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ONE IS NOT BORN BLACK:  
BECOMING AND THE PHENOMENON(OLOGY) OF RACE

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[R]ace, exactly like sex, is taken as an “immediate given,” a “sensible given,” “physical features,” belonging to a natural order. But what we believe to be a physical and direct perception is only a sophisticated and mythic construction, an “imaginary formation,” which reinterprets physical features ... through the network of relationships in which they are perceived. (They are seen as *black*, therefore they *are* black; they are seen as *women*, therefore, they *are* women. But before being seen that way, they first had to be *made* that way).

Monique Wittig  
*One Is Not Born a Woman*

I believe the luminous work of Monique Wittig deserves special attention, particularly her take on the network of relationships between perception and reality, the mental and the physical, matter and language, especially gender and race.<sup>1</sup> “They are seen as *black*,” she writes, “therefore they *are* black; they are seen as *women*, therefore, they *are* women.” First, I want to ask, “they are seen” by whom and second what is the translatability or conversion of “being seen” into “is”—that is, the psychic relation between visibility and reality? “But before being seen that way, they first had to be *made* that way.” How does one make a woman woman or a Black person black? More importantly, what is the psychic and consequently ethnographic result of being made a woman or black? These are precisely the questions I would like to explore in this paper. I want to show that, much like gender, race is not a category we occupy or slot our selves into, but a performative category that we “do” every day. It is a role we play, a plot, a representational language that is beyond our control and since, as Wittig argues, “there is no nature in society,” it is a historical and social product.<sup>2</sup>

Race, I contend, is a network of meanings against which we negotiate our psychic being; that is to say, who we are, what future we envision for ourselves and others, and where we invest and find our desires reflected. Being a network of meanings or a collection of stories we “tell” ourselves and others and henceforth live by, race is a symbolic capital that is either valued positively in schools and in the larger society—if your narrative is the “right” narrative—or negatively—if your telling does not have the “right” infrastructure of the symbolic market of exchange: namely, possessing an authorized language, being an authorized speaker, speaking with authority and hence command hearing.<sup>3</sup> In educational and curriculum studies, Pinar *et al.* have shown, race was the abject category that was always subsumed under “politics,” the marginal and the outside

of pedagogy, the unnecessary discourse that tells “us” little about the *politique réelle*: the vulgar neo-Marxist bifurcation of economic structure, race and culture, thus reducing race to class.<sup>4</sup> Against these and other hegemonic discourses, Pinar *et al.* convincingly call for a pedagogical politics of “curriculum as racial text.”

I shall begin, in what follows, by reintroducing the introduction, then theorize “becoming,” and conclude on a discussion of an incident where I contend that, having arrived into North America as a refugee from Africa, I enter, so to speak, *a social imaginary*, a discursive space where I am already imagined, constructed, and thus treated as “Black” by hegemonic discourses and groups, respectively.

Elsewhere, I show how a group of immigrant and refugee continental African youth who are attending a French-language high school in southwestern Ontario, Canada, enter this social imaginary.<sup>5</sup> I also show its impact on their identity formation, who they identify with, and what they learn and how. First, I contended, these youth are not “Black” in Africa and that they become one once in North America. Becoming Black meant, I demonstrated, identifying with Black America which in turn influenced what and how they linguistically and culturally learnt. They learn “Black English as a second language” (BESL) which they access in and through Hip-Hop culture and Rap lyrical/linguistic styles.

Much like these youth, I am arguing, I was not considered “Black” in Africa, though I had other adjectives that patched together my identity, such as “tall,” “Sudanese,” “academic,” “basketball player,” and so on. In other words, except in South Africa, race is not “the” defining social identity in Africa. However, as we shall see, in direct response to the historical representation of Blackness and the social processes of racialization and racism where I am mapped against the hegemonic White state of mind: “Oh, they all look like Blacks to me!”, these antecedent signifiers, adjectives become secondary to my Blackness, and I retranslate my being: I become Black. My main contention then is that, in North America, my Black body speaks a language of its own, it cheats me, it ritualizes me, where I become a condensed moment of historicity, an inscribed repetition of convention, a passerby who turns to the policeman to acquire an identity, “one purchased, as it were, with the price of guilt.”<sup>6</sup> Here, Judith Butler argues, the act of being recognized becomes an act of identity formation: the address animates me into an existence, constituting me within the possible circuit of recognition. To be recognized is to be interpellated, hailed within the terms of language and only there that my social existence becomes possible.<sup>7</sup>

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BEING MADE I:  
THE AFRICAN BODY IN NORTH AMERICA, AGAINST ALL ODDS

Continental Africans recently have been crossing the Atlantic Ocean to North America in a considerable number. In a sense, as Molefi K. Asante has argued, this is a performative act of defiance to the history of colonialism, imperialism and the middle passage.<sup>8</sup> They are joining the African diaspora by becoming part of it. But they have to first confront this history—the history of the present—where their bodies are already read as “Black.” They have to translate, negotiate and answer two questions. What does being Black really mean in North America? and, if one is “becoming” Black, what does this call for, entail, and thus produce? At a personal level, I want to ask the following: as a continental African living in North America, am I a Black man? Conjugating the verb *to be* in the present tense is central and I am using Blackness as defined in North America. If the answer is negative, what does it mean *not to be* a Black man, while materially possessing the socially defined Black male body? That is, how does one translate and negotiate one’s own sense of self *vis-à-vis* the already pronounced social order? On the other hand, if *I am* a Black man, when did I become one? Using personal narrative, I want to argue that my Blackness in Africa is at the shadow, the blind spot, the outside of the speech act of the dominant Other, refusing the latter’s regulation, interpellation, subjection, normative gaze and even recognition. Simply, it was—a radical autonomy. But, as we shall see, by falling within the address of the Other, I was given a new spelling of my name: I was rendered and addressed as Black. The paper is thus a stare into the ethnography, the processes of *becoming black*. That is, the cultural, linguistic, and socio-psychic implications of what it means to possess the Black body in North America (and the Western world in general). I do believe that the narrative and the processes of becoming Black are not only applicable to continental Africans, but to most, if not all, émigrés and displaced refugees who move to North America and whose body is read or socially defined as Black.

This is what I want to term the “politics of ultra visibility.” It is when the unmarked is marked and made visible.<sup>9</sup> This marking takes place in and through language and is felt on the surface of the body. If the “norm”—whiteness in North America, for example—is made obscure and invisible through technologies of normalisation and naturalisation, and if these technologies are embedded in language and work by hailing and pointing towards the Other and away from the Self, furthermore, if the hailer or the speaker possesses the authorised language and the authorised power to speak and be listened to, then the hailed Other—Blackness, in this case—can only be made ultra-visible.<sup>10</sup> This, I argue, is directly implicated in how I enter this politics of ultra-visibility, how people relate to my body, and hence how I experience the processes of becoming Black.

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BEING MADE II:  
BECOMING AS A REITERATIVE POSITION

There is a need, I presume by now, to distinguish between being and becoming. In his preface to Althea Prince's *Being Black*, Clifton Joseph poetically cites how he, among other West Indians, has entered this process of hailing, identification and ultimately becoming. He writes:

We were a politicised grouping of student/activists, athletes, those looking for a place to hang/out, street-wise players & partiers, and people who were just dissatisfied with not seeing enough blackness in school and in the society, generally. We *werent* "Black" where we came from in the West Indies, but in Toronto we had to confront the fact that we were seen as "Black," and had to check/out for ourselves what this blackness was.<sup>11</sup>

On his part, Hamlet once argued, "To be, or not to be—that is the question."<sup>12</sup> Or is it? *Being*, it has recently been argued, can never *be* (in full and in complete), since it is a *sujet-en-procès* or a work-in-progress, a continuous act of becoming.<sup>13</sup> In Clifton Joseph's quote, the negation and the past tense in "We werent 'Black'" assumes that we "are" now. I therefore distinguish between *being* and *becoming*. *Being*, as I already cited, is a continuous act of becoming. It is not a fixed entity; on the contrary, it is a production, a performative category that is never complete. Borrowing from Judith Butler, performativity is a concept that does not assume *idées fixes*, quite the opposite, it requires repetitive, parodic and continual acts of becoming.<sup>14</sup> For Butler, there is nothing fixed about, for example, gender or the category woman (and I would add race). So gender (or race) is for Butler the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of recurrent acts, words, gestures, or what Roland Barthes calls complex semiological languages.<sup>15</sup> These are signs that are open for signification and different readings since they cannot produce verbal utterances yet are ready to speak. For Butler, we produce and perform these complex languages on the surface of our bodies: in and through our modes of dress, walk, in our hair, *maquillage*, lip-gloss; also in architecture, photography, and so on. So we perform who we are, our identities, desires, and investments, at least in part, in and through these complex semiological languages: our dress, walk and talk. Following Simone de Beauvoir, Monique Wittig concludes that there is nothing inherent or guaranteed about being a woman. Indeed, one is not even born a woman, one becomes one.<sup>16</sup> If this be so, then one is not born Black either, one in fact becomes one, where Blackness is a set of norms, narratives, and everyday performative roles and acts.

Using the analogy of learning a language, *being* can be similar to a mother tongue while *becoming* is to learn a second language. Although no one can fully and completely master one's mother tongue, one is comfortable enough within it to know its nuances and to even know that which is beyond language:

the excess. Whereas, in the case of a second language, one enters that language as an outsider; always with the hope that that which is outside will eventually belong to the self, a second will become a first language. In short, *being* is an accumulative memory, an understanding, a conception and an experience upon which individuals interact with the world around them, whereas *becoming* is the process of building this memory, experience.

May 16, 1999 was a culminating day in my understanding of what it means to be Black in North America, specifically in Canada. It was the day I was hailed, declared “Black,” by an authorised speaker who possessed an authorised language. The following, published elsewhere, is an extract from my diary entitled *Being Under Surveillance: Who Controls My Black Body?*<sup>17</sup> It is cited here to demonstrate how my “Black” body was hailed, on the one hand, and the speech act, the address it produces in others, what it makes them “say,” on the other. In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks argues that, “experience can be a way to know and can inform how we know what we know” and that “personal testimony ... is such fertile ground for the production of liberatory [praxis] because it usually forms the base of our [knowledge and] theory making.”<sup>18</sup> And so, I hope, is my narrative.

#### MAY 16, 1999: THE STORY OF THE “DARK MAN”

Today was the last day of my trip to Toronto after a five-month absence in Ottawa. I had, to say the least, a wo(a)nderful time during my sojourn in Toronto: visited friends, had flavoury meals, and yes saw *The Mummy*, too. It was 1:10 p.m. on a sunny and an unexpectedly hot Sunday. I was more in the mood for poetry than for prose; and bicycling on St. George Street had never been as light. However it is frightening how lightness can so easily whirl into an unbearable heaviness, and how heaviness can cause so much pain. It all began when I had just crossed the yellow light of Bloor Street West. I saw a white car curving into the bicycle lane and I heard hereafter a siren coming from it. Since I was bicycling, I was neither able to fully verify the car nor who was driving it nor why it was requesting me to stop. However, when it was fully halted before my bicycle, I realized it was a police car. From it came veering a rangy White man with full gear and a pair of sunglasses, along with a clean and handsome gun. My immediate thought was that it must be the bicycle helmet, since I was not wearing one; and seeing that there will always be a first time for our social experiences, I whispered to myself “oh God, this is my first ticket of my life.” I was deadly mistaken.

He approached my bicycle and said “Have you ever been in trouble with the law before?” Shocked beyond any imaginable belief, I said “No.” “Can I know why am I asked the question?” I added. “You fit the description of a man we are looking for, who just snatched a bag from Yorkville; and I just saw you around the Yorkville area,” he said. Could I have avoided Yorkville, since to

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buy a muffler or a bandanna in Yorkville one needs at least few hundred and I had only forty-two dollars in my pocket? Coincidences have their own logic, which is beyond my humble understanding. At this point, he began a walkie-talkie conversation with a dispatcher; and I realized when he said “I am talking to him right now” that it was a continuation to a previous dialogue. The phrase “I am talking to him right now” was, however, traumatic. Involuntarily, it triggered and brought alive my unforgettable political prison memory in the early 1990s with the all-punishing dictatorial régime in Sudan. When memories are so deep, all they need is a match to find oneself burning and unwillingly shaking. The phrase was that match. It signified that I was already under surveillance; I was already “talked” about. Panopticism, somehow, keeps surfacing in my mind now. It was a situation where the marginalized and the invisible was becoming visible, if not the center of surveillance; where the “fictions” I was immersed into came alive into “reality.” Looking sternly into his eyes, I repeated “Can I know why I was stopped?” In a panoptic régime, I now understand, like all totalitarian régime, the true opponent or enemy, if you like, is the person who asks questions. Squirmingly, his face turned red and he loudly regurgitated “I told YOU Sir that you fit the description of a man we are looking for.”

Calmly but unaloofly, “And what is that description?” I wondered. “We are looking for a dark man with a dark bag,” he said. First, I was curious about the “we.” Who are “we”? I can hazard answers, but I am still not sure about the answer. Secondly I looked at my backpack which I was carrying, since I was leaving Toronto at 3:00 p.m., and it occurred to me that my bag was light-blue with one very small black (or as he said “dark”) stripe at the edge. More with my eyes than with my voice, I repeated after him “A DARK man?” Self-consciously, but pesteringly, he exclaimed “A Black man with a dark bag!” He insisted on my bag being “dark”; now I was significantly metamorphosed from “dark” into “black.” Not that it matters either way, I reflected after, but it seems that some people can either not see or have “color problem.” “Do you live around here, Sir?” he asked. “I don’t” I responded. Up until now, I have no idea why his eyes steered out and his face changed when I said I did not live in Toronto. “Where do you live, Sir?” The appellation “Sir,” at this point, was voiced with such an unease that I questioned the merit of its utterance. “Ottawa,” I said. “What are you doing in Toronto?” What, indeed, are you doing in Toronto? I repeated to myself. Some questions, I guess, are meant to be repeated for their banality, if not stupefaction. I told him none of these; “I am visiting friends,” I said. With an unconvinced face he murmured “Ohha!”

During this conversation, I saw another police car stopping behind the first; and from it came another White policeman. I was then asked for a piece of identification. I gave the first policeman my citizenship card. Before doing so, he asked me to lay down my (dark?) bag, which I did. With his order, I widely

opened my bag for anyone in the street to see. Since it was a tourist area, with the well-attended Bata Shoe Museum, everyone was looking into my bag. Some, I observed, pitied my plight and one White woman was smiling. I was not only pitying my situation, which was abtremely absurd, I was pitying also that Toni Morrison's *Paradise*, Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* and Julia Kristeva's *Reader* had to endure the same humiliation. These books were on top of my clothes. Not that these books mattered in and for themselves, because they didn't. Disrespectfulness for the authors was what pestered me. Anyway, it was getting closer to 2 p.m. and my ride for Ottawa was to leave at 3 p.m. At this point, I decided to use my University of Ottawa professor identification. I am still debating whether it was a favorable or unfavorable decision not to use it from the offset. After writing down my name and date of birth, he then announced to the dispatcher telling her "All is OK now."

With no apologies, I was ordered to collect my affairs and my bag and, as he uttered it, "You are free to go now." Given its inhumane nature, being under siege, believe me, is a feeling which should be avoided using all measures. Somehow, nonetheless, I pondered if the reasons for which I was stopped could or would be enough to stop any White man, should he be the suspect? Who among White men will be stopped? Most probably unsmartly dressed, with long bonny tail hair? Again, I kept wondering, what if I could not look at the policeman in the eyes and asked with a calm manner, which was not an evoked personae but a natural character, why I was stopped? What if I was just a shy man who is genuinely frightened by the police? As well, one might ask, did my Hip-Hop dress, my emerging dreadlocks and my youthfulness form part of the reasons why I was stopped? Given my panic, terror, and fright, what would have happened should I have run? The wrath I have seen in that man's eyes, I would be ready to say, and it would certainly not be a hazard guessing given the historical relationship between the police and the Black body, was not assuring.

#### L'ÉTRANGER: A BODILY SPEECH ACT OF LOVE

The ... speech act performs its deed *at the moment* of the utterance, and yet to the extent that the moment is ritualized, it is never merely a single moment. The "moment" in ritual is a condensed historicity: it exceeds itself in past and future directions, an effect of prior and future invocations that constitute and escape the instance of utterance (*ES*, 3).

"Si je suis tranger, il n'y a pas d' trangers," I repeat after Julia Kristeva.<sup>19</sup> *L'étranger* or the stranger, the Other, the policeman needs to remember, is not outside the semiotic system of the Nation but within it; and language forms his imaginary which is in dire need of deconstruction. Blackness, he should also know, is a multicultural, multinational and multiethnic body of alterity and heterogeneity. The semiotic chora of the Black body, then, is not thetic, stable

and fixed, but a sign that *has no* meaning in itself, in fact it *receives* meaning in its interdiscursive relation with other bodies. The story therefore should not be read as an expression of racism, but an aporetic metatranslation of this Black body that is caught up in a paradox, split; and of a man whose translation of himself is different than others of him. Henceforth, he finds himself at once subversive of and dependent on the signifying process of his own body.

He knows that, “a fully intentional speech is perpetually subverted by that in speech which subverts intentionality” (*ES*, 11). That is to say, our bodies cheat us all the time, what they “say” is almost always unknown since they “say” things that they do not intend. They say more, or say differently, than they mean to say; something is always in the excess. “In speaking,” therefore Butler argues, “the act that the body is performing is never fully understood; the body is the blindspot of speech, that which acts in excess of what is said, but which also acts in and through what is said. That the speech act is a bodily act,” Butler explains, “means that the act is redoubled in the moment of speech: there is what is said, and then there is a kind of saying that the bodily “instrument” of the utterance performs” (*ES*, 11). Moreover, Butler reminds us, the speech act itself has its own economy of exchange, where the Saying is not and should not be equated to what is being Said, since “to be addressed is not merely to be recognized for what one already is, but to have the very term conferred by which the recognition of existence becomes possible.” That is to say, “One “exists” not only by virtue of being recognized, but, in prior sense, by being *recognizable*” (*ES*, 5). To be recognizable, however, as we have seen, is to find oneself within a linguistic realm, a social rituality that works through exclusion and violence.

He also knows what Emmanuel Kant once argued, that *the thing in itself* is not the same as *the thing for me*. “Everything you see is part of the world around you,” explained the protagonist Alberto in *Sophie’s World*, “but *how* you see it is determined by the glasses you are wearing.” So, Alberto continues, “you cannot say the world is red even though you conceived it as being so.” As humans, Alberto concludes, “We are condemned to improvise. We are like actors dragged onto the stage without having learned our lines, with no script and no prompter to whisper stage directions to us. We must decide for ourselves how to live.”<sup>20</sup> In a humanist mould, this actor posits himself (as) a Black subject and simultaneously questions the adequacy of that location, deconstructs t/his subjectivity as an always-already *work-in-progress* that can never “be” (in full). He is a *subject-in-process* that is always to become, and to become—for him—is to become human with the truth of love: “When I am in love, there is palpating, passionate, unique meaning, but only right here and now, a meaning that may be absurd in another conjunction.”<sup>21</sup> He loves deeply, and he knows, finally, that ...



Love's procession is moving;  
 Beauty is waving her banner;  
 Youth is sounding the trumpet of joy;  
 Disturb not my contrition, my blamer.  
 Let me walk, for the path is rich  
 With roses and mint, and the air  
 Is scented with cleanliness.

Kahlil Gibran<sup>22</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Monique Wittig, "One Is Not Born a Woman," in *Identities: Race, Class, Gender, and Nationality*, ed. L. Alcoff and M. Eduardo (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 159, original emphasis. I am grateful for reviewers' and editor's helpful comments and feedback.
2. Wittig, *One Is Not Born a Woman*, 159.
3. Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (London: Polity Press, 1991).
4. William Pinar, William Reynolds, Patrick Slattery and Peter Taubman, *Understanding Curriculum* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995).
5. See for example Awad Ibrahim 'Hey, whassup homeboy?' *Becoming Black: Race, Language, Culture, and the Politics of Identity. African Students in a Franco-Ontarian High School*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation (OISE: University of Toronto, 1998); "Becoming Black: Rap and Hip-Hop, Race, Gender, Identity, and the Politics of ESL Learning," *TESOL Quarterly* 33, no.3 (1999): 349-369; "'Hey, ain't I Black too?'" *The Politics of Becoming Black*," in *Rude: Contemporary Black Canadian Cultural Criticism*, ed. R. Walcott (Toronto: Insomniac Press, 2000), 109-136; "'Whassup Homeboy?'" *Black/Popular Culture and the Politics of "Curriculum Studies": Devising an Anti-racism Perspective*," in *Power, Knowledge and Anti-racism Education: A Critical Reader*, ed. G. J. S. Dei and A. Calliste (Halifax: Feronwood, 2000), 57-72; "Operating Under Erasure: Hip-Hop and the Pedagogy of Affective," *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* 20. no. 1 (2004): 113-133.
6. Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York & London: Routledge, 1997), 25. This book will be cited as *ES* in the text for all subsequent references.
7. See also Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy* (London: New Left Books, 1971); J. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1962); Butler, *Excitable Speech*.

8. See M. K. Asante, "Afrocentricity and Culture," in *African Culture: The Rhythms of Unity* ed. M. Asante & K. Asante (Trenton, NJ: Africa World, 1990), 3-12. Thanks, in part, to the discourse of Afrocentrism and diasporic/Africana studies departments, there is a new dialogue created between Africans and diasporic Africans (see also Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London & New York: Routledge, 1993). And part of this dialogue is enhanced by, ironically, tourism and immigration, as well as involuntary displacement. In defiance of history, diasporic Africans in North America, for example, are making the journey back to Africa and continental Africans are making it to North America.
  9. See also Stuart Hall ed., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: The Open University, 1997).
  10. See Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*; Kathryn Woodward ed., *Identity and Difference* (London: The Open University, 1997); M. Fine, L. Powell, L. Weiss & L. M. Wong ed., *Off White: Readings on Race, Power and Society* (New York: Routledge, 1997); M. Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London: Tavistock, 1970); R. Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*.
  11. Althea Prince, *Being Black* (Toronto: Insomniac Press, 2001), 16-17, italics added.
  12. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet Prince of Denmark* (London: Penguin, 1988).
  13. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Awad Ibrahim "'Hey, ain't I Black too?'" The Politics of Becoming Black," in *Rude: Contemporary Black Canadian Cultural Criticism*, ed. R. Walcott (Toronto: Insomniac Press, 2000), 109-136; Julia Kristeva, *La révolution du langage poétique* (Paris: L'Armanet et Mallarmé, 1974); Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology* (New York: Pocket Books, 1980).
  14. Butler, *Gender Trouble*.
  15. Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983).
  16. Butler, *Gender Trouble*.
  17. Awad Ibrahim, "May 16, 1999: The Story of the 'Dark Man,'" *Inquiry: Critical Thinking Across the Disciplines* 22, no. 2 (2003): 21-25.
  18. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994), 168.
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19. Julia Kristeva, *Histoire d'amour* (Paris: Denoel, 1983), 3.
  20. J. Gaarder, *Sophie's World: A Novel About the History of Philosophy* (New York: Berkley Books, 1996), 457.
  21. Julia Kristeva, *Histoire d'amour* (Paris: Denoel, 1983), 259.
  22. Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet* (New York: Knopf, 1966), 120.
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