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# ***True Lies: Staging the Ethnographic Interview in Trinh T. Minh-ha's Surname Viet, Given Name Nam (1989)***

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To the question "Are you married yet?" of a man who makes advances to her, an unwedded woman would *properly* reply that she is at the same time engaged and not engaged by answering, "Yes, his surname is Viet and his given name is Nam." It requires wit to reply that one is married to the state; but such wittiness speaks volumes for both what it is supposed and not supposed to say on the question of gender and nationalism. *And the risk incurred in this form of feminine-nationalist in/directness is, for me, the same risk taken in the simultaneous filmic construction and deconstruction of the first-person interview in documentary practice.* (Trinh, *Framer Framed* 192; emphasis added)

## ***I. The Burden of Representation***

Vietnamese American cinematographer, cultural critic, writer and musician Trinh T. Minh-ha seized upon this response as the title of her film, *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* because it framed the film as a feminist inquiry into issues of national identity. It hinted at how speaking about personal and political identities implies considerable risk-taking for Vietnamese women. Both traditional Confucian ideals and modern nationalist discourse have strictly regulated the proper appearance and speech of Vietnamese women. For centuries, Confucian virtues have exerted intense social pressure upon them, requiring, among other things, that they always remember "where their place is" and sacrifice for their husbands (Trinh 90). *Cong* requires that women be skillful in cooking, sewing, managing the household budget, caring for the husband and educating the children – "all this to save the husband's face" (Trinh 90). *Dung* stipulates that women must maintain a gracious and compliant appearance around the husband, *Ngon* recommends that women speak properly and softly, never raising their voices in front of their husbands and their husbands' families, and *Hanh* states that women should always remember their place, respecting their elders and yielding to those younger or weaker. Most importantly, *Hanh* requires that women be faithful and sacrifice for their husbands.

Although Vietnamese nationalist discourses of the twentieth century promised liberation from these age-old Confucian requirements, many Vietnamese women today feel that their speech is still strictly regulated, only now by extreme nationalist ideologies. According to Cat Tièn, a Vietnamese woman in-

interviewed by Mai Thu Van in *Viêtnam: un peuple, des voix* (1983), many women must memorize and recite ideological maxims to show their loyalty to the nationalist regime if they hope to free their husbands and family members from Vietnam's infamous reeducation camps: "Il n'y a jamais de procès pour les personnes maintenues en camps de rééducation [. . .] les autorités compétentes décident que vous êtes coupables de trahison parce que vous avez vécu sous un régime qu'elles qualifient de 'fantoche'" [For the people held in reeducation camps, there's never a trial [. . .] The authorities currently in power decide that you are guilty of treason because you lived under what they call a 'puppet' regime] (Mai 175). Like many others, Cat Tiên was forced to attend political reeducation courses in the 1970s because her husband was considered a traitor to the nationalist cause. He was imprisoned in a reeducation camp without a trial because he had been forced to fight against north Vietnam under the American-supported regime of Ngo Dinh Diem in south Vietnam during the 1960s. One can easily see how speech can become a self-mutilating act rather than an empowering one in this particular situation (Lawrence 413).

In this context, women like Cat Tiên take enormous risks in speaking about social and political injustices with Mai Thu Van, who, they realize, will make their words public when she publishes her ethnography. In *Viêtnam: un peuple, des voix*, Mai charts the history of Vietnam as seen through the eyes of the Vietnamese women she interviews and through her personal perspective as a woman of Vietnamese origin, born in exile and living in France. We learn in the autobiographical introduction to *Viêtnam: un peuple, des voix* that Mai was born in New Caledonia because her mother's entire village was deported there during the 1930s after having rebelled against the abusive power of the colonial regime in French Indochina. Throughout her childhood, Mai's mother excluded her from knowledge of her Vietnamese heritage because Mai is of mixed race. Knowing next to nothing about her father, except that he was a foreigner who soiled her mother's honor, Mai felt she was regarded as the symbol of her mother's humiliation at the hands of the violent colonizer (*Viêtnam* 16). This feeling is confirmed when her mother abruptly abandons her in New Caledonia in the 1950s to return to Vietnam and help fight for her country's independence. As a result Mai lived in New Caledonia and France and was educated according to the French colonial system, never learning about the country for which her mother was willing to sacrifice her daughter and her life. Mai visits Vietnam in the late 1970s in order to conduct interviews with Vietnamese women, in part, I believe, to understand her mother's choice. The ethnographic project Mai embarks upon is thus framed by and seen through the prism of her autobiographical quest for origins and self-knowledge.

Like Mai's interviewees, who are asked to take the risk of speaking out against a corrupt regime, Trinh T. Minh-ha wishes to take a risk in revealing the abuses of power and the silencing of Vietnamese women in ethnographic representation and documentary practices. Although Trinh's risk-taking is certainly quite different from the risks taken by women dissidents in Vietnam, we should not underestimate the repressive regulatory power that dominant ethnographic and cinematographic traditions in the West exert upon Asian women.<sup>1</sup> Western depictions of Vietnamese women are linked, in part, to a more generalized trend of representation of Asians that is rooted in the threat of the so-called "yellow peril." Originally based upon fears of Mongolian invasions of Europe, the "yellow peril" feeds on the belief that, as Gina Marchetti says, "the West will be overpowered and enveloped by the irresistible, dark, occult forces" of Asia (2). This belief served, in part, to rationalize the West's carving up of Asia into colonies (Marchetti 2). In *Romance and the "Yellow Peril": Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction*, Marchetti argues that many films assuage "yellow peril" fears by cultivating a stereotype of the self-effacing Asian woman, who becomes a "metaphor for an Asia willing to sacrifice itself for the benefit of the West" (9). French colonial representations of Vietnamese women are no better. Henri Copin has shown how the stereotype of the "congai," described as self-sacrificing, sexually available Vietnamese women who facilitated French domination in Vietnam, pervaded French travel literature on Vietnam during the early twentieth century. Marchetti further argues that debilitating stereotypes like these are all too alive and well today in the French imaginary, as painfully evidenced by the hit musical *Miss Saigon* (1989).<sup>2</sup>

Trinh T. Minh-ha is one of several women film makers, including Valerie Soe, Lise Yasui, Janice Tanaka, Shu Lea Cheang, and Rea Tajiri, whose work has given rise to recent studies on Asian American women who reappropriate word and image in order to reinscribe Asian women as subjects of history.<sup>3</sup> Widely regarded as one of the foremost scholars of postcoloniality and feminism,<sup>4</sup> Trinh came to the United States at the age of seventeen after having witnessed the American presence in Vietnam and the devastating effects of war. She continued her studies in music composition, ethnomusicology and Francophone literatures both in the United States and France and went on to teach musical composition at the Dakar Conservatory of Music in Senegal from 1977 until 1980. During these years in Africa, Trinh traveled extensively and conducted research at the National Cultural Archives of Senegal. Her first two films, *Reassemblage* (1982) and *Naked Spaces: Living is Round* (1985), both set in Africa, were inspired by this experience. Her subsequent films, including *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* (1989), *Shoot for the Contents* (1991), and *A Tale of Love* (1996) deal specifically with Asian experience.<sup>5</sup>

Postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha has emphasized the “re” of reappropriation and reinscription processes in *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* as a crucial component of Trinh T. Minh-ha’s film-making practice. He views her work as taking documentary and ethnographic film making apart, but “not obscuring it, not saying that that moment does not exist historically, cinematically in representation, it does exist, but continually hybridizing it [. . .] reassembling it, disassembling it and so on” (Trinh, *Cinema Interval* 22). This kind of approach enables Trinh to continually reinscribe history without fixing its multiple meanings. In this article I want to explore how Trinh apprehends both Vietnamese history and Vietnamese women’s identity in their hybrid dynamics and multilayered thickness through the mechanism of “staged,” or “reenacted” ethnographic interviews. In *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam*, Trinh recreates the transcribed and translated interviews originally conducted by Mai Thu Van in *Việt Nam: un peuple, des voix* as a series of first-person dramatized interviews in which only the interviewee is seen and heard. These dramatizations, performed by Vietnamese women now living in the United States, are intermingled with newsreel footage and still photos of the Vietnam war, images of folk dances, women workers in the fields and markets of Vietnam, and cultural events in the Vietnamese diasporic communities of California.

In the first half of *Surname Viet*, the first-person interviews are dramatized by non-professional Vietnamese actresses who reenact the responses of Mai’s interviewees. These dramatizations easily pass for “authentic” ethnographic narratives. Most viewers assume that the Vietnamese women in this first part of the film have been interviewed and filmed in Vietnam. This should not surprise us, since, in the context of what has recently been called “the First-Person Era,” reality and authenticity have become “the greatest entertainment of all” in contemporary culture (Poniewozik 60-61). As the film advances, however, the interviews are made to look less and less “natural” and more stylized and dramatic until, about halfway through, the staged quality of the interviews becomes manifest. The staging becomes more obvious when, for example, we see a woman pacing back and forth, in and out of the camera frame while speaking, which is unusual in most interviews. Then we see a woman who turns her back to the camera as she speaks, which is even more unnatural.

In the second half of *Surname Viet*, Trinh films the actresses as they are asked why they agreed to play a role on screen and as they engage in some of their “real life” activities. For this part of the film, Trinh asked her actresses how they wanted to be represented and was thus able to explore how, whether we act or whether we tell our own stories, speech and self-presentation are always in some way “staged” and imbued with fictional elements (*Framer Framed* 194). It is generally accepted these days that whenever a movie camera is

present, we strike a pose and act, choosing or “editing” the parts of the self we wish to reveal to others on film. The first part of the film is designed and constructed to appear as “natural” as possible. Trinh worked with production designers to carefully craft a “feminist natural look” by clothing her actresses in the simple attire of socialist Vietnam. This artifice appears to be unveiled in the second half of the film, in which the actresses’ costumes are no longer contrived: they choose their own way of dressing for the “real life” interviews. Yet, as Trinh reveals in a voice-over that accompanies the second half of the film, “by choosing the most direct and spontaneous form of voicing and documenting” in this second part, she finds herself much “closer to fiction” (*Framer Framed* 74). Indeed, the women chose not only showy clothing and makeup, which they do not wear in ordinary life, to represent themselves on film engaged in their “real life” activities, but they also chose fantasized scenes that contrasted sharply with their own lived realities as settings for their “real life” interviews.

The fictionalizing effect that is inevitably involved in self-presentation and representation is aptly illustrated by one of Trinh’s actresses who wanted to be filmed at a fish pond even though she had no fish pond at home. “Why a fish pond, why not choose something you really like in your daily situations?” Trinh asked during the filming process (*Framer Framed* 168). She later realized just how important the fish pond was for this woman and for the film. The actress is a working-class woman living with a large family in a small apartment. She fantasizes about a fish pond, a rich symbol of meditation and peace in Asian cultures, because she longs for a retreat from the daily pressure of debilitating work. The fact that the actress chose to be filmed next to a fish pond “tells you how, when you want something true to someone’s life, what you get usually goes much further than the mere details of that person’s daily existence” (*Framer Framed* 168). This example illustrates quite well how fictionalization need not be associated with fraud, duplicity and lies, for it is ultimately able to draw out a greater truth than the mere attempt to mirror “reality” and everyday life. This Vietnamese woman’s personal dream speaks volumes about what her lived experience as a working class woman is really like, even as it engages in flights of fancy.

Many critics have complained that Trinh’s film “fails,” or “does not work,” because it commits “the absolute crime” and treats the spectator “shamelessly” in its staging of ethnographic interviews (Reynaud 154). In a scathing review published in *The New York Times* in 1989, for example, Vincent Canby claims that the staged interviews “denature the original testimony, removing any sense of urgency it might have once had” (14).<sup>6</sup> Canby’s reaction expresses the dominant view that documentary film should differ substantially from fiction. It should not, so the argument goes, “fabricate characters or situations,” but rather

should let the “unrehearsed drama of daily life unfold before an audience” (Sherman 39). Yet even the revered “father of documentary” Robert Flaherty, known for his 1922 ethnographic film *Nanook of the North*, had to alter the so-called “unrehearsed drama” of daily life in order to present his material. For instance, the seal which emerges after a struggle with Nanook has quite obviously been dead for some time: it was not really killed on the spot with the cameras rolling. Moreover, Nanook’s igloo was considerably larger in the film than those typically built by Eskimos, because it had to accommodate camera equipment and a camera crew.

But the reason that Trinh’s film provokes controversy and Flaherty’s did not is because whereas *Nanook of the North* hid distortions in order to cultivate the *appearance* of genuineness and authenticity, Trinh seeks to expose the ways in which ethnographic films and film makers construct authenticity for ideological reasons. She has confirmed on numerous occasions that the controversy generated by *Surname Viet* stems from the ideological charge of representation, in which demands for authenticity have been transformed into naturalized conventions:

Thus, interviews which occupy a dominant role in documentary practices – in terms of authenticating information; validating the voices recruited for the sake of the argument the film advances (claiming however to ‘give voice’ to the people); and legitimizing an exclusionary system of representation based on the dominant ideology of presence and authenticity – are actually sophisticated devices of fiction. (*Framer Framed* 195; emphasis added)

Trinh’s work is controversial, then, precisely because it unveils, rather than masks, how ideologies of authenticity legitimize exclusionary systems of representation. These systems exclude, silence and objectify Third World women within debilitating stereotypes that not only deny them agency and subjectivity, but make this lack appear somehow “natural” and inevitable.

The particular ideology of presence and authenticity can be found in both Vietnamese nationalist representations and Western ethnographic representations of Vietnamese women. As one Vietnamese woman’s words, re-enacted by her stand-in in *Surname Viet*, remind us in the first half of the film, a fictitious image of the ideal Vietnamese woman citizen has been constructed and fortified by nationalists for the needs of significant moments of Vietnamese history:

Let us take the example of street sweepers. These women are doing repellant, very repellant work [ . . . ] They select a few of them and they put them on the platform during a congress or a meeting. They make them read political discourses quickly put together by men, and the trick meets with success. These women forget for a while that they are sweepers, and have the illusion of being full citizens. (*Framer Framed* 72-73)

This staged image masks the exploitation of women for the sake of a nationalist agenda that “mobilizes women when they are needed in the labor force or even at the front,” only to return them to subordinate social roles when the national emergency is over (Kandiyoti 376). Vietnamese women are often mere stand-ins in these nationalist scenarios; yet we learn during the second half of the film that mouthing someone else’s words and acting as a stand-in can be employed strategically in some cases. One of the actresses describes how she imitated the national stereotype of a rural worker in order to dissipate suspicion and eventually escape with other refugees from Saigon to California, where she now lives:

Oh, I tell you, the first time in my life, I never knew how to carry water across my shoulders. [The pole] bites into me. But I had to do it. I act *real* good, and after 3 months they thought I had become a ‘country girl,’ not a Saigon person anymore [. . .]. Yeah, I say, No, please stop, no, I don’t want to escape. If I wanted to escape, I escape years ago, when Saigon first fell. I can go in the harbor — there are a lot of ships — and I can jump on a ship and escape. But no, I love our country. After my husband was reeducated by the government I love our country. So, no, please don’t shoot me. No. He said, “Are you telling me the truth?” I said, “I swear!” But you know, I read the book my husband had in the reeducation camp. So I know how to talk. So I said, I believe in the government, I believe in the chairman. We have been liberated! Why would I want to escape? I am Vietnamese [. . .] I convinced him. (*Framer Framed* 79)

In this context, a Vietnamese woman is able to subvert oppression by mouthing the dominant ideological discourse. Like the woman who replies that she is at the same time engaged and not engaged when telling her suitor that her husband’s surname is Viet and his given name is Nam, many Vietnamese women have learned to speak obliquely, saying one thing and meaning another, as a result of their country’s traumatic history.

In numerous interviews Trinh examines this form of “doublespeak” as a larger phenomenon common to all marginalized peoples. “Marginalized people are always socialized to understand things from more than their own point of view, to see both sides of the matter, and to say at least two things at the same time, they can never really afford to speak in the singular” (“The Undone Interval” 8). Colonialism and imperialism have bequeathed a legacy of split identities to colonized and marginalized subjects, and this experience, whether it is called “double consciousness” or “epidermization,”<sup>7</sup> amounts to a painful realization on the part of the marginalized subject that the oppressor is not only outside, but also “alive and well within each oppressed self” (“The Undone Interval” 8-9). In an excellent study on the representation of Third World subjectivity in film, Fatimah Toby Rony identifies this phenomenon in visual terms as the “third eye experience” (5-6). She describes how

marginalized spectators undergo the uncanny experience of viewing themselves as an object, without being able to fully identify with this objectified image:

How can it be otherwise? How can any viewer identify with the 'savage' [when the savage] is represented as having scarcely a shred of subjectivity? [...] What does one become when one sees that one is not fully recognized as self by the wider society but cannot fully identify as Other? (Rony 5-6)

Trinh's interest in ethnographic film and writing has grown out of the alienating "third eye" experience of reading and seeing herself offered up as a cultural object by experts of Vietnamese culture. While she was living in West Africa, working on her first two films, and developing her critique of cultural anthropology and ethnographic film, she was reminded of her personal experience of this objectification because both Vietnamese and Senegalese peoples share a traumatic colonial history. Trinh remembered times while living in Vietnam when she experienced the odd feeling of reading about herself as "a cultural entity offered up to the reader" in works written about Vietnamese culture by the colonial administration and by foreign scholars (*Affirmative Actions* 14-15). She likens this experience to being "pinned to a butterfly board" by anthropologists, as if her identity were a taxidermic exhibit (*Woman, Native, Other* 48).

Rony argues convincingly that an imperialistic ideology of evolutionary progress underpins the seemingly benign desire of many Western anthropologists to "preserve" cultures as if they were taxidermic exhibits (194-97). Analyzing Regnault's chronophotography of West African performers at the Parisian Ethnographic Exposition of 1895, she proposes that indigenous peoples came to be viewed in the West as evidence of a time "before history" that must be scientifically documented:

Posited as already dead, long since passed by in the steeplechase of history, the "vanishing" Native is "redeemed" through taxidermic reconstruction: the dead is brought to life. The premise of the inevitable death of the Native, moreover, allows the physical and cultural destruction wrought by the West to appear ineluctable, and [...] provides ideological justification for [...] colonial and economic conquests. (*Woman, Native, Other* 196)

One of the most debilitating implications underlying the syndrome whereby "vanishing Natives" are preserved by Western ethnographers is that the West appropriates the experience of non-Western "natives" and speaks in their place. Repeatedly represented as voiceless and as having no history, oppressed and marginalized peoples have subsequently become very uncomfortable with the pursuit of scientific objectivity in the representation of their cultures by the West (Xing 160). Scientific objectivity often goes hand in hand with colo-

nizing the words and images of native “others” to prove Western superiority over other cultures.

When Western ethnographic discourse hides its imperialist drives under the smooth veneer of scientific objectivity, the powerful are privileged at the expense of the powerless and subordinate communities are often reduced to voiceless objects of representation. Western ethnographers feel compelled to mask their own subjectivity in their encounters with native informants in order for their work to gain credibility as empirical data. Far from obtaining objectivity or impartiality, this pursuit is rife with ideological power struggles in which the West attempts to define itself as “knower” by trying to go unnoticed and by “moving invisibly in unmarked zones” (Trinh qtd. in Reynaud 159). The invisible “I/eye” of the film maker becomes omniscient in traditional documentary film making and its all-knowing capacity firmly guides the spectator to accept his/her view of the Native as objective truth.

This issue raises the controversial question at the heart of identity politics: Who can speak for whom, or, said differently, who represents whom, and for what reasons? Trinh argues that “speaking for” the Other is tantamount to an epistemological act of colonization that, in paternalistically claiming to “give voice,” actually silences the Other by regulating what the Other is allowed to mouth. As anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod has eloquently argued, the Western knower has historically asserted his/her own ideal fantasy of him or herself by regulating the Other’s speech in this manner (24). This creates a particularly painful predicament for marginalized peoples, what Trinh has called the burden of representation: “One always has to face the question of representing the community or the communities and at the same time, not representing them, not speaking for them [ . . . ] It’s a very difficult task [and] a constant challenge” (Trinh, *Affirmative Actions* 19). On the one hand, members of marginalized groups, who used to be spoken about, are now asked to speak, but only as a token and within certain restrictive boundaries determined by those in power. On the other hand, resisting this ideological coercion with silence is not a satisfactory option for most marginalized people, who feel the desire to speak on behalf of their community due to the bonds of solidarity forged in resistance struggles. In this context self-representation and representation are, for Trinh, responsibilities that marginalized peoples simply cannot afford to reject (Trinh qtd. in Reynaud 154-55). As a result, when they do raise their voices, the marginalized are usually perceived to be speaking for their communities and nations as token representatives. In this context, they often end up inadvertently reinforcing a monolithic and reductive idea of their culture.

## II. *Framer Framed*

A crucial question arises in the context of this burden of representation and Trinh's film: does *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* participate in the colonizing activity of speaking for others when Vietnamese American actresses mouth the transcribed and translated words of Vietnamese women living in Vietnam? Many spectators are bothered by *Surname Viet* because "they feel that the speech uttered by the women featured is being undermined, so that instead of coming out as an acquisition of power, translation [of the Vietnamese women's experience by the actresses] comes out as a way of undermining power" (Trinh, *Affirmative Actions* 16). Surprisingly, Trinh addresses this issue by first admitting that film makers can never really avoid or escape the objectification that lies at the heart of all representational practices. "You are never in a position where you can say, 'I'm not objectifying' [. . .] you are always a voyeur, so what do you do? I think the predicament of that position has to be brought out into the open" (Trinh qtd. in Reynaud 168). Then she suggests that film makers constantly disclose their film's workings for viewers in order for representational power to always be seen in its limits (Trinh in Reynaud 168). Even though she can not entirely avoid objectification, Trinh makes a more important, albeit paradoxical point: "Speaking is both an empowering tool and one that can always subvert the very power of speech" (*Affirmative Actions* 16). *Surname Viet* plays with this paradox by depicting women speaking about when the act of speech empowers and liberates, and, conversely, when speech is coerced or used to oppress that same subject. In this regard the film challenges ideologies that legitimize the appropriation of words and images by the powerful at the expense of the powerless. I argue that it is in this sense that *Surname Viet* exposes not only the limits of power in ethnographic and cinematographic traditions in general, but also the limits of its own power.

One technique that Trinh deploys to disclose both her power and the power of ethnographic film and of documentary film makers in general is to reveal the limitations of synchronized sound. Synchronized sound is a traditional documentary technique used to substitute one voice for another: one voice simultaneously speaks for, or in the place of, another, creating the illusion of unity (Trinh, *Framer Framed* 227). *Surname Viet* dramatizes the power struggle between the film maker's voice, which usually takes the form of a voice-over, and the voices of those being filmed when, at certain moments during the film, voice-overs are played simultaneously with the synchronized voice of the interviewees. The spectator is thus placed in the uncomfortable position of being forced to choose what he or she listens to: it is next to impossible for the spectator to pay equal attention to both voices. This technique places the

spectator in the position of the film maker, who must choose whose voices will be heard, and how his or her own voice will be heard in the film.

Techniques such as this one illustrate a broader point about the power of representation in *Surname Viet*. Contrary to visual and textual images of Vietnam that bombard the spectator with stereotypes masquerading as the truth, there can never be only one truth about Vietnam or Vietnamese women. Staged interviews in *Surname Viet* reveal how “truth is [always] selected, renewed, [and] displaced” (Trinh, *Framer Framed* 73). When experts on other cultures or representative cultural spokespersons are chosen to speak for their community in traditional ethnographies and documentaries, they can not possibly express the entire reality of the culture depicted. The attempt to do so supports the insidious illusion that a culture and a people can be grasped, known, and categorized within a single, homogenous category or definition. *Surname Viet* thus stages interviews in order to reveal the fundamental “impossibility of one single truth” in any act of “witnessing, remembering, recording, re-reading” and, I would add, of representing (*Framer Framed* 83). And this is not the same thing at all as saying that there is no truth in representation, for testimony remains a powerful and ethically necessary act, especially in the violent contexts of colonization, imperialism, and patriarchy. It simply means that there are an infinite number of ways to tell a story, and many different truths to be heard.

My answer to the question of whether *Surname Viet* inevitably participates in the colonizing activity of speaking for others is thus a resounding “no.” I don’t see Trinh’s actresses as “speaking for” the Vietnamese women whose words they mouth in the first half of *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*. Instead I believe they “speak nearby,” forging an ethical mode of representation that some have even called Trinh’s manifesto as a film maker.<sup>8</sup> The “speaking nearby” mode is ethical because it does not point “to an object as if it is distant from the speaking subject or absent from the speaking place” (Trinh in Foster 105). More importantly, the film maker or writer who employs the “speaking nearby” mode does not appropriate the words of others in order to shore up their own power as subjects. In *Surname Viet*, “speaking nearby” is rather a mode that encourages Vietnamese women to become subjects in their own right, though subjectivity may be something quite complex and necessarily intertwined with representational structures. This ethical mode redefines the interview as a relational, rather than an oppositional, form of dialogue and exchange between marginalized subjects who paradoxically speak each other’s truths through the fictions of self-presentation. I see the Vietnamese American actresses, as Peckham does in her interview with Trinh, as contributing “their voices and images to embody the words of other women with whom they share a cultural and political history in an act of community” (Peckham qtd.

in Lawrence 416-17). Trinh critiques the interview as an antiquated form of documentary and ethnography employed to objectify and silence Third World women, but she does not ultimately reject it entirely. The interview has the potential to become much more than a methodological tool used to gain “scientific” data about cultural differences. It emerges in *Surname Viet* as an interstitial, hybrid space in which an ethical face-to-face encounter between self and other provides a dynamic alternative to the oppositional framework of Western identity constructions.

### III. True Lies

*James Baldwin:* I had to accept that I was on a slave boat once.

*Margaret Mead:* No.

*Baldwin:* But I was.

*Mead:* Wait, you were not. Look, you don't believe in reincarnation!

*Baldwin:* But my whole life was defined by history [. . .] My life was defined by the time I was five by the history written on my brow.  
(Baldwin 189)

In 1971, the novelist James Baldwin engaged in a debate with the anthropologist Margaret Mead. Their discussion revolved around differing views of history. Mead perceived history as a series of documented, factual events, whereas Baldwin envisioned a more subjective approach to history that defied objective criteria in ascertaining the “truth” of his past (Rony 193). Baldwin's notion of history collapsed the past into the present: “I had to accept that I was on a slave boat once” (Baldwin 189). His present had been defined by the collective trauma of slavery, the violent legacy bequeathed to African-Americans. Baldwin thus claimed his personal identity was intimately linked to the collective history of his people: “My life was defined [. . .] by the history written on my brow” (Baldwin 189).

Until recently, history has been written by powerful, dominant groups. Dispossessed and marginalized groups were, in a sense, writ upon by history. Traditional ethnographic discourses have participated in this act of writing history on the brows of dispossessed “others,” as Trinh T. Minh-ha shows in *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam*. The constant naming and renaming of Viet Nam throughout history – Van-Lang, Nam-Viet, Hoang Viet, Dai-Viet, An-Nam (which under the French became Bac Ky – Le Tonkin); Trung Ky (which became An Nam); Nam Ky (which became La Cochinchine); French Indochina, Viet-Nam, Nam – aptly illustrate the quasi-obsessive need to rewrite the history of invasion and colonization again and again on the brow of the Vietnamese people (Trinh, *Framer Framed* 89). In this historical context of domination, Trinh reveals how the interview has been used as “objective proof” of a correlative colonization of the “other” in ethnographic representation. This epis-

temological form of colonization feeds Western desires to assert an unproblematic notion of self as unified and coherent under the guise of an "all-knowing I" (Trinh, *When the Moon Waxes Red* 192). This "all-knowing I" negates difference because difference threatens to disrupt the self's mirror image or itself as a unified, coherent presence. Difference distorts the mirror, revealing multiple, often contradictory images of identity that suggest that the self is in fact "an other" to itself.

Trinh T. Minh-ha and Mai Thu Van break with the dominant paradigm of unified, coherent selfhood by redefining the interview as an encounter between self and other, and self as other, that does not negate difference, but rather embraces it. This encounter revises identity in terms of connection and reconceives the boundaries between self and other as "sites of proximity" rather than battlefields of divisive separation (Griffin 6). Trinh T. Minh-ha's break is announced by an exploration of the threshold space between reality and fiction. She draws out the illusory nature of the widely held belief that only "authentic" first-person testimony can tell the truth of history. In *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* she unveils the truth-telling capacity of fiction. Her strategy points to the fictional element that exists at the heart of all representation, including self-presentation in the act of recounting one's life story. Trinh thus subverts the notion that the self exists somewhere outside of, and prior to, representational structures. Implicit in her subversion is a critique of the notion of the self as an entity "taken for something given, as solid, as referable as an object that lies deeply hidden under my layers of artificialities, waiting patiently to be uncovered and proven" (Trinh, *Woman Native Other* 18). For Trinh, therefore, identity is conceived of as multiple layers, the uncovering of which never leads to "the true self" or to an "original self." Unveiling the self only leads to other layers and other selves.

This is also what Mai Thu Van discovers in her ethnographic quest in *Việtnam: un peuple, des voix*. Drawn back to the country of her roots to study Vietnamese women, Mai does not discover her "one, true self" but rather her many selves and their shifting complexities. She, like Baldwin, had to first realize that her life had been defined by history and that her personal story of exile and exclusion were part of a collective drama of disenfranchisement and oppression. This initial identification with the victims of history is complicated by Mai's subsequent discovery of the enemy inside herself. The interview experience stimulates a painful, but necessary discovery of the foreigner residing within her who, as a result of her acculturation in the West, views Vietnamese women with westernized eyes. Mai told Trinh that since the publication of *Việtnam: un peuple, des voix*, she felt as if she had lost a part of herself (*Framer Framed* 82).

Perhaps Trinh was drawn to Mai's work because it takes the same sort of risk that her interviewee did when subverting nationalist discourse with doublespeak, that language cultivated as a survival strategy among marginalized peoples. Mai's work takes the risk of breaking down rigid boundaries between autobiography and ethnography. Her interviewing of "others" paradoxically drew out a discourse of the self, thus departing from the ethnographic traditions preserving an objective, "all-knowing I" during the interview process. Conversely Mai writes autobiography as a sort of ethnographic exploration of the others within herself. Her coming to writing is thus a painful emergence from the reassuring membrane of unified selfhood and a departure towards assuming her self-strangeness.

Ultimately it is not in the initial identification with Vietnamese women that Mai weds her individual destiny to the collective destiny of her people. Rather it is when Mai takes the risk of losing herself that she is able to envision her identity in collective terms: "The self must seek and lose, lose freely" (Trinh, *Woman Native Other* 35). In this sense I see the emergence of a new vision of subjectivity in both Mai and Trinh's work. What emerges is a "non-I/plural-I" which is fundamentally "different from the subjectivity of the sovereign-I (subjectivism) or the non-subjectivity of the all-knowing-I (objectivism)" (Trinh, *When the Moon Waxes Red* 192). The *entre-deux* experience fostered by interviews lays the groundwork for thinking of subjectivity as an "I-you" relation in which "neither I nor you come first" (Trinh, *Woman Native Other* 22). *Việt Nam: un peuple, des voix* and *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* redefine identity as an interview experience, an ethical mode of encountering the other, of listening to the other, and of (re)creating one another anew without hierarchal firsts or seconds. Meaning is not "colonized" by self or other, it is constructed in between the "I" and the "you": in other words, neither self nor other become sole proprietors of meaning. The overlapping texts of Mai Thu Van and Trinh T. Minh-ha produce their own dialogic interview experience, speaking doubly as they speak nearby, not for, Vietnamese women.

## Notes

1. Ella Shohat has argued that cinema enacts a "historiographical and anthropological role, writing the cultures of others" since its inception (24). In the early twentieth century, cinema "celebrated its ethnographic and quasi-archeological powers to resuscitate forgotten and distant civilizations" (25).

2. *Miss Saigon* was created by Claude-Michel Schonberg and Alain Boublil for the London stage in 1989. A subsequent Broadway version of *Miss Saigon* was then created in 1991 (Thanh).

3. See Jung Xing's chapter, titled "Hybrid Cinema by Asian American Women," in *Asian America through the Lens: History, Representations and Identity*. In this chapter he studies Valerie

Soe's *New Year: Parts I and II* (1987) and *Picturing Oriental Girls: A (Re)Educational Videotape* (1992), Lise Yasui's *The Family Gathering* (1988), Janice Tanaka's *Memories from the Department of Amnesia* (1991), Shu Lea Cheang's *Color Schemes* (1989), Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* (1989), and Rea Tajiri's *History and Memory: For Akiko and Takashige* (1991).

4. See Trinh's landmark study *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*.

5. The script of *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* is reproduced in Trinh's *Framer Framed*, and scripts of *Shoot for the Contents* and *A Tale of Love* can be found in Trinh's *Cinema Interval*.

6. Canby summarizes his view of the film as follows:

Ms. Minh-ha, who emigrated from Vietnam some years ago, did not return there to make her film. The movie is composed of newsreel and archival footage, as well as printed information. The heart of the film features interviews with five contemporary Vietnamese women, whose words are recited by five amateur actresses under Ms. Minh-ha's direction. The effect is to denature the original testimony, removing any sense of urgency it may have once had. Ms. Minh-ha further distances the audience from the subject by shooting these actresses in such a way that one might think she was bored by their performances. The camera fidgets. It pans to one side and then the other, almost losing the speaker. Sometimes the camera studies the speaker's hands, which are, after all, not the hands of the woman who originally spoke the words but those of her American resident stand-in. (14)

7. Fatimah Toby Rony compares the marginalized's ability to see its self as other to Dubois' notion of double consciousness and Fanon's theorization of epidermalization in *The Third Eye*.

8. In a review of *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* that appeared in the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1989, Kaliss contends that the message of the introductory voice-over of Trinh's first film *Reassemblage* — "I do not intend to speak about/just speak nearby" — is her manifesto (30).

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