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The Mark of the Detail: Universalism, Type, Difference

Dora Zhang

Abstract Departing from the premise that novelistic details particularize and locate characters in a sociocultural matrix, this essay examines what happens to the detail in texts that refuse certain norms of specification. The essay focuses on the French writer Anne F. Garréta's novel *Sphinx* (1986), which avoids all linguistic markers of gender for its central pair of lovers, and Toni Morrison's short story "Recitatif" (1983), which never reveals the racial identities of its two protagonists, one of whom is white and one Black. Drawing on Georg Lukács's discussion of realism and typicality, the essay considers how these unmarked texts mediate between individual and type, as well as their approaches to the representation of difference.

Keywords type, gender, race, Anne F. Garréta, Toni Morrison

At least since Roland Barthes's (1968: 142) essay "The Reality Effect," details have been associated with fiction's authenticating impulse. In the sentence from Gustave Flaubert's "Simple Heart" that serves as a paradigmatic example—"An old piano supported, under a barometer, a pyramidal heap of boxes and cartons"—Barthes assigns significance to two details: the piano, indicating "its owner's bourgeois standing," and the cartons, signaling "a kind of lapse in status likely to connote the atmosphere of the Aubain household." A third, "useless" detail, the barometer, adds nothing to the information already conveyed by the other two. But even as Barthes consigns the barometer to uselessness, his analysis highlights the realist detail's locating effects, as objects, manner of dress, speech, gesture, and physical features cannot help but position characters in an economic-cultural-moral matrix. This locating function is not contradicted but supplemented by the useless detail, which relies on referential plausibility (i.e., correct location) to weave its illusion.

Novelistic details specify and situate, differentiate and categorize; as such, they are always subordinated to greater ends. As Naomi Schor has shown, the detail's partiality and particularity have gendered it feminine and placed it in tension with the aspiration to universality, unity, wholeness, or totality (gendered masculine) that remains the ideal in a variety of disparate traditions, from neoclassicist to Marxist to structuralist aesthetics. In Schor's (1987: 3) account, until the rise of post-structuralism's "pervasive valorization of the minute, the partial, and the marginal" in the later twentieth century, the detail was mostly viewed as a threat to the integrity of the aesthetic work. But as Barthes's analysis shows, if details particularize and concretize, they also classify and typologize, connecting the individual instance to larger categories. In the novel, a central problem animating the detail is how it mediates between part and whole, individual and type, particular and universal.

This problem is raised with special intensity in what we might call "unmarked fictions," texts that, in one way or another, resist or suspend specification by withholding some important and expected information about a character's social positioning.¹ If the detail is the mark of the particular, what happens to this technology of description and classification when a text refuses to identify or differentiate? In this essay I take up two late twentieth-century unmarked fictions, the French experimental writer Anne F. Garréta's 1986 novel *Sphinx* and Toni Morrison's only published short story, "Recitatif," which first appeared in 1983 in *Confirmation: An Anthology of African American Women* and was republished in February 2022 in stand-alone book form for the first time. Set in the world of Parisian nightlife, *Sphinx* tells the love story of a young theology student turned DJ and an African American cabaret dancer, neither of them marked linguistically by gender. "Recitatif" presents a series of vignettes in the lives of two women, Twyla and Roberta, who meet as

¹ According to Henning Andersen (1989), the unmarked/ marked distinction was first used by Roman Jakobson and Nikolai Trubetzkoy to characterize asymmetry in binary oppositions and is now used in linguistics to describe several kinds of distinction. Typically, the unmarked term is the most basic, neutral, standard one, whereas the marked term is in some way inflected. I use these terms in an opposite sense here, since what I call the unmarked text is the nonstandard one. Colleen Lye (2015) uses the term *unmarked character* in her analysis of a novel in which the race of the characters is not specified until the very end, but I am not aware that *unmarked text* is used generally as a term of art.

girls in a shelter and whose fates subsequently diverge. We are told that one of the girls is white and one is Black, but not which is which.

These unmarked fictions function as a limit case for the locating and specifying functions of the detail with respect to social identity.² By withholding key information that the reader expects to be stated explicitly, these texts refract gender and race, among other categories, into so many aspects of body, habit, dress, speech, and behavior to be parsed and decoded. At the same time, the relationship between detail and context is suspended or destabilized, since each detail could be read in multiple ways, with quite different consequences. If details are a means of differentiating this from that, of sorting something into one category and not another, the unmarked text both intensifies and disrupts this marking of difference.

My thinking about the functions of detail is guided by a critic who was by no means its partisan, Georg Lukács. For Lukács (1971: 43), the (good) realist detail is “both *individual* and *typical*,” embedded in a specific context and mediating between the particular and the universal. The typical character, detail, or event can thus transcend its status as a singular, isolated instance, which enables the realist novel to reveal something about the underlying social relations and contradictions of history that is otherwise obscured in the whirl of surface appearances.

This ability to link the individual to type is precisely what is suspended or problematized in the unmarked text. At the same time, the pressure to read details as not only idiosyncratic but typical is intensified, since they function as clues only insofar as they are forms of “living probability” linking “individual [to] scalar possibility,” as Yoon Sun Lee (2012: 420) observes in her study of Asian American literature. Thus, although Garréta’s and Morrison’s texts may be read as descended from the formal experiments of modernism, or as belonging to the metafictional conceits of postmodernism, they more forcefully return us to the problems of realism, putting pressure on the typifying effects of detail as explicated by Lukács.

Sphinx and “Recitatif” both place in question the representation of social difference, unsettling our sense of what constitutes racial or

² I do not mean that details had no socially locating function prior to realism, although as Cynthia Wall (2006) shows, the rise of description in prose fiction in the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries led to a new proliferation of details.

gender identities as well as how we come to know them. But even as both texts have been hailed for subverting convention and challenging readers' habitual associations, they do so with different assumptions and logics, which must also be situated in their respective national contexts. Read comparatively, these texts exemplify the tension between disparate, sometimes conflicting attitudes toward difference in Western liberal democratic societies: asserting on the one hand the distinctive rights and interests of particular groups, and on the other the equality of all on the basis of a human commonality abstracted from all particularities of social status. In broad strokes, the first attitude characterizes the liberal pluralism of the United States, in which civic and political life is made up of minority groups advocating for their collective interests, while the second characterizes the republican universalism of France, which abstracts the citizen from group affiliations and "accords rights only to individuals" (Samuels 2016: 3; see also Scott 1996: esp. chap. 1; 2004).

Sphinx, in its ambition to destroy the structuring binary of sexual difference, is a universalist project, influenced more specifically by an "anti-difference" strand of French feminism (especially the work of Monique Wittig) that seeks to break away from the determinism of identitarian categorizations, and to ultimately make these obsolete.³ For its part, "Recitatif" tends more toward particularism, highlighting the complex intersections of race, gender, and class, in line with the critiques made by 1970s and 1980s Black and women-of-color feminists, who emphasized the need to think about such categories together as well as to resist easy confluences. If there is something schematic, not to say reductive, about this way of contrasting the two works (and their national contexts), I do it nevertheless to point out the heterogeneity of the politics of difference undergirding unmarked texts' challenges to stereotype. This heterogeneity is especially evident in *Sphinx's* treatment of race in contrast to its treatment of gender, which points to the nonequivalence of aesthetic strategies for handling different kinds of

³ As Annabel L. Kim (2018) observes, "anti-difference French feminism," represented by figures like Wittig, Colette Guillaumin, and Christine Delphy, has been left out of (or paradoxically lumped in with) the American reception of "French feminism" as exemplified by Hélène Cixous's *écriture féminine*, which stresses feminine difference. See also Fraser 1992.

social difference. Finally, the critical reception of these texts—and their translation, in the case of *Sphinx*—reveals the complexities of how we read (and misread) details of social identity across language, culture, and time.

Unmarked Fictions

Unmarked texts remove identity specifications deliberately—and are often produced by writers who are themselves in some way socially marked—in contrast to cases in which an omission expresses the default assumption of a norm, for instance, when not specifying a character's race implies that they are white. Some critics cite the unspecified heterodiegetic narrators of nineteenth-century fiction as examples of fictional “degendering,” but many experiments with the form seem to belong to the postwar and contemporary periods (Schabert 2010: 75).⁴ Unmarking can be accomplished via a variety of formal means. *Sphinx* works through the silent removal of grammatical markers of gender, such that readers may not even realize the constraint until partway through the novel. This is no mean feat in French, in which gender is revealed not only in third-person pronouns and kinship terms, as in English, but also in adjective endings, direct objects, verbal predicates, and common verb tenses like the *passé composé*, all of which demand gender agreement with the subject. Accordingly, as Emma Ramadan (2015) writes in her translator's note:

In Anne Garréta's original French text, the narrator of *Sphinx* walks, overtakes, passes, is dragged along, is led places, follows, hurries, rushes, reaches. . . . Never does the narrator simply *go* anywhere. . . . To say “I went to the Apocryphe,” the narrator would have to use the *passé composé* (the most common French tense used to describe actions already completed) and would have to say either “*je suis allé*” or “*je suis allée*.”

⁴ This is not meant to be an exhaustive overview of the genre, whose boundaries would need to be defined more precisely, for instance, by differentiating between texts that withhold some information, only to reveal it at the end, and those that remain ambiguous throughout. Other examples of ungendered novels include Gilles Rozier's *Un amour sans résistance* (2003) and Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body* (1992). Anna Livia (2000: 21) lists twenty-six novels published between 1868 and 1999 that “experiment with or challenge the linguistic gender system.” See also Lye 2015.

Garréta employs a host of ingenious tactics to get around these issues, avoiding pronouns by referring to the person by a specific body part (especially the narrator's beloved, A***) or by using impersonal constructions. She also turns to the *imparfait* tense (used for durative actions) and the *passé simple* (reserved for written French and almost never used in first-person narration in modern texts). The result is a formal, classical prose style, conveying an impression of stasis, or atemporality, and a sense of impersonality.⁵ Of course, in the English translation a whole different set of strategies has to be used to avoid markers of gender, and I will return to questions of translation later.

While Garréta works to eliminate a feature of language that is ordinarily taken for granted, Morrison highlights her story's creation of ambiguity. When Twyla, the first-person narrator and the less self-assured of the two girls, recounts her first meeting with Roberta in a children's shelter at the beginning of the story, she observes, "It was one thing to be taken out of your own bed early in the morning—it was something else to be stuck in a strange place with a girl from a whole other race" (243).⁶ This conspicuous setting up of racial difference—underscored by visual descriptions such as "it didn't matter that we looked like salt and pepper standing there and that's what the other children called us sometimes" (244)—is thwarted by Morrison's refusal to racially identify the two girls at any point in the story.⁷ These differences in literary strategy derive from the categories that each author is unmarking: unlike gender, race and class are not encoded into the morphosyntax of English or French (Livia 2000: 36).⁸ Thus, even as unmarked texts work in general by omission, the effect is not accomplished by uniform means.

⁵ Garréta is also an academic specialist of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French literature.

⁶ All quotations and page citations of "Recitatif" are taken from and refer to Morrison 1983.

⁷ The mystery of the girls' racial identities is further highlighted by their conflicting memories of a pivotal moment from their time at the shelter, when a group of older girls taunt a disabled kitchen worker, Maggie. The conflict centers on their role in this incident and on whether Maggie is Black or white.

⁸ However, in French the informal and formal second-person pronouns *tu* and *vous* can be used to mark class distinctions, and linguistic anthropologists have pointed out the more expansive nonreferential and nonsemantic ways that language indexes social position. See, e.g., Ochs 1992 and Lucey and McEnaney 2017.

There is also a basic tension in unmarked texts when they are, broadly speaking, realist, that is, when the constraints of objective (i.e., not mind-dependent) reality have some bearing on subjectivity. Speculative fiction can simply invent a differently organized world, as in Ursula K. Le Guin's *Left Hand of Darkness*, set on a planet where everyone is androgynous except during a period of time each month when sexual differentiation occurs. Texts set in real places in the ordinary world, like Garréta's and Morrison's, instead create an unmarked world within a conventionally marked one. That is, the reader does not know the racial identity of Twyla or Roberta in "Recitatif" or the genders of the narrator or their beloved in *Sphinx*, but these unmarked protagonists do not inhabit sexually or racially undifferentiated diegetic worlds. Other characters exhibit no confusion about the main characters' identities, and notably minor characters *are* marked in both texts.

The tension between the marked and unmarked orders of the narrative reflects an important tension in these texts' aspirations to challenge standard categorizations: on the one hand, they want to refuse and move beyond normative classifications (call this a utopian impulse); on the other hand, they want to parse such classifications even more precisely so as to better document their effects in actually existing society (call this a critical-descriptive impulse).

Sphinx is oriented toward the former pole (the utopian pole of destroying the gender binary). Garréta creates an ungendered pairing to evoke the possibility of a world not organized around sexual difference and sexual hierarchy. Paradoxically, this also means that the novel must behave as though, at least for the protagonists, gender did not matter (it behaves as though it did not affect the characters' material prospects and opportunities, their treatment by others, etc.), even though the oppressive ways in which it does matter in the real world is precisely what the novel is trying to challenge.⁹ In "Recitatif," by contrast, the difference that race makes is constantly at issue, underscored for the reader as a puzzle. As Morrison (1992: xi) puts it, the story is "an experiment in the removal of all racial codes from a narrative about two characters of different races for whom racial identity is crucial." In

⁹ As Joan W. Scott (1996: 4) writes, the paradoxical "need both to accept *and* to refuse sexual difference . . . was the constitutive condition of feminism as a political movement throughout its long history."

this way we can see “Recitatif” as more oriented toward the critical-descriptive pole (although it, too, has a certain ambition that we might call utopian). The ambiguity surrounding the identities of Morrison’s main characters works in service not of suspending or destroying racial difference, or even imagining a world in which such differences do not matter, but of asking us how we “read” racial identity at all, in what such identity inheres, and how these lines exist alongside other lines of shared experience.

The creation of an unmarked world within an ordinarily marked one also results in a fundamental tension at the level of the detail, at once the site of particularization and the means of connecting the individual to larger classes of phenomena. To elaborate, I turn to Lukács’s analysis of the detail in realism. For him, the realist novel takes as its central concern “the dialectic between the individual’s subjectivity and objective reality,” which entails “a description of actual persons inhabiting a palpable, identifiable world” (Lukács 1971: 24). Only thus, “in the interaction of character and environment[,] can the concrete potentiality of a particular individual be singled out from the ‘bad infinity’ of purely abstract potentialities, and emerge as the determining potentiality of just this individual at just this phase of his development” (23–24).

Here we can see why it seems perverse to read unmarked fictions (especially those oriented more toward a utopian impulse, like *Sphinx*) as realist in Lukácsian terms: the texts’ withholding of key information about their protagonists means that they are, at least in a certain way, unconcerned with “a description of actual persons inhabiting a palpable, identifiable world,” since they suspend one of the organizing features of that world. Thus the narrator of *Sphinx* falls into the job of DJ at the club they frequent when the previous DJ dies of an overdose. But we could ask, Would they have been promoted so easily into the role if they were a woman as they would if they were a man? Would their conversations with the Padre, a Spanish Jesuit who teaches at the university, be so free? To be sure, posing these questions is to miss Garréta’s point, to insist on reconstituting the neat boxes that she has so carefully broken down. But they are also solicited by the unmarked text itself, which both invites and negates the association of individuals with types.

Lukács’s notion of typicality is centrally connected to his notion of concrete potentiality. As Lee (2012: 421) helpfully glosses, “Realist

types . . . belong to their own unique conceptual and narrative locations in a total pragmatic context.” The type is not “a reified social or demographic category” (421), nor is it derived from an empirical statistical average; rather, it is “a living probability” that “embodies the contradictions of a historical moment” (420, 421). Importantly, typicality does not mean making the individual a “case” or an “example” of an abstract universal (i.e., a “type” considered either as a positivist category or as poetic invention) (Lukács 1970b: 169); it entails the depiction of consistent patterns of experience arising from historical processes, evoking “a social though not purely empirical generality” (Lee 2012: 420). In this way the novel can distill and expose—through the crucial mediation of its form—the underlying truth of social relations obscured by the “whirl of petty, disparate accidental events” in ordinary life (Lukács 1970b: 158).

If it is clear what a good detail is for Lukács, it is also clear what a bad one is. The dialectical status of the particular on which realism hinges is lost in modernism. Whereas realist details are both individual *and* typical, “modern allegory, and modernist ideology . . . deny the *typical*” (Lukács 1971: 24). It thus destroys “the coherence of the world” (24), which relies on establishing patterns and connecting individual instances to find coherence and meaning; instead, modernism reduces the detail to mere particularity. In fact, shorn of the “total pragmatic context” (Lee 2012: 421) in which the realist detail is embedded, modernism elevates the particular to the status of an absolute: any detail can take on universal significance, but by the same token it becomes entirely transferable and arbitrary. The result is a world where, as Lukács (1971: 42) quotes Walter Benjamin’s work on allegory, “every person, every object, every relationship can stand for something else.” The modernist detail “is often of an extraordinary sensuous, suggestive power” (25), but because it bypasses the concrete—the dialectical hinge that holds together the inseparable unity of particular and universal—it remains incapable of being connected to other phenomena and leading to the objective world.¹⁰ “Modernist literature thus replaces concrete typicality with abstract particularity” (43).

¹⁰ For Lukács (1970a: 46), the concrete, as conceptualized by Karl Marx, is the way to avoid opposing the individual and the typical, the particular and the universal.

Where between these poles can we place the unmarked text? Put crudely, are they realist or modernist?¹¹ Lukács's categories give us a way of thinking about the tensions in the unmarked text that have been outlined, specifically a way of thinking about the perils of unmarking social categories. By suspending the realm of concrete particularity, are details in *Sphinx* and "Recitatif" liable to become endlessly transferable, a charge Lukács levels at modernism? Do these characters become simply singular or idiosyncratic (or absolute particularities, to use Lukács's term)? Does the gambit of removing specifications of race and gender lead to an "attenuation of actuality" (Lukács 1971: 25) rather than to a more robust grasp of its workings?

In Lukács's account, the modernist detail is indifferent to differences. That description could also be applied to the unmarked text. Insofar as such texts refuse to differentiate between racial or gender status, they can be read as free-floating and transferable, uprooted from historical specificity. In other words, they run the risk of bypassing the typical that results in elevating particularity to an absolute. At the same time, to unsettle our naturalized habits of association, unmarked fictions must always keep the possibilities of type alive, if only to undermine them. Unsettling overdetermined gender and racial categories might seem precisely to entail a repudiation of type, but only of a crude idea of typicality as an abstract universal, of which the individual becomes merely an example. By simultaneously appealing to concrete potentiality (as a way of reading details as clues that connect individuals to larger patterns) while at least partly suspending it, unmarked texts achieve their effects not by denying typicality but precisely by recourse to it.

Reading Differences in Detail

Although the detail seems transferable in an unmarked text, this charge can be mitigated by disentangling the notion of transferability from ambiguity. For an unmarked text to remain indeterminate, it must maintain equal plausibility across several possible readings: characters—specifically, the details that mark them—have to be rendered in such

¹¹ I do not mean to suggest that either text is realist or modernist in a literary-historical periodizing sense (periods, of course, also vary by national traditions), nor am I making an argument about influence or authorial frames of reference. Rather, I use *realist* and *modernist* in Lukácsian terms as historically situated theoretical categories.

a way that they *could* be read as variously racialized or gendered. Correspondingly, insofar as unmarked texts turn details into clues, a lot depends on how those detail-clues are read.¹² So critics of *Sphinx* acknowledge that its characters have sociological and psychological traits associated with both masculinity and femininity, but which traits are assigned to which gender is telling. Gill Rye (2000: 533) writes: “A*** is a dancer in a nightclub, spends much time on makeup, 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.” In this set of oppositions, being a theology student is, for Rye, on the side of femininity, along with being quiet and reserved. But given the barriers to entry for women in that discipline, from a historical perspective it seems more plausible that the detail would lead us to assume that the narrator is masculine.

The criticism on “Recitatif” makes especially clear the stakes of different ways of reading in detail. As Elizabeth Abel (1993: 471) summarizes, in the story the racialized body becomes “a series of disaggregated cultural parts—pink-scalloped socks, tight green slacks, large hoop earrings, expertise at playing jacks, a taste for Jimi Hendrix or for bottled water and asparagus.” These details can be placed in particular contexts to generate differently coded meanings, revealing as much about the reader as about the characters. For instance, the fact that Roberta marries someone in the “IMB crowd,” lives in an upper-middle-class neighborhood in the Hudson Valley, and shops for asparagus at the grocery store, while Twyla marries a fireman and has a purse full of coupons, may lead readers to assume that Roberta is white and Twyla is Black, since we tend to correlate class with race. Indeed, Morrison herself explained that “her project in this story was to substitute class for racial codes in order to drive a wedge between these typically elided categories” (Abel 1993: 476).

“Recitatif’s” deliberate manipulation of types often inspires in critics self-reflexive meditations on practices of reading. The best example is

¹² Jinny Huh (2013: 13) reads “Recitatif” as incorporating “the generic forms of both the passing narrative and the detective story.” *Sphinx* features noirish elements, although it does not turn its details into clues in the same self-conscious way.

Abel's discussion of the story, which instructively opens and closes an essay about "white feminist readings of black women's texts" in the mid-1980s to early 1990s. In that essay Abel juxtaposes her own "psychological reading" against the "political perspective" of her friend Lula Fragd, a Black feminist critic, providing for our purposes a case study of the kinds of evidence we can draw on to link detail to type. In Abel's (1993: 472–73) reading (which is problematic by her own account), Twyla is white and Roberta is Black because, among other things, Roberta seems "consistently the more sophisticated reader of the social scene." The fact that Twyla sees Roberta as the more vital, daring, self-sufficient, and adventurous one reads to Abel as evidence of Twyla's whiteness, which points in turn to "a white woman's fantasy (my own) about black women's potency" (473–74). Whereas Abel relies on "categorical distinctions in body types, degrees of social cool, or modes of mothering" (474), Fragd draws in strong metonymic fashion on social-historical context. Fragd reads Twyla as "middle-class black" and Roberta as "working-class white" based on such indications as the fact that cultural accessories like hoop earrings circulated independently of race in the culture of the 1960s; that Jimi Hendrix actually appealed more to white than to Black audiences in that decade; that when Roberta meets Twyla at a Howard Johnson in the story's second vignette, her language is defined by the white hippie locution "Oh, wow"; and that IBM recruited Black executives in New York around the time the story is set, whereas the firemen's union was racially exclusive (474–75). Fragd's and Abel's readings are symmetrically plausible, but they are not transferable. That is, these details *could* be read both ways, but they take on different meanings in each reading. The uncoupling of transferability and symmetry goes some way toward mitigating the risk that an unmarked text results simply in a glossing over of difference and instead opens details onto differently ramifying pathways of historical and social connections.

Morrison relies on interpretative symmetries to maintain the racial indeterminacy of her characters; however, she does so to suggest not their irrelevance but the nonequivalence of the contexts that details conjure up in each case. The story shows not only that certain details would open onto different histories (of socioeconomic mobility, migration, education policy, etc.), depending on how Twyla's and Roberta's

racial identities are read, but that they would also take on different moral valences. In a later vignette the two women meet on opposite sides of the dispute over busing and school integration. If Roberta were a white woman of leisure opposed to school integration, this would read very differently than if she were a Black middle-class woman trying to prevent her children from being bused to a worse school in a white working-class neighborhood.¹³ Whereas “Recitatif” works to decouple forms of difference often melded together or considered in mutually exclusive terms, in line with critiques introduced in the 1970s and 1980s by Black and women-of-color feminists in the United States (Spillers 2019), *Sphinx* wants to move beyond difference *tout court*.¹⁴

Different Differences

Details in *Sphinx*, as in “Recitatif,” are susceptible to being read in different ways, but the social-indexical way of reading that Morrison invites seems at odds with Garréta’s goal, which is to “fuck difference” (quoted in Kim 2017: 5). To that end, there is an emphasis throughout the novel on motifs of indistinguishability, nondifferentiation, and the transgression of boundaries. The narrator’s ability to move without interference or question through disparate milieus is asserted repeatedly, for instance, as they make tours through half a dozen clubs on nights when they are not working as a DJ:

My eclecticism pushed me to ignore differences and transgress against exclusions; I entered indiscriminately into clubs that were gay or straight, male or female. . . . I had little to fear from these drunken late-night wanderings through this beautiful world abandoned to vice. The exquisite correctness of my manners, the benevolent restraint I displayed in every place and in every circumstance, made it so that I was easily accepted. (67; 30)¹⁵

¹³ For a discussion of these two readings, see Abel 1993: 476.

¹⁴ In his introduction to *Confirmation*, Amiri Baraka (1983) also makes explicit the need for mainstream feminism to account for race and class, as well as the need to link feminism to anticapitalism.

¹⁵ All quotations of *Sphinx* are taken from Garréta 2015 (the English translation); page citations refer to Garréta 1986 (the French original) and Garréta 2015, respectively, separated by semicolons. I have silently modified the translation throughout.

This desire to “transgress against exclusions” not only is characteristic of the narrator but also exemplifies the novel’s interest in indistinguishability, as is evident in the ecstatic descriptions of the blur of bodies on the dance floor and in the climactic first moment of sexual encounter between the narrator and A***: “In a sprawling obscurity . . . some vaguely outlined visions, and, in my ear, the echo of soft rustlings, of words barely articulated. . . . Sexes mixed, I no longer knew how to distinguish anything” (112–13; 55).

Yet the poetics of indistinguishability reads quite differently when it encounters another form of difference in the novel. *Sphinx’s* French and now Anglophone reception has celebrated the novel as subversively undoing sexual difference and heteronormative assumptions.¹⁶ However, although linguistic markers of sexual difference are effaced, racial difference is emphasized, as if the attempt to abolish one kind of particularity entailed the intensification of another. The contrasting skin color between the white French narrator and the Black American beloved, A***, is insistently highlighted alongside their differences of culture disposition and interests. And scenes set in New York when the narrator visits A***’s family are filled with racial clichés and fetishizations of Black American culture. Except by Annabel L. Kim (2017), this feature of the novel has been ignored in its critical reception. Moreover, many racial specifications in the French text, for example, those that refer to minor characters, are euphemized or simply elided in Ramadan’s translation.

Nevertheless the difference that gender makes also bears on the quieter details of race. I will focus on one instance: the narrator’s anxiety about being addressed in a particular way by their friend Tiff, a minor character who introduces them to A*** and who is also the first gendered character introduced in the novel:

I sped up until I reached the café on the northwest corner of the Place Pigalle. Some working-class men in tired suits [*Des Nord-Africains en costume de ville fatigué*] were packed tightly together along the bar. The neon dripped a muggy light on this anxious sampling of humanity. . . . Tiff would always start yelling out to me as soon as she saw me. Her shortsightedness,

¹⁶ While some initial reviews of *Sphinx* found its prose mannered, the novel was largely heralded on publication and established Garréta’s literary reputation at the age of twenty-three.

which she refused to correct out of vanity, thankfully limited the range of her shouts—a hello accompanied by so many affectionate names that it had made me blush at the beginning of our friendship. In this café filled with the lingering stench of anxiety and brutality, hearing myself called “my love” and “my pet” [“*mon amour*,” “*mon oiseau*”] sent shivers of nervousness and dread down my spine. In the clash of Arabic sounds and the servers’ shouts, I thought such an outburst would make the world stop spinning. (14; 2)

There are several details worthy of note in this passage. First, the racial description “North Africans” has been transposed in the English translation into the class-inflected description “working-class men.”¹⁷ The new class-based designator is incongruous with the detail of the men’s clothing, “tired suits,” which suggests something more like business attire (albeit not in mint condition) than work clothes. Here the translation superimposes class onto race, precisely what Morrison aims to pry apart in “Recitatif.”

Moreover, why is the narrator so concerned about being called “*mon amour*” and “*mon oiseau*” at this café filled with male Arab patrons? Those phrases are described as both sonically and semantically at odds with the clashing sounds of the café, the “*entrechoc*” of “*sonorités arabes*” and the (presumably French) orders yelled out by the servers. Uttered by Tiff, who is unambiguously gendered, “*mon amour*” and “*mon oiseau*” suggest perhaps a transgressive performance of over-the-top maternal femininity. When a strong coffee and cognac causes the narrator to tear up, Tiff playfully chides them: “‘My child, when we are barely weaned from our mother’s milk, we don’t go venturing into disreputable places to drink such strong liquors.’ ‘My love,’ ‘my child’—we made each other burst out laughing” (16; 4). Tiff’s inhabiting of a mock maternal role as she is about to play Virgil through a tour of nightclubs suggests at any rate an embrace of nonnormative sexuality whose ostentatious performance may be the cause of the narrator’s fear of being so addressed. Again, the detail can be read in different ways. Is the narrator a man afraid of being feminized and thus inviting homophobic assault or mockery, or are they a woman afraid of inviting unwanted

¹⁷ The transposition is suggested by the fact that Pigalle, where the café is located, was a seedy neighborhood known for its sex shops and cabarets, although it has since undergone gentrification.

sexual advances? In each case, the anxieties surrounding the men at the bar and “the clash of Arabic sounds” in the café also open onto different Orientalist stereotypes: toward the idea of the Arab as a brute and a sexual predator of white French women (evident in the frequent association of Islam with criminality among North African immigrants and their descendants in France), or toward the idea of the Arab as representing a regressive traditional society in contrast to enlightened, secular Western liberal democracies, which allow women to have rights (evident today in the French debate over the veil). As in “Recitatif,” details in *Sphinx*, including bits of language that index gender non-semantically or nonmorphosyntactically, open onto different readings that connect to different social-historical pathways. But in *Sphinx* this fact is suppressed rather than foregrounded, aligning the novel with a modernist vision of the unmarked text, whereas “Recitatif” might align more with a realist one. My goal here is not to argue that *Sphinx*’s narrator can or should be read as gendered in a binary way. Rather, I seek to highlight how the ethos of “fuck difference” reads with regard to various categories of social difference and how the treatment of race in contradistinction to gender itself indexes the book’s national context of French universalism.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the least successful parts of *Sphinx* are the sections set in New York, first when the narrator meets A***’s mother and extended family and then years after A***’s death, when the narrator goes to see A***’s mother on her deathbed. In the earlier scene, the narrator’s sense of being universally at home continues undisturbed in the new setting, where they find themselves accompanying A*** to a family reunion “lost in the heart of a neighborhood where white people rarely ventured—some remote suburb of Long Island or New Jersey” (Garréta 2015: 63). In the original French, this sentence is followed by an additional numerically specific detail, “au milieu d’une trentaine de Noirs [amid thirty or so Black people]” (Garréta 1986: 128), that is omitted from the English translation. The rest of the scene proceeds with clichés of African American life: “soul food,” “Harlem,” and “gospel”:

I felt at home there, so much did they make me feel like a part of their family, effortlessly forgetting our differences in race, color, culture, class—everything that one might cite as possible traits of alterity. It was as if the language they were speaking and the food they were cooking had always been familiar to me.

And the old black mommas laughed with delight to see that I had such an appetite. A***, who was used to seeing me bored or different when faced with earthly sustenance, was astonished and overjoyed. It seemed that I was forgetting to waste away, that I was finally tasting life, that I was biting into it without words getting in the way, those tableside conversations that, in Europe generally and in France in particular, constitute the essential substance of meals. (129–30; 63)¹⁸

There is something vampiric about the gusto with which the narrator eats the food prepared by A***'s family and feels nourished by their language and culture. The scene recalls the tired trope of the Black mammy who provides care and sustenance to the white child, as well as the modernist idea of a decadent European culture rejuvenated by a specifically Black America.¹⁹ Kim (2017: 13) argues that the narrator should be distinguished from Garréta, who deploys the racial stereotypes in these passages ironically to “parody facile caricatures, rather than to reproduce them uncritically.” I am inclined instead to read these moments and others like them more simply as the novel's blind spots. Moreover, I would argue that these and later scenes in *New York* fail in no small part because their details fail to be typical, operating only with abstract universals (a strange mix of positivist description and poetic invention) that lack embeddedness in an actual, concrete milieu.

But more than to indict *Sphinx's* failures (although the silence on this point in its criticism is telling), my goal here is to suggest that these moments alert us to differences in the way that Garréta's and Morrison's unmarked texts operate and the contexts in which they were written. Whereas earlier moments of indistinguishability in *Sphinx*—the lovers in bed or a mass of bodies on a dance floor—might be read as radical moments of degendering and opening up the possibility of a sexually nonhierarchical world, the smooth overcoming of racial difference reads like nothing so much as a naive instance of color blindness. Although very much alive in the United States as well, color blindness is the official policy of French republicanism, under which racial difference is considered a challenge to the coherence of the nation and banned from explicit mention in the census or public policy.

¹⁸ I adopt Kim's (2017: 10) modification of Ramadan's translation here.

¹⁹ I am grateful to Natalia Reyes for pointing out the vampiric elements of this scene. On the last point, see Cheng 2013. As a cabaret dancer from Harlem, A*** certainly evokes Josephine Baker.

If it seems paradoxical that racial difference *can* be figured so prominently in *Sphinx*, it is because in France race is not regarded as the axis of difference that is symbolic of difference as such. That mantle belongs, rather, to sexual difference, which, Garréta (n.d.) explains in an interview, is “the anthropological source of all differentiation, the foundation of the symbolic order, of the social bond and of the very possibility of culture, etc.” (my translation). Or, as Joan W. Scott (2005: 17) writes of the *parité* movement, a campaign beginning in the late 1980s to mandate that half of electoral candidates be women, “Sexual difference stood for difference itself. Not just any difference, but one so primary, so rooted in nature, so visible, that it could not be subsumed by abstraction.”²⁰ In French society, the idea that sexual difference—and the heterosexual family that follows from it—is necessary to sociality itself is not academic or esoteric but widely espoused in public discourse and used to justify legislation (Robcis 2013: 4). Recognizing the centrality of sexual difference in France is important for understanding the radical nature of Garréta’s project to undo the gendered medium of the French language. At the same time, the necessity of certain forms of difference is coupled with the refusal to recognize others, both with oppressive results and in different ways. Notably, the 1980s also saw increased agitation for the recognition of racial difference in France, especially among those of North African descent, which led in turn to a right-wing backlash.²¹ These contradictions are reflected in *Sphinx*’s desire to dissolve differences into indeterminacy, as well as in the disparate—and unevenly successful—effects of this aesthetic strategy vis-à-vis gender and race.

Of course, color blindness has been part of US popular discourse, too, since the post-civil rights era but especially since the 1980s, the decade in which “Recitatif” was published (Omi and Winant 2015). But insofar as “Recitatif” seeks to “unmatter race” (to use one of Morrison’s [1997: 9] phrases) as part of a utopian project of imagining a world

²⁰ Scott focuses on the fact that the *parité* movement demanded equal representation for women on *universalist*, not *differentialist*, grounds, that is, on the grounds of general rather than “special” interest.

²¹ Of course, French color blindness has been subject to many critiques, especially by writers and critics of color such as Pap Ndiaye (2008), Mame-Fatou Niang (2019), and Maboula Soumahoro (2020). For a comparative view of French and US color blindness, see Lieberman 2004.

where race *actually* doesn't matter, I would argue that it is still imagined in particularist terms.²² In a talk titled "Home," Morrison lists the questions that animate her work: "How to be both free and situated; how to convert a racist house into a race-specific yet non-racist home? How to enunciate race while depriving it of its lethal cling?" (12). The experiment of unmarking in "Recitatif" should be read in this light, as evincing a desire to retain the connection of individual to type without thereby codifying it.

Reading *Sphinx* and "Recitatif" together shows the nontransferability and nonequivalence of aesthetic strategies for challenging conventional categorizations of social difference both within and across national contexts. At the same time, reading racial and sexual details in *Sphinx* and "Recitatif" entails recognizing that these are differently legible, and differently significant, across language, culture, and time. In this regard, the delayed translation of *Sphinx*, and now also the belated reissuing of "Recitatif," is instructive. In the former case, I would suggest that the modifications in the English translation of *Sphinx*, such as the omission or euphemizing of racial specifications, reflect Ramadan's attempt, knowingly or not, to render certain features of the novel more palatable for contemporary US readers, who, thirty years after the novel's original publication, may be sensitive to these details in a different way.²³ Morrison's and Garréta's characters may be unmarked, but their texts are inevitably inscribed by the forms of social recognition and misrecognition specific to particular contexts, which, of course, also condition scenes of reading. Just as types are "living probabilities," how details mediate the relation of individual to type continues to evolve. Unmarked texts may suspend particularity, but in making sense of them, we find ourselves pushed again toward the details.

²² Morrison writes, "I have never lived, nor has any of us ever lived, in a world where race did not matter." Rather than imagine a world free of racial hierarchy as a utopian dreamscape, she chooses the figure of "home." This term "domesticates the racial project, moves the job of unmarking race away from pathetic yearning and futile desire; away from an impossible future or an irretrievable and probably non-existent Eden to a manageable, doable, modern human activity" (9).

²³ Although French reviews of *Sphinx* were silent on its handling of race, a few Anglophone reviews of the translation have remarked it negatively. See Cogan 2016 and Mars-Jones 2015.

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