Buddhist philosophy of attentiveness to the present moment. Here we see an earnest multiculturalist effort to make equivalent two socioeconomically unequal situations. It is not difficult to understand why *khon* is now only “for the tourists,” whereas Bel can claim that his contemporary choreography is supported by the bet that dance audiences are willing to make when they purchase tickets to see avant-garde work.²⁶

The interview continues in much the same structure, with Klunchun asking Bel to demonstrate some aspect of his work, Bel confounding the expectation set up by the request, Klunchun asking for elucidation, Bel explaining his aesthetic objectives. The piece comes to a climax when Bel offers to demonstrate a section of one of his pieces that contains nudity—he is attempting to get at the foundation of dance as a medium—the fleshly, live body. Bel begins to unbuckle his pants and Klunchun quickly entreats him to stop. They agree to end the conversation there.

PICHET KLUNCHUN AND MYSELF AND MYSELF

Pichet Klunchun and Myself raises a lot of questions for me. As a choreographer, Klunchun is invested in preserving and revitalizing a dance tradition. With his sinewy, articulate, deeply trained body, he is a dancier dancer. In contrast, Bel is invested in breaking down a dance tradition. In his baggy jeans and big glasses, his greasy comb-over and paunchy belly, Bel has rejected dancier dance. What kind of work could come out of their collaboration? What happened in the studio that led them to this result—a result that might be viewed as a kind of

(perhaps deliberate) failure to collaborate? Although *Pichet Klunchun and Myself* is not typical intercultural theatre in the tradition of Brook or Mnouchkine—what Daphne Lei calls “hegemonic intercultural theatre”²⁷—it is clear that Bel is thinking about the issues at stake in cross-cultural exchange. He lists the following as topics the piece addresses: “Euro-centrism, inter-culturalism, or cultural globalization.”²⁸ Perhaps the idea was that this conversation in its seeming rawness would avoid the pitfalls of interculturalism, which often attempts to smooth over incommensurabilities in favor of a hybridized but melded product. I have seen intercultural work that maps one aesthetic tradition onto another, quotes one form within another, adapts one narrative for another genre, and so forth. These productions usually fail to distribute compromise equally. *Pichet Klunchun and Myself* is unique in that it does not try to stitch together two disparate art forms; instead, it allows these two forms to remain side by side—at some distance from each other. And it lays bare the miscomprehensions that occur in the encounter.

But of course, this encounter is not a spontaneous, unedited conversation between two artists from different traditions who have just met one another. In fact, it is a scripted, structured, and planned performance.²⁹ It was repeated over a hundred times from 2004 to 2012 in numerous venues around the world.³⁰ In this way, it does not escape the realm of representation, or “spectacle,” that Bel endeavors to dismantle in his other work. It is representation made to *seem* unmediated. It is Bel’s decision to choose talking as an artistic medium that I wish to examine in relation to questions of ethics in interculturalism.

Interestingly, in the introduction to his 1996 anthology on interculturalism, Pavis argued that true intercultural theatre must be “inter-corporeal.”³¹ He believed that an “oxidation” of the other’s body in oneself was necessary to resist “Europeanization” in intercultural practice.³² From our more jaded vantage point, we might protest that it is presumptuous to assume that a European artist could acquire in his/her body a particular Eastern technique free of the problems of social, historical, and political context. Then again, perhaps it is essentialist to presume that an Eastern technique is not translatable—or is off limits—to a Western body.³³ Whatever the case, it would appear that Bel and Klunchun elected to avoid these ethical pitfalls by resisting “inter-corporeal” work and replacing dancing with talking.³⁴

Bhabha posits the idea of enunciation as the site where cultural difference is not merely articulated but in fact produced. The boundary point where two cultures—or two people—meet and must confront each other is a “Third Space” of enunciatory emergence.³⁵ Bhabha offers the idea of enunciation as a generative site that reveals the hybridity of culture.³⁶ For Bhabha, the recognition of cultural hybridity is a key corrective to Western-dominated ideologies that obscure hybridity in favor of unified narrations of seemingly singular cultural identities, identities that are then neatly polarized between the West and the rest—a polarization that has given interculturalism its exotic, avant-garde appeal. Enunciation, then, is a process of engagement that gives voice to the messiness of cultural difference. And cultural difference is always hybrid because it is always in negotiation with the Other: it is, in fact, a result of hybridity.

Certainly in the case of *Pichet Klunchun and Myself* Bel and Klunchun are involved in a process of enunciation at a border point between two different sets of

cultural knowledge. The dissimilarities between the two artists' work clearly emerges through their conversation. The fact of their copresence and their willingness to dialogue does represent an acknowledgment of our hybrid world. The fact that both must speak in a language—English—that is not native to them further underscores the inescapable mediatedness of the Third Space of cultural encounter. As Bhabha writes, "The pact of interpretation is never simply an act of communication between the I and the You designated in the statement."³⁷ What is introduced in this space of interpretation is an "ambivalence."³⁸ In this meeting space Bel and Klunchun are both forced to acknowledge the assumptions each brings to his imagination of how others perceive his work and the assumptions each brings to his appreciation of the work of other artists. The interpretive gap "destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code."³⁹

I am not sure, however, that this particular process of enunciation manages to dismantle a polarized view of European contemporary choreography vis-à-vis Thai classical dance. While Bhabha views the Third Space of enunciation as a site of possibility wherein the postcolonial subject can be in performative, discursive negotiation with hegemonic Western narratives, I still see, in this actual performance of enunciation, a familiar reiteration of colonialist ideas about the very fixed differences between East and West. Yes, the sight of Klunchun's lithe and expressive body in simple black workout clothes demonstrating steps from the *khon* vocabulary—without the accompanying tourist spectacle—does incite a necessary disruption of our image of the East and, in fact, closes a bit the distance that orientalism creates without, at the same time, allowing us to take hold of *khon*. Similarly, the experience of watching Bel strive to explain his work and the realization that he uses Klunchun merely as a screen through which to do so, not just to an Eastern audience but also to Western spectators, complicates a sense that the West is a place of unified cultural knowledge. In these respects this enunciatory piece does reveal the hybridity of cultures.

Still, the piece is not a spontaneous moment of enunciation. It is not an immediate encounter with difference but a scripted pair of interviews. Of course, Jacques Derrida has already deconstructed the notion that speech is any more or less mediated than writing; both are conditioned by the endless deferral of meaning.⁴⁰ Bhabha is aware of this and, in fact, draws upon Derrida to support his formulations about hybridity as the disruption of totalizing narratives of nation and other. But Bhabha wants enunciation to be endlessly processual, continually performative, and at least in the case of *Pichet Klunchun and Myself*, which is a performance in the conventional sense, not just the theoretical sense, I think that enunciation fails to keep identities discursive. Even though the theory is that the opportunity for rehearsal, for repetition, and therefore for revision is inherent in performance, I feel that *this* performance does not allow for discursive resistance but in fact only reifies over and over again a fixed polarity. What is rehearsed in *Pichet Klunchun and Myself* is not a process of discovery and negotiation but a fixing of an orientalist narrative.

Emmanuel Levinas argues that it is our ethical responsibility to an Other that, in fact, constitutes our being. We are determined by our relationship to an

exteriority, yet at the same time that exteriority always by definition escapes our full comprehension. The site where this necessary relationship to an exteriority that can never be fully comprehended occurs is the face-to-face encounter.⁴¹ For Levinas, the face is the other that confronts us in its infinity—in other words, its unassimilability—and it compels us to speak to it. This impossible but inescapable encounter is the subject of Levinas’s philosophy of ethics. One way that Levinas formulates an understanding of how we relate to each other is through the idea of saying and said.⁴² *Saying* is the instant and immediate medium through which we relate to an other; it is a process that disrupts any impulse toward totalization (reducing the other into the same, much as multiculturalism seeks to do) because, perhaps like Bhabha’s enunciation, it always reveals our separateness from the other. By contrast, the *said* is the content of speech already spoken; it is the more conventional impulse toward encompassing, digesting, comprehending, grasping. The problem, of course, is that saying always becomes the said, and perhaps this is why Bhabha’s idea of enunciation does not fully satisfy. The challenge is how to make relations continue the “signifyingness of signification,”⁴³ how to say without devolving into the solidity of the said, how to maintain the ethical exteriority of intersubjectivity.

We might say that Bel’s efforts resemble the attempt to maintain “a saying that must also be unsaid.”⁴⁴ In a way, the fact that his interview with Klunchun is made to seem spontaneous even though it has been scripted works to repeat the initial site of cross-cultural encounter, to maintain the immediacy of it. The piece has been performed hundreds of times now in numerous venues, so perhaps we can view these multiple performances as multiple attempts to keep saying, to keep disrupting totalization. But of course, the piece *is* scripted. Even given the room there is in every performance for slippage, for nuance, for alteration, ultimately this performance reinscribes an existing order; it is something already said.

I think that both Bhabha and Levinas recognize the utopian quality of their respective formulations. Their theories of enunciation and of saying both carry the potential to make the encounter with difference ethical in its recognition of what cannot be appropriated or reduced, even as we must continue to engage as responsibly as we are able across third spaces (Bhabha) or face to face (Levinas). And perhaps Bel’s endeavor might also generously be perceived as an attempt at ethical intercultural exchange even as it recognizes the challenges.

I cannot help but feel, however, that Bel’s piece is ultimately not absolutely satisfying. Perhaps this is because I detect a self-interested motive on Bel’s part. Power, ideology, and economic advantage always animate artistic choice. The placement of Bel’s interview with Klunchun first is a conscious choice whose effect is to center the piece from Bel’s point of view. Bel’s encounter with *khon*, like the colonial encounter, really just becomes an opportunity for Bel to project himself against the absolute difference of the other in order to better justify his own identity. That is why the interview with Klunchun is placed first, so that we can better appreciate Bel. While there is little explicit juxtaposition between *khon* and Bel’s avant-garde choreography, this piece still relies on the trope of East–West incommensurability. *Khon* is traditional, Bel’s work challenges conventions of dance. *Khon* is representational, Bel’s work attempts not to be. Klunchun is preservationist,

Bel is avant-garde. Klunchun is modest, Bel is exhibitionist. All of these contrasts, of course, not only support hackneyed stereotypes of East versus West; they also ignore the significantly unequal histories and political economies of the environments from which these two artists come. As I argue above, Bel can rely on the bet that Euro-American audiences are willing to make when they purchase tickets to see avant-garde work; Klunchun's Thai audiences do not have this kind of economic freedom. Bel's intentions in *Pichet Klunchun and Myself* are admirable; and Klunchun's participation is self-possessed throughout. The decision to try to avoid cultural appropriation through the format of the interview is thoughtful and new. I am not sure, however, that the piece manages to shed the weight of orientalism.

AN ETHICS OF INTERCULTURALISM

At one time, this dissatisfying conclusion served as the stopping point for this article. I simply did not know where to take my thoughts after it. The irreconcilable debate over interculturalism during the 1980s and 1990s seemed to remain here. Is there no way to create East–West intercultural work that resists orientalism? Is Bel's work just one more example of an artist with good intentions who yet again falls into the trap of exploiting the East for his own purposes? If that is so, then what? Aren't we a bit tired of wagging our finger at "bad" intercultural appropriations? What would a "good" one even look like? Hasn't Bhabha shown us that everything is always already hybrid anyway? Is this conversation done with, then? Do we just accept that interculturalism *is*? If not, then what does *Pichet Klunchun and Myself* help us to understand?

After presenting a version of this work in a few public forums, I received feedback that gave me some possibilities for thinking my way out of this conundrum. Dancer-scholar Keith Hennessey emphasized the fact that this is one of Bel's most widely toured pieces and that it has generated numerous responses. He suggested that I think about these responses as themselves generative of a continuing process of engagement with the issues the piece raises. Similarly, film scholar Dan Cuong O'Neill urged me to consider the key fact that this work is a dialogue performed *for an audience* and thus is generative of multiple layers of other dialogues. What's more, the global circulation of the piece (to more than fifty cities from Bangkok to Paris, Singapore to San Francisco, Riga to Mexico City, Istanbul to Melbourne) meant that it produced innumerable dialogues with varied interlocutors from varied sociocultural contexts who must have had a plenitude of different reactions. These spin-off dialogues include reviews, blog posts, and scholarly writing.⁴⁵ *Pichet Klunchun and Myself* has also spawned another interview-cum-performance piece called *About Khon* in which Bel asks Klunchun a series of questions that allow Klunchun to explain and showcase *khon* in greater detail.⁴⁶ Finally, of course, I am myself in dialogue with the piece, as this article, yet another layer of discourse, hopefully attests. All of these layers could be read as continuing enunciations across subjectivities, a way that this initial intercultural encounter maintains its sayingness, its fundamental responsibility to engage the incomprehensible other.

But what is the nature of these enunciations? This is where the politics come in. One might argue that the numerous enunciations, the sayingness, the reverberating discursivity generated by the nomadic circulation of the piece save it from ossification into a singular (orientalist) narrative. We might contend that the piece is constituted not just by the two-part interview between Bel and Klunchun but also, fundamentally, by the numerous dialogues between the performance and the audience and with readers of the reviews, blog posts, and articles, and between audience members with each other. Perhaps it follows then that the orientalist relationship I see between Bel and Klunchun is challenged by the fact that it is performed for an audience, making the relationship more than merely dyadic, more than merely one European artist and his Asian foil.

Still, the ethics of intersubjective encounter are complicated by unavoidable differentials of power and economic and social circumstances between interlocutors. Dance scholar Susan Foster writes that the piece garnered “adulatory reviews and standing ovations especially across Europe and North America but receiv[ed] less positive responses in Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia, and Singapore.”⁴⁷ Yes, allowing for the discursive multiplicity of *Pichet Klunchun and Myself* adds to the Bel-Klunchun dyad, but it does not ameliorate the orientalist dynamic already present between them.

Certainly the piece is “generative,” as Hennessey describes it. And that is definitely a worthwhile effect. Audience members, though, are primarily silent interlocutors. We do not get to talk back to the performers. Our written and verbal responses to the piece happen beyond the performance, as satellite discourses. In her scholarly article “Jerome Bel and Myself,” Foster advances a feminist critique by engaging in a fictional dialogue involving Bel. Her imagined dialogue, however, is one-sided; she can only make up what Bel might say in response to her critiques.

So where does this leave me? Back again to my dissatisfaction with the piece and perhaps with interculturalism in general. There is simply no way to absolve ourselves of the history of colonialism. All encounters between East and West are inescapably stained by the structures of orientalism. *Pichet Klunchun and Myself*, even if we concede its layers of discursivity, does not, cannot, in its earnest effort to comprehend, to create dialogue, to give equal voice, move outside of these structures. The piece cannot level out that which is not even.

But perhaps that should not be the pedestal on which I evaluate this piece. I have asked what *Pichet Klunchun and Myself* helps us understand. Perhaps the piece is useful not as an ideal model of “good” interculturalism but merely insofar as it helps me call attention to the process by which systemic inequalities get masked by the pretense of intercultural collaboration. In this way I might consider the piece useful as a productive failure. In its failure to create true reciprocity it produces instead a reminder of colonialism’s impact; it produces residual discourses that, like this article, can reveal the processes by which orientalism structures the initial dialogue, even if they cannot overcome them. The piece does not succeed in leveling inequity; it merely serves to lay it bare. To extrapolate more generally, then, we might view interculturalism itself as a necessary failure. In our era of globalization it is our obligation to continue to connect across what

are nonetheless impassable cultural, ethnic, and racial divides that will confoundingly reveal the ways that we are not equivalent.

Three special journal issues on theatre and globalization have urged us to consider such difficulties as the specific materializations of globalization in local instances of theatre making, the complications of global spectatorship, and the migrations of theatrical forms and theatre artists globally.⁴⁸ While recognizing the ways that “bio-ethnic politics” coerce a notion of “Asia” as a place and a symbol, Haiping Yan also posits a “transnational theatre in the making” that might “attempt not only to understand what is becoming of the human geography of the world but also to envision how to partake in its alternative configurations.”⁴⁹ Similarly, Janelle Reinelt celebrates the unique capacity of performance to “posit various possible conceptual and aesthetic schemas to provoke its spectators to seek their own finite relations to the enormous, sometimes overwhelming plurality of the new worldly context.”⁵⁰ I do not feel that *Pichet Klunchun and Myself* offers a new envisioning of our global community, although I admire the impetus that led to the collaboration. The piece did inspire subsequent work by Klunchun, one piece with some help from Bel. Klunchun has since gained a measure of access to a global stage and cultural currency (and Bel has increased his). The touring of the piece widely across the globe as well as the numerous spin-off dialogues the piece has engendered offered some possibilities for symbolic “what-ifs.”

I have talked about Pavis’s privileging of intercorporeality in interculturalism and Bel’s rejection of corporeal collaboration in *Pichet Klunchun and Myself*. In “Substitution,” a chapter from *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas uses bodily terms in his philosophical formulations. He discusses being “in one’s skin” as not being concealed by a wall between oneself and another but as merely the “*meanwhile* which separates inspiration and expiration.”⁵¹ “Incarnation” (embodiment in flesh) does not enclose the self; rather, it “exposes it naked to the other to the point of making the subject expose its very exposedness.”⁵² At the end of *Pichet Klunchun and Myself*, Bel, as noted earlier, attempts to demonstrate physically an aspect of his work that he has only so far described verbally. He begins to unbuckle his pants in order to expose his skin to us and to Klunchun. Klunchun quickly asks him to stop, and the performance ends. This piece is an attempt, mostly through language and lastly through the body, to expose oneself to an other. To his credit, Bel endeavors to bare himself to the world beyond, to bring himself to an other, to inspire and to expire through the skin of his body. But just as Levinas is paradoxical in his attempt to describe our “exposedness” (“the self in its skin both is exposed to the exterior . . . and obsessed by the others in this naked exposure”),⁵³ Klunchun’s refusal reminds us that this “exposedness,” our inescapable will to exteriority, is confounded by that very other to which we expose ourselves.

Levinas built a philosophy of ethics on his personal experience with the horrors of the Holocaust. He knew that people fail to act ethically in the most devastating ways. And yet he continued to argue that the essence of our being is our debt to an other that will always be irreconcilable to us—a subjectivity built upon the impossibility of intersubjectivity. For Levinas, ethics by definition resists the appropriation of the other.⁵⁴ Ultimately, Levinas does not prescribe an answer

to the problem of intersubjectivity. What he offers is a recognition of its limits. As Simon Critchley describes it:

[For Levinas] ethics is not . . . the overcoming or simple abandonment of ontology [that is, total comprehension] through the immediacy of ethical experience. It is rather the persistent deconstruction of the limits of ontology and its claim to conceptual mastery, while also recognizing the unavoidability of the Said.⁵⁵

In Levinas's philosophy of ethics, we are resigned to the awareness that even as our own selfhood is built upon a will to know the Other, that other is always irreducible to us—and that this is as it should be. In speaking of intercultural theatre, Schechner asks what rules should govern the interplay across cultures. Perhaps an "ethics of interculturalism" might be described as simply the obligation to continue to make evident the impossibility of communion in intercultural encounter, even as we keep trying.

ENDNOTES

1. Jérôme Bel, "pichet klunchun and myself (2005)," RB JEROME BEL Web site, <http://www.jeromebel.fr/performances/presentation?performance=Pichet%20Klunchun%20and%20myself>, accessed 17 January 2014.

2. I recognize, even as I ask the question, that most of Bel's work deliberately resists conventional notions of choreography, but in this case I am interested in what this particular refusal might say about orientalism.

3. Sally Banes, *Dancing Women: Female Bodies Onstage* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Jane Desmond, "Dancing Out the Difference: Cultural Imperialism and Ruth St. Denis's *Radha* of 1906," *Signs* 17.1 (1991): 28–49; Suzanne Shelton, *Ruth St. Denis: A Biography of the Divine Dancer* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981); Priya Srinivasan, "The Bodies beneath the Smoke or What's behind the Cigarette Poster: Unearthing Kinesthetic Connections in American Modern Dance," *Discourses in Dance* 4.1 (2007): 7–47; Yutian Wong, *Choreographing Asian America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2010).

4. Priya Srinivasan, "The Nautch Women Dancers of the 1880s: Corporeality, U.S. Orientalism, and Anti-Immigration Laws," *Women & Performance* 19.1 (2009): 3–22; Wong, 41–54.

5. Of course, the kinesthetic legacy of these Asian forms exists in the choreography itself, and it remains the work of another project to tease out and trace these influences. Priya Srinivasan has successfully begun this work with the choreography of Ruth St. Denis. See Srinivasan, *Bodies beneath the Smoke*.

6. While the term "intercultural" could certainly include non-Western artists who assimilate forms from outside their native culture, I am focused here on the long tradition of Western artists drawing from Asian forms. The debates of the 1980s and 1990s over interculturalism sometimes included discussions of non-Western productions, but they were mostly concerned with the work of Western artists borrowing from (most often) the East.

7. See, for example, *The Intercultural Performance Reader*, ed. Patrice Pavis (New York and London: Routledge, 1996); *Interculturalism and Performance: Writings from PAJ*, ed. Bonnie Marranca and Gautam Dasgupta (New York: PAJ Publications, 1991); *Peter Brook and the Mahabharata: Critical Perspectives*, ed. David Williams (New York and London: Routledge, 1991); Jacqueline Lo and Helen Gilbert, "Toward a Topography of Cross-Cultural Theatre Praxis," *TDR: The Drama Review* 46.3 (2002): 31–53.

Theatre Survey

8. Richard Schechner, "Interculturalism and the Culture of Choice: Richard Schechner Interviewed by Patrice Pavis," in *Intercultural Performance Reader*, 41–50; Richard Schechner, "Intercultural Performance: An Introduction," *TDR: The Drama Review* 26.2 (1982): 3–4; Richard Schechner, "Performance as a 'Formation of Power and Knowledge,'" *TDR: The Drama Review* 44.4 (2000): 5–7; Patrice Pavis, "Introduction: Towards a Theory of Interculturalism in Theatre?" in *Intercultural Performance Reader*, 1–26; Craig Latrell, "After Appropriation," *TDR: The Drama Review* 44.4 (2000): 44–55.

9. Schechner, "Intercultural Performance: An Introduction," 4.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Rustom Bharucha, *Theatre and the World: Performance and the Politics of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990); Rustom Bharucha, "Somebody's Other: Disorientations in the Cultural Politics of Our Times," in *Intercultural Performance Reader*, 196–212; Rustom Bharucha, *The Politics of Cultural Practice: Thinking through Theatre in an Age of Globalization* (Hanover, NH: UPNE for Wesleyan University Press, 2000); Rustom Bharucha, "Foreign Asia/Foreign Shakespeare: Dissenting Notes on New Asian Interculturality, Postcoloniality, and Recolonization," *Theatre Journal* 56.1 (2004): 1–28; John Russell Brown, "Theatrical Pillage in Asia: Redirecting the Intercultural Traffic," *New Theatre Quarterly* 14.53 (1998): 9–19; Biodun Jeyifo, "The Reinvention of Theatrical Tradition: Critical Discourses on Interculturalism in the African Theatre," in *Intercultural Performance Reader*, 149–61.

12. Bharucha, *Theatre and the World*; Bharucha, "Somebody's Other"; Bharucha, *Politics of Cultural Practice*; Rustom Bharucha, "Consumed in Singapore: The Intercultural Spectacle of *Lear*," *Theater* 31.1 (2001): 107–27; Bharucha, "Foreign Asia/Foreign Shakespeare."

13. Bharucha, "Consumed in Singapore."

14. Schechner, "Interculturalism and the Culture of Choice," 49.

15. Schechner, "'Formation of Power and Knowledge,'" 7.

16. Patrice Pavis, "Intercultural Theatre Today (2010)," *Forum Modernes Theater* 25.1 (2010): 5–15, at 13.

17. Patrice Pavis, Introduction (79–80) to Marvin Carlson, "Brook and Mnouchkine: Passages to India?" in *Intercultural Performance Reader*, 79–92, at 79.

18. In her blog I note several instances of Western prejudice and a lens on China colored by overused Western representations of the nation as creatively challenged and politically naive. Jenkins measures Chinese censorship levels, decries the GMDC company manager's reticence to discuss domestic politics with her, laments a lack of political critique in Chinese dance work, infantilizes and genericizes this same company manager as "the metaphor of a culture at once bursting to grow and shift and encompass," and is awed by what she imagines is an audience seeing modern dance for the first time. She also retains a persistent optimism about the possibilities of intercultural work: "[The dancers] were completely and deeply focused on one another, knowing that although there are always surprises during performance, they were creating a world of their own, one to share with one another and with the audience, a world that could only come from their time together over the years it took to complete this work." At the same time that she imagines a new world being created by her collaboration with the Chinese dancers, she continues to depict China as an "other sun" that she was enlightening with the bright rays of Western creativity and individualism: "It was so touching to hear the Chinese dancers talk about how their lives have been changed, how they learned to pay attention, to be present, to trust, and how this was as close to learning to fly as they thought they might get." See "Excerpts from Margaret Jenkins' Personal Journal during the MJDC's Asia Tour of *Other Suns* with the Guangdong Modern Dance Company (GMDC), December 25, 2010–January 9, 2011," www.mjdc.org/blog2011.html.

19. Susan Leigh Foster, ed., *Worlding Dance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

20. Lena Hammergren, "The Power of Classification," in *Worlding Dance*, 14–31, esp. 15–18.

21. Marta Elena Savigliano, "Worlding Dance and Dancing out There in the World," in *Worlding Dance*, 163–90, at 165, 184.

22. The following depiction of the piece is based on my three experiences of it: a recording of the work performed at Novell Hall in Taipei, Taiwan, in June 2006; a live performance at Dance Theater

Workshop in New York City in November 2007; and another live performance at REDCAT in Los Angeles in February 2009.

23. Note that the dialogue is staged as if it were spontaneous, but in fact it is scripted, and they have performed it numerous times. The artists, who are both nonnative speakers of English, retain the syntax and language usage that presumably would be present in an unscripted conversation.

24. Toward the end of Bel's interview of Klunchun, Klunchun discusses his efforts to make *khon* relevant to contemporary audiences in Thailand. For example, after premiering *Pichet Klunchun and Myself*, Klunchun created a hybridized work called *Black and White* (2011) using *khon* within a contemporary choreographic structure. In *Pichet Klunchun and Myself*, however, Bel's skeptical response belies his lack of faith in *khon's* accessibility: "Good luck."

25. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* [1967], trans. David Nicholson-Smith, 5th ed. (New York: Zone Books, 1995).

26. In 2011, Thailand's per capita GDP was 9,700 USD while France's was 35,000 USD. See *The World Factbook* at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html>.

27. "The most dominant form of intercultural theatre today, which I term 'hegemonic intercultural theatre' (HIT), is a specific artistic genre and state of mind that combines First World capital and brainpower with Third World raw material and labor, and Western classical texts with Eastern performance traditions"; Daphne Lei, "Interruption, Intervention, Interculturalism: Robert Wilson's HIT Productions in Taiwan," *Theatre Journal* 63.4 (2011): 571–86, at 571.

28. See Bel.

29. According to Keith Hennessey, who spoke with Bel, the piece is not rigidly scripted, but the dialogue has settled over time. Bel and Klunchun are each welcome to improvise according to what they feel is appropriate for a particular time and audience. See Keith Hennessey, "Pichet Klunchun & Myself (Jerome Bêl)," circo zero/performance Web site, 19 April 2009, zeroperformance.blogspot.com/2009/04/pichet-klunchun-myself-jerome-bel.html (accessed 17 January 2013).

30. The piece premiered in Bangkok in December 2004, and Bel and Klunchun agreed to perform it for the last time in Bangkok in February 2012. See Pawit Mahasarinand, "And So the Curtain Closes," *The Nation* (Thailand), 23 December 2011.

31. Pavis, "Introduction: Towards a Theory?," 15.

32. Ibid.

33. In a special issue on theatre and globalization in *Contemporary Theatre Review*, Michael Welton likewise argues for a consideration of embodied experiences of different cultural practices as an alternative to what he views as the dominance of representational or spectatorial modes of intercultural theatre. See Michael Welton, "Just for Kicks? In Search of the Performative 'Something Else' in a South Indian Martial Art," *Contemporary Theatre Review* 16.1 (2006): 153–8. As a Western practitioner of the Indian form *kalarippayattu*, he is hopeful that his practical understanding of this martial art might help "resist division into the dualistic categories of self and other which dog so much (inter)cultural enquiry" (156). What is somewhat confusing in his formulation, however, is the way he seems to link his learning of an Indian cultural form to a transformation of self that somehow comes to understand the lived experience of the other. I am skeptical of such a link.

34. There is one instance when Bel learns a *khon* phrase from Klunchun and one moment when Klunchun imitates ballet.

35. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), esp. 53–6.

36. Bhabha's primary aim is to critique the kind of postcolonial nationalisms that work to conceal hybridity in favor of unified narrations of seemingly singular cultural identities.

37. Bhabha, 53.

38. Ibid., 36.

39. Ibid., 54.

40. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* [1967], trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

Theatre Survey

41. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* [1961], trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).

42. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* [1974], 2d ed. [1978], trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981).

43. *Ibid.*, 5.

44. *Ibid.*, 7.

45. A writer for Thailand's *The Nation* views the piece as an "informative study" of *khon* and "modern conceptual dance." See Jasmine Baker, "Every Single Dance in One Hour," *The Nation* (Thailand), 16 March 2012. More than one reviewer, including Roslyn Sulcas, describes it (perhaps to Bel's chagrin) as "entertaining." See Roslyn Sulcas, "Thai Spars with French in a Cultural Exchange," *New York Times*, 9 September 2007; Jane Howard, "Audience Quite Beside Itself," *Sunday Herald Sun* (Australia), 29 October 2006; and Christine Madden, "Reviews," *Irish Times*, 28 April 2006. On the other hand, a critic for *The Australian* describes it as "a brilliantly lucid deconstruction of two approaches to dance"; see Lee Christofis, "Cultural Exchange on the Hop," *The Australian*, 30 October 2006. Jennifer Dunning sees the work as a "series of cultural collisions" and describes the end (where Bel begins to unbuckle his pants and Klunchun stops him) as a "gentle cataclysm." See Jennifer Dunning, "Hear Them Talk and See Them Dance, Then Watch Their Cultures Clash," *New York Times*, November 9, 2007. The *Sunday Times* of London describes the first half as "like having a Thai-dancing guidebook come to life" and the second half as a place where Bel discusses "his own western philosophy of movement" and makes provocative statements about religion and marriage. See Christie Taylor, "Joy is in the Air," *Sunday Times* (London), 7 May 2006. One Australian critic uses food metaphors to describe the artistic "fusion": "In short: funny French with Thai spice"; see Howard. Most of the reviews depict *Pichet Klunchun and Myself* as a mix of educational cross-cultural demonstration, personal interview, and amusing dialogue. None of them mentions the disparity between *khon* as a form and Bel's work as an individual choreographer, or the economic disparity that affects the production and reception of these two forms. None of them seems to take issue with the way the piece reproduces an orientalist relationship. One writer from the *Irish Times* does wonder whether the piece provokes thought or is merely narcissistic: "Is it egocentric intellectual self-pleasuring on stage? Is it a wickedly clever, insightful and entertaining exploration of communication, contemporary art and society? Maybe both"; see Madden.

Keith Hennessey, the aforementioned interlocutor after I presented my own dialogue with the piece, whose comments prompted me to research these reviews, writes in a blog: "*Pichet Klunchun & Myself* is an excellent failure. It paradoxically embodies all that it attempts to critique, in terms of spectacle, a democratic exchange, virtuosity, and the role of the European in global culture. Its contradictions are inspirational, evocative, encouraging, and generative." He then goes on to discuss other discourses on the piece and how they reveal things he missed, and to discuss a second viewing and more subtleties that he noted. See Hennessey.

Yvonne Hardt has written about *Pichet Klunchun and Myself* as a form of ethnography through performance; see Yvonne Hardt, "Staging the Ethnographic of Dance History: Contemporary Dance and Its Play with Tradition," *Dance Research Journal* 43.1 (2011): 27–42. She argues that the piece operates as a study of two dance forms, working on the assumption that both contain representational codes and staging conventions that are culturally specific (rather than relying on a Eurocentric notion of Western dance as universal). Hardt wants to demonstrate how the piece challenges our Eurocentrism because it approaches both Klunchun's and Bel's work equally as ethnographic sites. But I argue, again, that the key difference is that Klunchun discusses *khon* as an entire tradition whereas Bel is asked to be informant for only his own work. In another article about the piece, dance scholar Susan Foster advances a feminist critique, interspersing her argument with a fictional dialogue involving Bel. See Susan Leigh Foster, "Jerome Bel and Myself: Gender and Intercultural Collaboration," in *Emerging Bodies: The Performance of Worldmaking in Dance and Choreography*, ed. Gabriele Klein and Sandra Noeth (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Transaction Publishers, 2011), 73–82.

46. Natasha Rogai finds this piece entertaining, but says that it “does not develop into a profound dialogue on eastern and western dance”; see Natasha Rogai, “About *Khon*,” *South China Morning Post*, 25 November 2008.

47. Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 197. I have not personally found any direct evidence of such contradictory responses across Asia and the West; but the previous two notes do suggest a difference in reception of Bel and Plunchun between Rogai of Hong Kong’s *South China Morning Post*, who is critical, and Christofis of *The Australian*, who is laudatory.

48. See “Globalisation and Theatre,” special issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review* 16.1 (2006); “Other Transnationals: Asian Diaspora in Performance,” special issue of *Modern Drama: World Drama from 1850 to the Present* 48.2 (2005); and “Theorizing Globalization through Theatre,” special issue of *Theatre Journal* 57.3 (2005).

49. Haiping Yan, “Other Transnationals: An Introductory Essay,” *Modern Drama: World Drama from 1850 to the Present* 48.2 (2005): 225–48, at 227 and 242.

50. Janelle Reinelt, “Three Thoughts toward a Global Poetics,” *Contemporary Theatre Review* 16.1 (2006): 151–3, at 152.

51. Emmanuel Levinas, “Substitution,” in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Seán Hand, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 88–125, at 98.

52. *Ibid.*, 99.

53. *Ibid.*, 102.

54. See Simon Critchley, “Introduction,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, ed. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1–32.

55. *Ibid.*, 18.