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APHASIA, APHONIA, AND ALTERNATE ARTICULATIONS

Francophone Polyphonic Narratives and Assia Djébar's *L'amour, la fantasia*

In her seminal essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak," Gayatri Spivak interrogates the possibility of "giving voice" to the subaltern Other and concludes upon the impossibility of the subaltern to be "heard or read" without external intervention (104)ⁱ. Thus, the question "Can the subaltern speak?" frames the problem in terms of whether the subaltern can speak in his/her own right, and if s/he can be heard without intervention from a hegemonic power source. In this paper, I propose to examine another aspect of this question: *can* the subaltern physically speak? That is, Spivak assumes that subaltern speech can be physically produced but cannot be "heard" or circulated without becoming complicit in the task of imperialism. How then, can we understand the inability to physically produce articulate vocal utterance within the postcolonial context? Vocal manifestations in the form of speech and writing are privileged in literary criticism. There exists the need for coherent articulation for there to be form of valid expression. What then is the place of inarticulations in a landscape fixated on retrieving and rehabilitating the articulate voice? How is language implicated in silence or in inarticulate vocal expressions such as the cry or the wail?

To examine these questions, I turn to the Francophone novel, *L'amour, la fantasia* (1985) by the Algerian novelist, filmmaker, and translator Assia Djébar, which is deeply engaged in questioning the hegemony of the French language—particularly in its written form. I examine how aphasia, aphonia, and "alternate articulations" function within the context of the polyphonic narrative, a technique that Djébar employs in *L'amour, la fantasia*.

My use of the term polyphony draws on Mikhail Bakhtin's definition of the polyphonic novel as a "plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousness, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices" (6)ⁱⁱ. The polyphonic novel does not privilege a single authorial consciousness but is characterized by "a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights" (6)ⁱⁱⁱ. I make several corollaries to Bakhtin's definition with respect to *L'amour, la fantasia*: the first is that in this novel, not only are there a plurality of consciousnesses, but these different consciousnesses are formally organized into discrete sections. The form and structure of the novel itself is rigorously engaged with the work of polyphony. *L'amour, la fantasia* consists of a compilation of different narrative voices, and the authorial voice is subsumed within this chorus of voices. Second, I want to draw attention to the musical implications of polyphony. Polyphony, in the musical context, is defined as both "involving the playing of more than one note simultaneously" and "involving the production of many sounds or voices." In particular relation to Assia Djébar's work, the musical connotations of polyphony are of paramount importance because *L'amour, la fantasia* is deeply invested in musical elements, forms, and structures. The evocation of simultaneity in the musical definition also highlights the complex temporalities extant in the novel. As

an established and much discussed literary metaphor, polyphony not only points to the theories propounded by Bakhtin of “equal” voice, but also to these musical definitions. I suggest that the musical aspect of polyphony will prove useful in examining how Djébar’s work interacts with articulate and inarticulate vocalizations as it seeks to navigate between several different languages.

In her critique of how the term “polyphony” has been uncritically used by literary scholars especially with regard to Caribbean and African texts, Kathryn Lachman challenges the misconception of using literary polyphony as a means to approximate oral culture and give voice to disenfranchised subjects. In her reading of Maryse Condé’s 1992 novel, *Traversée de la mangrove*, Lachman highlights the fact that the novel consists of silent, interior monologues and that the novel challenges readings that privilege orality and the equality of voices. I want to make a further intervention in the privileging of articulate vocalizations in discussions surrounding literary polyphony by specifically examining the aphonic and inarticulate utterance. In medical terms, Aphasia is defined as the “loss of speech, partial or total, or loss of power to understand written or spoken language, as a result of disorder of the cerebral speech centers.” Aphonia is also the loss of speech but through disease in or damage to the larynx or mouth. Thus, aphasia is a speech disorder originating from damage to the brain while aphonia is the inability to physically produce speech from the vocal chords and mouth. These terms highlight two sites of “trauma” (the brain and throat) that are engaged in language production. The first acknowledges the formation of speech before it is vocalized, and the second acknowledges the physical processes of speech production.

I do not suggest, by using the medical terms aphasia and aphonia that there exists real cognitive or pathological conditions underlying the colonial subject’s inability to speak. However, because Djébar actively employs the metaphor of aphasia in relation to colonialism, I suggest that this framework is useful in expounding the different ways in which the inability to speak coherently manifests. Furthermore, my use of the term “alternate articulation,” refers to inarticulate vocal utterings in the context of Djébar’s work such as vocal trills, cries, and wails. Djébar presents different models of how the inability to produce sound or coherent speech intervenes with the task of writing in French.

Djébar conceives of writing as a problematic remedy to aphasia and aphonia. She writes: “Écrire ne tue pas la voix, mais la réveille, surtout pour ressusciter tant de sœurs disparues” (285)^{iv}. The task of writing for Djébar is fraught with the same anxieties Spivak expresses. Namely, the task of giving voice to the “subaltern” proves to be potentially problematic for Djébar. Djébar is concerned with resurrecting and transcribing the voices of the Algerian women who have been written out of colonial history. The final section of *L’amour, la fantasia* comes from sound recordings made for her documentary, *La Nouba des femmes du mont Chenoua*. Thus, she is acutely aware of her own authorial position. The authorial voice then resurfaces within this polyphonic narrative context as a voice that threads and joins together the disparate voices of the other women. However, the authorial voice holds no authority over the other voices, but rather it is engaged in

the introspective reflection of its own problematic place within the narrative. Djébar writes:

Vingt ans après, puis-je prétendre habiter ces voix d'asphyxie? Ne vais-je pas trouver tout au plus de l'eau évaporée? Quels fantômes réveiller, alors que, dans le désert de l'expression d'amour (amour reçu, "amour" imposé), me sont renvoyées ma propre aridité et mon aphasie. (283)^v

The authorial voice is afflicted with aphasia, and shows a profound anxiety concerning its own ability to revive and inhabit the voice of others. She questions her own ability to speak at all, which throws suspicion on her suitability for taking up the voice of others. Djébar, as the Western-educated, French-speaking woman, is intensely aware of the contradictory forces at play in her own project that stem from her own privileged position. Thus, in claiming to resurrect the "asphyxiated" voices of the repressed, the authorial voice must confront its own aridity and its own inability to speak.

Indeed, Djébar in *L'amour, la fantasia* and elsewhere in her work fiercely struggles with her relationship to the language in which she writes. French is her "stepmother-tongue," and it is her only recourse because she had been cut off from her "mother-tongue." Aphasia becomes a metaphor for the inability to access the "mother-tongue," and also an acknowledgement of the mother tongue. The rift between Djébar and her mother tongue is likened to a cognitive disorder. The mother tongue resides in a space inaccessible to the brain; the brain is unable to process and produce the sounds of the mother tongue. Furthermore, Djébar's conception of "silence" is not simply rooted in the brain's inability to conjure words but also reflects the inability to utter speech formed within the brain. If aphasia is a colonial condition, that is, a result of colonial education through severing the individual from his/her mother tongue, aphonia is presented as a condition produced by both colonial and local power structures. Words die at the throat because there does not exist a space for women to articulate. The use of writing, therefore, becomes a transgressive act that creates a space for female articulation.

Nevertheless, the space that writing opens up for the possibility of female articulation is one fraught with complexity and contradiction. Djébar's work asks the question: how can the French written language capture the Arab or Berber female voice? I suggest that Djébar's solution is to use the French language to highlight the symptoms of aphasia and aphonia. That is, her writing is engaged with the questions surrounding the bio-mechanical production of speech. Often, her writing draws attention not to what is being said, but to the process of producing speech as processes involving the mouth, throat, and body. She writes:

Propulsion interminable. S'étirant dans mes membres, se gonflant dans ma poitrine, écorchant mon larynx et emplissant mon palais, un cri enraciné s'exhale dans un silence compact ; une poussée anime mes jambes. Tout mon être est habité par ces mots : "Mamma est morte, est morte, est morte !" (271)^{vi}

The "speech" in this passage "Mamma is dead" is in fact a silence and is secondary to the process by which these words fail to erupt from the body. These

words that cannot be vocalized are instead shaped by the body and resonates throughout the body from the limbs to the chest to the larynx. These words are de-articulated in the sense that not only are they not articulated, but furthermore they resist articulation and coherency. The coherent words are transformed into the incoherent cry that eventually erupts out of the body as the speaker awakes. This focus on bodily sensations and the production or rather non-production of speech brings to attention the mechanics underlying the inability to speak. Djébar reduces speech down to its constituent components, to the “originary” cry that embeds itself within the body and then travels throughout the body. Speech then, finds its source in this kind of “incoherency,” from this spring of emotion within the body. The cry, “Mamma est morte,” is not a coherent utterance but a silent force that finds its expression in these internal bio-mechanical interactions of the body.

Thus, depictions of the incoherent utterance become a method of contending with the paradoxes in which Djébar finds herself. The incoherent utterance becomes a bridge between the aphasic and aphonic states and the problematic practice of writing in French. Djébar’s numerous and detailed depictions of inarticulate utterances, of cries, screams, ululations and etc. draw attention to the inadequacy of the French language regarding its ability to capture the voices of the Algerian women. There exists an entire realm of vocal expression inaccessible to a logocentric dominant view of language. Djébar writes:

Ce cri ancestral de déchirement – que la glotte fait vibrer de spasmes allègres – ne sortait du fond de ma gorge que peu harmonieusement. Au lieu de fuser hors de moi, il me déchirait. Je préférais écouter la longue vocifération de ma mère, mi-roucoulement, mi-hululement qui se fondait d’abord dans le chœur profus, puis le terminait en une vocalise triomphale, en long solo de soprano. (182)^{vii}

This passage, which is found in the section “L’aphasie amoureuse,” highlights the disjunction between the French language and the voices of the speaker and her female relations. The Western-educated speaker finds herself detached and alienated from this collective ancestral cry. Her attempt to join the collective voice fails as her own inharmonious vociferations tear her apart. Through contact with the foreign language of French, the speaker loses her ability to participate in the collectivity shared by her female relatives. This separation occurs at the level of the body. In addition to her inability to vocalize within the collective, she also loses her ability to sit comfortably within the collective and to fully participate within collective dances. Thus, the French language does not only effect a transformation on linguistic terms, but it transforms the body and the social space. For the speaker, to be at once separate from and to operate within the collective voice is impossible. However, she turns to her mother’s vociferations for a model of the successful interplay between the collective and individual. Her mother’s vocalizations at first blend into the collective voice but end in a triumphant solo declaration that does not represent a rift from the collective voice. Rather, her mother establishes a firm place for herself within the collective voice.

Furthermore, the incoherent utterance in *L’amour, la fantasia* acts as a countermeasure to the colonial writing of history. Ritual female utterance and the

female cacophonous voices of colonial trauma and violence are continually linked to and juxtaposed against one another. Djébar quotes an anonymous Spanish soldier's account of the *enfumades* of the Dahra caves:

Quel plume saurait rendre ce tableau ? Voir, au milieu de la nuit, à la faveur de la lune, un corps de troupes françaises occupé à entretenir un feu infernal ! Entendre les sourds gémissements des hommes, des femmes, des enfants et des animaux, le craquement des roches calcinées s'écroulant, et les continuelles détonations des armes! (103)^{viii}

The anonymous soldier's interrogation of the act of writing here is also taken up by Djébar. Her use of this quote within the context of her own reflections upon the act of writing grants it multiple layers of meaning. From one angle, we see this foreign soldier acknowledging the insufficiency of his own writing when confronted with the horrors of the slaughter of men, women, and children. Additionally, from another angle, we see Djébar's commentary upon this soldier's writing. The groans of these men, women, and children who eventually die from asphyxiation are spotlighted in Djébar's work through the ways in which she draws links to other kinds of vocalizations. The notions of "inarticulateness" and "cacophony," when placed within the context of the ritual, changes how inarticulate utterances are viewed with relation to speech and writing. No longer are these kinds of "inarticulations" simply the result of colonial trauma and violence viewed through foreign eyes, but they are instead ritualized forms of expression that exist in an intimate, feminine sphere. In a section titled "Trances," Djébar writes: "Un tambour scandant la crise, les cris arrivaient: du fond du ventre, peut-être même des jambes, ils montaient, ils déchiraient la poitrine creuse, sortaient enfin en gerbes d'arêtes hors de la gorge de la vieille" (207)^{ix}. This form of predominantly female expression brings to attention how the inarticulate utterance defies the written word. That is, while reading Djébar's descriptions of these kinds of utterances, we are acutely aware of the inability to access these vocalizations through the written text. Therefore, the inarticulate utterance becomes a way in which Djébar can negotiate between her status as the privileged writer and the problematic task of writing these Algerian female voices in French.

The binaries of silence vs. sound, articulation vs. inarticulation, and speech vs. writing are examined and questioned by Djébar's work. Djébar's paranomasic phrase, "L'amour, ses cris (s'écrit)" reveals the complex interplay between all of the elements in these binaries (299)^x. This phrase must be both written and spoken; it depends on both script and sound. Yet, it also engages with the inarticulate, and it must confront the silence of its position as text on a page. To understand these polyphonic narratives, all of these aspects of voice and voicelessness must be interrogated. The polyphonic narrative is not only comprised of a multitude of voices, but it is also comprised of what is not voiced and not sounded as well as what *cannot* be voiced and sounded. Thus, the idea of an aphasic, aphonic, or inarticulate polyphony reveal the complexities and problematics of writing the "subaltern" voice.

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ⁱ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the subaltern speak," (New York: Columbia UP, 2010), 104.

ⁱⁱ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1984), 6.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1984), 6.

^{iv} Assia Djébar, *L'amour la fantasia: roman*, (Paris, A Michel, 1985), 285.

^v Djébar, *L'amour*, 283.

^{vi} Djébar, *L'amour*, 271.

^{vii} Djébar, *L'amour*, 182.

^{viii} Djébar, *L'amour*, 103.

^{ix} Djébar, *L'amour*, 207.

^x Djébar, *L'amour*, 299.