

• BOOK REVIEW •

The Triple Bind

Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism
by Trinh T. Minh-ha. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.
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TO THE FILMMAKING COMMUNITY, Trinh T. Minh-ha is best known as the Vietnamese-born director of a number of experimental documentary films: *Reassemblage*, *Naked Spaces—Living Is Round*, and *Surname Viêt, Given Name Nam*. Visually stunning, poetic, and highly idiosyncratic, these works radically question and reopen ethnographic and documentary film languages. Her films represent one part of a much larger project, loosely organized around the "problem" of how to represent a Third World, female Other. As well as making films, Trinh studied ethnomusicology and West African vernacular architecture, composes music, and has written a number of books. Her most recent is *Woman, Native, Other*.

As the title indicates, Trinh's book is as much about writing as it is "about" any of its other areas of research: postcolonial culture, feminist theory, anthropology, deconstructionist philosophy, narrative. Like her films, Trinh's writing represents a critical engagement with a number of what she terms "master discourses," the languages of human sciences that the West has used to represent itself and its Others. In the four essays published here, Trinh works to interrogate these languages and interrupt their claims to authenticity, transparency, and universality.

Rather than constructing a clear-cut counterdiscourse—a Third World feminist criticism posed in relation to First World male-dominated criticisms—Trinh's writings employ a very different tactic, working inside these discourses to allow other readings, other responses, impersonating them in some instances, playing with them, exposing their limits and contradictions. This makes for a very mobile ride, as Trinh shifts discourses, speaking positions, and stances, moving in and out of a number of languages of authority and resistance. She describes her method as a form of storytelling:

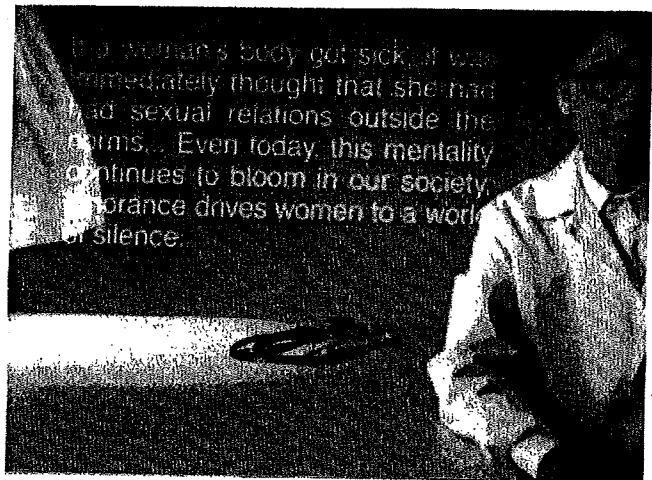
From jagged transitions between the analytical and the poetical to the disruptive, always shifting fluidity of a headless and bottomless storytelling, what is exposed in this text is the inscription and de-scription of a non unitary female subject of color through her engagement, therefore also disengagement, with master discourses.

At times phrases or quotes reappear from one essay to another, as their paths intersect around certain recurring paradoxes. Writers like Roland Barthes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Andre Lorde reappear throughout the book. Trinh seems particularly intrigued by Hurston, the African American novelist and "insider anthropologist" sent by Franz Boas to collect Black folk tales, as a figure in the intersecting stories of ethnography, language, literature, and race probed in *Woman, Native, Other*. Hurston's fluid prose—her ability to play with her audience and benefactors, communicating African American experience while evading languages of truth and transparency—makes her a suggestive model for Trinh's use of language. Trinh's text reads as a search for a way of speaking about power and domination that doesn't extend its operations. Fundamentally, hers is an approach to writing that is always strategic, always positioning itself in relation to other utterances, both silent and spoken.

Trinh works within a postcolonial framework that understands modern forms of power as functioning primarily not by brute force, visible mechanisms of power, or the military interventions and imposed governments of the colonial period, but through invisible, internalized relations of power that operate via consent. This perspective intersects with many feminist analyses of power as well as the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault, who discerned the emergence of a modern liberal form of power that makes

social regulation tolerable by masking its operations and incorporating opposition. In more familiar terms, Foucault's work proposes an critique of pluralism and cooptation. Similarly, Trinh refuses to describe herself, the Other, the woman of color, in Western languages designed for her submission or annihilation. A strategy of inclusion, she implies, only reinforces hegemonic power by incorporating the Other into its own language of difference as essence, division, or inferiority—what she calls "an apartheid kind of difference."

In the book's initial essay, "Commitment from the Mirror-Writing Box," Trinh explores the role of the Third World woman writer and investigates the possibility for a nonsubmissive, active relationship between writing and political struggle. The essay examines a number of propositions, from Sartre's model of the "engaged writer" with its discussion of "freedom" and "responsibility" to Western ideas of "art for art's sake," as well as other politically meaningful stances. Trinh works with a range of references, largely drawing from French philosophy and anthropology juxtaposed with writings by U.S. women of color and other Third World women. Unusual selections sit side by side, illuminating and informing each other, almost as



Film still from *Surname Viêt Give Name Nam*, by Trinh T. Minh-ha. Like her films, Trinh's book *Woman, Native, Other* examines ethnographic and anthropological languages, postcolonial culture, feminist theory, deconstructionist philosophy, and related issues.

if Trinh stages a series of conversations, between Roland Barthes and Toni Cade Bambara, Mitsuye Yamada and Julia Kristeva. Like the layered voices she orchestrates in *Naked Spaces*, this approach operates like a musical composition, with none of the elements subordinated but playing off and with each other.

This strategy shifts in the book's second chapter, "The Languages of Nativism: Anthropology as a Scientific Conversation of Man with Man." Like Trinh's first film, *Reassemblage*, in this essay she undertakes a more explicit attack on anthropological-ethnographic studies and their support of Western cultural hegemony. Most controversially, she criticizes many of the contemporary attempts to formulate "progressive" anthropological methods—"insider anthropology," "shared anthropology," and various efforts to "give voice" to the Other—which mask and prolong the relations of power between Western "experts" and Third World subjects, rather than unsettling them. Critiquing anthropology as "a discussion between old white men" about the Other, Trinh deploys one set of old white men—Barthes, Jacques Derrida, at times Claude Levi-Strauss, against another—Bronislaw Malinowski, Clifford Geertz, and others:

One of the rules of my games is to echo back his words to an unexpected din or simply let them bounce around to yield most of what is being and has been said through them and despite them. I am therefore not concerned with judging the veracity of his discourses in relation to some original truth.

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Drawing on the work of Ivan Illich, Trinh implicates anthropology in the ideology of "development," the latest in a long line of Western definitions of the outsider where the underlying dynamics remain constant: the barbarian, the pagan, the infidel, the wild man, the native, the underdeveloped. In such a context, debates over the terms of representation all too easily function to update and relegitimate underlying power relationships, questioning how the Other is represented—"positive images" vs. "negative images," "stereotypes" vs. "realistic depiction"—without considering who controls the definitions.

One of the cornerstones of Trinh's work is a radical rethinking of concepts of identity and difference from the standpoint of postcolonial experiences of displacement and cultural hybridization, which overlaps and complements the work of many contemporary cultural critics like Paul Gilroy, Gayatri Spivak, Stuart Hall, Homi Bhabha, and Hazel Carby. Despite their sometimes disparate interests and methods, these writers—along with Trinh—have all contributed to rigorous reconceptualizations of ethnic, gender, and sexual differences, often questioning notions of an "authentic" or "true" identity in the process. At stake in these theoretical discussions are notions of identity that have long been taken as the foundation of political resistance. A very different model of identity, based on recognition of the interpenetration of First and Third Worlds, implicitly suggests the need for different forms of political action and intervention. As Trinh very succinctly and poetically states in her introduction to an issue of the journal *Discourse* (No. 8, Fall/Winter 1986-87), "What is at stake is not only the hegemony of western cultures, but also their identities as unified cultures; in other words, the realization that there is a Third World in every First World, and vice versa."

Her third chapter, entitled "Difference: A Special Third World Women Issue" (originally written for *Discourse* and revised and expanded here), represents a search for language acknowledging differences but resisting tendencies toward both universal explanations of systems of difference and the imposition of rigidly-defined differences, for instance, those represented by the token and the exception. In this context, she again turns to writings by various women of color, particularly works from "marginalized" and "feminized" genres—prose fiction, poetry, autobiography—although she reads these texts as philosophy and theory as well as literature. Her own writing, too, incorporates poetic language and forms and a personal, although never explicitly autobiographical, voice. Continually self-reflexive, Trinh's method offers not so much a systematic analysis as a circling around the questions she interrogates—"a text which recognizes its own instability." Such an attention to the various languages of theoretical utterances leads her to a poetics of silence and the unsaid as a potential language of resistance:

Silence as a refusal to partake in the story does sometimes provide us with a means

Woman, Native, Other includes photo/text page layouts that combine images from Trinh's films and excerpts from the essays. This image from her work-in-progress *India—China* shares a page with the text, "Civilization is not mere advance in technology and in the material aspects of life. We should remember it is an abstract noun and indicates a state of living and not things (C. Rajagopalachari)."

to gain a hearing. It is voice, a mode of uttering, and a response in its own right. Without utter silences, however, my silence goes unheard, unnoticed; it is simply one voice less, or more point given to the silencers.

In her final text, "Grandma's Story" (reprinted from the anthology *Blasted Allegories*), Trinh explores storytelling as an expression and repository of historical consciousness. In this mode of representation, which she sees as a function of community, Trinh develops a discourse that allows differences to emerge without domination, articulating different positions without opposition. Tracing the separation of "literature" and "history" as distinct narrative practices in Western culture, she proposes their reintegration. Working with texts by Teresa Hay Kyung Cha and Maxine Hong Kingston, Trinh explores the overlapping effects of storytelling: passing on information, inspiration, a sense of history, and emotional bonding, what she terms "a living female tradition." In many instances, she refers to traditional cultures as sites of cultural space that is female, gendered, but not subordinated; a postcolonial reappropriation of "women's space" against the movement of "genderless hegemonic standardization."

Although genre-crossing in what's categorized as literature may be acceptable nowadays, it is still quite suspect when the writing is theoretical. But this is precisely the territory of *Woman, Native, Other*. Located at the boundaries of a number of discourses and disciplines, Trinh's book explores the various resistances produced by their interplay. Her intense awareness of how languages construct political and institutional positions, her attention to silence, and her resistance to a fixed and marginalized identity as a Third World woman writer suggest a powerful strategy for politically engaged writing. Hers is a dense text, inviting readers to tease out different strands and lines of thought, often without explicitly spelling out the implications of her ideas or arguments. Although not directly addressing questions of cinema, it sketches a provocative context for such work. For those interested in a more pointed discussion of film, her article "Outside In, Inside Out" in *Questions of Third Cinema* (Jim Pines and Paul Willems, eds., London: British Film Institute, 1989) offers a more topical application of her ideas to problems of representation and documentary filmmaking.

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