

Neither Black / Red / Yellow nor Woman

The daylight was fading and Theresa knew she had to hurry before Cimetière du Montparnasse closed. As she made her way through the crowd of male modernist specters—Charles Baudelaire, Man Ray—Theresa’s mind was still filled with the memories of her recent return to Korea and her years of estrangement in a foreign country: “One day you raise the right hand and you are American.”

The tombstones cast long shadows on the ground. Theresa’s eyes anxiously searched amongst the tombstones for the name “Pan Yu Ling”—he name she had seen in the Paris police archives. She finally found a headstone bearing the inscription “PAN YULIN 1899–1977.”¹ Relieved, she murmured, “Here you are, exiled and never returned home. I’ve brought you a poem of mine.” Theresa read the lines in her soft voice, then burned the piece of paper to ashes.

“*Ni zai zheli gan shenme?*” (What are you doing here?)

Theresa recognized the sentence as Chinese. It was a language her mother used to speak. She turned around to see a woman standing stiffly in a dark cheongsam. “*Qui êtes-vous?*,” Theresa responded, startled.

The woman in the cheongsam stepped out from the shadows. “So I’m still in Paris . . . I can’t remember, what happened?”

“Pan? Is it you? I saw your photo in the archives . . .”

Someone else cut in from behind the stone: “You were born anonymous and with multiple names, as the daughter of the Republic of China and the emblem of the Asian New Woman. You are the victim who is trapped at the impasse of the occidental and the oriental. You are the woman who is defined by your subaltern birth. You are the woman who is silenced and is written repeatedly . . . and you,” this woman with long black hair turned to Theresa and asserted, “You are the woman who is writing.”

The three women stood there eyeing each other with distrust, if not hostility. Finally, the intruder disclosed herself. “My surname is Viet, given name Nam. You can call me Minh-ha if you want.”

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“WORDS-FAIL-ME-SANS (without)-MOT (word)-SANS-VOIX-AVEUGLE.”
There was fire in Pan’s eyes when she suddenly grabbed Theresa’s shoulders and looked at her in horror. “I see deaths . . . I see young people marching and mothers crying . . . Go back to your mother’s. She had lived in Manchuria before you were born, and now she is in the West. I would rather go back East, but I’m stuck here.”

Minh-ha broke the dreary sadness with a calming utterance: “Neither black/red/yellow nor woman but poet or writer. Yellow stamens, white petals, green leaves. Always near mud, but never smells of mud.” The invasion of the evening awakened a fresh sorrow in the three of them. They held hands and chanted together, “Not gone / Not yet / Not gone not yet / A few remaining / A few / A few remaining moments moments / It should be as good / It should be as good as gone / Good as gone, gone / But still—but still remaining moments moments yet / Still remaining moments yet / Wait / Wait what wait whom waits where and when.”

Later, **Theresa Hak Kyung Cha** (1951z1982) would move to New York. On 5 November 1982, a week after the publication of *Dictee*,² she would be brutally raped and murdered in lower Manhattan. In the early 1990s, when multiculturalism emerged as a significant topic in the American art world, her works would be interpreted through the lens of race and gender. In 2001, a major retrospective, *The Dream of the Audience*, would be held at the UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive. Minh-ha would contribute an essay to the exhibition catalogue and talk about her moving encounter with Cha’s *Dictee* in her keynote speech. **Pan Yuliang** (1895–1977) would finally return home in 1984, when the Chinese government shipped her estate of over four thousand paintings back to the Anhui Provincial Museum. People would recount her stories and reconstruct her persona in newspaper profiles, novels, TV dramas and films. She would be known to most Chinese as the woman painter “who painted her own nude.” Remaining a misfit in the Western canon of modernism, she would be engulfed by the accelerated state and its amnesia. In 1980, **Trinh T. Minh-ha** (b. 1952) would travel to Senegal, where she stayed for three years and shot her first film *Reassemblage* (1982). The film focuses on the lives of women in rural Senegal while questioning its own way of looking at the subjects, abiding by an approach that the filmmaker would describe as a “speaking nearby” rather than a “speaking about.” She would go to China after the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident and make the film *Shoot for the Contents* (1992), a complex, poetic exploration of questions of power and change, politics and culture against the backdrop of the crackdown. She would continue lecturing, writing and making films about

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women of color and the transnational struggles of women. All three of them would inspire artists, writers, and makers of cultures and intellectuals of different generations to imagine and produce their own world images. But all this was in the future, and none of them knew what would happen when they crossed space and time to meet in 1979.

When Minh-ha published her significant text *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* in 1989, some of the turbulent and transformative events of the world's recent history were yet to happen, such as the end of the Cold War, the so-called East Asian Miracle and the more aggressive global expansion of identitarianism. But Minh-ha had already proposed a non-dualistic affirmation of women by stating that, "The idea of two illusorily separated identities, one ethnic, the other woman (or more precisely female), again, partakes in the Euro-American system of dualistic reasoning and its age-old divide-and-conquer tactics."³ And her criticism of the paradigms of Western academic discourses reads radical and prophetic in today's milieu of socio-political divide: "No more illusory reflection; rather, *superposition of two presences*, hence the perpetual fear of one presence absorbing the other. [...] Here, you still exist and I do too, but one of us is bound to remain the shadow of the other."⁴

Inspired by Minh-ha's belief of the empowerment of writing and storytelling, Times Art Center Berlin—an institution in search of her own diasporic identity—presents *Neither Black / Red / Yellow nor Woman* in 2019. The exhibition departs from a fictional encounter of the three protagonists, and is informed by their works and archives. Through the textual revisiting of their performances, films and writings, such as *Dictee* (1995), *Aveugle Voix* (1975), *Passages / Paysages* (1978) and *Exilée* (1980) by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha; *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (1989), *Reassemblage* (1982) and *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989) by Trinh T. Minh-ha, as well as numerous articles on Pan Yuliang from both the scholarly world and popular media, the stories of Yuliang, Theresa, and Minh-ha start to take shape as the prelude of an orchestra.

These are exceptional stories about women who are searching for their voices as artists and struggle with their identity-impasse while navigating through various cultural, geographical and historical contexts. Retracing their journeys around the colonial memories before and after the World War II and regional chaos induced by ideological camps of the Cold War, conflictual histories relegated by the dissolution of the Eastern Bloc re-emerge as paradoxes beyond the East / West division. It is indeed much simpler to speculate about these three women getting together physically in Paris than to

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affirm their anachronistic affinity as artists and as women. The question lies in whether we could venture to say we are also Yuliang, Theresa and Minh-ha, and whether there could have been empathy and resonance regardless of their different personal trajectories, cultural identifications, ideological positions and understandings of gender. The current crisis of identitarian politics manifests the antagonistic dichotomy that haunts our interpretation of the past, present and future, where life is still imagined as opposition and conflict. In view of this, the exhibition is envisioned as a conversation between “them” merging with “us,” which forms an polyphony of cross-border storytellers that juxtapose historical materials with fictional constructs, speculate beyond categorization of gender and culture and speak in proximity with each other. Artists who share a fluid state of mind and a diasporic mode of living and working are invited to respond to their own choices of conceptual personae and explore new dimensions of subjectivity and interrelation.

The question to consider today is how to proceed with generosity in an age of cynicism and antagonism in which the production of the script of the world's realities and images is corrupted by binaries: East and West, North and South are spectral doubles of each other; democracy and totalitarianism become two sides of the same coin; and our collective desire to fix history collapses into our individual drive of immortal legacy. To break this illusory reflection and to allow the emergence of a new reality, a story should give birth to many, and an exhibition would dissolve into three.

Neither Black / Red / Yellow nor Woman is the first act of a trilogy that will unfold into the future with multiple chapters in different institutions and geographies. The second act of the project, *The Mythic Being of Us*, is inspired by Ursula K. Le Guin's proposition to revive the usage of “us,” and humanistic portraits of woman poets, writers, filmmakers, activists, whistle-blowers, witches, gurus, ghosts, hackers, workers and housewives will be permeated the exhibition. The third act of the project, *Not a Manifesto but a Wish List*, embraces solidarity while celebrating differences. A series of encounters will take place in performance and durational settings as in a theatre or in a parade, where poets, musicians, choreographers, opera performers among many others are invited to take over the stage.

We want to take this opportunity to express our gratitude to all the artists who have told us stories about confronting their own histories, cultures and identities; we thank all the woman writers, filmmakers, cultural producers and mothers who have taught us about nurturing, sharing and relating. We also want to thank those who have contributed to the conceptualizing, debating and shaping of this project with generosity and enthusiasm: they are Övül Ö.

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Nikita Yingqian Cai and Xiaoyu Weng, 2019

Participating Artists: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Chang Wen Hsuan, Dachal Choi, Chitra Ganesh, Jane Jin Kaisen, Iris Kensmil, Sylbee Kim, Dohee Lee, MAI LING, Laura Huertas Millán, Sara Modiano, Pan Yuliang, Mai-Thu Perret, Thao Nguyen Phan, Arin Rangjung, Shen Xin, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Evelyn Taochen Wang, Yuanyuan Yang, Mia Yu

¹ According to Pan Yuliang's biographer Dong Song, Pan was born in 1895. Yu Ling and Yulin are alternate romanizations of her name that reflect French pronunciation (the current *Hanyu pinyin* romanization system only came into use in China after 1958).

² *Dictee* (Berkeley, CA: Third Woman Press, 1994).

³ *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 104.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 60.