



*Can the essay form offer new ways of describing the world? Joshua Fausty looks at Trinh T. Minh-ha's writing and explores how their framing of a self-as-other could be a model for understanding ethics within critical thinking.*

Writing's slippery, mysterious, protean quality gives it a freedom and efficacy always tempered by specific social and historical settings. Like speaking, acting and teaching, writing *creates* contexts – and there is no end to context-making. Trinh T. Minh-ha's essay-writing is a clear example of this: through the performance of feminist, post-colonial and post-structuralist theories of language, subjectivity and power, her work reveals that writing constructs its own contexts, and cannot be trusted to illuminate without confusing, to disclose the truth without concealing it.

Trinh's intellectual history and artistic production emerge in and out of a multiplicity of national and disciplinary contexts. Born in 1952 in Vietnam and educated there and in the Philippines, Trinh emigrated to the United States in 1970 where she studied French literature, music and ethnomusicology at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Trinh is currently Professor of Women's Studies and Rhetoric (Film) at the University of California, Berkeley. Her work with theory, poetry and experimental film centres around a reflection on language and identity – a reflection that emerges through literary performances, most explicitly developed in her pointedly *essayistic* essays on art and criticism.<sup>1</sup>

The singularity of Trinh's literary and ethical performances makes attempts to explain them impossible, rendering inaccurate any reading that claims they 'say' anything other than what they say. In 'Commitment from the Mirror-Writing Box', from *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (1989), for example, Trinh articulates the importance of 'becoming' in writing:

*To write is to become. Not to become a writer (or a poet), but to become, intransitively. Not when writing adopts established keynotes or policy, but when it traces for itself lines of evasion. Can any one of us write like a man, like a woman, like a white? Surely, someone would quickly answer, and this leads us straight back to the old master-servant's Guild. A sentence-thinker, yes, but one who so very often does not know how a sentence will end, I say. And as there is no need to rush, just leave it open, so that it may later on find, or not find, its closure. Words, fragments and lines that I love for no sound reason; blanks, lapses and silences that settle in like gaps of fresh air as soon as the inked space smells stuffy.<sup>2</sup>*

Trinh's prose here starts as a discourse on what writing is, but quickly transforms into an example of the very *literary* writing that it is about: 'A sentence-thinker, yes, but one

Trinh T. Minh-ha and  
Jean Bourdier, *Night  
Passage*, 2005, digital  
film, 98min, stills.  
Courtesy Moongift Films

1 Trinh's books include *The Digital Film Event* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), *Cinema Interval* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), *Drawn from African Dwellings* (with Jean-Paul Bourdier, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), *Framer Framed* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), *Out There: Marginalisation in Contemporary Culture* (co-edited with Cornel West, Russell Ferguson and Martha Gever, Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1990), *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), *En Minuscules* (Paris: Le Meridien Éditeur, 1987), *African Spaces: Designs for Living in Upper Volta* (with Jean-Paul Bourdier, Teaneck: Holmes and Meier Publishers, 1985) and *Un Art sans oeuvre* (Lathrup Village, MI: International Book Publishers, 1981). Her films include *Night Passage* (2004), *The Fourth Dimension* (2001), *A Tale of Love* (1995), *Shoot for the Contents* (1991), *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989), *Naked Spaces – Living is Round* (1985) and *Reassemblage* (1982).

2 Trinh T. Minh-ha, 'Commitment from the Mirror-Writing Box', *Woman, Native, Other*, *op. cit.*, pp.18–19.

who so very often does not know how a sentence will end, I say...’ The passage ‘traces lines of evasion’ that run from the assertion it begins with – ‘to write is to become’ – to the unpredictable end of the passage, with its enactment of the earlier description of leaving ‘it open’ so that ‘it may later on find, or not find, its closure’. It is made up of ‘words, fragments, and lines’ that are a product of an exercise of writing that is a becoming, performed by a writer who has written ‘to write is to become’.

The trope of becoming signals Trinh’s openness to the alterity of the writing self, and to the alterity of the writing *itself*, gesturing to the possibility of a better future as an alternative to a present conceived as static or complete. When Trinh writes that ‘to write is to become’, she emphasises the *process* of becoming; for her, the important point about ‘becoming’ is its movement *towards* – but not towards anything pre-defined – as opposed to a teleological movement towards some end of history, an ultimate or essentialised notion that would impose clarity on the complexity of the self or its relations. Recognising the relations among writing, ethics and identity – especially gender and ‘race’ identity – is therefore central to a theorisation of Trinh’s essayistic ethics. Analysing the argumentative strategies typical of theory, she tells the story of her own discursive production, describing and re-enacting the processes that construct self-other relations, questioning and proposing ‘critical’ and ‘creative’ approaches that challenge assumptions about dominant and unproblematised notions of the self and the other.

In ‘Commitment from the Mirror-Writing Box’ and ‘The Other Censorship’, from *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (1991), Trinh formulates a model of openness to otherness understood both as characteristic of the multiple self and of an alterity outside the self. These essays take the form of literary auto-ethnography that proposes alternatives to Western discourses on the other and the self. At the same time, they provide a model of critical intervention that conceives itself as performance, not prescription; as dialogue, not declaration.

For Trinh, critical essay-writing subverts and displaces dualisms and ‘ready-mades’.<sup>3</sup> Privileging forms of theorisation that attend to practices of construction and difference, and committed to a perspective that acknowledges partiality and process, in ‘The Other Censorship’ Trinh argues that critical writing and art, with its insistence on anti-transcendentality, should take place between theoretical assumptions, on the borders and across the boundaries of cultural and political certainty: it is ‘made to fare on interstitial ground’. Critical theory is difficult because it calls into question boundaries that have been taken for granted and thus ‘speak[s] from no clearly defined place’.<sup>4</sup> The difficulty of criticism derives from its situation: it happens in shifting contexts because its object is the contexts themselves, and it must therefore take care to notice all forms of ‘positioning’, which both locate and confine subjects (objectified) within the terms of explicability and other ‘systematic forms of closure’.<sup>5</sup> If art’s ‘elements of inexplicability and of wonder’ lend it a critical edge, as Trinh suggests, then criticism too must find ways to partake of the ‘artistic’ without losing sight of its own status.<sup>6</sup>

All the relations of alterity inherent in what Derek Attridge calls ‘the literary’ come into play in Trinh’s critical essayistic writing.<sup>7</sup> Attridge writes that the ‘literariness of *any* text ... [is] the degree to which it is open to ... [a] staging of the primary functions of language and discourse’.<sup>8</sup> If that is the case, then literary language, which always foregrounds these ‘primary functions’ with varying degrees of self-consciousness, can be thought of as the ethical in itself:

*Reading a work of literature entails opening oneself up to the unpredictable, the future, the other, and thereby accepting the responsibility imposed by the work’s singularity and difference. There is also abundant evidence that writing a literary work is often a similar experience. In a sense, the ‘literary’ is the ethical. Literary criticism, however, can seldom make the same claim.<sup>9</sup>*

3 *Ibid.*, p.36.

4 Trinh T.M., ‘The Other Censorship’, *When the Moon Waxes Red*, *op.cit.*, p.229.

5 *Ibid.*, pp.229–30.

6 *Ibid.*, p.230.

7 See Derek Attridge, ‘Literary Form and the Demands of Politics: Otherness in J. M. Coetzee’s *Age of Iron*’, in George Levine (ed.), *Aesthetics and Ideology*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994.

8 *Ibid.*, p.246.

9 D. Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature*, London and New York: Routledge, 2004, p.111.

Trinh T. Minh-ha,  
*Surname Viet Given Name  
Nam*, 1989, 16mm film,  
108min, stills. Courtesy  
Moongift Films



Trinh's criticism, however – and essayistic criticism more generally – *can* make a claim to be ethical. In Trinh's writing, the ethical relation between self and other becomes a conscious operative principle, even as the writing enacts otherness through its literariness, through its staging of the formal properties of language, and through its deliberate manipulation and display of Attridge's primary functions of language and discourse.

Essaying implies adopting attitudes to one's work, to the future and to the reader. As such, it is a partial act in a double sense. First, the self of essayistic writing is a self-in-process – in the process of thinking and writing itself into being – and thus incomplete; it is aware of the impossibility of self-completion. Thus it is aware, too, of the impossibility of full self-presentation. Essayistic writing is also partial in its awareness of its *perspectival* nature, as it offers presentations of particular positions, arguments, ideas, experiences and memories.

Trinh's essayistic strategies of self-writing are an integral part of her critique of feminism, post-colonial theory and identity politics, and the simplistic readings these often give way to. In her writing and films, she privileges the 'partiality' of the self and its representation: subjectivity, in her formulation, is both incomplete *and* biased, and her essayistic writing urges the development of a shifting relation to selfhood and otherness, in writing and in the worldly contexts in which the self's diverse articulations emerge.

The relation to the future produced by a deep awareness that things could be otherwise is a crucial component of these essayistic ethics. This relation to the future takes many forms. One of those is a persistent openness to possibilities not yet able to be articulated. An example of this openness is discussed by Michel Foucault in his introduction to *The Uses of Pleasure* (1984), in which he links his own philosophical practice to the essay as a self-transformative strategy. The essay, he argues, 'should be understood as the assay or test by which, in the game of truth, one undergoes changes, and not as the simplistic appropriation of others for the purpose of communication – [it] is the living substance of philosophy, at least if we assume that philosophy is still what it was in times past, i.e. an "ascesis" [...] an exercise of oneself in the activity of thought.'<sup>10</sup> Foucault's conception of essay writing as 'philosophical' self-activity closely resembles Trinh's ethical approach in her essayistic theoretical writings: 'For what is philosophy today – philosophical activity,' Foucault asks, 'if it is not the critical work that thought brings to bear on itself? In what does it consist, if not in the endeavour to know how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently, instead of legitimating what is already known?'<sup>11</sup> The 'object' of his studies, he writes, 'was to learn to what extent the effort to think one's own history can free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently'.<sup>12</sup> Trinh's theoretical work similarly explores and seeks to transform – often from the inside out – the writing self's relations to language, power, thought and meaning.

Stanley Cavell's reading of Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay 'History' (1841) offers another entry point into Trinh's performance of essayistic ethics. Cavell identifies the recognition and assertion of partiality in Emerson's essay as relating to Emerson's theory of the self as being always already in the process of becoming.<sup>13</sup> Cavell highlights Emerson's efforts as 'the modern essayist' to effect change in the reader by modelling or performing the processes of subjective becoming one undergoes through thinking and writing.<sup>14</sup> Emerson's prose is at once self-referential and directed towards the other, a written invitation or call to another – the unknown reader – who invests attention in the written text. In his effort to position himself as an actor who performs the processes about which he writes, Emerson dramatises the possibility of adopting an attitude of partiality focused on the future, on what comes next, and reveals the ways in which a subject can achieve a state of 'becoming' through writing.

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10 Michel Foucault, *The Uses of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality*, vol.2 (1984, trans. Robert Hurley), New York: Random House, 1985, p.9.

11 *Ibid.*, pp.8–9.

12 *Ibid.*, p.9.

13 See Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.

14 *Ibid.*, p.8.

The notion that selves or subjects ‘become’ – that we are constituted by a collection or series of ‘nexts’ – captures the attitude of partiality central to Trinh’s essayistic ethics. Cavell’s point that the self ‘becomes’ clarifies the relationship between Emerson’s style and his emphasis on partiality, and reveals the deep connection between the exercise of self-reliance and a notion of ‘nextness’ that makes it possible to avoid or overcome the habit of conformity. Cavell reads Emerson as representing, through his writing, ‘the urgency of the need for transformative social change and the resistance to internal change, to transformative nextness’.<sup>15</sup>

*Emerson’s turn is to make my partiality itself the sign and incentive of my siding with the next or further self, which means siding against my attained perfection (or conformity), sidings which require the recognition of an other – the acknowledgement of a relationship – in which this sign is manifest. Emerson does not much attempt to depict such a relationship[...] but the sense I seek to clarify is that Emerson offers his writing as representing this other for his reader.*<sup>16</sup>

It is in this sense that I want to argue that writing is an ‘other’ in the ethical encounter that is reading. Emerson’s writing sets out to produce a relationship of alterity in an attempt to encourage his reader to realise the potential one has, in Emerson’s words, as an ‘attained’ self, to become a ‘next’ self – or to work towards such a becoming. Trinh’s essayistic writing, too, draws the reader into the processes it performs, and offers an experience of alterity that allows the enactment of ethics and ethical relationships. She offers her work as a representation of an ‘other’ for her readers, and embraces the partiality of her perspectives, asserting through her essayistic performances that self-writing need not – or must not – pretend either impartiality or completeness.

Trinh T. Minh-ha’s essayistic work demonstrates that the relationship between critical essay writing and subjectivity, like the relationship between ‘art’ and ‘reality’, must be conceived as one of constant motion, reflection and (re)constitution. Her essays acknowledge writing not only as literary practice but also as a practice imbricated in the subject and the social. What Trinh calls ‘the *interval* that neither separates nor assimilates’ is a concept that allows her to theorise a ‘tension’ between art and theory, even as she argues for a theory *and* an art that can ‘constitute “artistically” critical practices whose function is to upset rooted ideologies, invalidating the established canon of artistic works and modifying the borderlines between theoretical and non-theoretical discourse’.<sup>17</sup> Such a practice involves moving beyond simple either/or dichotomies: identity claims such as ‘I am a critic, not an artist, or vice versa’ undermine a reframing of the ‘field of struggle’ where ‘positions and postures are defined’.<sup>18</sup>

Trinh’s critical project involves pointing out what has tended to go unnoticed in dominant cultural perspectives. Liberal claims for multiculturalism, for example, risk falling into the simple ‘juxtaposition of several cultures whose frontiers remain intact’ and ultimately of preserving the status quo, since the usual boundaries between classifications underwrite ‘race’, gender and sex discrimination in the first place.<sup>19</sup> In the project of maintaining ‘the indeterminacy of art’, which she posits as the source of art’s critical potential, Trinh argues that criticism needs to test its own limits in order to question the processes that produce authority, by problematising its own legitimisation, that is, ‘the legitimisation of its own discourse’.<sup>20</sup>

While critical practice involves a resistance to ‘forms of theorisation’ that universalise and idealise, Trinh warns that such resistance is risky, since it can lead to ‘reinstating naïvely naturalised theoretical concepts as alternatives to theory’.<sup>21</sup> Trinh’s attention to the historical specificity of discursive processes that constitute concepts assumed to be pre-theoretical – such as the ‘accessibility’ of writing, for

15 *Ibid.*, p.16.

16 *Ibid.*, pp.31–32.

17 Trinh T.M., ‘The Other Censorship’, *op. cit.*, p.226.

18 *Ibid.*

19 *Ibid.*, p.232.

20 *Ibid.*

21 *Ibid.*, p.228.

instance, which, like ‘experience’, is ‘often taken to be a “natural”, self-evident state of language’ rather than a contingent process – follows from her assertion that binary thinking reduces such a process to ‘intolerance and an unacknowledged practice of exclusion’ that places the ‘creative interval’ at risk.<sup>22</sup>

Trinh’s own work thus rejects ‘binary thinking’ in favour of exploring and multiplying relations of difference *and* connection:

*The politics of exclusion has never really succeeded in challenging theory in relation to art (or vice versa); it only results in furthering division and isolation, and ultimately it contributes to preserving hegemonic forms of individualism. Thus, strategies developed could explore to a fuller extent the dynamics of relations by linking up with an elsewhere(-within-here) of theory and of art, one that exceeds both knowledge and aestheticism.*<sup>23</sup>



Her notion of ‘an elsewhere(-within-here) of theory and of art’ articulates and reproduces the paradoxical situation of her own essays, in which she speaks from a self-consciously demarcated position and, at the same time, works through language to break down systems of order that normally provide (the illusion of) clarity.

Trinh’s discussion of the difficulty of critical work recalls Attridge’s description of the demands of literary writing, the ‘responsibility imposed by the work’s singularity and difference’. As Trinh puts it, ‘Critical work requires a difficult mode of attention’:

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.228–29.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p.229.

*One sees and listens to it happening; one plays (with) it as one experiences it in/ as an activity of production. One does not really catch it, nor does one speak about it without contingent detours and demanding patience. It can constitute a unique event (despite its antecedents), whose resistance to any single guiding schema is bound to create a handicap for immediate comprehension or immediate gratification[...] insightful understanding of it is more likely to be gained from remaking the course of the work itself – the frame, the flow, the fire, whose workings and vitality inspire other frames as they open up to other possibilities.<sup>24</sup>*

The idea that an understanding of critical work is ‘more likely’ through ‘remaking the course of the work itself’ suggests the appropriate response to essayistic criticism is to write another essay – yet essayistic writing is not considered appropriate to most scholarly venues, and the difficulty of writing literary criticism (criticism as literature)



Trinh T. Minh-ha,  
*Reassemblage*, 1982,  
16mm film, 40min,  
stills. Courtesy Moongift  
Films

means that her provocations and performances may not result in the essayistic response they aim to engender.

In responding to Trinh’s writing, one is faced with the choice of either attempting to *explain* it, in which case one finds oneself trying to *translate* it into more accessible terms that tend to undo its literary performances and ethical enactments, or of attempting (merely) to *describe* those performances and enactments, struggling to convey the fullest sense of the complex ways in which her writing *works*. While other options certainly exist – like confronting it, analysing it, questioning it, or testing it – taking Trinh’s writing seriously involves engaging it as writing, as literary

24 Trinh T.M., ‘The Other Censorship’, *op. cit.*, p.234.



performance, and not merely as a set of claims to be debated or overcome. Much like an account of a musical performance, ballet, painting, sculpture, joke, novel or other literary work, any description is doomed to fall short of reproducing the effects of the singular original. The difficulty of analysing Trinh's writing through the conventional methods of literary criticism may help to account for the fact that Trinh's writing *as writing* has not been taken up as the subject of much scholarship. In fact, although her writing and film-making have been widely influential and many scholars refer to and quote from her work in discussions of genre, feminist and post-colonial theory and experimental ethnographic film studies, little systematic study of her writing exists.<sup>25</sup>

Trinh's work demonstrates the importance of continuously opening up spaces for the articulation and exploration of alterity, vigilantly protecting such spaces 'in the interval' by critically self-monitoring one's own practices as an artist, writer and thinker in search of undercurrents and counter-gestures that might silence otherness and perpetuate dogmatisms.

As 'literary' theory, Trinh's essay-writing provides abundant examples of 'the ethical' that Attridge notes is uncommon in works of criticism. One source of the difficulty of doing justice to Trinh's writing is that essayistic writing, as a rule, cannot effectively be summarised; to give a synopsis of a piece of essayistic writing means to focus on the meaning of the writing, to neglect its performances, structures and textures – those aspects of the writing Emmanuel Levinas terms the 'saying' that, together with what it 'says', constitute its singularity.<sup>26</sup> Trinh's essayistic writing elucidates what is true of *all* literary writing: that the form cannot be separated from the content. It is the 'singularity of literature'<sup>27</sup> – and Trinh's writing is literature – that individual acts of criticism must respond to. The aesthetics of criticism can only emerge through the writing itself – through the articulations, readings and flows that result from the process of a text taking shape at the meeting point between the writing self and his or her living other.

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25 Numerous writers have drawn on and acknowledged Trinh's ideas in their own scholarship. AnaLouise Keating's study of Paula Gunn Allen, Gloria Anzaldúa and Audre Lorde, for example, includes numerous references to Trinh. However, these references consist either of quotations from Trinh's work that serve as epigraphs to several chapters in Keating's own book (pp.1, 81, 134 and 164), or quotations from Trinh's work used to shed light on the three authors who are the focus of Keating's study. For example: 'As Trinh T. Minh-ha explains...' (p.128); 'As Trinh T. Minh-ha asserts...' (p.64); 'Each writer exhibits what Trinh T. Minh-ha describes as...' (p.90); and 'Anzaldúa positions herself at what Trinh describes as...' (p.142). Like many critics who find Trinh's work helpful and even groundbreaking, Keating unequivocally acknowledges the importance of Trinh to her own reading of the subjects of her study, although she does not comment on Trinh's writing as writing. See AnaLouise Keating, *Women Reading Women Writing: Self-Invention in Paula Gunn Allen, Gloria Anzaldúa and Audre Lorde*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996.

26 In *Otherwise than Being: or, Beyond Essence* (1974), Levinas writes that 'Saying states and thematises the said, but signifies it to the other, a neighbour, with a signification that has to be distinguished from that borne by words in the said.' Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being: or, Beyond Essence* (trans. Alphonso Lingis), Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998, p.46.

27 D. Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature*, *op. cit.*, p.xx.