



Trinh T. Minh-ha

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Neither black/red/yellow nor woman but poet or writer. For many of us, the question of priorities remains a crucial issue. Being merely “a writer” without doubt ensures one a status of far greater weight than being “a woman of color who writes” ever does. Imputing race or sex to the creative act has long been a means by which the literary establishment cheapens and discredits the achievements of non-mainstream women writers. She who “happens to be” a (non-white) Third World member, a woman, and a writer is bound to go through the ordeal of exposing her work to the abuse of praises and criticisms that either ignore, dispense with, or overemphasize her racial and sexual attributes.

— *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*

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Quick Facts

- * Born in 1952
- * Vietnamese-American filmmaker, writer, and academic
- * Author of *Woman, Native, Other* (1989)

Biography

Trinh T. Minh-ha was born in Vietnam in 1952, and immigrated to the United States in 1970 after studying in both Vietnam and the Philippines. Trinh studied music composition, ethnomusicology, and French literature at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, where she received M.F.A. and Ph.D. degrees. She is currently Chancellor’s Distinguished Professor of Women’s Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, and associate professor of cinema, San Francisco State University. She has also taught at Harvard, Smith, the University of Illinois, and the National Conservatory of Music in Senegal.

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Trinh T. Minh-ha

Biography continued

Filmmaker, writer, poet, literary theorist, educator, musical composer, and (un/non)ethnographer, Trinh T. Minh-ha builds much of her work around the theme of the “other” (the persona one considers him/herself to be in relation to), challenging cultural theorists’ traditional notions of the subject or/subjected duality. She performed three year’s worth of ethnographic field research in West Africa the Research Expedition Program of the University of California, Berkeley. This fieldwork led in part to her first film, *Reassemblage*, which was filmed in Senegal and released in 1982.

Trinh’s views on traditional ethnographic documentaries are hinted at in one of her voice-overs that occurs early in the film. She states: “I do not intend to speak about/Just speak near by.” The film is a montage of fleeting images from Senegal and includes almost no narration, save for the occasional statements by Trinh, none of which attempt to assign meaning to the seconds-long scenes. Where one expects an omniscient, scientific voice to override the moving pictures in order to overlay a mapping schema of “meaning,” there is sometimes music, sometimes no sound, sometimes Trinh assigning a reality or sign to the culture it hopes to “know” by viewing a movie, she refuses to make the film be “about” something, refuses to speak about the images, and denies the hopeful observer the opportunity to record, categorize, and save an (“other”) culture. The viewer is left with a sense of disorientation, in that no meaning was assigned to any of the images in the film, and yet the viewer’s mind was constantly expecting such designations.

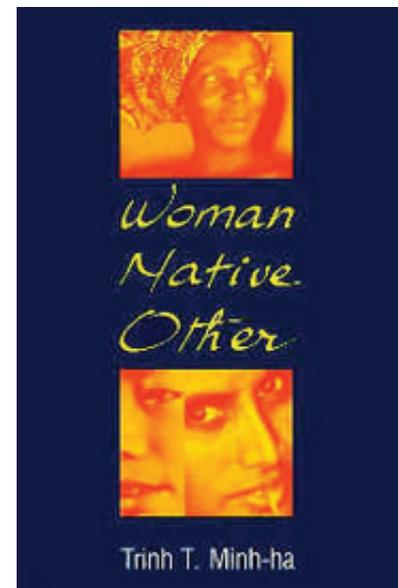
The method of constantly shifting the focus also appears in Trinh’s seminal 1989 book, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*. Here the reader is confronted with topics which are brought up, dealt with momentarily, and put aside, their echoes to be revisited later in the text. Even the four sections of the book are somewhat discontinuous; the first and third portions deal in large measure with notions of the linguistic mis-mapping of women and all the subsequent re-posturing that occurs in its wake. The space created for females has constantly been dictated by an oppressing group, and women are always needing to move either towards that space, in that they feel a drive to fulfill that space’s parameters, or away from that space, in that they are not comfortable occupying the area within its set borders. The second and the final sections pertain to the mis-taking of others’ cultures and personas as the consuming group attempts to tell the “others” stories for the benefit of themselves.



Trinh T. Minh-ha

Biography continued

The transient nature of Trinh's textual subjects refrains from employing the conventions of traditional cultural and literary theorists in order to leave the reader or viewer with a "flat" text, one in which the consumer can not gather up the few main "points" and file them away. Instead, the flatness forces the reader to walk through the entirety, noticing each and every step, rather than focusing on a few high points. In crafting a text in this manner, Trinh avoids building up a monumental argument against any particular thought, and thus keeps the dialectical swing in motion. In doing so, Trinh discourages readers from becoming attached to any new coordinate, an attachment which would prevent the swing from eventually settling into "true," socially-dictated stasis. To hold fast to a feminist ideal would be almost as damaging as remaining within the original misogynistic rhetoric. Trinh asserts that the argument must be constantly in progress in order for the falsities of the discourse to fall away. She summarizes her idea thus: "to prevent this counter-stance from freezing into a dogma (in which the dominance-submission patterns remain unchanged), the strategy of mere reversal needs to be displaced further, that is to say, neither simply renounced nor accepted as an end in itself" (40).



This continual readjustment of the points of reference in both *Reassemblage* and *Woman, Native, Other* has an effect in addition to the feeling that one will not be able to subsume any hard and fast rules pertaining to the rhetoric of postcolonialism or feminism. Following the snaking trace back and forth between the voyeur and the other, the reader becomes unable to define any agency. This is unexpected by the reader or viewer, but anticipated by the author. Trinh notes that there is a continual readjustment on the part of both the definer and the defined in relation to the constantly-renegotiated spaces. This process allows for no time slice to be selected from out of the movement, and thus no distinct agent can be defined.



Trinh T. Minh-ha

Biography continued

After viewing the film, one notes that no god-voice has pushed the viewer's mind towards either sex by stating purposes for either sex's actions. No purpose has been described for any of the actions seen in the movie, and thus no protagonist has been advanced; each action, regardless of the sex of the person performing it, carries as much consequence and reality as any other. The book contains a section termed "The infinite play of empty mirrors," in which Trinh notes that the gaze of one sets up a space for the watched to occupy, whether or not that space reflects well the watched's conditions. The persons being watched feel that they should or might be well-represented by this space and move towards it, but settle in a space negotiated between the original and the new space. Alternately, the watched may push against the observer's space, but still develop a negotiated space.

These cultural conversations continue, bouncing each group's idea of space off the other's, while the infinite play of empty mirrors leaves the notion of the "starting" space impossible. Since one can never re-find the original space, one can not pinpoint the agent. Trinh notes that "A writing for the people, by the people, and from the people is, literally, a multipolar reflecting reflection that remains free from the conditions of subjectivity and objectivity and yet reveals them both. I write to show myself showing people who show me my own showing" (22). Just as one wants to see certain things in the other, the other responds to these demands by moving in re(a)lation to the asked-for performance, and in so doing, affects the watcher's "original" sighting, as well as the watched's "original" sense of place. "No primary core of irradiation can be caught hold of, no hierarchical first, second, or third exists except as mere illusion" (22). Trinh's tossing-about of the viewer's or the reader's focus, which is constantly searching for grounding, leaves one feeling displaced from the "home" space one brought to the text. The style is effectively unsettling. Throughout the text, Trinh pulls the dialectical discourse of post-coloniality towards the discourse of feminism in an attempt to infuse the former's rhetoric with the language of feminism. She explains that if she does not, the "Third/First" world debate will continue to operate with an oppression of women, regardless of any other effects to the benefit of the "Third" world.



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