



# Beyond the Failure of Communication with Others: Angela Carter from a Global Perspective

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That Angela Carter is a global author might seem too obvious of a statement, since her oeuvre has been read and studied all over the world and translated into multiple languages. Since her premature death in 1992, Angela Carter's international reputation has only grown. The multiplicity, hybridity, and progressiveness of her stories are just some of the reasons for her global popularity. It is not possible to categorise her literature into one genre. She is a novelist, a writer of fairy tales, a translator, a poet, a magic realist, a surrealist, a journalist, a scriptwriter, a fantasist. It is impossible to pin her literature down to one nationality, either. Although her literature is obviously influenced by the heritage of English literature, Carter was often vocally critical of the colonialist / nationalist / sexist nature of English high literature and mocked the 'invasion' of Shakespearian actors in America in her last novel, *Wise Children* (1991). Carter attempted to expand her literary universe by absorbing elements from around the world, demonstrating what she writes in one of her essays: 'I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode'.<sup>1</sup> She made it plain for everyone to see that her work was indebted to myriad other cultures, including French, Spanish, Italian, German, Eastern European, Russian, American, and Japanese. She reviewed many non-English writers in her journalism and introduced a multitude of stories from non-European cultures in her fairy-tale collections. She questioned the demarcation of national literature and was open to the world. She celebrated hybridity and flinched at the idea of purity. Uninterested in maintaining past legacies, she preferred to destroy them, committed to 'the demythologizing business'.<sup>2</sup> Ahead of her time, her progressive thinking is finally being reflected in 21st-century social change, and a series of global social justice movements against legacies of colonial pasts, slave trade and racism are unfolding.

Her feminism is also very progressive, being non-sectarian, non-biologically determined, and not about the victimhood of women, echoed in the characters of Fevvers in *Nights at the Circus* (1984), or Dora and Nora in *Wise Children*. Carter explored the idea of gender performativity even before theories of gender

performativity were developed in *The Passion of New Eve* (1977), which demonstrates how women as well as men can become oppressors when they resort to the notion of biological superiority and separatism, and how trans people suffer as a result of binary thinking. This story caricaturises exaggerated notions of femininity and the appreciation of female symbols in the '70s, inspired by the writing of French feminists, such as Helene Cixous's 'The Laugh of Medusa'. Carter's inclusive vision, expressed in the novel's thought experiments, is more relevant than ever today, as we discuss issues of trans exclusion, sexual violence, misogyny, misandry, body positivity and cosmetic surgery. Her playful and inclusive approach is inspirational in this divided society, rife with opposing and divisive ideologies.

Carter had not always been so progressive, however. It was through encounters with the heterogeneity of others that made Carter this progressive and open to global perspectives. The drastic re-examination of her racial, sexual, gender and national identity began in Japan, where she interacted with others whose language, culture, ideology, religion and political system were foreign and inexplicable to her. Looking back at her pre-Japan days, she writes, 'I was, as a girl, suffering a degree of colonialization of the mind. Especially in the journalism I was writing then, I'd – quite unconsciously – posit a male point of view as a general one. So there was an element of the male impersonator about this young person as she was finding herself.'<sup>3</sup> Carter connects colonialism with feminism, her sense of race and of gender. And indeed, Carter's anti-nationalism and her inclusive, non-biologically determined feminism seemed to emerge at the same time as she travelled around the world:

My female consciousness was being forged out of the contradictions of my experience as a traveller, as, indeed, some other aspects of my political consciousness were being forged. (It was a painful and enlightening experience to be regarded as a coloured person, for example; to be defined as a Caucasian before I was defined as a woman, and learning the hard way that most people on this planet are not Caucasian and have no reason to either love or respect Caucasians.)<sup>4</sup>

Although her interrogation into hegemony had certainly begun pre-Japan and can be found in works such as *Heroes and Villains* (1969), Carter's experience in Japan was an important catalyst for her to find herself at the intersections of gender, race, nationality, class, and language and cultural difference, driving her out of her complacency in her position as a Caucasian, feminist, English-speaking woman who agreed with the postcolonial movement. As a Caucasian, she came across the indifference and, often,

hostility of Japanese people, including Sozo Araki, whom she met in Tokyo and fell in love with. For the first time in her life, she became conscious of her own race and how she was regarded amidst the racial tensions of the world, especially in post-war Japanese society when protests against the renewal of the Security Treaty between Japan and the US were raging. No matter how she regarded herself, she was defined as 'the White', which was synonymous with the oppressor, the occupier, the invader, the colonizer.<sup>5</sup> For the first time in her life, it dawned on Carter that feminism should not just concern itself solely with gender but needs to include the interrogation and deconstruction of its relationship with racial and national hegemonies, as they are helplessly intertwined.

In Japan, Carter became aware of her own bewilderingly Orientalist tendency to objectify beautiful Asians as a connoisseur of *objets d'art* and to dissect them as a coroner or taxidermist might.<sup>6</sup> The narrator of 'Flesh and the Mirror' relates, 'I wanted to take him apart, as a child dismembers a clockwork toy ... I picked up my scalpel and set to work ... I was so absorbed in this work it never occurred to me to wonder if it hurt him.'<sup>7</sup> She was, in a way, trying to make a pressed flower, an *ikebana* arrangement, or a perfectly pruned *bonsai*. However, her object of desire had other plans, his 'own design'.<sup>8</sup>

Criticising her own privilege as a member of the British middle class and examining the colonialist and Orientalist mindset within her own writing, Carter writes that 'white women can't get out of our historic complicity in colonialism, any more than the white working class can'.<sup>9</sup> She further addresses the entanglement of Western feminism with colonialism in an interview:

In some respects perhaps it's a rather arrogant thing for a white middle-class woman, from a developed country, to say [that she feels more affinity to third-world writers]. Because I cannot dissociate myself from the history of my country. I notice – and it makes me very angry – that a lot of American feminists are perfectly prepared to dissociate themselves from the history of America, they're perfectly prepared to say 'Yes, but women have always been more oppressed than ...'<sup>10</sup>

In the following sections, I will trace how Carter's encounter with others are narrated in her fiction, especially how her experience of communication failures with foreign others, and of misunderstanding them, are reflected and overcome in some of her stories. These stories offer the readers visions of connecting with others against all odds in different systems of language and thought, of surmounting the impossibility of translation, of creating together an inclusive world where heterogeneity is celebrated.

The short story 'The Smile of Winter', in Carter's Japanese collection *Fireworks* (1974), depicts the situation of a foreign woman living in a society of others whom she does not understand. The narrator, in fact, does not hold a conversation with anyone in the story at all. Apart from her solipsistic monologue, she does not seem capable of communicating with other people. She is surrounded by objects and people 'so inaccessible'<sup>11</sup> and 'inimical to [her] loneliness because of their indifference to it'.<sup>12</sup>

The picturesque but uninviting scenery the narrator describes may essentially resemble Carter's own psychological landscape when she came to Japan. Especially at the beginning of her stay, because she did not understand the Japanese language, Carter's Japan must have been more or less a silent world, if we do not take into account her conversations in English with Sozo Araki and her British and American friends. She was not able to engage in bilateral communication with local people. Even her conversations with Sozo in English were rife with misunderstandings and errors, as is inevitable in any act of translation.

And yet, though frustrated by the lack of communication and understanding, by the apparent indifference of the surroundings to her, the narrator of the story attempts to reach beyond the reflection on the surface to find out what is on the other side. She endeavours to read 'brilliant hieroglyphs across the panes'<sup>13</sup> scrawled by the midnight riders and 'the absolute purity of a Taoist mirror',<sup>14</sup> although their meaning is unattainable, no matter how hard she tries. She imagines these bikers as well as local people to be of a species other than human, living in the sea. Since these '[d]ifferent peoples inhabit the countries of the ocean',<sup>15</sup> she accepts why their underwater voices cannot reach the ear of the narrator. The sea is, as she imagines, a soundless world, 'an inversion of the known'.<sup>16</sup>

Feeling alienated but comforted by this imagination, she thinks of the local people as 'sea creatures, spiny, ocean-bottom-growing-flora and if a tidal wave consumed the village ... there, under the surface, life would go on just as before ... the women going about their silent business because everything is as silent as if it were under the water, anyway'.<sup>17</sup> This passage suggests the author's realisation of the existence of another world, with its own set of rules, values, and philosophy, in which the people go about their business regardless of her interest or concern. She may not penetrate this other world, no matter how she desires.

This may not sound remarkable. However, as the narrator of 'The Flesh and the Mirror' tells us, this foreign woman came to Japan 'to satisfy' herself,<sup>18</sup> 'trying to subdue the city turning it into a projection of [her] own growing pains',<sup>19</sup> creating the image of the other 'solely in relation to [herself] ... corresponding to the ghost inside' her.<sup>20</sup> She only thought of the other on her own terms and saw only what she could understand: 'If I ever found anything new to me, I steadfastly ignored it.'<sup>21</sup>

Compared to the Orientalist attitude of wanting to make the other correspond to a certain image, the narrator of this story respects the insurmountable boundary between herself and the other. As is typical for Carter's protagonists, she allows the reader to accompany her on a slow, detoured journey to epiphany. And certainly, recognising that 'different peoples also live in the countries of the night'<sup>22</sup> is a small epiphany as to the equal validity of other people, other values, other cultures, which cannot be fully known or grasped, yet can be appreciated and their differences cherished. When the narrator smiles 'the desolate smile of winter',<sup>23</sup> she seems able to appreciate the beauty of unknowability.

Another text that deals with the impossibility of foreign communication is 'The Tiger's Bride', an adaptation of the fairy tale 'Beauty and the Beast', contained in Carter's fairy-tale collection *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979). At the beginning, the Beast is portrayed as someone whose language the protagonist does not understand, a linguistic other. He conceals his face with a human mask, and his words are conveyed by his valet, his interpreter. The difficulty of interpretation is manifold, as both the Beast and the valet are not quite human, and with the protagonist they use Italian, which is – 'my limping Italian'<sup>24</sup> – not her native language. They use a language neither of them is fluent in as a common medium of communication, thus they are both linguistically handicapped. Furthermore, since that conversation is being related by the author in English, there is, in theory, another layer of translation involved.

From the beginning, their communication is ungainly and full of misunderstandings, as typical in any translation, retranslation, or relay translation. Besides, the protagonist, unaware of the true nature of the Beast's otherness, is antagonistic and prejudiced towards the Beast, convinced that he is a sexual predator, a man who abuses women. She wonders suspiciously, 'what can he smell of, that needs so much camouflage?'<sup>25</sup> The description of him by the protagonist reflects her distrust of him and is constantly negative, using words such as 'two-dimensional', 'crude,' 'uncanny', and 'false'. He is 'a carnival figure made of papier mâché and crêpe hair'.<sup>26</sup>

The protagonist melodramatically pities herself, lamenting her future at the hand of the Beast – 'Lost to the Beast! And what, I wondered, might be the exact nature of his "beastliness"?'<sup>27</sup> – but the valet, to her dismay, does not show any 'pity' for her. It is the first sign that something is off, that there might be a misunderstanding, that she might be misjudging him. Too absorbed in her own conviction, however, the protagonist does not pursue her momentary doubt.

When the valet conveys his master's request that she show him her naked body, the valet is clearly aware of the difficulty of translating such a sensitive request, especially when the other party has already formed a negative opinion. Burdened by 'the delicate task', he 'coughed', 'started', 'lost his place in this speech, began again', 'twittered', 'gulped', and 'swallowed'.<sup>28</sup> With his 'ironic composure gone', his role of go-between clearly caused him



a good deal of embarrassment' as he knows 'the desire of a master; however trivial, may yet sound unbearably insolent in the mouth of a servant'.<sup>29</sup> The possibility of successfully transmitting his master's intention without it being misunderstood seems miniscule, and the valet is clearly at a loss.

When the valet finally articulates the request that she become 'Desnuda – ',<sup>30</sup> the protagonist immediately suspects his request to be a degrading, obscene kind of sexual objectification, although the language the valet uses is quite neutral and there is no suggestion of obscenity. 'Desnuda' or 'nude' originally means just 'without clothes'. However, the protagonist, as well as the readers, interpret the word in association with all the connotations incurred throughout the history of the exploitation of women's bodies in Western culture. The Beast's request, translated to a human language by the valet, inevitably assumes these connotations, and is understood by the protagonist as a degrading transaction of the female body, equivalent to prostitution. Based on this interpretation, the protagonist responds sharply. The Beast's true intention does not reach the protagonist, because she is filled with rage thinking she is being treated as a whore as she has been in the past, infuriated with a social system in which women's bodies are abused. Her misandry, her distrust of men, her previous experience of being objectified, her preconceived notions of beastliness – all make the protagonist blind to the Beast's true intention, and to the possibility that she might have misunderstood him.

The author, however, offers the protagonist and the readers several clues that their assessment needs rethinking. For instance, when the protagonist harshly responds to the Beast, 'one single tear swelled, glittering, at the corner of the masked eye. A tear! A tear; I hoped, of shame.'<sup>31</sup> It is an unexpected response to the protagonist's words, even if he is ashamed of his own request, as she surmises. She is taken aback, still unable to break free from her preconceived ideas about the Beast.

The valet's reaction continues to perplex her as long as she regards the Beast as a predator and an abuser: When she defiantly says she may kill herself, the valet responds, 'Oh, no, you will not. You are a woman of honour.'<sup>32</sup> It is apparent that the protagonist's 'honour' and the 'honour' described by the valet do not correspond, or at least their value systems are different, because, in the protagonist's world, it is considered honourable for a woman to kill herself when faced with sexual assault. It is evidently not in the valet's world. Still, the protagonist does not understand the meaning of their differences.

It is not until the riverbank scene that the protagonist finally realises her misinterpretation of the Beast's request, when the valet tells her, upon her refusal to comply, to 'prepare yourself for the sight of my master; naked.'<sup>33</sup> On hearing this second request that is apparently not predatory, the protagonist realises that she has held prejudice towards the Beast. She loses her 'composure' and is 'on the brink of panic': 'I did not think that I could bear the sight of him, whatever he was.'<sup>34</sup>

When the Beast, shaking and scared, unmasks, disrobes, and shows her the nature of his strangeness, in his wild-animal nakedness, it is clear that it is the protagonist who has been in the wrong and who needs to be reformed, not the Beast. Unlike the Beast in the original versions by Gabrielle-Suzanne de Villeneuve and Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont, this Beast in Carter's tale is not a human being in disguise. The Beast is a real beast, a wild animal, a resident of a world completely different from the human one. It has different logic, different rules, and different values. The Beast's request has not been an obscene one all along, but a request to be equal from one animal to another by showing each other's true skin. She has been blind to his vulnerability, his fear, as an animal in the presence of a human being. But now, finally, she realises her privilege, her power, and her prejudice towards the Beast.

The perspective shift here is drastic and profound. The protagonist has been trapped in a divided world of black and white, in which the Beast was either a sexual predator with abusive, exploitative power, or a potential romantic partner for a heterosexual relationship. The stereotype she held was deeply ingrained and did not easily allow her to see the Beast as anything other than these two types. The difficulty in communication only aggravated her prejudice. But when she realises that she has been completely misguided in her assessment of the situation, she starts to look at the world differently. It dawns on her that she might have made a mistake in interpreting the request of the Beast as obscene. She might have made a wrong judgment about him.

By addressing the protagonist's tendency to misunderstand racial, sexual and linguistic others according to stereotypes and prejudices, and her tendency to be scornful of those with speech deficiencies or limited language abilities, Carter makes us, the readers, see our own similar tendencies. We now see how we have been complicit in the abuse and exploitation of the Beast, who does not speak human language. We also come to realise how anthropomorphised animals populate our human literature, as we use them as metaphors for sexual predators or intellectually inferior beings. The collapse of the castle in the final scene encapsulates this complete paradigm shift:

*The sweet thunder of this purr shook the old walls, made the shutters batter the windows until they burst apart and let in the white light of the snowy moon. Tiles came crashing down from the roof; I heard them fall into the courtyard far below. The reverberations of his purring rocked the foundations of the house, the walls began to dance. I thought: 'It will all fall, everything will disintegrate.'*<sup>35</sup>



This scene is truly magnificent in its power of deconstruction. When all human constructs crumble down, so do the demarcations between species and their hierarchies and prejudices. Anthropocentric perspectives collapse to make way for alternative, posthuman, or antihuman perspectives. The protagonist, with help from the Beast, sheds 'all the skins of a life in the world',<sup>36</sup> the skins she accumulated in the human world with its sexism, human-centrism, and all sorts of prejudices against others, and obtains 'a nascent patina of shining hairs'.<sup>37</sup> She learns the rules of the other and decides to adopt them.

The story, as we have seen, is the beautiful tale of an encounter with a strange other; and how communication difficulties, prejudice and stereotyping can be overcome. With this story, Carter again makes the readers follow the same winding path the protagonist treads, makes them experience her mistakes and learn from them. This story lays bare how we live in a myriad of intersections and how power relations are more complicated than is often realised, since privilege in one aspect does not mean privilege in another. Carter's experience of her gender and race in the complicated political situation of post-war Japanese society, especially with regard to the politics of the gaze, is reflected in this story.<sup>38</sup> Although in Europe, she had regarded herself as the victim of sexism, she found herself in Japan possessing the Orientalist gaze, similar to the narrator of 'A Souvenir of Japan', who tells how she 'should have liked to have had him embalmed and been able to keep him with [her] in a glass coffin, so that [she] could watch him all the time and he would not have been able to get away from [her]'.<sup>39</sup> In a similar manner, the protagonist of 'The Tiger's Bride' thinks she has been an objectified victim in a sexist human world, but during the interaction with the Beast, she becomes aware that she has been the one who discriminates, the gazer who judges the Beast because of his outer strangeness.

The Beast in this tale represents an uncommunicable other who does not belong to one's own signification system. Or, from the Beast's perspective, the protagonist represents an uncommunicable other to him. The protagonist at first fails to acknowledge the fragility and difficulty of their communication using a language neither of them is familiar with, even when, as Naoki Sakai points out, with a linguistic other, we have to assume that our attempt at communication may fail, and we may be misunderstood or not understood at all, although in a 'homo-lingual' mentality, we tend to forget the fact that in every utterance 'one must first "address" someone', without assuming 'we can "convey" the message'.<sup>40</sup> Sakai succinctly compares homo-lingual communication with 'communion',<sup>41</sup> an assumption of one-ness and homogeneity, and writes that the 'practice of addressing the homo-lingual audience excludes the possibility of multiplicity and the coexistence of languages among the audience and the readers'.<sup>42</sup>

It may go without mentioning that what Sakai articulates here is applicable to every kind of difficulty – not only linguistic – in communication with others. In a globalised world, we encounter linguistic and ideological others all the time, and Sakai therefore tells us that, in a

global community which does not guarantee mutual understanding and the transparent conveyance of information, 'we must always be prepared to encounter misunderstandings, mishearings, and a lack of comprehension.'<sup>43</sup> However, we tend to make the assumption that meaning can be conveyed, ideas can be shared, and mutual understanding is easily attainable with translation, interpretation, and AI technology. It is an assumption that the users of a dominant language tend to make, and upon encountering difficulties in communication, they either give up quickly or blame the other for being incompetent. The protagonist of this tale made a similar assumption and formed a low opinion of the Beast.

It is the Beast, a brave hero pursuing a global interaction between strangers, who does not give up on communication in this story. He persistently addresses the protagonist, even though she does not try to understand him. He does not lose 'the will' to communicate despite repeated failures, exemplifying the kind of communication attempt to establish an equal relationship stipulated by Jacques Rancière:

All words, written or spoken, are a translation that only takes on meaning in the counter-translation, in the invention of the possible causes of the sound heard or of the written trace: the will to figure out that applies itself to all indices, in order to know what one reasonable animal has to say to what it considers the soul of another reasonable animal.<sup>44</sup>

The Beast tries to speak to 'the soul' of the protagonist and when approach by language fails, he uses the bodily performance, a 'counter-translation', of revealing his natural body, to which the protagonist finally responds.

Going beyond the failure of communication despite apparent impossibility, 'The Tiger's Bride' allows the readers to glimpse at the possibility of communication with someone of a different race, gender, sexuality, physical condition, or species, however difficult, without eliminating their difference, individuality, or heterogeneity, and without subjecting one to the other's order. It may be a fairy tale, a dream, but it certainly gives us a vision to aspire to in this globalised world.

Carter's oeuvre, as we have seen, invites readers to scrutinise their preconceived notions of gender, power and race, and leads them through a total restructuring of them. Her stories are often connected to issues of sexism, orientalism, nationalism and racism that are not initially evident. By reading Carter's stories carefully, readers are encouraged to question their internalised orientalism, racism and sexism and to embrace heterogeneity. Carter's literature has great potential beyond the scope of literary studies and can bring about empowerment and liberation in today's world.

To borrow Carter's words, I became radicalised by reading Angela Carter. It was a liberating, empowering and life-changing experience for me. I am sure I am not the only one for whom Angela Carter is not just a favourite author, but a guiding light for survival, a visionary for a better society, and a great teacher in feminism from a global, anti-colonial, deconstructive perspective. My wish as a researcher of Carter and as an educator is that more readers have a similar epiphany through reading her stories, that her stories may provide such tools for survival, aiding them throughout their lives. Carter's influence is reverberating around the globe, and her stories, essays, dramas, and poetry help liberate more and more readers into a heterogeneous world. I am convinced that Carter's visionary power will increasingly empower people in their endeavour to communicate with others and make this globalised world a better place.

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Notes

1. Angela Carter, 'Notes from the Front Line', in *On Gender and Writing*, ed. Michelene Wandor (London: Pandora Press, 1983), 69-77 (71).
2. Carter, 'Notes from the Front Line', 71.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Carter, 'Notes from the Front Line', 72.
5. Interestingly, according to Sozo Araki, she presented herself as 'Scottish' while she was in Japan. Although this was not entirely false, as her father was Scottish, it may have been an attempt to distance herself from Englishness, England's colonial history, and the idea of racial supremacy (Araki, personal interview).
6. For a more thorough analysis of her Orientalism, see Natsumi Ikoma, 'Through the Looking Glass of Madame Butterfly: Narrative Gender Transition in the Writings of Angela Carter', in *Contemporary Women's Writing* (OUP, forthcoming).
7. Angela Carter, 'Flesh and the Mirror', in *Fireworks* (London: Virago, 1988), 61-70 (68).
8. *Ibid.*
9. Carter, 'Notes from the Front Line', 73.
10. Kerry Goldsworthy, 'Angela Carter', *Meanjin* 44, no. 1 (1985): 4-13 (10). Ellipsis original.
11. Carter, 'The Smile of Winter', in *Fireworks* (London: Virago, 1988), 39-46 (40).
12. Carter, 'The Smile of Winter', 46.
13. Carter, 'The Smile of Winter', 45.
14. Carter, 'The Smile of Winter', 43.
15. Carter, 'The Smile of Winter', 46.
16. Carter, 'The Smile of Winter', 45.
17. Carter, 'The Smile of Winter', 46.
18. Carter, 'Flesh and the Mirror', 61.
19. Carter, 'Flesh and the Mirror', 62.
20. Carter, 'Flesh and the Mirror', 67-8.
21. Carter, 'Flesh and the Mirror', 68.
22. Carter, 'The Smile of Winter', 45.
23. Carter, 'The Smile of Winter', 46.
24. Angela Carter, 'The Tiger's Bride', in *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (London: Vintage, 1995), 51-67 (52).







25. Carter, 'The Tiger's Bride', 53.
26. *Ibid.*
27. Carter, 'The Tiger's Bride', 55.
28. Carter, 'The Tiger's Bride', 58.
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Ibid.*
31. Carter, 'The Tiger's Bride', 59.
32. *Ibid.*
33. Carter, 'The Tiger's Bride', 63.
34. *Ibid.*
35. Carter, 'The Tiger's Bride', 67.
36. *Ibid.*
37. *Ibid.*
38. For a more detailed analysis, see Ikoma, 'Through the Looking Glass of Madame Butterfly'.
39. Angela Carter, 'A Souvenir of Japan', in *Fireworks* (London: Virago, 1988), 1-12 (6).
40. Naoki Sakai, *Nihon shiso to iu mondai: honyaku to shutai* [*Issues in Japanese Thought: Translation and Subjectivity*] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1997), 12.
41. *Ibid.*
42. Sakai, *Nihon shiso to iu mondai*, 11.
43. Sakai, *Nihon shiso to iu mondai*, 8.
44. Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. Kristin Ross (California: Stanford UP, 1991), 64.

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