

## Document Citation

Title	<b>Ethnocultural voices and African aesthetics in Trinh Minh-ha's Reassemblage</b>
Author(s)	Khadidiatou Gueye
Source	<i>Research in African Literatures</i>
Date	9/1/2008
Type	article
Language	
Pagination	
No. of Pages	12
Subjects	Trinh T. Minh-ha
Film Subjects	Reassemblage, Trinh T. Minh-ha,, 1983



# Ethnocultural Voices and African Aesthetics in Trinh Minh-ha's *Reassemblage: From the Firelight to the Screen*

KHADIDIATOU GUÈYE

The University of Wisconsin–Oshkosh

## ABSTRACT

Current scholarship in African literature does not always transcend the insider-outsider perspectival binarism. The critical engagement of non-African intellectuals on African cultural issues is invested with authority and credibility when it demarginalizes difference and relocates the gaze. Through the theoretical paradigm of the afrocentrist theory, this article analyzes the ways in which the film by the Vietnamese filmmaker and postcolonial theorist Trinh Minh-ha, *Reassemblage: From the Firelight to the Screen*, captures the oral foundations of African aesthetics. Ethnically derived and culturally instituted, the aural voices discussed in the essay exude a counterhegemonic ethos, where fragmentation and plurality constitute the valuable markers and sites of difference. The disjointed structure of the film, in tandem with its arcane signifiers, challenges the linear and monolithic mandate of dominant cultural inscriptions. Trinh's use of a Western medium to subvert the anthropological I/eye is aporetic, yet uncontaminates her aesthetic purpose.

Critics often identify the works of Vietnamese-born postcolonial filmmaker, composer, and writer Trinh Minh-ha as extremely convoluted. Her consistent deployment of and infatuation with poetic lyricism substantiates the difficult publications of her books, criticized for their "impurity" and the well-nigh impossible classification of her films. Trinh's crossing of borderlines and dismissal of rigid institutional bodies of knowledge set her off from many contemporary filmmakers and considerably shape her aesthetic paradigm. Her films *Reassemblage* (1982), *Naked Spaces* (1985), *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989), *Shoot for the Contents* (1991), and *A Tale of Love* (1995), along the lines of Chris Marker's *Sans soleil* [Sunless] (1983), provide examples of documentary films that privilege critical reflection over



passive consumption. Trinh inscribes her films within the framework of third cinema, which rejects the consumerist ends of blockbuster type cinematic narratives. As a montage of disruptive images and discontinuous sounds, *Reassemblage* fosters multiple readings from multiple angles and offers evidence of Trinh's novel rationale for documentary making. In her representation of the cultural specificities of the various ethnic groups in the film, she uses polyphonic and polymorphic linguistic media to convey the many-leveled patterns of communication in Senegal.

This article addresses the ways in which ethnocultural voices displayed in the film become the touchstones of cultural affirmation and ethnic identity. Ethnocultural voices are the aural voices produced by ethnic music, languages, and minimal responses in the form of *mmhmm* that will be further explained, the story intonated by the voice-over, and sounds of pestles against mortars. I will elaborate on the culture of the mortar, the importance of minimal responses in interpersonal dialogues, and the rhetoric of music and dance. I situate these culturally instituted voices within the broader framework of African aesthetics specifically rooted in oral art forms. Although I am cognizant of the fallacy of the Afrocentrist program proposed by Molefi Kete Asante and Kariamu Welsh Asante in their book on African culture and grounded in their assumption of the purity and the homogeneity of African cultural values (*African Culture* 3), I find their theorization of the foundations of African aesthetic useful to my analysis of ethnocultural voices. Trinh frames the voices within her "speaking nearby" technique in order to restore their plurality and to critique the anthropological film. Such are the questions this study will ponder: What are the characteristics of "speaking nearby"? How does it favor the expression of cultural diversity? What are the ethnocultural voices in the film and how are they arranged and to what effect? How do they relate to African aesthetics?

Trinh's focus on rural Senegalese women provides a partial representation of rural women who belong to different classes and also an incomplete picture of the Senegalese woman who is both urban and rural. However, this does not undermine the quality of her film, which favors the strategy of "speaking nearby" over that of "speaking about." Right from the beginning of the film, Trinh alerts the viewer to her aesthetic paradigm: "I do not intend to speak about . . . just speak nearby." The voice-over equally intones: "A film about what? A film on Senegal, but what in Senegal?" As the film unfolds, a concatenation of different images, animate and inanimate creatures ranging from human beings from different ages to dead cattle, sounds (namely the background music, the sound of the mortar, women clapping their hands while pounding corn, chirping birds, et cetera), and silences, disallows any narrative pleasure for the viewer. In fact, the puzzling scenario of *Reassemblage* has contributed to its lesser accessibility and understanding.

Trinh's description of the hegemonic and binary rhetoric of the "speaking about" method in *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender, and Cultural Politics* implies the counterhegemonic feature of "speaking nearby": "'[s]peaking about' only partakes in the conservation of systems of binary opposition (subject/object; I/it; We/They) on which territorialized knowledge depends [. . .]. It secures a position of mastery" (22). I would argue that the "speaking nearby" paradigm excludes correct, pure, and linear syntactic cultural representations and exudes the fragmented, heterogeneous, and heterotopic nature of images, sounds, and ethnic voices in the film.



The "speaking nearby" strategy is essentially grounded in Trinh's philosophy of indirectness: "One can only approach things indirectly. Because, in doing so, one not only goes toward the object of one's focus without killing it, but one also allows oneself to get acquainted with the envelope, that is, all the elements which surround, situate or simply relate to it" (Morelli 4). The structure of the film revolves around this principle of indirectness by virtue of the shifting foci of the camera which concentrates on women's gazes, breasts, young girls' faces, silences, repetitive self-reflexive voice-overs, and the interplay of on-screen images and off-screen sounds. Trinh's method of indirectness forecloses on any totalitarian discourse and lays the groundwork for multiple interpretations from multiple angles.

As an outsider studying the culture of the insider, Trinh's "speaking nearby" strategy responds to her alternative filmmaking which seeks to decolonize the look. Nevertheless, her project of revalorization of multiculturalism in Senegal through her sketching of the cultural peculiarities of the multifarious ethnic groups in Casamance, namely, the Diola, the Sereer, the Peul, the Bassari, the Sarakhole, the Manding, and the Toucouleur, cannot help being flawed by the use of the camera which "has position in both time and space, and therefore imposes a perspective on any action" (Asch 179). Under such circumstances, Trinh becomes torn between her railing against the anthropologists' monadic and artificial fabrications of the identities of non-Westerners and her entrapment within that very discourse, which is indicative of conceptual aporia.

In *The Gift of Death*, Jacques Derrida conceives of aporia as a necessary condition of responsible human conduct: "[T]he concepts of responsibility, of decision, or of duty are condemned a priori to paradox, scandal, and aporia. Paradox, scandal, and aporia are themselves nothing other than sacrifice, the revelation of conceptual thinking at its limit, at its death and finitude" (68). The death and limit of conceptual thinking testify to the rigidity and limitations of human reason. Though Trinh cannot go beyond that limit, she deconstructs the colonizing effect of the camera by giving authority to the liminal space of "the borderline, the taboo, [and] the untranslatable" (Foster 95). The liminal space of the film is in fact the fluid and flexible space where the "speaking nearby" rhetoric is located. I believe that critics should shift their attention from the selective recording of the camera to the creative ways in which Trinh uses the camera to serve her aesthetic purposes. Throughout *Reassemblage*, the look of the camera is decolonized.

It is important to specify that Trinh's "speaking nearby" is a critique of the anthropological reportage film. While anthropologists have the background knowledge that helps them appreciate and understand "discreet [cultural] units" "with definite beginnings and ends" (Asch 183), Trinh's interview with Annamaria Morelli expresses her transcendence of the linear pattern of restitution of cultural meanings: "I never proceed by having a plan (with an introduction, a development and a conclusion, for example) by mapping out the terrain of the arguments I wish to sustain, or by compiling ahead of time all the points I want to discuss" (5)

*Reassemblage* furnishes heterogeneous cultural soundscapes such as ethnic musical backgrounds, the reverberations of ethnic languages, sounds of mortars and pestles, and minimal responses. The film begins and ends with the music of the Diola—the most prominent ethnic group in Casamance—in the background. Casamance is located in the southern part of Senegal. The Diola ethnic music is



particularist because it captures the essence of the Diola culture. But beyond the ethnic scope, music is an internationalist form of art that can express the specificities of non-African cultures. That is why Kariamou Welsh Asante contends that "[a]ll African cultures express themselves through the *universals* of dance, music, visual arts, and graphic arts" (72; emphasis added).

I suggest that Asante's description of cultural vehicles of expression include *knowledge* and *skills*. These added elements are epistemological premises of cultural enunciations and instantiations. Dancers, musicians, and artists weave the potency of communal endowments and idiosyncrasies in the matrix of cultural belonging. In *Reassemblage*, knowledge and skills predetermine the abilities of rural Senegalese women to deftly and expertly pound corn or sift rice. Trinh particularly teases out the importance of mortars and pestles in terms of cultural resonance and nutritive quality. In Senegal, pounding is part of the food culture. Grains like corn, millet, and rice are pounded by women before their multipurpose use in cooking. Before the introduction of mills in postcolonial Senegal, women, regardless of their class, commonly pounded cereals when needed. With modernization, pounding becomes associated with the rural, uneducated, and working-class Sereer women who migrate to the capital, Dakar, and draw their means of livelihood from pounding and selling millet to modern Senegalese housewives. As the film illustrates, the ritual of pounding has something communal and ludic. Not only do women pound together but they play with the pestle by mingling their pounding with handclapping. Interestingly, the images of women who are pounding are mingled with off-screen sounds of mortars and ethnic languages.

In the film, "speaking nearby" provides a fragmented account of ethnic and multicultural heteroglossia, unstructured around principles of clarity, conventionality, and rationality. Trinh's polymorphic and plurilingual representation in *Reassemblage* is rooted in ethnic diversity and bespeaks her earnest interest to pool the musical, poetic, and artistic potentialities she developed over the years as an ethnomusicologist. Her sensitivity to the tone and musicality of the ways in which people speak is reflected through the different language patterns she brings up in the film. The fact that music is at the beginning and end of *Reassemblage* reinforces Trinh's ethnomusicologist background.

Trinh subjects the myriad aural voices to musical arrangements. The film alternates between the interruption and resumption of music. Between the interruption and resumption of music, come the voice-over narrations and miscellaneous images of people who indulge in different activities. The different cultural areas representative of the ethnic groups in the film such as the Peul, the Bassari, and the Sereer, are not delineated by spatial divisions but are enriched by language diversity. The shift from one cultural area to another is mostly mediated by the change of musical background. Such change is felt through rhythmic alterations. For instance, the Diola music differs from the Peul music because of the use of drums and rattles, which produce stronger tones.

Trinh, however, deliberately fails to use music as entrance into the land of the Mandingue and the Peul, and also uses Diola music in the land of the Sarakhole and the Toucouleur. The striking aspect of the absence of music in the land of the Mandingue and the Peul resides in the insertion of alien voices. Surprisingly and unexpectedly, Sereer male voices strongly resonate in the ethnically specified areas. Sereer voices are complemented by women's minimal responses in the form of



*mmhmm*. Jennifer Coates and Deborah Cameron, Don H. Zimmerman and Candace West prevalently employ the term *minimal response* in research about language and gender. In other areas of linguistics, such as social and behavioral psychology, synonymous terms for minimal response are *assent terms* (Schegloff), *back channels* (Yngve), *listener responses* (Dittman and Llewellyn), *feedbacks* (Allen and Guy), *accompaniment signals* (Kendon), and *hearer signals* (Bublitz). Minimal responses, as illustrated in *Reassemblage*, occur during interpersonal dialogues and are uttered by female listeners. Women listening to men in the Sereer land manifest their attentiveness to the speakers. In Senegalese culture, minimal responses are like humming sounds formed out of the prefix *mm* and interimplicated with special facial expressions. Socially constructed and culturally acquired, they can express approval, disapproval, warning, and surprise, depending on the intonation patterns.

Though important, the combination of minimal responses from women with verbalized male voices in the Sereer land bears less significance than the intrusion of Sereer language within the Mandingue and Peul lands. This conscious and deliberate technical difference projects Trinh's feminist ethos. In *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, she explains: "Difference is not otherness. And while otherness has its laws and interdictions, difference always implies the interdependency of these two-sided feminist gestures: that of affirming 'I am like you' while pointing insistently to the difference" (152). The concept of difference has a long history in Western thought where differences are conceptualized in terms of hierarchies and binaries between the self and the other. Trinh's differentiation of difference from otherness is an interesting political distinction. She repudiates otherness, and articulates difference and sameness as mutually enriching situations rather than polarities.

The introduction of the Sereer language in the land of the Mandingue and Peul reveals Trinh's denial of the essentialist and fixed construction of culture. As a matter of fact, there is no such thing as pure culture. Cultures evolve historically through borrowings and exchanges. Aijaz Ahmad's "The Politics of Literary Post-coloniality" makes a relevant argument regarding the inherence of cross-cultural exchanges in human life: "[C]ross-fertilisation of cultures has been endemic to all movements of people [. . .] and all such movements in history have involved the travel, contact, transmutation, hybridisation of ideas, values, and behavioural norms" (18). Beyond the "hybridisation of ideas, values, and behavioural norms," the Senegalese multicultural and multiethnic landscape offers a relevant example of linguistic "hybridisation" produced by migration, interethnic cohabitation, and marriage. The eleven regions that comprise Senegal are inhabited by ethnically diverse populations speaking different languages. The interethnic ambience is a fertile soil for fruitful cultural exchanges and language development. The exposure to many languages in their environment makes polyglots of most Senegalese. *Sererophones* do not specifically live in the Sereer land nor do *peulophones* live in the Peul land. Ethnicity is not bound up with spatial demarcations. For instance, as a Senegalese woman belonging to the Wolof ethnic group, I dwell in the same neighborhood as Serer, Peul, Diola, and many other ethnic communities unspecified in the film. Wolof is the largest ethnic group in Senegal and the main vehicle of intercultural communication. Trinh's choice to focus on ethnic minorities other than Wolof in *Reassemblage* is likely to be motivated by her objection to hierarchical cultural inscriptions.



In her interview with Pratibha Parmar, Trinh situates identities as well as the nature of her works in the unending network of discontinuity: "Since the self, like the work you produce, is not so much a core as a process, one finds oneself in the context of cultural hybridity. [. . .] Fragmentation is therefore a way of living at the borders" (Parmar 72). In postcolonial currency, fragmentation is an important aspect of "cultural hybridity." Such postcolonial theorists as Homi Bhabha (142, 158) and Robert Young (25) locate cultural hybridity in acts of interruptive enunciations to emphasize the instability of heterogeneous and discontinuous realities. Trinh likewise employs fragmentation in the technique of her film: both the structure and ethnocultural voices obey a fragmented model.

Trinh's dissimilar arrangement of voices partakes of her refusal to respond to the viewer's need for visual gratification. Indeed, the film unsettles the spectator by divesting language of its promised meaning. Decentered of his/her self-complacent stature, s/he negotiates meaning in the liminal meditative site straddling the filmic signifiers and his/her looking ways. Some critics, like Nwachukwu Frank Ukadike, overlook the deconstructionist project of the film and hastily articulate their criticism. In *Black African Cinema*, Ukadike conceives of Trinh's films as "amateurish [and] bracketed by opportunism" and characterized by "lack of continuity emanating from unclear structure, incorrect exposure, out-of-focus shots, bad editing, and disconcerting voice-overs" (56). It appears that Ukadike misjudges and misunderstands Trinh's interference with the reification of the hegemonic investment of the anthropological I/eye. Along the lines of the renowned Senegalese neo-Marxist revolutionary filmmaker Ousmane Sembène, I argue that Ukadike ignores that "[p]urity has become a thing of the past" (Niang and Gadjigo, "Interview" 174). Trinh translates the hybrid resonance and posture of ethnocultural voices through the devices of imperfection or impurity. Such impurity is manifest in the mixture of dissonant, disjointed, and untranslatable voices, produced by the aural voices, fragmented silences and repetitions, and the polysemous voice-over. The voice-over is a metadiscursive device Trinh mostly employs to critique the unreflective practices of documentarists and anthropologists who mis-represent the cultures of non-Westerners. An example of this practice is shown in the film when Trinh talks about the white man who, after attending a slide show on Africa, tells his wife that he has seen some pornography. In addition, the voice-over functions as a cultural epistemological tool. Thanks to it, the viewer knows about the story of the woman possessing fire. I now turn to the second section of the paper which will focus on the ways in which music and story are linked to African aesthetic cultural representations which draw their strength from oral traditional forms. I do not lose sight of the historical nexus between African, African-American, or Caribbean musical and cultural traditions. I just find useful the Asantes' conceptualization of what they consider as the components of African aesthetics.

In African as in other cultures, the centrality of oral art forms is noticeable. They include oratory, myth, story, legend, and music or song. These culture-specific media efficaciously articulate and uphold cultural beliefs, meanings, and values. In contradistinction to literate cultures, oral cultures are typically aural, functional, and collective. These distinctive characteristics are mainly harnessed through the participatory modes of oral performances that foster communal involvement.



The Afrocentrist Kariamu Welsh Asante identifies "the oral principle [as] a fundamental principle in African aesthetics" (74). "Aesthetic senses" underlie these art forms. In his analysis of the dance form, Asante finds seven aesthetic senses: "polyrhythm, polycentrism, curvilinear, dimensional, epic memory, repetition, [and] holism" (74). As already specified above, and for thematic convenience, I limit my focus to music and not dance. Primarily music and story, and peripherally repetition and silence, are the frameworks through which African aesthetics will be appraised in this paper. Music pervades *Reassemblage*, the voice-over intones the story of the woman possessing fire, and repetitions and silences are the twin punctuations used in the film. Although there are many repetitions made in different contexts, I will only consider the repetition germane to the story. When it comes to silence, I will relate it to the overall context of the film. Among the aesthetic senses already mentioned, I am choosing those in accordance with music and the story.

The tonality of African languages determines the nature of musical structure, namely, its melodic pattern, harmonic texture, and rhythmic consideration. The rhythmic characteristics are indicative of cultural orientations and are distinctly specific to ethnic groups. As noticed in *Reassemblage*, the two traditional or cultural musical rhythms felt in the film are the ethnically divergent and *polyrhythmic* Diola and Bassari ones. When applied to dance, the first aesthetic sense "polyrhythm" refers to the "motion sense" (Asante 74). The "motion sense" in dance can be found in ethnic music.

Asante's view of dance as an aesthetic form concurs with Judith Lynne Hanna's description of the African dance as the "quintessential aesthetic form" in her article "African Dance: The Continuity and Change." Both music and dance are aesthetic forms that include motion. But while musicians can move and shake their bodies because of the feel of the music, the physical movements performed by dancers are usually more intense. African music is fundamentally performed for dancing. There is a vast critical corpus on dance and music from scholars including J. H. Kwabena Nketia, John M. Chernoff, and Judith Lynne Hanna. Dance and music are both communicative modes rooted in culture and linked to communal participation. The use of percussion instruments such as wood blocks or rattles and sounding devices in the Diola music triggers rapturous handclapping and elicits the uncontrolled movements of bodies frenzied by the spell of music. Trinh mostly underscores the sound of music. The enthralling musical performance is guided by the aesthetic potentialities of the performers, who manage deftly and knowingly the internal musical arrangement. The musical pattern, as illustrated in *Reassemblage*, is ethnically derived. Diola and Bassari ethnic groups do not share similar heterophonic musical styles. I propose that the tonal inflections of ethnic languages determine and model the musical construction. Interestingly enough, in Senegal, ethnic languages are easily identifiable from the musical type or sound. But in the film, Trinh goes beyond the specificity of ethnic languages and their musical patterns to embrace a poetics of cultural diversity. As already specified, the use of the Diola music in the land of the Sarakhole and the Toucouleur illustrates Trinh's anti-essentialist philosophy. The "motion sense" Asante associates with polyrhythmic dance and that I have extended to ethnic music in this section is polyvocal. In my view, the "motion sense" includes what could be referred to as physical behavior, artistic behavior, cultural behavior, and communicative



behavior. In other words, music is a dynamic art form which is a cultural mode of communication. Music is also audiovisual because it involves the sight of performers and the sound of the music *per se*. Another aesthetic sense that might be useful for the study of music is "dimensionality" (Asante 77).

Dimensionality is the fourth sense Asante ascribes to the dance form. As he notes, "[t]he dimensional aspiration speaks to the supernatural in space, the presence beyond the visual presence. The dimensional aspect is characteristic of all the senses in that it is by definition *extrasensory*, involving the oral tradition" (77; emphasis added). Ostensibly, music is as dimensional as dance. In both music and dance, the extrasensory is an opaque and untranslatable space, which is incommensurable in sensory perceptions as well as in bodily responses. Music involves the audiovisual, the smell of physical exertion, the touch of the performer's feet which are likely to stamp the earth, and the feel of the music. In *Reassemblage*, the dimensionality of music is complemented by the gamut of heterophonic sounds that the viewer hears and feels in different ethnoscares, be it in Diola, Bassari, or Peul areas, and is aesthetically significant. Such significance is enmeshed in the dismantlement of totalitarian and monomaniac meaning and in the celebration of the multiplicity of language. Trinh inscribes meaning in the realm of constant revision. Her intent to break free from mainstream aesthetic, cultural, and ideological conventions is also illustrated in the provocative ways in which she presents what I call the "single plural" story in the film.

The story of the rural Senegalese woman possessing fire in *Reassemblage* is complex and ambiguous. Although the story is similar in content, it is dissimilar in form. Trinh repeats the following story in two different contexts: "In numerous tales, woman is depicted as the one who possessed the fire. Only she knew how to make fire. She kept it in diverse places. At the end of the stick she used to dig the ground with, for example, in her nails or in her fingers." The first recitation of the story is complete whereas the second and the third versions are incomplete. The first repetition of the story elides the first two sentences and the last seven words of the story: "She kept it in diverse places. At the end of the stick she used to dig the ground with, for example." The second and last repetition of the story focuses on the first two sentences: "Woman is depicted as the one who possessed the fire. Only she knew how to make fire."

Trinh's repetition of the story with variation articulates the ongoing refiguration of meaning in polymultiple cultural contexts. The spaces in-between the enunciation of the fragmented stories are occupied by heterophonic sounds such as music, indistinct voices of people, and songs. The lack of repetition of the "same" coupled with the polysemically sound voices delimiting the enunciation of the stories trigger what I call aesthetic fillers salvaging meaning from fixity. Trinh's repetition procedure of reality shares affinities with Derridean concept of iterability, being the repetition of a term in different contexts, for the sake of semantic dispersal. In other words, the *différance* of meaning is upheld by the impossible achievement of a fixed meaning. As expressed throughout *Reassemblage*, Trinh rejects the practice consisting in "copying reality meticulously." Her use of repetitions and silences partakes of her avoidance of packaging meaning like an information brochure.

The story *per se* involves one basic aesthetic "repetition" that occupies the sixth position in Asante's classification. Interestingly, there is an overlapping



between Trinh's use of repetition as simultaneously punctuation and representative of African aesthetic. Asante conceives of repetition in the context of dance as: "the intensifying of one movement" and adds that "intensification is *not static*, it goes by repetition from one level to another until ecstasy, euphoria, possession, saturation, and satisfaction have been reached" (81; emphasis added). Like Trinh, Asante dismisses mimetic and static repetition. The attainment of satisfaction by the dancer consecutive to the asymmetric intensity of her/his physical movements corresponds to Trinh's attainment of satisfaction resulting from the fragmented, unfettered, and unanchored recitation of the story. Furthermore, Trinh's satisfaction stems from her gendered conceptualization of repetition as a device to "emphasize something that may be lost otherwise, therefore drawing attention to the negligible, the unessential, the marginal" ("The Undone Interval" 11).

Trinh's "dynamic" repetition of the same story is prompted by her de-marginalized re-articulation of the identity of the rural Senegalese woman. The image of the naked breasted woman cooking or standing by the fireplace is spread across *Reassemblage*. Trinh displaces and relocates the gaze of the spectator by attaching an arcane meaning to fire. Fire plays a key role in the history of human civilization and is associated with a myriad of mythic and symbolic representations. As far as the rural woman in the film is concerned, the possession of fire and the knowledge of the secrecy of its preservation—she kept fire in her nails and fingers—makes her body matter. Gwendolyn Audrey Foster describes fire as "that which destroys and at the same time regenerates" (97).

Foster makes a link between fire, destruction, and regeneration. It is my contention that fire is the precondition for regeneration. In *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* (1964), Gaston Bachelard spells out the function of purification of fire: "fire separates substances and destroys material impurities" (103). In *Reassemblage*, I would suggest that the fire the rural woman standing by the pot and cooking possesses symbolically destroys the clichés of marginality that the viewers might attach to her. Trinh's woman cannot be understood via the hasty and facile interpretations of viewers. The complexity of the woman cannot be captured in the visual either. Trinh specifies in the film that "nudity does not reveal the hidden. It is its absence." Nudity is embodied by the emptiness of visual signifiers. Trinh makes the woman invisible and ungraspable by elevating her to a plane higher than that of ordinary human beings, hence the transcendence of the signifier of fire. So the form of the story which is punctuated by non static repetition and the content which repudiates monolithic interpretation emphasizes Trinh's creativity. This creativity is not confined to the use of disjointed yet intriguing repetitions. In her relentless endeavor to eschew the fossilization and irrevocability of cultural meanings, Trinh uses silences throughout the film.

In Asante's theorizing, silence overlaps with "holism," and takes center stage for being an incredibly important rhythmic device allowing the "appreciat[ion of] the full complexity and beauty of the polymultiple experience" (81). Accordingly, the "complexity and beauty of the polymultiple experience" is fully staged in the film through the entanglement of multiple voices emerging from multiple contexts and producing unfixed meanings. In *Reassemblage*, silences are interstitial spaces between music and the voice-over, but also over the textual gaps. Interstitial silences result from the interruption of music, talking ethnic voices, sounds of mortar and handclapping, and the chirp of crickets and birds. These



silences follow their own mood of self-reflexivity and are pregnant with meaning. As far as the textual gaps are concerned, they constitute the pauses observed by the voice-over and also the deliberate elision of words. Examples of textual gaps abound in the film.

An example of silence as pause is provided in the following intonation of the voice-over: "A film about what? My friends ask. \_\_\_\_\_ A film about Senegal; but what in Senegal?" Regarding silence as word erasure, it is inscribed within repetition. Trinh reaffirms her disapproval of anthropologists' "habit of imposing a meaning to every single sign" with difference: "The habit of imposing \_\_\_\_\_ every single sign." The conscious and literal effacement of the word "meaning" is indicative of the dissolution of fixed "meaning" for the triumph of multiple meanings. Furthermore, the inscription of silence in the form of omission of words within repetition conjures up the unequivocal countervailing dimensions of repetition and silence. Despite their divergent tones, the two punctuations are complementary. Nonetheless, of these communicative modes, silence is the one likely to encompass "plenitude."

As a nonverbal and nonanthropomorphic communicative mode, silence expresses the infinite scope of language in the film. Perceived through the lens of Trinh's critical subversion of hegemonic discursive logic, silence is the site of resistance to the absolutization of meaning and to the mimetic rendition of reality. Even though silence takes on different forms and meanings and serves manifold functions, depending on historical and sociocultural realities, it is almost unanimously seen in women's works as an effective site of struggle against patriarchal impositions and repressive regimes. Mariama Ba's *Une si longue lettre*, Marta Traba's *Mothers and Shadows*, Calixthe Beyala's *Tu t'appelleras Tanga*, and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, among others, offer enough evidence.

I have approached the aesthetic significance of ethnic music and story in connection with vernaculars and minimal responses, repetitions and silences, from the Afrocentric perspective. It can be noticed from Trinh's representation of the aural voices examined in this essay that ethnic communities are more knit by cultural commonalities than they are divided by cultural discrepancies. The way they sound through either their traditional music or ethnic language is ethnically bounded. But the communal function and contrapuntal variations of music as well as the common resort to mortars and pestles and the shared tonality of their languages are evocative of cultural rhythmic unity. The mixing of opposed or apparently irreconcilable aural voices from different cultural registers in the same filmic space testifies to the richness and complexity of African aesthetics. Throughout the film, the combination of polysemous silences and repetitions with a kaleidoscope of fragmented soundscapes, to only name these, opens up a wide range of interpretive possibilities.

The merit of Trinh's film lies in the profoundly sharp insights of a Vietnamese "outsider-insider" who carefully weaves her well-crafted ethnomusicologist skills into the matrix of Senegalese socio-cultural diversity. Trinh unwrites the hegemonic investment of the insider/outsider binarism to break the policing to which the identities of non-Westerners have been subjected. In "Not You/Like You: Post-colonial Women and the Interlocking Questions of Identity and Difference," she repudiates the [c]orrect cultural filmmaking [which] usually implies that Africans show Africa; Asians, Asia; and Euro-Americans the world" (McClintock 417).



## WORKS CITED

- Ahmad, Aijaz. "The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality." *Race and Class* 36.3 (1995): 1-20.
- Allen, Donald E., and Rebecca F. Guy. *Conversation Analysis: The Sociology of Talk*. The Hague: Mouton, 1974.
- Asante, Molefi Kete and Kariamu, eds. *African Culture: The Rhythms of Unity*. Trenton: Africa World P, 1990.
- Asch, Timothy, John Marshall, and Peter Spier. "Ethnographic Film: Structure and Function." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 2 (1973): 179-87.
- Bâ, Mariama. *Une si longue lettre*. Dakar: Nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1979.
- Bachelard, Gaston. *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*. Trans. Alan C. M. Ross. Boston: Beacon, 1964.
- Beyala, Calixthe. *Tu t'appelleras Tanga*. Paris: Éditions J'ai Lu, 1988.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Bublitz, Wolfram. *Supportive Fellow-Speakers and Cooperative Conversations: Discourse Topics and Topical Actions, Participant Roles, and 'Recipient Action' in a Particular Type of Everyday Conversation*. Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1988.
- Coates, Jennifer, and Deborah Cameron. *Women and Their Speech Communities: New Perspectives on Language and Sex*. London: Longman, 1988.
- Derrida, Jacques. *The Gift of Death*. Trans. David Wills. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995.
- Dittman, Allen T., and Lynn G. Llewellyn. "The Phonemic Clause as a Unit of Speech Decoding." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 6 (1967): 341-49.
- Foster, Gwendolyn Audrey. *Women Filmmakers of the African Asian Diaspora: Decolonizing the Gaze, Locating Subjectivity*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1997.
- Hanna, Judith Lynne. "African Dance: The Continuity and Change." *Yearbook of the International Folk Music Council* 5 (1973): 165-74.
- hooks, bell. *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations*. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Kendon, Adam. "Some Functions of Gaze-Direction in Social Interaction." *Acta Psychologica* 26 (1967): 22-63.
- Morelli, Annamaria. "The Undone Interval." *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*. Ed. Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti. New York: Routledge, 1996. 3-16.
- Niang, Sada, and Samba Gadjigo. "Interview with Sembène Ousmane." *Research in African Literatures* 26.3 (1995): 174-78.
- Parmar, Pratibha. "Woman, Native, Other: Pratibha Parmar Interviews Trinh T. Minh-Ha." *Feminist Review* 36 (1990): 65-74.
- Schegloff, Emanuel A. "Sequencing in Conversational Openings." *Directions in Sociolinguistics: The Ethnography of Communication*. Ed. John J. Gumperz and Dell Hymes. New York: Holt, 1972. 346-80.
- Traba, Marta. *Mothers and Shadows*. Trans. Jo Labanyi. London: Readers International, 1986.
- Trinh, T. Minh-ha. *Reassemblage: From the Firelight to the Screen*. Wychoff, NJ: Women Make Movies, 1982.
- . *Naked Spaces—Living Is Round*. New York: Women Make Movies, 1985.
- . *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*. New York: Women Make Movies, 1989.
- . *Shoot for the Contents*. New York: Women Make Movies, 1991.
- . *A Tale of Love*. New York: Women Make Movies, 1995.



#59123  
12p

- . *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- . "Not You/Like You: Postcolonial Women and the Interlocking Questions of Identity and Difference." *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*. Ed. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997. 415–19.
- Ukadike, Nwachukwu Frank. *Black African Cinema*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1994.
- Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. New York: Harcourt, 1982.
- Yngve, Victor. "On Getting a Word in Edgewise." *Papers of the Sixth Regional Meeting of the Chicago Linguistic Society*. Chicago: Chicago Linguistic Society, 1970. 567–77.
- Young, Robert J. C. *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Zimmerman, Don H., and Candace West. "Sex Roles, Interruptions, and Silences in Conversation." *Language and Sex: Difference and Dominance*. Ed. Barrie Thorne and Nancy Henley. Rowley, MA: Newbury, 1975. 105–29.

