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Traitors and Translators: Reframing Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*

Lan Duong

This essay examines Trinh T. Minh-ha's 1989 film *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* through the thematic of treason and translation. Looking at the acts of treason and translation undergirding Trinh's film, I demonstrate how these axes of analyses intersect with the very terms that structure the film—that is, gender and nation. For feminists, such junctures have been critical in order to interrogate representations of women in history and language. Among other feminist theorists, Norma Alarcón has insightfully investigated the ways in which the primordial figure of the traitor in Chicana/o culture is both a woman and a translator; since she serves as a mediating body between the colonizer and colonized, La Malinche's betrayal is not only cultural and sexual but also linguistic.¹ Being both a traitor and translator is a dynamic, I argue, that plays out in Trinh T. Minh-ha's work, as well, whereby the female translator (Trinh herself) is a traitor to the documentary form and ethnographic mode of inquiry. Expounding upon the idea of feminine betrayal, *Surname Viet* also exposes the ways in which translation and treason are tied to the female body within a nationalist context. Situated in the frames of the film, Trinh betrays the notion of feminine authenticity by rendering inaudible the women's heavily accented speeches and by providing subtitles that elucidate little about the women's speeches. Although subtitles are a translational

operation that typically try to effect a “cultural affinity” between West and East, Self and Other;² Trinh problematizes the idea that translations and subtitles as “visualized speech”³ and refuses the idea that translation guarantees access to the female Other.

Whereas other critics have looked at Trinh’s *Surname Viet* as a theoretical exercise for the auteur,⁴ I mean to reorient a critical gaze back onto the speech and bodies of the women in the film and contextualize how these women are engaged in the performance of memory within and outside the film. Going against a critical body of work that elide the women’s acts of storytelling in Trinh’s film in favor of auteurist analysis, I read the creative enactments that occurred in the preproduction phase and profilmic space of *Surname Viet*. I focus on the collaborative acts that constitute the film’s spine: the interviews in Vietnamese that were collected and translated by Mai Thu Vân into French, which were then translated into English by Trinh T. Minh-ha and reinterpreted by Vietnamese American women in the film. These translations upon translations reference a colonial and imperial legacy. Translation theorist Niranjana Tejeswari writes on the importance of studying translation in Western colonial discourse: “Translation brings into being the overarching concepts of reality and representation.”⁵ Indeed, such concepts are the dual processes that *Surname Viet* aims to deconstruct, as the film attempts to mediate between multiple linguistic registers and multiple texts. As a result of these manifold acts of translation, the film alludes to there being neither an original text that bears originary meaning for the film nor an originary bearer—a woman who is unproblematically given voice—to whom meaning can be affixed. In relation to film as translation, Rey Chow argues in a different context that Trinh’s film shows “a process of ‘literalness’ that displays the way the original itself was put together, that is, in its violence.”⁶ In the second half of the film especially are those moments when Trinh demonstrates the fragmented means by which the translations of Vietnamese woman have been composed.⁷

Examining this latter portion of the film, the essay also concentrates on the women’s agentive practices of storytelling, a subject that is overlooked in the critical scholarship on the film. Such practices of storytelling involve what Trinh calls “headless and bottomless” ways of telling stories, which expose the “inscription and de-scription of a non-unitary female subject of color through her engagement and disengagement with master discourses.”⁸ Following Trinh’s formulation, I contend that the semblance of stories narrated by the immigrant women in the second part of the film function to “narrate displacement,” and point to the possibility of a

feminist understanding of difference and the creation of alliances between women in Việt Nam and the diaspora.⁹ As film scholar Glen Mimura puts it, *Surname Viet* “illuminates the cultural circuits along which these stories have traveled and the marks that these displacements have inscribed on the original texts.”¹⁰ Premised upon Mimura’s points, this essay proposes to investigate further the displacement of meaning located in the “original” and its translated versions at the same time that it locates meaning in the exchanges amongst women that have originated from this film project. In this, I do not mean to align the women as “sisters in struggle,” as Amy Lawrence has argued;¹¹ rather, I plait the fragments of stories together to contend that they comprise a partial archive, one that pivots on affective ties amongst women and stands collectively opposed to the masculinist narratives that abound in national and community discourses. Trinh addresses this masculinism in the ways that she reappropriates the famous words of anti-French leader Phan Bội Châu to make them serve as the film’s title. Trinh critiques a form of heteropatriarchal nationalism that requires women subjects to defend the home against foreign invaders and to reproduce the nation during a time of nation building. In a parallel fashion, Trinh takes aim at a diasporic community that favors male-dominated discourses of wartime soldiering and postwar suffering and censures Vietnamese American women for speaking out against such narratives.¹²

Based on Trinh’s multivalent critiques, I posit how the problematic of translation and the practice of collaboration serve as useful components for the construction of a Vietnamese diasporic feminism. This mode of inquiry relies on an analytic framework that understands the making of culture as an essentially collaborative one. Similar to Trinh’s critique against patriarchal discourses in the homeland and the diaspora, I give female collaborators—or those deemed by the powerful as traitors to the family and nation—a positive valence in order to understand the work of Vietnamese and Vietnamese diasporic cultural producers anew. This essay purposely conflates the terms of collaborator, traitor, and translator in order to pose the question, who is the traitor and to whom and what is she betraying? If, as a Vietnamese woman declares that “heroism is monstrous” in the film, Trinh forces us to look at how treason, as heroism’s opposite, is equally monstrous. This reframing of Trinh’s film details the extent to which Trinh, as translator of and traitor to the production of knowledge about women, critiques the ways these terms circulate around the Vietnamese female body. By also analyzing the rhetorical and representational strategies of the women participants in Mai Thu Vân’s collection of interviews

and Trinh's film, I show the ways in which the women themselves betray the notion that female subjectivity can only be premised on serving the nation. Ultimately, my readings of Trinh's film and the women's narrations contained in it attempt to animate other circuits of meaning that are found in the film and outside of its frames. The final section of the essay advances the formulation of a diasporic Vietnamese feminism, one that articulates the notion of collective difference and archives the images and stories of women in Việt Nam and the diaspora.

Collaborative Acts and the Displacement of Authorship and Meaning

As critics like Hamid Naficy have noted, *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* is multilayered as well as aurally dense.¹³ The film interweaves dialogue, music, and graphic text in order to wage a critique against the strictures of documentary, anthropology, and Western feminism, all of which purport to know and represent the Other truthfully. Yet, if the film deconstructs Western modes of analysis, the film also targets Vietnamese nationalism. Its title is based on the words of anticolonial French resistance leader Phan Bội Châu and his charge that a single woman must proclaim her union with the nation when responding to heterosexual courtship. In replying to a young man's inquiries into her marital status and family name, she would need to say "My surname is Việt, given name is Nam."¹⁴ Taking Phan's dictum for the film's title, Trinh reveals how the Vietnamese female subject is not only caught in the heteronormative binds of the familial and the national but also holds no singular identity.

Critical of how women's stories have been appropriated by nationalist discourses, Trinh demonstrates instead the "radical multiplicity" that women represent.¹⁵ Trinh cites from and reframes a menagerie of heroines from Vietnamese folk and literary history; this includes Lady Triệu, Hai Bà Trưng, and Kiều, a character from Việt Nam's most beloved literary masterpiece, *Truyện Kiều* (*The Tale of Kiều*). With these references, Trinh establishes the ways that Vietnamese women have been mythologized through the prism of nationalist patriarchy, a construct of Vietnamese woman that has been enacted as a result of masculinist acts of appropriation and translation. Foregrounding the issue of translation, Trinh discusses the multiple ways in which the character of Kiều, the protagonist of in Nguyễn Du's epic poem, has been appropriated by the state during the country's most tumultuous periods.¹⁶ Consequently,

Trinh's use of Nguyễn's text represents a doubled appropriation. She alludes to the ways that Vietnamese male authors like Phan and Nguyễn have deployed a woman's voice to advance national liberation or to agitate for social change. Secondly, because Kiều has been interpreted as being either a collaborator or paragon of filial piety, Trinh recites the ways that women's subjectivity often hinges upon the dualism of treachery or heroism. She shows that women are often caught in an impossible dialectic of loyalty and disloyalty to family and nation.

The film's thematic concerns are reflected in its formal structure. The first part of the movie stages Vietnamese American women performing the translated interviews of women who live in postwar Việt Nam. The second portion then focuses on the actors' lives themselves in order to reveal the structural threads that hold the film together: acts of translation and collaboration. In these two parts, Trinh means to frustrate the Western spectator's will to knowledge through translation. Throughout the first half of the film, Trinh occupies the role of translator and traitor, willfully mistranslating and misrepresenting the Vietnamese female subject in ways that render her unintelligible and illegible as an object of Western inquiry.

Addressing the problem of either translating by "ear or by eye," Trinh contends, "[T]ranslation seeks faithfulness and accuracy and ends up always betraying either the letter of the text, its spirit, or its aesthetics."¹⁷ To this end, Trinh's film betrays the documentary mode and audience expectations in terms of this genre by demonstrating the ways in which the female subject is unrepresentable and unknowable, an idea that the film underlines from the film's beginning to its conclusion. Deploying a variety of formal techniques, particularly vis-à-vis text and sound, Trinh incites viewers to read, hear, and see in a fractured fashion. More specifically, Trinh superimposes multiple voice-overs while the subject speaks and fills the screen with subtitles of parts of the women's speech at various moments in the film. However, the lack of subtitles in the film is also telling, as when subtitles are sometimes cut off on the screen, or when what the "talking head" says does not always match the words on the screen. Further compounding the problem of viewer incomprehensibility is that when the speaking subject enunciates her words, they are often spoken in halting, fractured English—without any subtitles to aid the English-language viewer.

Along the same lines, Trinh intersperses the women's staged monologues with Vietnamese songs and folk sayings, which are heard in the background and sometimes overpower their speeches. Often the songs' lyrics and sayings are subtitled, thematically

emphasizing the popular understandings of Vietnamese gender roles: “She who is married is like a dragon with wings / She who has no husband is like a rice-mill with a broken axle.” At the same time, Trinh subverts the meaning of these lyrics by placing them adjacent to quotes by several women poets of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries or by writers who have railed against Vietnamese patriarchy. As an example of this, she cites feminist poet Hồ Xuân Hương, who is famous for integrating double entendres into her poetry: “To marry and have a child, how banal! But to be pregnant without the help of a husband, what merit!” Underlying this reference to literary foremothers like Hồ is Trinh’s remapping of a feminist genealogy rooted in women’s oral and folk culture. This remapping represents an important move for Trinh in establishing the agentive power found in women’s storytelling and the pleasures that are found in their auratic relay, especially located in the second half of the film, where the pleasurable act of telling stories is most apparent.

Juxtaposed with these recitations of poetry by women are images of women. Interwoven with the sounds and text of the film is Trinh’s practice of reframing Vietnamese women, the bodies of whom have been captured on film and in photography during the French and American wars and within Vietnamese cultural history. Trinh’s technique launches a critique against the scopic regime that has appropriated the idea of womanhood within a patriarchal imagination in either the West or the East.¹⁸ For example, the film begins and ends with women’s swaying bodies in traditional costumes as they perform on a brightly lit stage, the spectacle of which is shot in full color, up close, and in slow motion (figure 1). During the interviews of the women, Trinh also frames them in extreme close-ups while they speak; at the same time, she directs the camera in a wayward manner to catch the subtle movements of their hands, feet, and heads. Refusing to assign meaning to these bodies, however, she relays the problem of how women have been reinterpreted for the purposes of advancing a nationalist cause. She challenges viewers to apprehend the objectifying manner in which woman-as-nation has been reified in visual imagery. However, if she critiques the spectacle that has created “Vietnam,” she also proffers viewers a glimpse into what the women subjects take pleasure in seeing and the moments when they enjoy being seen.¹⁹ Trinh’s practice of reframing and the “re-photography” of women’s bodies grounds the film does not simply obliterate truth: it also points to a regeneration of meaning and import within the diaspora.²⁰



Figure 1. Women dancing (*Surname Viet Given Name Nam*, dir. Trinh T. Minh-ha, 1989).

The second half of the film, which features “real” interviews of Vietnamese immigrant women in the United States, serves to trouble further the notion of veracity in documentaries and critique the genre’s overreliance on voice-giving claims. Here, Trinh emphasizes the inadequacy of not only translation but the problematic of translating experience onto film. On this point, film scholar Peter X. Feng maintains that Trinh T. Minh-ha “loses control in the second half of the film.”²¹ In other words, it can be argued that the second half of the film is more formulaic, and as such, it is unfaithful to the formalist rigor found in the first half of the film. Yet, this latter portion of the film hinges precisely on the issue of control, accenting Trinh’s positioning of herself as collaborator in the filmmaking and interviewing process, one who is faithless to the ethnographic imperative. A narrator off screen (the voice of a second-generation Vietnamese American by the name of Lan Trinh) “interviews” Trinh on the reasons why she chose to make the film, which stories she wanted to retell, and how many interviewees were picked. Trinh goes on to state, “Interview: an antiquated device of documentary. Truth is selected, renewed, displaced, and speech is always tactical.”

At this point, it is clear that Trinh stresses her performing self as an integral part of the interviewing process. In effect, she becomes the “framer” who is “framed” within this collaborative project. She writes, “Because of the film, I am constantly questioned in who I am, as its making also transforms the way I see the world around me.”²² Viewers thus realize that she confronts the problem of having to revise her own practices in representing the Other. In this, we also learn that Trinh inhabits the subject of her own film; she is both a translator and traitor as a result of the collaborative act. As Trinh retells it, the problem of being “framed” had actually been sutured into the fabric of the film from its inception, a point Trinh emphasizes repeatedly in her film. At the crux of the film is a demystification of the collaborative processes of filmmaking and storytelling.

Relaying faulty translations and subtitles, Trinh demonstrates the ideological effects of having translated Mai Thu Vân’s five-year research project from Vietnamese into French and then into accented English. Even so, critics have understood Mai’s work on Vietnamese women, *Vietnam: un peuple, des voix* (1983), as being ancillary to Trinh’s project. Underlying the scholarly analyses that see Trinh as the sole author of the film is what I believe to be an overreliance upon a Eurocentric idea of the auteur. In actuality, within the film and the theoretical writings that complement it, Trinh frequently discusses how the idea of authorship has been continually displaced in the filmmaking. She underscores the act of collaboration that is threaded throughout the film and thus, the film’s “unsewing” of image and meaning, sound and text.²³

Yet, when critics privilege Trinh’s film over and above Mai Thu Vân’s collection of interviews, *Vietnam: un peuple, des voix*, they miss the critical textures that both Mai Thu Vân and Trinh weave into their works. Fundamental to Mai’s collection of interviews is her postcolonial critique of a Western idealization of revolutionary socialism. Overwhelmingly, her female subjects narrate lived experiences that are marked by deprivation within socialist Việt Nam. As a Marxist, Mai felt compelled to change her views on socialism as the women’s narratives “shook” (*a ébranlé*) her preconceptions of the movement’s effects on Vietnamese women.²⁴ In conjunction with Mai’s book and her participation, then, Trinh redoubles her critiques against the structures of knowing that are embedded in Western feminism. In the second half of the film, Trinh enunciates Mai Thu Vân’s troubles with getting her book published by major presses in France without an accompanying preface by French feminist Simone de Beauvoir. Entrenched in this is Mai’s own assessment of a hegemonic French feminism that disallows a feminist voice divergent from its own. On the book’s negative reception,

Trinh reads Mai's letter in the film: "Dear Minh-ha, Since the publication of the book, I felt like having lost a part of myself. At least in France where, in spite of the Mouvement de Liberation de la Femme, maternalism remains the cornerstone of the dominant ideology."

Moreover, to read through the different women's narratives that make up *Vietnam: un peuple, des voix* is to understand the difficult process of negotiation by which Mai herself had to transcribe, translate, and edit in order to craft a readable text for a predominantly Western audience that would be publishable by a scholarly press, Pierre Horay. Published in 1983, the book is organized by different sections: an autobiographical preface, ethnographic details about post-1975 Vietnamese society, the testimonials, and then, finally, Mai's scholarly work on family, socialism, and women's conditions. Like Trinh T. Minh-ha, Mai is careful to select women of different class strata, regions, and occupations in order to render a composite sketch of contemporary Vietnamese society. Although less self-reflexive than Trinh and therefore less invested in deconstructing an authorial voice, Mai Thu Vân is aware of her privileged position in the book. Prefacing her interviews, she writes that her encounters with Vietnamese women in the late 1970s were initially predicated on mistrust (*méfiance*) because she was a foreigner to them, a *Việt Kiều Pháp* (overseas Vietnamese from France) as they had called her.²⁵

Where the text and the film do convene is their sharp, shared critique of the expropriation of women's labor and the commodification of their bodies. Mai's book focuses upon how the women's narratives object to the socialist state in its failures to address their needs in the postwar era. In Trinh's film, this critique is not only reiterated but is extended to speak against a gendered nationalism found in the diaspora, as well. Juxtapositions of beauty contestants and intertitles that detail feminine virtues (beauty, speech, charity, and labor) reference the continuity with which patriarchal norms seek to discipline women in the diaspora. Yet, the rebukes of socialism and patriarchy are rooted not only in the ways in which Mai and Trinh have presented them but also in the women's *gestes* (gestures) as well as their *paroles* (speech). At this point of convergence, I draw the women's self-narrations in Mai's book together with those of the immigrant women featured in the second half of Trinh's film. Like the immigrant women's life stories in *Surname Viet*, the Vietnamese women's narratives in the text have been effectively rehearsed, dramatized, and staged. Following Trinh's arguments about speech, I contend that the narrative performances in Mai's book are tactical and rhetorical. To counter the idea that the

women featured in the film are passive players in the execution of Trinh's theories, I point to the active cooperation among women—the ethnographer (Mai), documentarian (Trinh), and storytelling subject (women in Việt Nam and the diaspora)—to emphasize that theirs is a pact of the imagination, one that lays the groundwork for the “staging of action.”²⁶

In the dialogues between Mai and her various interviewees, instances of performing and punning that speak to the women's awareness of their roles as informants are plentiful. During several interviews, the women subjects preempt Mai's inquiries with their own questions.²⁷ Early on during their meeting, for example, Liên, a thirty-two-year-old artist, asks Mai in turn, “Pensez-vous qu'il est intéressant de parler de tous ces problèmes de femmes?”²⁸ What constantly underpins the interviews is a self-reflexive mode of performativity on the part of the women subjects. In another instance, Mai writes that, before the interviews, some women, including an official representative from the Women's Union, served tea and biscuits as a way to facilitate conversations and maintain good relations between subject and researcher.²⁹ It is also evident that, for some women, the women interviewees challenge the tenets of a Western feminist articulation of women's equality; they argue instead for a form of gender equality that involves the rights and participation of men within any feminist project in Việt Nam.³⁰

Also at play in Mai's book are illustrations of humor in the women's deployment of language and self-inscription. In an interview with Thu Vân, a young health technician, she recounts how an engineering or medical diploma has no value in today's society; a diploma (*bằng*) does not make one *bằng lòng* (satisfied).³¹ Translated into French, the pun works only in Vietnamese and must be accompanied by Mai's explanatory footnote. This statement signals not only a linguistic and cultural displacement but also alludes to a colonial dislocation, given the context of Mai's translation of Vietnamese wordplay for a French readership. Thu Vân's clever rewording in Vietnamese still makes a fine point about postwar Việt Nam: only a well-endowed bank account can make one content within a society still reeling from the traumas of war and an arrested economy. It is at once a criticism of both the state and the society. A mocking parody of official sentiment is also found in the women's refashioning of themselves as subject-citizens. The southern women speak of having to craft politically correct curriculum vitae to avoid being sent to prison after the north's “liberation” of the south. A woman by the name of Cát Tiên describes how she tricked the cadres by simply retranscribing a previously submitted

résumé.³² Transmitted in these minutiae are the women's recognition that their political identities must be fluid, fictionalized, and performed in the public space.

A keen awareness of postwar Việt Nam's position on the global stage and the women's positions as critics of the state marks the narratives, as well. Playing such roles, they are either ferocious in their critiques or apprehensive about what they are saying, depending on their class positioning and regional location. One woman, in particular, embodies the stance of a fierce critic wholeheartedly. A sixty-year-old musician, An Thu, explains that she is committed to building national and international coalitions as a way of countering the state's acts of war-making against Cambodia and China so soon after the American War had ended in 1975. An Thu claims, "Hier nous étions tous frères. . . . Nous jurions fidélité comme les cinq doigts de la main. . . . Aujourd'hui, nous devenons ennemis. . . . Toute notre histoire est une histoire de trahison."³³ I highlight this quote because it speaks to the problem of women's treason and fidelity that is so central to this essay. Moreover, An Thu's words represent an ironic and critical reframing of Hồ Chí Minh's own words about the national family. Hồ Chí Minh's famous slogan, akin to Phan Bội Châu's famous saying that serves as the title of Trinh T. Minh-ha's film, refers to the cohesion and unity of the Vietnamese that connects people like the five fingers that are adjoined in a hand.³⁴ As the women's narratives collectively show in *Vietnam: un peuple, des voix*, their telling of stories is highlighted not only by Mai's acts of collation and organization but also underlined by the rhetorical power of imagery and figuration. In this I do not see the production of truth per se but the workings of the imagination as a "social practice,"³⁵ a theme that becomes translated in Trinh's re-presentation of women's stories and of their storytelling practices in *Surname Viet*.

Nevertheless, in the film's feminist critical discourse, Mai's voice and the voices contained in the collection are referents for a traumatic "real." Despite Mai's self-positioning in her work and sense of discomfort as a result of its publication ("It is very difficult for a Vietnamese woman to write about Vietnamese women"),³⁶ one critic has looked mainly at Mai's scholarly work as autobiographical in purpose. Katherine Gracki writes, "[Her] ethnographic project is framed by and seen through the prism of an autobiographical quest for origins and self-knowledge."³⁷ Gracki goes on to claim, "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 silencing of Vietnamese women in ethnographic representation and documentary

practices.”³⁸ While it may be true that the women in Việt Nam took a risk in speaking out against the state, grounded in Gracki’s statement is a conflation of all women, one that collapses Vietnamese and Vietnamese diasporic women, as well as the author, Mai Thu Vân, and filmmaker, Trinh T. Minh-ha.

Similarly, a homogeneous construction of women is underlined in Lawrence’s essay on women’s voices in Third World cinema. Feminist critics like Lawrence elide the fact that Trinh’s project was a collective effort not only produced in the global north but also distributed by a major U.S.-based feminist distributor of independent films: Women Make Movies.³⁹ In such critical work, the relations of power structuring the collaborative efforts in the making of Trinh’s film tend to be ignored while the web of access that references the ways such texts are circulated is dismissed. What must be taken into account is the way in which Trinh’s filmic and critical texts circulate widely within many contexts. Having accrued intellectual capital since her first film and publication, Trinh is afforded access in the making and dissemination of culture; her long-term relationship with Women Make Movies attests to this. A renowned feminist academic, director, and critic, Trinh’s positionality is thus markedly different from that of the women subjects in the film. Any conflation of the women involved in this project elides these key differences of class, capital, and status.

By the same token, however, because Mai Thu Vân’s book is bound in a collection and published by a major French publisher, the women’s voices contained therein are unquestioned as authentic representations of political and patriarchal repression. In contrast to the Vietnamese women’s stories of subordination, which are *recognizable* scripts of “Third World” oppression, the oral testimonials of the Vietnamese American women are little studied because their narratives are cast in a more conventional setting. As viewers, we see the immigrant women as living subjects in the film whose biographies are recounted through their stories and photographs. Consequently, the women’s stories in the second half of *Surname Viet* are understood to be less forceful in their rhetorical power as they hew to naturalized filmic techniques and the conventions of U.S. immigrant narratives. Linda Peckham notes that the techniques used here enable us to see the actresses in more natural settings: in their homes, with children, and at work. But while Peckham recognizes the inherent differences between these two communities of women found in the film, she also delineates how the halves of the film ultimately serve a methodological purpose. In effect, the immigrant women’s bodies and speech are seen as

reflexive elements in Trinh's assault on epistemology. On the reenactments, Peckham observes,

[T]he speaker is an actress, a substitute, a "fake," [so] that the interview style becomes subversive. . . . [T]he artificial subject points to the absence of a "real" speaker, an absence that suggests internment, kinship, and death, as well as the survival of a witness, a record—a history.⁴⁰

Without anchoring to the women's words and their bodies a "totalizing quest for meaning,"⁴¹ I want to flesh out what Peckham calls "a record—a history" and examine the actresses' narratives as part of a meaningful history.⁴² I propose that we re-center rather than decenter these women's stories as performative acts in the reenactment of the history of southern and central Vietnamese refugees as survivors. In doing so, what we will hear if we listen "nearby" is the notion that the women actively cooperated in the film for various reasons: to be a star, to partake in a dialogue, or to see themselves on screen.⁴³ Most resoundingly, the immigrant women indicate that they wanted to participate in a project that addresses their conditions as diasporic women, a desire consonant with the needs of marginalized peoples to be recognized as imaginative agents in dominant cultures. Unlike others who have argued that these voices attest to a triumphalist narrative,⁴⁴ I take into account the ways in which the four women's testimonials speak of life under the oppressive regime of communism and the problems of adjusting to American life after the war. The topics they touch upon are not assimilationist but rather are critical of racism and sexism, and deal with the negotiations entailed by female political subjectivity in the United States.

It is to the latter half of the film that I now turn, particularly because other critics have looked at this second half as more of a theoretical exercise for the filmmaker rather than an expression of meaning. I find a curious lack of critical engagement with this portion of the film. However, this part of the film should not be seen as merely instrumentalist in value and function because of its stylistic plainness and gestures toward sentimentality. Rather than ask whether there is anything "real" about the film, given its subversion of truth, I mean to look at the structures of looking and speaking with which the actors are engaged. Unlike Bill Nichols, who argues that Trinh simply flattens out women's subordination under a "monolithic construction of patriarchy," I focus upon Trinh's and the actresses' collaboration, which cites a shared sense of purpose and clears a space for an apprehension of difference amongst women.⁴⁵

**Accenting the Archive: Structures of Looking in
*Surname Viet Given Name Nam***

In the film *The Fact of Asian Women* (2003), Celine Parreñas-Shimizu works with Asian American actresses who reenact the personae of Anna May Wong, Nancy Kwan, and Lucy Liu. Theorist and filmmaker Parreñas-Shimizu argues that the interaction between filmmaker and actress alludes to a “metaprocess . . . that not only dramatizes the relationship among actor, filmmaker, and spectator but also dramatizes the idea of authorship itself as a contested issue.”⁴⁶ Parreñas-Shimizu de-emphasizes that Asian American stereotypes proliferate in popular films; instead, she reinvests energy and import into that creative participation between director and actor. Similarly I accentuate the film’s productivity rather than its negative critique.⁴⁷ I explore the authority that Trinh T. Minh-ha tries to divest from her own voice and examine how power can be redirected back into the voices and bodies of the women who are shown to perform multiple roles in the film: as women in socialist Việt Nam, women in the diaspora, and women subjects interpellated by both nation and community. Through this way of looking, what becomes clear is that the women are not only actors but also social actors, integrally involved in acts of looking and looking back in the second portion of the film.

Going one step further, I contend that the film constitutes an archive of images and stories that can be accessed through film. Framed in this fashion, *Surname Viet* becomes a performative process, enacted by a collective of women and underlined by the pleasures of storytelling. As Diana Taylor argues in another context, these “performances [represent] a challenge within—a process, praxis, an episteme, a mode of transmission, an accomplishment, and a means of intervening in the world, exceeding the possibilities of other words offered in its place.”⁴⁸ In the ellipses of the narratives—placed variously between the musical segments, voice-overs, and voice-offs—are the performances of women and the power they wield in the telling of their stories. Brian Wallis has also noted the storytelling modes that underpin Trinh T. Minh-ha’s work. Wallis contends that the stories “acknowledge the craft of construction and delivery, the pleasures of interchange, the biases of the teller and the moral or lesson unmistakably transmitted.”⁴⁹

True to Wallis’s words is a certain pleasure in the sharing of stories between women in the film. An actress by the name of Khiển Lai, a woman who plays the role of Thu Vân (“a 35-year old technical cadre from Việt Nam”), animatedly shares the account of her interrogation by a Vietnamese soldier after the war. Narrating in

English, she proclaims to the cadre that she loves her country and does not plan to escape. She pleads with him, “Please, don’t shoot me.” Khiến Lai’s testimonial tells of the traumas that afflicted southern Vietnamese women after the war but also stresses a strategy of speaking in camouflage, an act that had enabled her to survive a horrific situation. In another recounting, spoken in Vietnamese but not subtitled in English, she narrates how her hair caught on fire at work, jokingly comparing her burnt hair to crispy fried noodles.⁵⁰ She relays that, after the trauma of war, the physical injury does nothing to her psychically. Like An Thư’s words that resignify Hồ Chí Minh’s propagandistic slogan, this story points to how Khiến Lai’s embellishment—in the form of figurative language—is an imaginative act that translates horror into humor.

Captured on film, the pleasure of storytelling underlies how the “gift of storytelling” brings people together.⁵¹ The act of storytelling and its attendant pleasures courses through the scenes with the young Vietnamese American woman, Lan Trinh, and her white girlfriend, Sue Whitfield. Close-ups of the two women display the homoeroticism of female bonding as they run, laugh, climb trees, and speak intimately with each other in front of a crackling fireplace, a common signifier for heterosexual romance in popular culture. Seemingly out of place, especially given her age in respect to the other interviewees in the film, Lan speaks to the ways that telling stories becomes an act of female empowerment and concretizes an expression of homosociality that transcends generations. While this move opens Trinh T. Minh-ha up to a critique of her reification of women’s experiences,⁵² as well as of her idealization of the Other,⁵³ it can also be seen as part of a deconstructive undertaking that enables a broader critique of the structures of power that silence women’s stories and obscure female bonds by masculinist formations of viewing in both Việt Nam and the diaspora.

Essentially, the pleasure of telling stories coincides with the pleasures of looking. The viewing that all of the four actresses (besides Lan Trinh) enact is key within the film because they are caught gazing at and speculating upon several spectacles: dogs on tightropes, performing dancers, and concert singers during a Tết Festival or at other community events. Trinh’s camera not only demonstrates how the women (Khiến and Hiền, for example) look at spectacles but also reveals their pleasure in being spectacles themselves. In one sequence, Hiền plays the role of cultural interpreter when she talks about the Vietnamese national costume, the *áo dài*, in front of a group of young students, while wearing an *áo dài* herself. The scene ends with two white children wearing *áo dài*s, in turn. Especially meaningful is Hiền’s orchestration of this

sequence of show-and-tell so that the Western gaze is reversed: the ethnic spectacle is displaced onto the Western body as Other. On this point, Trinh describes how the women's clothing was a point of contention for her. Though wanting to resist commodifying ethnicity, she assents to the women's desires to promote their identity through a sartorial display.⁵⁴ It is a point worth exploring further because picturing the áo dài on screen relates to Trinh's theoretical praxis. Since sewing and weaving are seen as feminine labor, Trinh employs the metaphors of veiling and costuming to fashion a film about women's relationship to the national costume.⁵⁵ Nhi Lieu argues that the áo dài is a figuration for the nation, a piece of clothing for women that is cathected with affect, pride, and nationalism that becomes especially pronounced as such within diasporic beauty pageants.⁵⁶ Given the symbolic importance of the national costume for women, then, choosing to wear an áo dài is a political act for diasporic women. It is this political sentiment that Trinh gestures to when she maintains that women's choice of fashion in the film "constitute[s] one of the critical threads woven through the entire texture of the work."⁵⁷ Trinh's repositioning of Vietnamese American women as agents of the look appears to be just as important for Trinh as it is for her to peel back the sedimented layers of meaning that have constituted "woman."

Furthermore, the second half of the film firmly alludes to the role the women play prior to the metafictional development of filming. They are creative participants in the processes of self-representation, having positioned themselves in the settings that they choose to be filmed against. Trinh's interviews with the women point out that they imagine themselves on the screen prior to the film's recording and that they place themselves in particular scenarios in order to be filmed. Khiến Lai asks that she be placed near a "fish pond" where she can be aestheticized against a natural and beautiful backdrop, a point that Trinh disagreed with initially but later agreed to. Because of their collaborative exchange, the film features scenes of Khiến Lai looking at koi in a Japanese garden, or drinking tea in a teahouse. For Khiến Lai, these sites are places of peaceful meditation.⁵⁸

As a material product, the film is, finally, a significant part of a Vietnamese feminist repertoire. The film archives images and narratives that are invariably inflected by postwar trauma but also contains spectacles of a Tết Festival, music concerts, and beauty pageants for an emergent diasporic Vietnamese population after their emigration to the United States. Produced in 1989, *Surname Viet* was one of the first films to have encapsulated the cultural practices that dominated the theater of diasporic Vietnamese

community life during this time. Two years prior, the Vietnamese state opened itself to market capitalism, thus dramatically changing the ways that the government did business with its foreign others and the diaspora from this time onward. From this angle, the film composes one historical document within what Ann Cvetkovich calls an “archive of feeling.” As Cvetkovich describes, an “archive of feelings is an exploration of cultural texts as repositories of feelings and emotions, encoded not only in content but in the practices that surround their production and reception.”⁵⁹

Cvetkovich’s concept of this archive focuses mostly on lesbian public cultures and trauma; however, her work on trauma’s expressivity in ephemeral and elliptical sites is deeply relevant to my understanding of Trinh’s film because much of the second half of the film dwells on the traumas, as well as the joys, of diasporic women. Cvetkovich’s work is especially useful because it provides a lexicon of affect with which to study the sentiment interwoven in the women’s words and their pictures. Representative of an affective archive, the poignant photos that make up the women’s past and present are mostly black-and-white depictions of their lives as young girls. The pictures are invested with meaning and sentiment on the screen because they narrate a meaningful story about the women’s lives, religion, families, past, and occupations. Accompanied by the women’s spoken narratives, these still images compose a partial but moving history of southern and central Vietnamese female refugees.

As much as Trinh invites us to be suspect of the speaking subject in her documentaries, this historical narrative nonetheless underlines a class and community of women in the diaspora. Despite its claims to decenter master narratives, the film creates a space for the exchange of women’s remembrances about the narrative of war. More than this, the film houses these women’s stories and photographs, which bear witness to history and contradict the male-centered American versions of “Vietnam.” The remembrance of this regional aspect of Vietnamese history is especially critical when we consider Thu-Hu-o-ng Nguyễn-Võ’s assertion that Vietnamese Americans, many of whom were southerners prior to coming to the United States, “mourn the dead as a way to accuse the living.”⁶⁰ As Nguyễn-Võ relates, particularly expressive are the stories inside U.S. borders that attest to the failures of American imperialism. Yet, I would go further in appropriating this archive for feminists to claim that, in speaking of this history from a women’s perspective, the film becomes even more emphatically an “embodied practice” and episteme.⁶¹ This is significant when we take into account how a Vietnamese American political public is dominated primarily by the presence of male patriots and their narratives. Southern and

central Vietnamese women's traumas are rarely encoded as part of the traumatic history that a masculinist southern Vietnamese regime had experienced during the war and under communism in the war's aftermath. Part of Trinh's powerful critique of nationalisms is a criticism of a form of cultural nationalism—as an extension of patriarchal power—that takes root in the diaspora, as well.

Toward a Diasporic Vietnamese Feminism

The idea of an archive is useful for an articulation of a diasporic Vietnamese feminism, one that is committed to seeing differences, as well as similarities, between Việt Nam and the diaspora. It is a kind of feminist looking that Yen Le Espiritu alludes to when she argues for a critical transnational perspective. Espiritu makes clear that a structural analysis of war, which interrogates the impacts of war for Vietnamese women in multiple sites, is necessary. For “racialization and the racial formation of Vietnamese women does not begin in the United States but rather in the ‘homeland’ already affected by United States economic, social, cultural and military influences.”⁶² Through an understanding of the dynamics of war, we can delineate how war is a “subject-making project—fashioning both Americans and the ‘enemies’ in ways that were and continue to be mutually implicated in each other.”⁶³ Along with Trinh T. Minh-ha, Espiritu lays the groundwork for a positioning that takes into account the forces of war and neocolonialism that continue to configure men's and women's lives. Trinh's film lays the groundwork for a feminist positioning that takes into account the forces of war and neocolonialism that continue to configure men's and women's lives. Such a mode of analysis comprises a vital aspect of a Vietnamese diasporic feminism that looks at the larger structures of power that bring postwar national and diasporic subjects into being but also query the acts of agency and resistance that mark women's everyday lives. This line of inquiry also enables us to see the twinned disciplinary systems by which nationalism is gendered and gender is nationalized in the Vietnamese and the Vietnamese diasporic contexts. In its pointed references to Phan Bội Châu and Nguyễn Du, Trinh's film allows us to see the ways that this dualism takes place on the site of women's bodies. She counters this patriarchal discourse by privileging women's collaborative acts and collective sense of agency instead.

To this end, I read the framing of the film as profoundly telling, even as Trinh returns us to the images and mechanisms of spectacle that have doggedly constituted “Vietnam.” Since the images of

woman-as-nation are repeated in the final frames of the film, there appears to be a cyclical return to the film's beginning—yet, with a difference.⁶⁴ For if the film begins with the theatricality of war and the spectacle of womanhood, *Surname Viet* also shows us how the actresses are bound up in this same system of image making but who attempt to resist them at the same time. In a central dialect, the actress, Trần Thị Bích Yến looks toward a red-hued horizon. She claims a sense of solidarity with Vietnamese women, speaking as a woman who had originally come from the central region of Việt Nam, an area notorious for having been battered by the battles between north and south. This space of communality gets lost amidst the celebrations and critiques of Trinh as a deconstructive auteur. For me, this sequence—however sentimental—is not without sentiment. As Trinh argues in respect to the emotive ways that the film speaks to viewerships, including Vietnamese viewers, “[T]he question of rendering visible the manipulations [in the second half of the film] or not is not so much the point, as that something different is happening which would provoke awareness and reflection.”⁶⁵ A contemplative moment that points to “something different,” Yến’s speech enunciates a transnational feminist politics that becomes a generative point of convergence between the diaspora and homeland.

I end this essay by sharpening the radical edge of Trinh’s film, since it dispatches several critiques but also archives Vietnamese American women’s roles and the fact of their realities on film. The film stands as a material product that significantly reforms documentary practices. More importantly, however, it remains a recorded document of postwar Vietnamese American women’s performances of memory. In this fashion, *Surname Viet* encompasses “a membrane that brings its audience into contact with material forms of memory,” underpinning what Laura U. Marks names “intercultural cinema.”⁶⁶ Rather than just evaluate Trinh T. Minh-ha’s critique of ethnographic and documentary film as a truth-telling medium, I contend that *Surname Viet* alludes meaningfully to the felt experiences of diasporic women and thus has powerful connotations for the Vietnamese American feminist critic who can try to make sense of the film’s purported “doublespeak.”⁶⁷

In this positioning of myself as a critic, I question the construction of a hegemonic Western viewer located in a critical body of work who would find the narratives and images in the film unpleasurable, indecipherable, and untranslatable.⁶⁸ We are now at a historical moment when feminist scholars, particularly those who are versed in the Vietnamese language and caught in the same

historical circumstances as the subjects of Trinh's film, are working to define a meaningful analytic with which to make connections between the diaspora and Việt Nam. While I do not agree with Sylvie Blum-Reid's assertion that only a native critic can "decipher the codes" of Vietnamese films,⁶⁹ I do emphasize that we must contextualize and historicize cultural productions to avoid dismissing the relations of power that operate within a powerful discourse such as "Vietnam" in the Western imagination. This includes critically looking at and historicizing Trinh T. Minh-ha as a filmmaker, in effect, contextualizing her work as essentially intertextual and collaborative. In reframing her films, we can apprehend the ways that her work speaks to other forms of knowledge and pleasure.

Notes

¹ Norma Alarcón, "Traddutora, Traditora: A Paradigmatic Figure of Chicana Feminism," in *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*, ed. Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 110–36, quotation on 111.

² Brenda Longfellow, "The Great Dance: Translating the Foreign in Ethnographic Film," in *Subtitles: On the Foreignness of Film*, ed. Atom Egoyan and Ian Balfour (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 335–54, quotation on 343.

³ Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Framer Framed: Film Scripts and Interviews* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 193.

⁴ Scholarship on Trinh T. Minh-ha's films is extensive. Besides the critics and their essays already listed in this chapter, see also Soo-Young Nam, "Recounting 'History': Documentary as Women's Cinema," *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 7, no. 1 (2001): 80–110; and Lynn C. Turner, "Documentary Friction: Vocal & Visual Strategies in *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*," *Parallax: A Journal of Metadiscursive Theory and Cultural Practices* 3 (1996): 81–93.

⁵ Tejeswari Niranjana, *Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism, and the Colonial Context* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 2.

⁶ Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 185.

⁷ In her discussion on mainland Chinese films, Rey Chow draws on Walter Benjamin's essay "The Task of the Translator," wherein Benjamin comments on the importance of displaying "the fragmentedness of the original" in the echoes that follow (in *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. Lawrence Venuti [New York: Routledge, 2000], 15–22, quotation on 21).

⁸ Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 43.

⁹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Post-colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 381.

¹⁰ Glen Mimura, *Ghostlife of Third Cinema: Asian American Film and Video* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 75.

¹¹ Amy Lawrence, “Women’s Voices in Third World Cinema,” in *Multiple Voices in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Diane Carson, Linda Dittmar, and Janice Welsh (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 406–20, quotation on 417.

¹² In the aftermath of the film, Trinh T. Minh-ha states,

[W]hat the women were facing here was not just the interviewer but a whole community of Vietnamese exiles, especially Vietnamese men or those who claim authoritative knowledge of the culture. . . . Everything that came out was a way of addressing the community. (Minh-ha, *Cinema Interval* [New York: Routledge, 1999], 57)

¹³ Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 72.

¹⁴ According to David Marr, Phan Bội Châu often championed the rights of women and their right to fight against foreign invaders (*Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920–1945* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981]).

¹⁵ The concept of “radical multiplicity” is explained in Trinh’s book *Cinema Interval*. Most particularly, she speaks about how her 1995 film, *A Tale of Love*, is an attempt to reinterpret Kiều in order to reflect the polyvalent experiences of women in Việt Nam and the diaspora (Minh-ha, *Cinema Interval*, 10).

¹⁶ Nguyễn Du’s nineteenth-century epic poem, *Truyện Kiều* (*The Tale of Kiều*), is made up of 3,254 verses in the *lục bát* (6–8 meter) form. A lengthy account of a young woman’s travails, the core of the narrative is the display of a woman’s filial piety. To free her father from jail, Thúy Kiều becomes a prostitute. Despite being kidnapped, cheated, and sold into brothels soon after, she continually sacrifices herself for the sake of her family. Written in *chữ nôm*, a vernacular script of Vietnamese based on Chinese ideograms, Nguyễn Du’s text is understood to be an allegory for Việt Nam and its struggles with colonialism and foreign domination. In his English translation of the poem, scholar Huỳnh Sanh Thông contends that the character of Kiều creates a template for the Vietnamese diaspora. Like Kiều, Vietnamese exiles are consigned to wander in search of home and family (Huỳnh Sanh Thông, “Introduction: The Tale of Kiều,” in *The Tale of Kiều*, by Nguyễn Du, trans. Huỳnh Sanh Thông [New York: Random House, 1973], xix–xl, esp. xl).

Because of its political overtones, the politics of the poem have been interpreted differently by various regimes throughout Việt Nam’s history. Mark Philip Bradley discusses how, in the 1920s, those, like Phạm Quỳnh, who collaborated with the French “sought to canonize Kiều” as a way to justify their collaboration, while anticollaborationists argued that “Kiều was a reprobate who ‘drift[ed] on streams of foul desire’” (“Contests of Memory: Remembering and Forgetting the War in the Contemporary Vietnamese Cinema,” in *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam*, ed. Hue-Tam Ho Tai, Asia: Local Studies/Global Themes series [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001], 196–226, quotations on 215). As Kim N. B. Ninh remarks, soon after the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Việt Nam (DRV), headed by Hồ Chí Minh, intellectuals began to evaluate the story of Kiều in terms of class (36) and applied a Marxist approach to the text (60) (*A World Transformed: The Politics of Culture in Revolutionary Vietnam: 1945–1965* [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2002]).

¹⁷ Trinh, *Framer Framed*, 80.

¹⁸ Along the same lines, Herman Rapaport argues that Trinh stages “precarious objectifications” of difference in both her film and book *Woman, Native, Other* (100). Looking at Trinh as a deconstructionist in the vein of Derrida, Rapaport lays

emphasis on the partial viewings and inherent risks that Trinh undertakes in representing the Other from a possibly essentialist position (“Deconstruction’s Other: Trinh T. Minh-ha and Jacques Derrida,” *Diacritics: A Review of Contemporary Criticism* 25, no. 2 [1995]: 98–113, quotation on 100).

¹⁹ Trinh T. Minh-ha criticizes Western spectators and their consumption of the war in this pithy statement: “Every spectator owns a Vietnam of his or her own” (“All-Owning Spectatorship,” in *Otherness and the Media: The Ethnography of the Imagined and the Imaged*, ed. Hamid Naficy and Teshome Gabriel, Studies in Film and Video series [Langhorn, PA: Harwood Academic, 1993], 189–204, quotation on 201). Similarly, I delineate the ways in which “Vietnam” is a predominantly Western construction in my work. However, I also argue that this construction is ever-present in the diasporic imagination. “Viêt Nam,” when broken down in two monosyllables in this essay, alludes to the ways that the country has always and presently spells its name. Neither for linguistic nor nationalistic authenticity do I use “Viêt Nam” to reference the country in its contemporaneity. Rather, I insist on the different spellings to mark the violent history between Viêt Nam and the West as an imposition that is literalized by the Anglicized spelling and to signal a particular discourse of “Vietnam,” one dominated by a sense of tragic pastness that undergirds many Western and diasporic cultural productions.

²⁰ Trinh, *Framer Framed*, 208.

²¹ Peter X. Feng, *Identities in Motion: Asian American Film and Video* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 198.

²² Trinh, *Framer Framed*, 123.

²³ *Ibid.*, 207.

²⁴ Mai Thu Vân, *Vietnam: un peuple, des voix* (Paris: Pierre Horay, 1983), 20.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

²⁶ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Public Worlds series (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 7.

²⁷ Mai, *Vietnam*, 100, 171.

²⁸ “Do you find it interesting to speak about these problems concerning women?” (*ibid.*, 100, my translation).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 99, 133.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 60, 149.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 191.

³² *Ibid.*, 173.

³³ “Yesterday we were brothers. . . . We pledged our loyalty to one another like the five fingers of a hand. . . . Today we have become enemies. Our whole history is a history of treason” (*ibid.*, 130–31, quotation on 25, my translation).

³⁴ In an important letter addressed to his southern compatriots in May 1946, Hồ Chí Minh proclaimed, “The five fingers are of unequal length but they are united in the hand.” The historical context for this proclamation was especially complex. Before departing for France to negotiate for national independence, Hồ Chí Minh needed to encourage southerners to continue to fight for national reunification. A year earlier, Hồ had established the Democratic Republic of Viêt Nam (DRV) in Hà Nội but, at the time, southern Viêt Nam was still under French colonial

authority. On the importance of this event, see William Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh: A Life* (New York: Hyperion, 2000).

³⁵ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 31.

³⁶ These are Mai's words, which Trinh reads in the film.

³⁷ Katherine Gracki, "True Lies: Staging the Ethnographic Interview in Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam*," *Pacific Coast Philology* 36 (2001): 48–63, quotation on 49.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

³⁹ In fact, *Women Make Movies* has distributed all of Trinh T. Minh-ha's films: *Reassemblage* (1982), *Naked Spaces: Living is Round* (1985), *Shoot for the Contents* (1991), *A Tale of Love* (1995), *The Fourth Dimension* (2001), and *Night Passage* (2004).

⁴⁰ Linda Peckham, "Surname Viet Given Name Nam: Spreading Rumors & Ex/Changing Histories," in *Screening Asian Americans*, ed. Peter X. Feng (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 235–42, quotation on 238.

⁴¹ Cf. Trinh T. Minh-ha, "The Totalizing Quest of Meaning," in *Theorizing Documentary*, ed. Michael Renov (New York: Routledge, 1993), 90–107.

⁴² Trinh T. Minh-ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 29.

⁴³ I am purposefully redeploying Trinh's notion of "speaking nearby." Trinh uses this method as an ethical way of representing the Other. In turn, it is instructive to emphasize the speaker and for viewers to listen nearby (see Trinh T. Minh-ha and Nancy N. Chen, "Speaking Nearby," in *Feminism and Film*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan, Oxford Readings in Feminism series [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000], 317–35).

⁴⁴ Lawrence, "Women's Voices," 417.

⁴⁵ Bill Nichols asks, "Why, for example, give such emphasis on the failures of the Communist government when neither it nor American-style democracy provide a context in which patriarchal oppression can be overcome?" Nichols critiques the film for concerning itself mostly with the problems of Vietnamese socialist patriarchy (Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991], 253–54).

⁴⁶ Celine Parreñas-Shimizu and Helen Lee, "Sex Acts: Two Meditations on Race and Sexuality," *Signs: A Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30, no. 1 (2004): 1385–402, quotation on 1388.

⁴⁷ For example, Cassie Premo contends that Trinh T. Minh-ha offers an unproductive critique, one that is not a viable blueprint for speaking of difference for postmodern feminism ("When the Difference Becomes Too Great: Images of the Self and Survival in a Postmodern World," *Genre* 16 [1995]: 183–91). On Trinh's rhetorical strategies, which emphasize empathetic connotation rather than emphatic argumentation, see Susan C. Jarratt, "Beside Ourselves: Rhetoric and Representation in Postcolonial Feminist Writing," in *Crossing Borderlands: Composition and Postcolonial Studies*, ed. Andrea Lunsford and Lahoucine Ouzgane, Pittsburgh Series in Composition, Literacy, and Culture (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000), 110–28.

⁴⁸ Reading performance through this analytic offers scholars different methodologies, as well as different ways of knowing (Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the*

Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas, John Hope Franklin Center Book series [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003]).

⁴⁹ Brian Wallis, "Questioning Documentary," *Aperture*, no. 112 (1988): 60–71, quotation on 60.

⁵⁰ A full transcript of the film alludes to this moment (see Trinh, *Framer Framed*, 80).

⁵¹ Rapaport, "Deconstruction's Other," 102.

⁵² See Sara Suleri's critique of both Trinh T. Minh-ha and bell hooks. As Suleri argues, neither theorist offers a nonessentialist way of speaking out about women's conditions in a multiculturalist context, which often co-opts women's stories ("Woman Skin Deep: Feminism and the Postcolonial Condition," in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman [New York: Columbia University Press, 1994], 244–56). Similarly, in her essay on the need to reconceptualize the meanings of "home" in a sociopolitical and contemporary context, Feroza Jussawalla questions Trinh's language, specifically, Trinh's use of the term *hybridity* to define the fluid and heterogeneous identities that postcolonial Third World women occupy ("South Asian Diaspora Writers in Britain: 'Home' Versus 'Hybridity,'" in *Ideas of Home: Literature of Asian Migration*, ed. Geoffrey Kain [East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1997], 17–37).

⁵³ Jane Desmond looks at Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Reassemblage* and *Naked Spaces*, contending that Trinh's formalism and "incipient humanism" betray her deconstructive critiques. Analyzing her filmic techniques, Desmond argues that these two films, which deal mainly with African women, reify the Other in Orientalist ways ("Ethnography, Orientalism and the Avant-Garde Film," *Visual Anthropology* 4, no. 2 [1991]: 147–60, quotation on 153).

⁵⁴ Despite this gesture, Peter X. Feng discusses how Trinh T. Minh-ha is trapped in the commodification of ethnicity: "Although the film may call attention to these processes of textual mediation, the film does not foreground its own construction to the same extent that it problematizes translation" (*Identities in Motion*, 200).

⁵⁵ For more on the veiling metaphors found in this film, see Adrienne McCormick, "Veiling Practices, Invisibility, and Knowledge Production in the Documentary Films of Trinh T. Minh-ha, Barbara Hammer, and Lourdes Portillo," in *Visual Media and the Humanities: A Pedagogy of Representation*, ed. Kecia Driver McBride, Tennessee Studies in Literature (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 2004), 357–99.

⁵⁶ Nhi T. Lieu, "Remembering 'The Nation' through Pageantry: Femininity and the Politics of Vietnamese Womanhood in the Hoa Hau Ao Dai Contest," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies* 21, nos. 1–2 (2000): 126–51.

⁵⁷ Trinh, *Framer Framed*, 194.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feeling: Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Culture*, Series Q (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 7.

⁶⁰ Thu-Hu-o-ng Nguyễn-Võ, "Forking Paths: How Shall We Mourn the Dead?" *Amerasia* 31, no. 2 (2005): 157–75, quotation on 170.

⁶¹ Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 3.

⁶² Yen Le Espiritu, "Vietnamese Women in the United States: A Critical Transnational Perspective," in *Le Việt Nam au Féminin: Việt Nam—Women's Realities*, ed.

Gisele Bousquet and Nora A. Taylor (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2005), 307–21, quotation on 311.

⁶³ Ibid., 312.

⁶⁴ On the issue of repetition and difference, Trinh T. Minh-ha states, “Repetition here is not just the automatic reproduction of the same, but rather the production of the same with and in differences” (*Framer Framed*, 114).

⁶⁵ Ibid., 169.

⁶⁶ Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 243.

⁶⁷ Gracki, “True Lies,” 54.

⁶⁸ Writing on *Reassemblage*, Catherine Russell speaks to the limitations of the film, noting that it is “addressed to an intellectual audience for whom the meaninglessness has meaning” (“Beyond Authenticity: The Discourse of Tourism in Ethnographic and Experimental Film,” *Visual Anthropology* 5, no. 2 [1992]: 131–41, quotation on 136).

⁶⁹ Sylvie Blum-Reid, *East-West Encounters: Franco-Asian Cinema and Literature* (London: Wallflower, 2003), 143.