



*Woman  
Native  
Other*



Trinh T. Minh-ha

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Woman, Native, Other

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# WOMAN, NATIVE, OTHER

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Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism



Trinh T. Minh-ha

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To my sisters  
Le-Hang,  
Thu-Thuy,  
Ngoc-Quynh,  
Ngoc-Diep,  
Ngoc-Lan

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## *The Story Began Long Ago . . .*

This is the world in which I move uninvited, profane on a sacred land, neither me nor mine, but me nonetheless. The story began long ago . . . it is old. Older than my body, my mother's, my grandmother's. As old as my me. Old Spontaneous me, the world. For years we have been passing it on, so that our daughters and granddaughters may continue to pass it on, so that it may become larger than its proper measure, always larger than its own in-significance. The story never really begins nor ends, even though there is a beginning and an end to every story, just as there is a beginning and an end to every teller. One can date it back to the immemorial days when a group of mighty men attributed to itself a central, dominating position vis-à-vis other groups; overvalued its particularities and achievements; adopted a projective attitude toward those it classified among the out-groups; and wrapped itself up in its own thinking, interpreting the out-group through the in-group mode of reasoning while claiming to speak the minds of both the in-group and the out-group.

In a remote village, people have decided to get together to discuss certain matters of capital importance to the well-being of their community. A meeting is thus fixed for a definite date at the marketplace at nightfall. On the day and at the time agreed, each member eats, washes her/himself, and arrives only when she is ready. Things proceed smoothly as usual, and the discussion does not have to begin at a precise time, since it does not break in on daily village life but slips naturally into it. A mother continues to bathe her child amidst the group; two men go on playing a game they have started; a woman finishes braiding another woman's hair. These activities do not prevent their listening or intervening when necessary. Never does one open the discussion by coming right to the heart of the matter. For the heart of the matter is always somewhere else than where it is supposed to be. To allow it to emerge, people approach it indirectly by postponing until it matures, by letting it come when it is ready to come. There is no catching, no pushing, no directing, no breaking through, no need for a linear progression which gives the comforting illusion that one knows where one goes. Time and space are not something entirely exterior to oneself, something that one has, keeps, saves, wastes,

or loses. Thus, even though one meets to discuss, for example, the problem of survival with this year's crops, one begins to speak of so-and-so who has left his wife, children, family, and village in search of a job in the city and has not given any news since then, or of the neighbor's goats which have eaten so-and-so's millet. The conversation moves from the difficulties caused by rural depopulation to the need to construct goat pens, then wanders in old sayings and remembrances of events that occurred long ago . . . A man starts singing softly and playing his lute. Murmurs, laughter, and snatches of conversation mingle under the moonlight. Some women recluse on a mat they have spread on the ground and wake up when they are spoken to. The discussion lingers on late into the night. By the end of the meeting, everyone has spoken. The chief of the village does not "have the floor" for himself, nor does he talk more than anyone else. He is there to listen, to absorb, and to ascertain at the close what everybody has already felt or grown to feel during the session.

The story never stops beginning or ending. It appears headless and bottomless for it is built on differences. Its (in)finity subverts every notion of completeness and its frame remains a non-totalizable one. The differences it brings about are differences not only in structure, in the play of structures and of surfaces, but also in timbre and in silence. We—you and me, she and he, we and they—we differ in the content of the words, in the construction and weaving of sentences but most of all, I feel, in the choice and mixing of utterances, the ethos, the tones, the paces, the cuts, the pauses. The story circulates like a gift, an empty gift which anybody can lay claim to by filling it to taste, yet can never truly possess. A gift built on multiplicity. One that stays inexhaustible within its own limits. Its departures and arrivals. Its quietness.

Its quietness. As our elder Lao Tzu used to say, knowing ignorance is strength, ignoring knowledge is sickness; if one is sick of sickness, then one is no longer sick. For a variation, I would say knowledge for knowledge's sake is sickness. Let her who is sick with sickness pass on the story, a gift unasked for like a huge bag of moonlight. Now stars shine white on a black or a colored sky.

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*"May my story be beautiful and uncoiled like a long thread . . .," she recites as she begins her story. A story that stays inexhaustible within its own limits (Stills from I-C)*

# Commitment from the Mirror-Writing Box

*A grain of sand contains all land and sea*

—Zen saying

*"poetic language" . . . is an unending process—taken not an outright destruction—of the identity of meaning and speaking subject, and consequently, of transcendence or, by derivation, of "religious sensibility"*

—Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language*

I was made to believe  
we who write also dance  
yet no dancer writes  
*(the way we write)*  
no writer ever dances  
*(the way they dance)*  
while turning on heel  
and heel over  
stand on and squat  
and can neither stand erect  
nor lie flat on our back  
younger pretends to bend  
with this man while writing  
must be flying free  
as free as a cage bird  
singing not this as this  
has as has  
not any prison yard

All stanzas are taken from the following lines by Didi J. Minzean: *Revanmôtye* (RR) *Nôzet Sôses* – *Ching as Kama!* (NS); *Burama' el' Chên Anze Nem* (BVCNN); *Imâie – Câm* (work in progress) (i-C). The production photographs are by Jean-Paul Bourlier.



### The triple bind

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. Implying 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. Yet, the time has passed when she can confidently identify herself with a profession in artistic vocation without questioning and relating it to her color-woman condition. Today, the growing ethnic-feminist consciousness has made it increasingly difficult for her to turn a blind eye not only to the specification of the writer as historical subject (who writes? and in what context?), but also to writing itself as a practice located at the intersection of subject and history—a literary practice that involves the possible knowledge (linguistical and ideological) of itself as such. On the one hand, no matter what position she decides to take, she will sooner or later find herself driven into situations where she is made to feel she must choose from among three conflicting identities. Writer of color? Woman writer? Or woman of color? Which comes first? Where does she place her loyalties? On the other hand, she often finds herself at odds with language, which partakes in the white-male-is-norm ideology and is used predominantly as a vehicle to circulate established power relations. This is further intensified by her finding herself also at odds with her relation to writing, which when carried out uncritically often proves to be one of domination: as holder of speech, she usually writes from a position of power, creating as an "author," situating herself above her work and existing before it, rarely simultaneously with it. Thus, it has become almost impossible for her to take up her pen without at the same time questioning her relation to the material that defines her and her creative work. As focal point of cultural consciousness and social change, writing weaves into language the complex relations of a subject caught between the problems of race and gender and the practice of literature as the very place where social alienation is thwarted differently according to each specific context.

### Silence in time

Writing, reading, thinking, imagining, speculating. These are luxury activities, so I am reminded, permitted to a privileged few, whose idle

hours of the day can be viewed otherwise than as a bowl of rice or a loaf of bread less to share with the family. "If we wish to increase the supply of rare and remarkable women like the Brontës," wrote our reported forecaster Virginia Woolf, "we should give the Joneses and the Smiths rooms of their own and five hundred [pounds] a year. One cannot grow fine flowers in a thin soil."<sup>1</sup> Substantial creative achievement demands not necessarily genius, but acumen, bent, persistence, time. And time, in the framework of industrial development, means a wage that admits of leisure and living conditions that do not require that writing be incessantly interrupted, deferred, denied, at any rate subordinated to family responsibilities. "When the claims of creation cannot be primary," Tillie Olsen observes, "the results are atrophy; unfinished work; minor effort and accomplishment; silences." The message Olsen conveys in *Silences* leaves no doubt, as to the circumstances under which most women writers function. It is a constant reminder of those who never come to writing: "the invisible, the as-imaginably-capable; the born to the wrong circumstances—diminished, excluded, fondered."<sup>2</sup> To say this, however, is not to say that writing should be held in veneration in all milieus or that every woman who fails to write is a disabled being. (What Denise Paulme learned in this regard during her first period of fieldwork in Africa is revealing. Comparing her life one day with those of the women in an area of the French Sudan, she was congratulating herself on not having to do a chore like theirs—pounding millet for the meals day in and day out—when she overheard herself commented upon by one of the women nearby: "That girl makes me tired with her everlasting paper and pencil: what sort of a life is that?" The lesson, Paulme concluded, "was a salutary one, and I have never forgotten it.")<sup>3</sup> To point out that, in general, the situation of women does not favor literary productivity is to imply that it is almost impossible for them (and especially for those bound up with the Third World) to engage in writing as an occupation without their letting themselves be consumed by a deep and pervasive sense of guilt. Guilt over the selfishness implied in such activity, over themselves as housewives and "women," over their families, their friends, and all other "less tortured" women. The circle in which they turn proves to be vicious, and writing in such a context is always practiced at the cost of other women's labor. Doubts, lack of confidence, frustration, despair: these are sentiments born with the habits of distraction, distortion, discontinuity, and silence. After having toiled for a number of years on her book, Hattie Gossett exclaims to herself:

Who do you think you are [to be writing a book?] and who cares what you think about anything enough to pay money for it . . . a major portion of your audience not only can't read but seems to think reading is a waste of time? plus books like this aren't sold in the ghetto bookshops or even in airports!<sup>4</sup>

The same doubt is to be heard through Gloria Anzaldúa's voice:

Who gave us permission to perform the act of writing? Why does writing seem so unnatural for me? . . . The voice recurs in me: Who are you, a poor Chicana from the sticks, to think I could write? How dared I even consider becoming a writer as I slogged over the banana fields bending, bending under the hot sun. . . . How hard it is for us to *think* we can choose to become writers, much less *do* and believe that we can.<sup>7</sup>

### Rites of passage

She who writes, writes. In uncertainty, in necessity. And does not ask whether she is given the permission to do so or not. Yet, in the context of today's market dependent societies, "to be a writer" can no longer mean purely to perform the act of writing. For a laywoman to enter the priesthood—the sacred world of writers—she must fulfil a number of unwritten conditions. She must undergo a series of rituals, be baptized and ordained. She must submit her writings to the law laid down by the corporation of literary/literary victims and be prepared to accept their verdict. Every woman who writes and wishes to become established as a writer has known the taste of rejection. Sylvia Plath's experience is often cited. Her years of darkness, despair, and disillusion, her agony of slow rebirth, her moments of fearsome excitement at the start of the writing of *The Bell Jar*, her unsuccessful attempts at re-submitting her first book of poems under ever-changing titles, and the distress with which she upbraided herself are parts of the realities that affect many women writers:

Nothing stinks like a pile of unpublished writing, which (some I guess) shows I will definitely have a pure motive (O if's such) but I just can't stop who cares-it's-(publ-ic-or-not) about writing. . . . still want to see it finally ritualized in print.

Accumulated unpublished writings do stink. They heap up before your eyes like despicable confessions that no one wants to hear; they sap your self confidence by incessantly reminding you of your failure to incorporate. For publication means the breaking of a first seal, the end of a "not admitted" status, the end of a soliloquy confined to the private sphere, and the start of a possible sharing with the unknown other—the reader, whose collaboration with the writer alone allows the work to come into full being. Without such a rite of passage, the woman-writer-to-be/woman-to-be-writer is condemned to wander about, begging for permission to join in.

and be a member. "It is difficult for any woman to find acceptance for her writing, it is all the more so for those who do not match the stereotype of the "real woman" - the colored, the minority, the physically or mentally handicapped. Emma Santos, who spent her days running to and fro between two worlds—that of hospitals and that of the "normal" system—equally rejected by Psychiatry and by Literature, is another writer whose first book has been repeatedly dismissed (by twenty-two publishing houses). Driven to obsession by a well-known publisher who promised to send her an agreement but never did, she followed him, stood on him, called him twenty times a day on the phone, and ended up feeling like "a pile of shit making after great men of letters." Writing, she remarks, is "a shameful, venereal disease," and Literature, nothing more than "a long beseeching." Having no acquaintance, no friend to introduce her when she sought admission for her work among the publishers, she describes her experience as follows:

I receive encouraging letters but I am cautious. Publishers, among these are worse than psychiatrists, interrogatories. The publishers perceive a sick and oblivious girl. They would have used the text, the same one, without changing a single word, had it been presented by a young man from the [École Normale Supérieure,] dignitary of philosophy, worthy of the Goncourt prize.<sup>7</sup>

### The Guilt

To capture a publisher's attention, to convince, to negotiate, these constitute one step forward into the world of writers, one distress, one guilt. One guilt among the many yet to come, all of which bide their time to loom up out of their hiding places, for the path is long and there is an ambush at every turn. Writing: not letting it merely haunt you and the over and over again at you until you no longer know how to speak. Getting published: not loathing yourself, not burning it, not giving up. Now I (the all-knowing subject) feel almost secure with such definite "not-to-do's." Yet, Ii (the plural, non-unitary subject) cannot set my mind at rest with them without at the same time recognizing their precariousness. I (the personal race- and gender-specific subject) have, in fact turned a deaf ear to a number of primary questions: Why write? For whom? What necessity? What writing? What impels you and me and Hattie Gossett to continue to write when we know for a fact that our books are not going to be "sold in the ghetto bookshops or even in airports?" And why do we care for their destinations at all? "A writer," proclaims Toni Cade Bambara, "like any other cultural worker, like any other member of the community, ought to try to put

her/his skills in the service of the community." It is apparently on account of such a conviction that Barbara "began a career as the neighborhood scribe," helping people write letters to faraway relatives as well as letters of complaint, petitions, contracts, and the like.<sup>5</sup> For those of us who call ourselves "writers" in the context of a community whose major portion "not only can't read, but seems to think readin is a waste of time" (Gossett), being "the neighborhood scribe" is no doubt one of the most gratifying and unpretentious ways of dedicating oneself to one's people. Writing as a social function—as differentiated from the ideal of art for art's sake—is the aim that Third World writers, in defining their roles, highly esteem and claim. *Literacy* and *literature* intertwine so tightly, indeed, that the latter has never ceased to imply both the ability to read and the condition of being well read—and thereby to convey the sense of *poète lecteur* through the arts of grammar and rhetoric. The illiterate, the ignorant versus the *wo/man* of "letters" (of wide reading), the highly educated. With such discrimination and opposition, it is hardly surprising that the writer should be viewed as a social parasite. Whether s/he makes common cause with the upper classes or chooses to disengage her/himself by adopting the myth of the bohemian artist, the writer is a kept woman who for her/his living largely relies on the generosity of that portion of society called the literate. A room of one's own and a pension of five hundred pounds per year solely for making ink marks on paper: this, symbolically speaking, is what many people refer to when they say the writer's activity is "gratuitous" and "useless." No matter how devoted to the vocation s/he may be, the writer cannot subsist on words and mere fresh air, nor can s/he really "live by the pen," since her/his work—arbitrarily estimated as it is—has no definite market value. Reading in this context may actually prove to be "a waste of time," and writing, as Woolf puts it, "a reputable and harmless occupation." Reflecting on her profession as a writer (in a 1979 interview), Toni Cade Bambara noted that she probably did not begin "getting really serious about writing until maybe five years ago. Prior to that, in spite of all good sense, I always thought writing was rather frivolous, that it was something you did because you didn't feel like doing any work." The concept of "writing" here seems to be incompatible with the concept of "work." As the years went by and Toni Cade Bambara got more involved in writing, however, she changed her attitude and has "come to appreciate that it is a perfectly legitimate way to participate in struggle."<sup>6</sup>

Commitment as an ideal is particularly dear to Third World writers. It helps to alleviate the Guilt: that of being privileged (Inequality), of "going over the hill" to join the clan of literates (Assimilation), and of indulging in a "useless" activity while most community members "stoop over the tomato fields, bending under the hot sun" (a perpetuation of the same privilege). In a sense, committed writers are the ones who write both to

awaken to the consciousness of their guilt and to give their readers a guilty conscience. Bound to one another by an awareness of their guilt, writer and reader may thus assess their positions, engaging themselves wholly in their situations and carrying their weight into the weight of their communities, the weight of the world. Such a definition naturally places the committed writers on the side of Power. For every discourse that breeds fault and guilt is a discourse of authority and arrogance. To say this, however, is not to say that all power discourses produce equal oppression or that those established are necessary. Discussing African literature and the various degrees of propaganda prompted by commitment, Ezekiel Mphahlele observes that although "propaganda is always going to be with us" — for "there will always be the passionate outcry against injustice, war, fascism, poverty" — the manner in which a writer protests reflects to a large extent her/his regard for the reader and "derides the literary worth of a work." "Commitment," Mphahlele adds, "need not give rise to propaganda: the writer can make [her/his] stand known without advocating it . . . in two-dimensional terms, i.e., in terms of one response to one stimulus."<sup>10</sup> Thus, in the whirlwind of prescriptive general formula such as: Black art must "respond positively to the reality of revolution" or Black art must "expose the enemy, praise the people, and support the revolution" (Ken Karenga, my italics), one also hears distinct, unyielding voices whose autonomy asserts itself as follows:

Black pride need no blind us to our own weaknesses. In fact it should help us to perceive our weaknesses. . . .  
[I do not care for black pride that drags us into a condition of stupor and inertia. I do not care for it if leaders use it to dupe the masses.]<sup>11</sup>

To us, the man who adorns the Negro is as sick as the man who abominates him.<sup>12</sup>

### Freedom and the masses

The notion of art *engagé* as defined by Jean-Paul Sartre, an influential apologist for socially effective literature, continues to grow and to circulate among contemporary engaged writers. It is easy to find parallels (and it is often directly quoted) in Third World literary discourses. "A free man addressing free men," the Sartrean writer "has only one subject—freedom." He writes to "appeal to the reader's freedom to collaborate in the production of his work" and paints the world "only so that free men may feel their freedom as they face it."<sup>13</sup> The function of literary art, in other words, must be to remind us of that freedom and to defend it. Made

to serve a political purpose, literature thus places itself within the context of the proletarian fight, while the writer frees himself from his dependence on elites—or in a wider sense, from any privilege—and creates, so to speak, an art for an unrestricted public known as “art for the masses.” From the chain of notions dear to Sartre—choice, responsibility, contingency, situation, motive, reason, being, doing, having—two notions are set forth here as being most relevant to Third World engaged literary theories: freedom and the masses. What is freedom in writing? And what can writing-for-the-masses be? Reflecting on being a writer, “female, black, and free,” Margaret Walker, for example, defines freedom as “a philosophical state of mind and existence.” She proudly affirms:

My entire career in writing . . . is determined by these immutable facts of my human condition. . . .

Writing is my life, but it is an occupation nobody can buy. In this respect I believe I am a free agent, stupid perhaps, but free and still free. . . .

The writer is still in the avant-garde for Truth and Justice, for Freedom, Peace, and Human Dignity. . . . Her place, i.e., as be reminded, is anywhere she chooses to be, doing what she has to do, creating, heading, and always being herself.<sup>4</sup>

These lines agree perfectly with Sartre's ideal of liberty. They may be said to echo his concepts of choice and responsibility—according to which each person, being an absolute choice of self, an absolute emergence at an absolute date, must assume her/his situation with the proud consciousness of being the author of it. (For one is nothing but this “being-in-situation” that is the total contingency of the world, of one's birth, past, and environment, and of the fact of one's fellow woman.) By its own rationale, such a sense of responsibility (attributed to the lucid, conscientious, successful man of action) renders the relationship between freedom and commitment particularly problematic. Is it not, indeed, always in the name of freedom that My freedom hastens to stamp out those of others? Is it not also in the name of the masses that My personality besides itself to impersonalize those of my fellow women? Do the masses become masses by themselves? Or are they the result of a theoretical and practical operation of “massification”? From where onward can one say of a “free” work of art that it is written for the infinite numbers which constitute the masses and not merely for a definite public stratum of society?

#### For the people, by the people, and from the people

Like all stereotypical notions, the notion of the masses has both an upgrading connotation and a degrading one. One often speaks of the

masses as one speaks of the people, magnifying thereby their number, their strength, their mission. One invokes them and pretends to write on their behalf when one wishes to give weight to one's undertaking or to justify it. The Guilt mentioned earlier is always lurking below the surface. Yet to oppose the masses to the elite is already to imply that those forming the masses are regarded as an aggregate of average persons condemned by their lack of personality or by their dim individualities to stay with the herd, to be docile and anonymous. Thus the notion of "art for the masses" supposes not only a split between the artist and her/his audience—the spectator-consumer—but also a passivity on the part of the latter. For art here is not attributed to the masses; it is ascribed to the active few, whose role is precisely to produce for the great numbers. This means that despite the shift of emphasis the elite-versus-masses opposition remains intact. In fact it must remain so, basically unchallenged, if it is to serve a conservative political and ideological purpose—in other words, if (what is defined as) "art" is to exist at all. One of the functions of this "art for the masses" is, naturally, to contrast with the other, higher "art for the elite," and thereby to enforce its elitist values. The wider the distance between the two, the firmer the stand of conservative art. One can no longer let oneself be deceived by concepts that oppose the artist or the intellectual to the masses and deal with them as with two incompatible entities. Criticisms arising from or dwelling on such a rift are, indeed, quite commonly leveled against innovators and more often used as tools of intimidation than as reminders of social interdependency. It is perhaps with this perspective in mind that one may better understand the variants of Third World literary discourse, which claims not exactly an "art for the masses," but an "art for the people, by the people, and from the people." In an article on "Le Poète noir et son peuple" (The Black Poet and His People), for example, Jacques Rabemananjara virulently criticized Occidental poets for spending their existence indulging in aesthetic refinements and subtleties that bear no relation to their peoples' concerns and aspirations, that are merely stultic intellectual delights. The sense of dignity, Rabemananjara said, forbids black Orpheus to go in for the cult of art for art's sake. Inspired by his people, the poet has to play the difficult role of being simultaneously the torch lighting the way for his fellowmen and their loyal interpreter. "He is more than their spokesman: he is their voice": his noble mission entitles him to be "not only the messenger, but the very message of his people."<sup>25</sup> The concept of a popular and functional art is here praised against that of an intellectual and aesthetic one. A justified regression? A shift of emphasis again? Or an attempt at fusion of the self and the other, of art, ideology, and life? Let us listen to other, perhaps less didactic voices; that of Aimé Césaire in *Return to My Native Land*:



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