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**UNCERTAIN READINGS AND MEANINGFUL DIALOGUES:  
Language and sexual identity in Anne Garréta's Sphinx  
and Tahar Ben Jelloun's L'Enfant de sable and La Nuit sacrée**

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“Ecris-toi: il faut que ton corps se fasse entendre”; so runs Hélène Cixous's exhortation to women in her 1975 essay “Le Rire de la Méduse” (43). Over the twenty years or so which have since passed, Cixous's decree that women should write and celebrate their bodies, their sexual jouissance and their voices, as a way of bringing into Western phallogocentric culture what has historically been silenced and invisible, has been widely discussed and hotly disputed. An ongoing issue is the possible essentialism of such a project. While Cixous's écriture féminine is certainly not equated with female gendered writing, sexual jouissance is at the root of her understanding of sexual difference: a woman's sexual pleasure is different from a man's.<sup>1</sup> Her strategy of positing sexual difference at the level of sexual drives works conceptually to untangle and to liberate sexual identity from gender-linked cultural attributes as well as from specific formulations of sexuality and sexual relationships. However, in reality, is it so easy to extricate ourselves from the complexity of how our sexual identity is constituted and to change what it means “to be a woman” or “to be a man”?

It is surely axiomatic that texts have a part to play in the construction of both individual and group identities, and Cixous's work has prompted discussion on not only writing but also reading as a gendered activity. For women, reading women's writing may indeed be an experience of connecting with a collective women's identity, but gender in reading is a complex matter and cannot be so easily assimilated.<sup>2</sup> Gendered reader address and textual strategies which construct a specifically gendered implied reader certainly go some way

towards determining a reading position of a text, but the individual reader may or may not (choose to) accept this; s/he is always free to (re)position him/herself in relation to the text.<sup>3</sup> In these terms, reading can be formulated as a dialogue which takes place within a framework of (changing) power relations. The individual reader has to negotiate his or her particular reading in dialogue with, in response to, and in interaction with (and against) the text.

In Structure du langage poétique, Jean Cohen addresses the problematic of the un-named je, which in poetry is often a personal pronoun without referent or context, and which can be understood to refer to the poet, as an image or as an absolute--or to the reader who thus participates in the text (158). Cohen's work specifically relates to poetry, since he assumes the narrative subject in a novel to be readily identifiable (157). However, his point would in fact seem to be more widely applicable than he himself assumes it to be. Cixous's poetical fiction is perhaps an obvious case, but the un-named (and even uncertain or ambiguous) je is not an uncommon feature of modern fiction. It is the reading experience of three contemporary novels in which the narrative je is of uncertain or ambiguous gender that I shall explore in this article. In Anne Garréta's Sphinx, the gender of the two principle protagonists, je, who is also the narrator, and A<sup>\*\*\*</sup>, remains “unsettlingly uncertain throughout”;<sup>4</sup> in Tahar Ben Jelloun's two novels, L'Enfant de sable (ES) and La Nuit sacrée (NS), gender is uncertain in a somewhat different way, for these texts enact the telling of the story of Ahmed/Zahra, a girl, brought up as a boy, who lives as a man and who then “becomes” a woman.

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In Sphinx, the relationship between je and A<sup>\*\*\*</sup> begins as friendship, develops into a sexual relationship, deteriorates as it becomes predictable, and ends with the death of A<sup>\*\*\*</sup>.

For the reader, the riddle of the mythical Sphinx is emblematic of reading Garréta's enigmatic novel. Some characters, like Tiff, “une strip-teaseuse” and “acrobate”, “une amie” of je (12), are clearly gendered linguistically, but in spite of tantalizing pointers, the gender of both je and A\*\*\* remains uncertain. Clues which point to categorization are always potentially red herrings: A\*\*\* is a dancer in a nightclub, spends much time on make-up, is inconsistent, loves shopping and watching television, but has a shaved head, a muscled body and is sexually active and incapable of remaining faithful to je; je, a student of theology, is intellectual, quiet and reserved, but works as a D.J. in a nightclub and loves looking at A\*\*\*'s body. Je and A\*\*\* each display attributes which are traditionally ascribed to both masculine and feminine stereotypes. The reader is invited to categorize the protagonists, but s/he is never allowed the certainty with which to do so. The linguistic confirmation of gender required to endorse the reader's impression is unforthcoming: gender agreements and gendered pronouns are avoided, since, unusually, the first person singular narration is primarily written in the past historic and imperfect tenses. A highly literary style and linguistic contorsions contrast, and yet co-exist, with a colloquial tone and with the content of the novel which is set in New York's Harlem and in the world of contemporary Parisian nightclubs. This rare mix has the effect of drawing the reader's attention precisely to that mix and to the reason for it (the uncertain gender of je and A\*\*\*) and also therefore to the particularly gendered nature of the French language and the difficulty of expressing gender ambiguities in it.<sup>5</sup> This latter point is prefigured by the dedication which reads “To the third” (in English), making reference to the existence in the English language of the neuter which expresses what is neither masculine nor feminine.

The simple fact of undeclared gender makes it an important issue and fuels the reader's desire to know, but the few instances of gender-specific descriptions in this novel paradoxically raise more questions than they answer. For example, after A\*\*\*'s death, je describes him/herself as “Travelo en intellection, gigolo en énamorations” (170). Travelo and gigolo are masculine gendered terms both linguistically and in their application. In normal circumstances, the gender connotations of their usage would not be in question. In this text where gender and gender attributes are always uncertain, because of the figurative use of the terms and also because no feminine equivalents for them exist, they cannot be accepted as unquestionably masculine signifiers. The reader is led to recognize the way language encloses us in meaning and to accept his or her own complicity with reinforcing such meanings.

As the relationship between je and A\*\*\* becomes a sexual one, the uncertainty surrounding their gender necessarily comes to involve their sexuality. The sexual dimension may intensify the reader's desire to know, but in Sphinx ambiguity is maintained in both respects: “L'éclectisme de mon caractère me poussait à négliger les différences et à transgresser les exclusions. J'entrais indifféremment dans les boîtes hétéros et les boîtes homos, mâles ou femelles” (67). The ambiguity of je's gender and sexuality is emphasized in a positive way as it facilitates his/her acceptance across a variety of identity boundaries. However, just as friends of je and A\*\*\* are curious about their initial relationship (“cette étrange intimité ... n'était le signe ou l'effet d'aucune liaison d'ordre amoureux ou amical” [75]) and try to categorize it, gossip about it, and create their own (categorized and sexualized) version of it, so Garréta's readers are likely to desire knowledge about the gender and sexuality of the two protagonists. Although this text resists any attempt to enclose identity

in knowledge or categorization, readers are nevertheless free to speculate and to create their own versions. It is possible to inscribe je and A\*\*\* into either a heterosexual relationship or a homosexual one, but it is also possible to inscribe fluidity.<sup>6</sup> The text itself encourages the reader to move je and A\*\*\* between gender positions, to slide them from one to the other; at different times in the text, for the reader, je and A\*\*\* can both be men and they can both be women.

In Sphinx, therefore, a variety of possible formulations of sexual identity are inscribable. If, as Cohen's point on poetry would suggest, the unidentified narrative je always potentially implicates the readers' own identity in some way, the readers of Sphinx are thus encouraged and challenged to put their own identity into play as they create their own versions for je and A\*\*\*. In Greek myth, it is Oedipus' successful solution of the Sphinx's riddle that makes him a public hero and leads to his marriage to Jocasta (his mother).<sup>7</sup> In psychoanalytical terms, the Oedipus myth is connected to psycho-sexual identifications and to the acquisition of sexual identity in the resolution of the Freudian Oedipus complex, but Freud's schema does not include the role that the Sphinx plays in Oedipus's fate.<sup>8</sup> In Garréta's novel which associates the Sphinx with uncertain formulations of sexual identity, the reader is free to fantasize about and to speculate on the implications of its inclusion. For instance, how might we think of, and indeed experience, sexual identity if Freud's explanations of its acquisition had taken account of the meeting with the Sphinx?

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In Tahar Ben Jelloun's novel, L'Enfant de sable, various versions of the tale of Ahmed/Zahra are recounted by a proliferation of conteurs all claiming their own version as

the truth. Although at times the quoting of Ahmed/Zahra's diary means that s/he becomes the first person narrator, this is always mediated by one of the conteurs and is always uncertain since the authenticity of the diary is constantly being thrown into doubt. The sequel, La Nuit sacrée, in contrast, has only one narrator, who is supposedly Ahmed/Zahra. To some extent this may play into readers' desires for certainty, but the novel's self-conscious fictionality and theatricality constantly toy with and frustrate those desires. The first sentence of La Nuit sacrée stresses the importance of the truth, but it is quickly apparent that this account does no more than “ressemble[r] à la vérité” (NS, 6), for the narrative je is also a conteuse.

In these two novels, the whole concept of sexual identity is put into question as the biological, socio-cultural, psychological and linguistic dimensions of gender are separated and explored. While it is clear to Ben Jelloun's readers from the outset that the character is biologically a girl, the linguistic gender at first follows his/her social identity and Ahmed/Zahra is referred to and speaks in the masculine. Biological gender is denied (“la bande de tissu autour de la poitrine me serrait toujours” [ES, 37]) as s/he is educated and initiated into the rites and rituals of the male world, takes on male privileges, and imposes male authority and the social order, including the silencing of women (his/her sisters).<sup>9</sup> However, increasingly, and particularly when Ahmed/Zahra's sexual desires refuse to be denied and s/he masturbates and experiences the sexual pleasure of a woman, the linguistic gender coincides with the biological. As Ahmed/Zahra struggles with the tensions and ambiguities of his/her sexual identity that this creates, the language at his/her disposal reflects the difficulties: “je suis las et lasse” (ES, 94). S/he no longer knows whether to speak in the masculine or the feminine. Indeed, the path to becoming a woman is fraught with difficulties:

“Je m'égare, mais depuis quelque temps je me sens libéré, oui, disponible pour être femme. Mais on me dit, je me dis, qu'avant il va falloir remonter à l'enfance, être petite fille, adolescente, jeune fille amoureuse, femme..., que de chemin..., je n'y arriverai jamais” (ES, 98). Ahmed/Zahra may have the body and sexual drives of a woman, but in order to become a woman in social and psychological terms, it would seem necessary to have had the childhood and adolescence of one, to have been socialized and psycho-sexualized as a woman.<sup>10</sup>

La Nuit sacrée, in which the first person narrator speaks only in the feminine, follows Ahmed/Zahra, liberated by her dying father, (“Tu es libre à présent .... Tu es une femme” [32]), and now able to speak, live and love as a woman. Her lover is blind, but by touching he is able to give her the identity she desires:

J'étais heureuse que le premier homme qui aima mon corps fût un aveugle, un homme qui avait les yeux au bout des doigts et dont les caresses lentes et douces recomposaient mon image .... Il m'avait sculptée en statue de chair, désirée et désirante. Je n'étais plus un être de sable et de poussière à l'identité incertaine, s'effritant au moindre coup de vent. Je sentais se solidifier, se consolider, chacun de mes membres. (NS, 137-38)

The fact that Ahmed/Zahra's lover is blind is a crucial point. Many Muslim women value the veil as protection against (Western) specular objectification of women's bodies. In Tahar Ben Jelloun: Stratégies d'écriture, Mansour M'Henni suggests that Ben Jelloun's work can be seen as a Maghreb/French dialogue and largely directed to a French readership (25-33). In this context, Ahmed/Zahra's lover's touch, which constitutes her identity as a sexual woman (both

desired and desiring), can also be seen to inscribe a way of “seeing” a woman's body differently.

Ahmed/Zahra's constitution of herself as a “feminine” speaking subject in La Nuit sacrée may be applauded as a triumph over the silencing of women in (Maghreb) culture, but it is only the word of her father (the father in society) that permits it. The back cover of L'Enfant de sable describes the revolt of Ahmed/Zahra's father, but rather, it is his surrender to the pressures of a society which accords so much prestige to men that makes him say what he wants to believe he sees: “‘C'est un garçon, c'est mon premier enfant, regarde comme il est beau, touche ses petits testicules, touche son pénis, c'est déjà un homme!’ .... Il avait bien vu une fille, mais croyait fermement que c'était un garçon” (ES, 26-7). Ahmed/Zahra's father constitutes Ahmed/Zahra's identity first as a man, then as a woman, by speaking it. Moreover, since he is dying when he allows her to be a woman, her female subjectivity is only achieved on the death of the father (in society). Indeed, perhaps Ahmed/Zahra can only eventually speak as a feminine subject in language because she has lived--and has already been able to speak--as a man. In this respect, it is important to address the fact that Tahar Ben Jelloun is a male writer who constitutes Ahmed/Zahra as a female speaking subject. As in the text, the woman is given voice only with the permission and by the action of a man. Winifred Woodhull's point in Transfigurations of the Maghreb that writing marginalities is not necessarily speaking for them but enables an opening up of space for the articulation of their own voices, may be applicable here (102), but equally, however, the reverse can also be argued.<sup>11</sup>



In La Nuit sacrée, Ahmed/Zahra is not able to enjoy life as a woman for long, since her sexual identity is once again put into question. Forced to undergo a clitoridectomy, her vagina is sewn up, an act carried out by her sisters in revenge for her treatment of them as their (patriarchal) brother and for which she shows no remorse (NS, 159-60).<sup>12</sup> Infection follows and renders her infertile. Learning her story, her lover starts to think of her as “tantôt homme, tantôt femme” (170) and eventually breaks off their relationship. Subsequently imprisoned for murdering her uncle, Ahmed/Zahra has to dress as a man, although this time it is not as a disguise and she becomes “coquette”, asserting her femininity (175). Gradually, however, even her biological sexual identity is problematized as her body closes down sexually and sensually. She considers herself neither man nor woman but “entre les deux, c'est-à-dire en enfer” (178) - or perhaps in sainthood (180).<sup>13</sup>

In both L'Enfant de sable and La Nuit sacrée, the images, structure and form of the novels mirror the uncertainty surrounding Ahmed/Zahra's sexual identity: in the former, constantly changing narrators and chronology, labyrinthine networks of doors and paths that lead nowhere, shadowy and steamy bathhouses, words that, in Ahmed/Zahra's ears, become separated from their meaning, the circus, the blindman, and the diary that is and is not Ahmed/Zahra's diary and from which, finally, all the words disappear; in the latter novel, hallucinatory, oneiric, and fabulous episodes, games, fluidity of time, theatrical vocabulary, and images of obscurity. Such overdetermination challenges the concept of sexual identity itself--of what it means to be a woman or to be a man. We may search in vain for linguistic confirmation of the gender of Garréta's characters in Sphinx in order to know, but in L'Enfant de sable language itself deceives us as it denies what we do know. Furthermore, in reading the

text, the readers are forced to accept complicity with the deception; they are like the crowd at the circus who play along with Malika, the bearded “woman”, although “she” is obviously a man (ES, 120).<sup>14</sup> The disassociation of signifier and signified in this way reveals not only the complexity of sexual identity, but also the powerful role of language.

Throughout L'Enfant de sable, the audience and, by extension, the readers, are directly engaged by the conteurs in the narrative and implicated in the content of the stories. At the end of this novel, the last conteur suggests that his audience (and thus the readers) should (re)create the story for themselves. La Nuit sacrée frustrates this freedom, as it problematizes Ahmed/Zahra's sexual identity to the extent of undermining the initial certainty of the gendering of biology and sexual desire. In the end, we do not know where we are positioned or where we can position ourselves in relation to the text, to the identity of Ahmed/Zahra, to any identity... to our own.<sup>15</sup> However, the final words of La Nuit sacrée are “Enfin vous voilà” (189). Perhaps this re-cognition that Ahmed/Zahra receives from her lover--whether it is in death, sainthood, hallucination or fiction--propels us off again into the never-ending labyrinth of the quest for identity. “Vous voilà”, the second person plural, can be read in terms of respect--or of plurality. The names Ahmed/Zahra may represent opposing poles of man/woman, male/female, masculinity/femininity, but Ahmed/Zahra's sexual identity--and our own--is an on-going, complex path through, and around, all the space between.

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In Sphinx and in L'Enfant de sable and La Nuit sacrée, the ambiguous and uncertain identity of the narrative subjects leads the readers to consider the very question of sexual identity and to interrogate their own attitudes. Sphinx draws our attention to the way in which

we connect sexuality with sexual identity, and by denying us certainty, it challenges the validity of that connection. Ben Jelloun's two novels emphasize the various aspects that make up sexual identity by separating and problematizing them and thus lead the reader to recognize the complexity and the multiplicity of the very concept of identity. All three novels attest to the power of language and its role in what (we think) we know about sexual identity. In Sphinx, the reader relies on language in order to know but knowledge is withheld, whereas in L'Enfant de sable and La Nuit sacrée, language itself forces the reader to question his/her own certainties. These texts reveal that language and epistemology are inextricably intertwined, but by calling sexual identity into question, they expose the instability of the very foundations of these systems.

Uncertainties and ambiguities unsettle, but they also have the effect of encouraging the reader to speculate and to create meaning for the text--and for him/herself. Our own sexual identities may be called into question and this may indeed be frightening, but the creative possibilities offered by reading enable us to fill the resulting void with reassuring--or exciting--potentialities. The crucial point, however, is whether the effect of textual uncertainty is contained within, and limited to, the process of reading, or whether the experience and the effect can cross over in any way into the reader's life. Dialogues always entail (at least) two-way interaction, and any reading experience, in however minor a way, subsequently becomes part of a reader's life. Nevertheless, this in itself does not necessarily alter perceptions or performances.

As Cixous writes so illuminatingly in Illa, the process of questioning per se is an important beginning: "Les questions sont des lampes sur nos chemins. Naître c'est avancer à la

lumière des questions. Les bonnes réponses sont celles qui donnent le jour à de nouvelles questions. Tout dans le monde a commencé par de nouvelles questions” (208). Before anything can change, we need to ask questions. Texts which seduce us or provoke us into asking questions of ourselves, of others, of society, of language, of thought, are those which can show us the way towards change. If the reader's (self-)interrogation and creativity do not necessarily end with the end of the reading of the text, if uncertain sexual identities in texts provoke ongoing questions about sexual identity in life, then the (uncertain) experience of reading is surely a meaningful dialogue—and it is one which can perhaps open up the way towards change.

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<sup>1</sup> Hélène Cixous in “Conversations,” Writing Differences: Readings from the seminar of Hélène Cixous, ed. Susan Sellers, 150.

<sup>2</sup> See Gendering the Reader, ed. Sara Mills, for a useful overview of relevant work.

<sup>3</sup> See Lynne Pearce, “‘I’ the reader: text, context and the balance of power,” 168.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Fallaize, French Women's Writing: Recent Fiction, 24.

<sup>5</sup> However, this is not obviously the case for all readers. Ralph Nelson in World Literature Today refers uncomplicatedly to je as “he” and to A\*\*\* as “she”. In “Plaisir et chorégraphie de l'inter-texte: Sphinx d'Anne Garréta,” Georgiana M.M. Colvile, while recognizing the gender uncertainty in Sphinx, consciously chooses to read (and write) je as male and A\*\*\* as female. Colvile's essay testifies to the “inépuisable” intertextuality which contributes to the hybrid nature of the text.

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- <sup>6</sup> In a similar vein, see Jeanette Winterson, Written on the Body. Winterson's narrator is of unknown gender but his/her beloved is a woman in a heterosexual relationship. The narrator has sexual relations with both women and men. Winterson's reader is, therefore, never allowed to inscribe an exclusively homosexual, lesbian or heterosexual sexuality, and is encouraged in this way to recognize that what is important is the loving relationship itself, irrespective of gender or sexuality.
- <sup>7</sup> See Robert Graves, The Greek Myths, 372.
- <sup>8</sup> See Sigmund Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams, 362-66: Freud mentions the Sphinx in his account of the Oedipus myth but not in the account of the Oedipus complex. See also Sigmund Freud, On Sexuality for further accounts of the Oedipus complex.
- <sup>9</sup> In this connection, see Winifred Woodhull, Transfigurations of the Maghreb: Feminism, Decolonization, and Literatures, who suggests that women's oppression in Maghreb societies (Algeria specifically) is a unifying principle and, as such, is considered to be indispensable to nationalist solidarity (13).
- <sup>10</sup> This echoes both Simone de Beauvoir's Le Deuxième Sexe on the socialization of women as women, and Freud's "Female Sexuality" in On Sexuality where he charts the path of women's psycho-sexual identifications as "a fairly lengthy development" (376).
- <sup>11</sup> Ben Jelloun's recent novel, La Nuit de l'erreur, could be used to support this latter argument. This text reveals the processes by which women's sexuality is mythologized as threatening and dangerous to men in (Maghreb) culture, but by means of the overdetermination it employs to do so, it would also seem to contribute to those very

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processes. The packaging of this best-selling book for the French market admittedly adds to this effect: the dust jacket bears the image of a naked woman (faceless, since her head is turned away from the camera) which would appear precisely to feed into, to exploit and thus to reinforce stereotypical patriarchal perspectives of woman as sexual object (and also, here, exotic, oriental).

<sup>12</sup> Ahmed/Zahra's assurance that the clitoridectomy has never been a muslim (nor other religious) practice would also seem to be directed at a French (or a non-muslim) readership in order to counter possible prejudice on this point (NS, 163).

<sup>13</sup> This point has resonances with French culture's own story of Jeanne d'Arc, a woman who lived as a man and who was first burnt at the stake as a witch and then subsequently sanctified. Perhaps this also reveals cross-cultural parallels in perceptions, in patriarchal societies, of women whose sexual identity falls outside the stereotypical virgin/mother/whore triad.

<sup>14</sup> Likewise, in writing about these novels, I have had to make a conscious (and difficult) decision regarding my own use of personal pronoun to refer to Ahmed/Zahra. I chose to follow the dominant narrative structure of each text, using "s/he" for L'Enfant de sable and "she" for La Nuit sacrée, but this is not necessarily the most satisfactory solution.

<sup>15</sup> Ben Jelloun's Maghreb context is important in terms of identity. Although my own focus is specifically on the question of reading and sexual identity in terms of the ambiguously gendered Ahmed/Zahra, sexual identity cannot (and should not) be completely disentangled from other aspects of identity in his work.

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