

Shuffling Towards Love: On Anne F. Garréta's *Sphinx*

Rosemarie Ho

*...where I does not exist, nor you,
so close that your hand on my chest is my hand,
so close that your eyes close as I fall asleep.*

—Pablo Neruda, Sonnet XVII

I first came across *Sphinx* when the local bookstore put the slim novella on display as part of their celebrations for Women in Translation Month. “A LANDMARK LITERARY EVENT, the blurb declared, “A MODERN CLASSIC OF FEMINIST AND LGBT/QUEER LITERATURE”. It is an odd choice of words, given that the story turns out to be none of those things—it had no aspirations to be a text easily slotted into nearly partitioned off categories or a list of hashtags that would appeal to the consumerist tendencies of the #woke. The central conceit of the book is that the two main protagonists, *je* and A***, are never gendered or sexed; had this book been written in English within the last decade, in our age of gender-inclusivity and promotion of a multitude of gender-neutral pronouns, this attempt would seem almost juvenile.

Rosemarie Ho is a third-year in the College majoring in Comparative Literature.

But *Sphinx* was—is—the call to revolt from within a language which requires the indication of the subject’s sex in order to make grammatical sense, and which assumes the masculine gender to be the neutral form for nouns. In French, to describe a subject is to immediately gender it: as the translator Emma Ramadan points out, Garréta could never have simply written that *je* went somewhere without already gendering the act of walking through being *je* (in *je suis allé* versus *je suis allée*, one supposes the latter sashays while the

SHUFFLING TOWARDS LOVE

former marches). What the text does is not so much pointing out the sexist nature of the French language, as revealing the reader's biases surrounding action, thought, occupations and gender as well as the human impulse to fracture the Other, and reconfiguring it into something comprehensible through the lens of difference. For Garréta, the point of writing and reading *Sphinx* is to unpack and destabilize the notion of (sexual) difference itself:

*[What is hegemonic in discourse is] sexual difference with a capital D, the Difference beyond all differences, the fundamental Difference which is so fundamental that it is the anthropological source of all differentiation, the foundation of the symbolic order, of social relations, and the very possibility of culture...If we touch, in one way or another, sexual difference, we are not far from the crisis in culture, the very collapse of civilization, the uneasiness within it...The experiment of Sphinx is to highlight the inanity of the secularization of this metaphysical difference.*¹

1. "Entretien avec Anne F. Garréta", <http://cosmogonie.free.fr/interview.html>, accessed January 26, 2016, translation mine.

Garréta's project is to show that the gendered binary of difference is a meaningless discursive (and pervasive) social concept: one can and should understand human experience without the dictates of gender; moreover, categorization itself is reductive, essentialist, a sort of epistemic violence. It is perhaps not surprising, however, that reviewers of the text readily imposed their readings of the characters in explicitly sexed ways when it first came out in 1986. A professor at the University of Winsor did not, for example, hesitate in calling *Sphinx* a love story between a young male intellectual and his "mindless Josephine Baker"². No reviewer considered the possibility of *je* or *A*^{***} being non-binary or trans, and yet all agreed that it was a moving story about love and loss. No one occupied themselves with the ways in which Garréta was fighting for subjecthood itself.

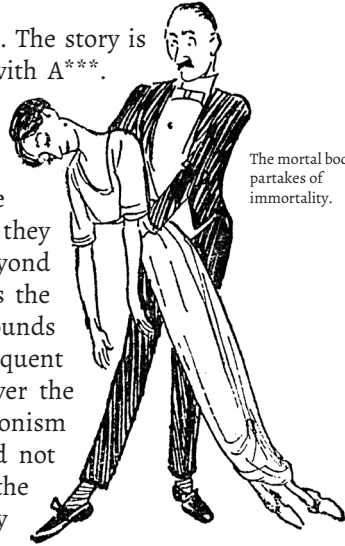
2. Ralph Nelson, *World Literature Today*, Issue 61, No. 2, Spring 1987, Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma: p236-237.

As with texts associated with OULIPO (*Ouvroir de littérature potentielle*, an experimental literary group that included Italo Calvino and Georges Perec), concerns with linguistic constraint guides the generation of plot and content. *Je*, as a studious theology student, only speaks in the extra-literary, high register, genderless *passé simple*. *A*^{***} is never truly individuated as a person so that they

ROSEMARIE HO

do not have had to reveal their gender. The story is framed as a recollection of *je*'s time with A***.

The whole text is saturated with a self-obsessed focus on *je*'s suffering because of A***'s non-existence in *je*'s life. *Je* is, in other words, insufferable in their pining for someone of whom they had never had any understanding beyond the physical in the first place. Besides the political act of writing out gender, this sounds like the average love story—the grandiloquent intellectual painting Annabel Leigh over the visage of Dolores Haze, the reductionism that accompanies lust for a body, and not for a being. Is it any wonder that the aforementioned professor exasperatedly asked in his review, “is A [sic] any more than a symbol of the enigmatic other (the riddle of the Sphinx)?”



The mortal body partakes of immortality.

Yet A*** is not just a signifier, but a body, albeit a gender indeterminate one. *Je*, due to the constraints of the novel, can only describe their love in body parts: the reader doesn't find herself wondering about the genitalia of the two lovers; she finds herself trying to put a face to a collection of lithe and slender limbs. The fixation of the reader is not necessarily on trying to understand A*** as a gendered or sexed being, but on the attempt to theorize a coherent, single subject—on filling in the ambiguous gaps that *je* leaves behind to parse why A*** was so loved by *je*. Some resort to attempting a gendered continuity of subject, and it is not hard to see why that is: the world that Garréta has so painfully constructed is not genderless. In French itself, the tables and chairs are unchangeably female, and the sun is always male; besides *je* and A***, everyone is explicitly gendered and sexed, stereotype after stereotype, a Padre and a mother, a high-strung cabaret danseuse and a sleazy nightclub manager. *Je* acknowledges this vagueness in describing A***:

In the end, what I loved beyond all else: those hips, narrow and broad at the same time, those legs that I never knew how to describe except, mundanely, as slim and long. But it wasn't this that made them

SHUFFLING TOWARDS LOVE

*desirable to me—when we made love, I couldn't stop caressing them, my lips against the inner thighs—it was something else, always something else, this indefinable something else where desire hides itself. Perhaps I was enticed by the slow motion of the dance, before my eyes, sublimely taking the body out of its rhythm.*³

3. Anne F. Garréta, *Sphinx*, trans. Emma Ramadan (Dallas: Deep Vellum Publishing, 2015), 84.

All this is gesturing towards an un-embodied body. A*** is hips and legs metonymized, a placeholder for the object of desire, body fragmented into intelligible yet generic parts for *je* to consume. A*** is not a person with distinct idiosyncrasies, physical or otherwise, just an “enigmatic, silent figure twisting to the extreme limit of dislocation in miraculous movements that were syncopated but not staccato...an immemorial fatality made into movement”⁴—and this accumulation of actions is attributed to the animated agent that is A***. A*** is from the waist down human—unlike a sphinx—but only when A is in motion.

4. Garréta, *Sphinx*, 57-58.

A*** is aware of this, of course. Before tragedy strikes, A*** asks *je* how *je* sees them, and the only answer *je* could think of is: “I see you in a mirror.”⁵ One could take *je* to be admitting that *je* has decidedly reified, ossified A***, this luminous subject, into a sexualized object distanced from *je* (consider the Lacanian injunction that there is no sexual relationship, but individuals mediating pleasure from one another). Or one could interpret this to mean that *je* has used A*** to foreground *je*'s parsing of *je*'s own self. In this sense *je* is using the mirror as a way to consider *je* as a coherent, integrated subject, and A*** is a part of this identity-formation, but only as a blur at the periphery of *je*'s narcissistic gaze. In both cases, A*** is shattered into splinters, and reformulated in *je*'s image.

5. Garréta, 73.

Yet this body, so beloved by *je*, is not only sexualized, but also explicitly raced. (A***'s skin is



Man should live, in the contemplation of beauty absolute.

ROSEMARIE HO

black, and “satiny...far superior to anything [je has] ever known”⁶.) Garréta makes it clear that A*** is of African-American origins, having grown up in Harlem and leaving her destitute single mother behind, so different from je (white, educated, graduate student in theology) in every facet of life imaginable (A*** performs in cabarets and likes to binge-watch soap operas). With the gender binary foreclosed, racial difference is made even more striking: je’s being in the world is mediated through contemplation and a distasteful reflection upon their surroundings, whereas A***, being an exotic “attractive animal”⁷ and exuding an eroticism, drags je from nightclub to nightclub. In the English translation, Ramadan avoids the problematic racial politics that permeate the novella in the original, side-stepping *les origines nègres* and *les Nord-Africains* and leaving in their place “working-class men”. What remains is still race refracted into a prism of distinct white privilege, and descriptions of a devastated Harlem that “projected the muffled but poignant impression of the end of the world”⁸. The raced subject is destroyed and consumed, even as sexual difference is shown to be artificially constructed. The sphinx of this novella may be gender-indeterminate, but it is fetishized beyond repair.

What *Sphinx* ends up arguing is that people can only conceive of one another in terms of oppositions; if it’s not gender or sex, as in the case of je and A***, then it’s race encoded in socioeconomic difference. If love has to be made comprehensible beyond the paradigm of overdetermined axioms about gender and sexual norms, then the beloved—a beloved, by definition, has to be non-generic—is reduced to the level of generalized biological functions. Love becomes moot when rendered in disembodied subjects, and objectification, unsurprisingly, ends in literal death. One can concede to Garréta’s point that she never intended for *Sphinx* to be a text to demonstrate any ostensible Grand Idea about the inequities in social relations, but rather to “test a hypothesis” about gender.⁹ Yet for a text to be so overtly political in its very axioms of construction, it is difficult to ignore the conclusions of the story, and continue to laud it unreservedly for its unsexed imaginary possibilities.

I cannot bear reading a text that attempts to bracket the question of socially-determined modes of interaction in and with the world

6. Garréta, 2.

7. Garréta, 37.

8. Garréta, 65.

9. “Entretien avec Anne F. Garréta”.

SHUFFLING TOWARDS LOVE

that doesn't generate space for a subject-self that is construed as a body of color to experience love and being loved back. *Sphinx*, within its linguistic constraints, could not let A*** speak for themselves about their relationship to *je*; there is blunt, absorbing blackness and an abandoned city back in America, where people speak funny to the patronizing ear of a French native. As I read the book, I found myself wishing that A*** hadn't been so disposable to the narrative, that A*** hadn't been so ossified into the unreachable sphinx, their blackness acting as yet another metonymy for their relational difference to *je*. In short, I wished that I could impose a different reading onto the text, and let A*** *love*.

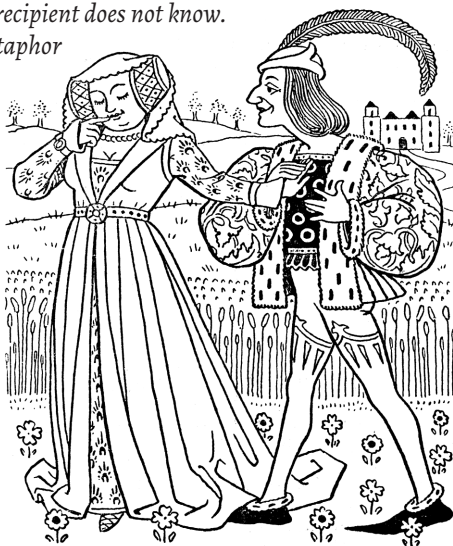
There's a scene in the book that comes close to demonstrating a dialogic interaction, where *je* and A*** decide to visit New York City as a way to mend the growing rifts in their relationship caused by their ostensibly fundamental incompatibility. Excited by this new, unknown city that functioned as a metonymy for A*** themselves, *je* horses around with A***, and declares:

After the subtle sensuality we had just shared, all the other times [we had made love] seemed like a laborious peccadillo. I concluded that making love without laughing was as bad as gifting a book written in a language the recipient does not know.

*The obscurity of my metaphor perplexed A***; already my more serious side was feeling neglected.¹⁰*

10. Garréta, 60-61.

Clearly *je*'s statement is close to complete absurdity, and one could see A*** being baffled by such an outlandish statement: what on Earth do you mean? Are you saying that our relationship has thus far been nothing but a chain of contentless hook-ups? Is it only here, in a city that you think hides the



How I wish, that wisdom could be infused by touch.

ROSEMARIE HO

secrets of my past, that you could see me not as the object of your lust, but as a subject with its orientation in the world? Reading *Sphinx*, I was reminded of Alain Badiou's formulation of love, where

*love reaches out towards the ontological. While desire focuses on the other, always in a somewhat fetishistic manner, on particular objects, like breasts, buttocks and cock... love focuses on the very being of the other, on the other as it has erupted, fully armed with its being, into [life] thus disrupted and re-fashioned.*¹¹

The re-fashioning of life itself happens *because* of the introduction of the other subject: the world is constructed anew from a de-centered perspective, where the beloved is incorporated into the infrastructure of understanding itself. Within this reconfiguration of relational dynamics, the question of difference itself is elided by the shifting of I/you into we. Garréta brought reified racial difference into the world-building of *je* and A^{***}, and *Sphinx* ends up being not about love that is independent of the overdetermination of the sexual binary, but about love that destroys its own prospects in the first encounter-meeting—when *je* sees A^{***}, and sees instead a generic lithe black body demonstrating a certain consumerist permissiveness.

11. Alain Badiou and Nicolas Truong, *In Praise of Love* (New York: New Press, 2012), 21.