

Trinh T. Minh-ha's Experimental Cinematic Language:  
Translation, Intertextual Patterns, and Ghosts of Citation

“The challenge is not just to write; you have to come up with a different form of writing...” (Trinh 2023: 191)

“Isn't a writer someone who loves for a living?” (*A Tale of Love*)



Figure 1. Still from Trinh T. Minh-ha's digital film  
*What about China?*, colour, sound, 2022. Moongift Films.

Contemporary filmmaker and scholar Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Traveling in the Dark* (Trinh 2023) is a handsomely open-ended artbook. Collaboratively curated with Larys Frogier, the publication was originally conceived in tandem with Trinh's 2023 video essay *What about China?* The work is a kaleidoscopic record of text, images, and film stills resourced from the archive of Trinh T. Minh-ha (Figure 1). More specifically, *Traveling in the Dark* is comprised of long-format interviews, aphoristic maxims, aesthetic reflections, and a constellation of fragmented pictures. It is a single movie-like take without a cut, a spliced cinematic journey sans the moving reel. Like a dream walk amidst a lilac corridor of clouds, or a look lost in a mossy grotto of contemplation, orphan images are reassembled to find new home in the compilation.

This essay explores the larger artistic oeuvre of Trinh T. Minh-ha and their relationship to citation, most especially two of her experimental films—*Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989) and *Forgetting Vietnam* (2015). I discuss how multivocality of voice and practices of referentiality function across related aesthetic registers in her bookend projects. I think through *citation as a form of translation*—the act both literal and metaphoric, figurative. Translation in this way is broadly understood to include textual explanations, the caption, linguistic interpretation, transposition, and the nuanced politics of the oral-history (outdated) interview. This conversation leads to a consideration of *citation as animate grammar*.

Intertextual exchange across Trinh's two major Việt Nam projects is paramount. *The riff, the passing reference, the missing footnote* each operate like a connective synapse; an arboreal-like network of dendritic branches form knowledge-making: citation is rhizomatic. With citational translation near-at-hand, I perform a kind of slowed-down visual analysis; close-looking through formal cinematic language, symbolic landscapes, and Marxist historical critique. For Trinh, the

auto-citation and self-referentiality perform their own kind of anti-hierarchical quotation. Summoning the blind wanderer's wisdom and guided by a willful suspension of disbelief, *Traveling in the Dark*—like Trinh's wider oeuvre of films—is itself too one long citation.

Last, I gesture towards citation as an 'aesthetics of disappearance,' *a politics of erasure*. *Citation as translational trace, the footnote as memorial*: a death-page of sorts. In *Forgetting Vietnam*, 'I was working with the ghosts of war...', narrates Trinh (Trinh 2023: 218). With a 'memory of vast origin,' cinema acts as the quintessential phantom medium for this exegesis (Figure 2). Hạ Long Bay, the 'pearl' of Vietnamese tourism pictured here in dim shades of grey, is poetical prologue for the film and our analysis. In this composite image, a craggily rock face and small schooner frame a nameless photograph upon the horizon: voice and void merging in a dimly lit seascape of stillness.



Figure 2. Still from Trinh T. Minh-ha's digital film *Forgetting Vietnam*, 2015, colour, sound, 90'. Moongift Films.

To begin unfolding this kind of phenomenological inquiry, we evoke the artist's concept of *speaking nearby*. "**In speaking nearby,**" the artist writes, "rather than speaking about, one leaves the space of representation open so that **at the same time as one is very close to one's subject, one is also committed to not speaking on their behalf, in their place, or on top of them**" (her emphasis). To surrender dominion and domination. Allow the citation to breathe. The footnote to fall. This kind of historical sensibility, aesthetic orientation, and affective humility constitutes Trinh's vision of documentary film making. It is a speechless act that discloses an 'open field of signification' (Chung 2026: 32).

## I. Citation and Translation

Trinh T Minh-ha's *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989; *Surname Viet* hereafter) assembles an archive of staged monologues with women from Viet Nam: disparate voices, biographical portraits, and diaristic memoirs suture the film together. Stories of collective identity and the gendered tropes of nation-building create a narrative arc, while Vietnamese folk sayings, *tục ngữ ca dao* songs, and found video footage interrupt staid meaning.

Trinh's re-evaluation of documentary (ethnographic) film is a riffing with the tropes of the oral-history interview. Resistant to the capitalist lexicon of packaging and product, her films ripple with life. It makes sense that the opening of *Surname Viet* performs this precise kind of material equivocation, images made ghostly and animate. The film commences with four women dancing 'for the nation' in harmony (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Still from Trinh T. Minh-ha's digital film *Surname Viet Given Name Nam.*, colour, sound, 1989 108'. Moongift Films.

Their matching costumed figures, however, have been cropped, and their rhyming movements slowed-down to a hush. As if paused or delayed, the stop-motion-like gesticulations become discreet frames. The fantasy, myth, and allure of Vietnamese womanhood ruptured in step. Union in solidarity and hauntings alike, the embodied conditions of diaspora figure and fade with the Trinh's *trans-migrational* voice.

Thereafter, the title of the film *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* appears vacillating on screen, submerged beneath a thin glassy layer of water. As if trapped inside this crystalline coating, the five words tremble in fluctuation. *Việt Nam, đất nước*, a country and a place, a memory and a dream for too many. The two words here—*đất* and *nước*—translate as land and water respectively, yet when assembled together create the Vietnamese word for country. A place in tandem, a terrestrial space and a history inexorably linked to the dual cosmos of earth and water alike.

Trinh T. Minh-ha's process of film construction and approach to the politics of representation acknowledges this 'ideology of starting from the source' (Trinh 2023: 249). The enigmatic act of translation is paramount. Somewhere between the skin of the sea and physicality of earth, her film finds footing. And as if only visible through the transparent glaze of mediation, *the real* remains out of touch: *xanh da trời*, a blue sky peeled back in disguise. What follows is a spliced compilation of monochrome found-footage photographs and videorecording (Figure 4). Like the repetitive pulse of a clicking camera's shutter, this succession of fragmented images spool open.

And in this prefatory montage, phantom traces of revolutionary Vietnamese womanhood are exposed.



Figure 4. Still from Trinh T. Minh-ha's digital film *Surname Viet Given Name Nam.*, colour, sound, 1989 108'. Moongift Films.

More exactly, Trinh depicts groups of (and individuals too) anonymous women in distinctive clothing, posture, and setting: comrades march in military uniforms, rural rice-farmers descend a hill in *đội nón* (the now iconic conical hat), a young girl in *áo dài* traditional dress sits entranced, and an intrepid squad of indigenous soldiers—with customary coiffure—carry rifles at hand.

Shuttling across this panorama of castaway female characters is a poetic enunciation, a silent signal to viewers: *We are in the realm of the unknown. Come with us across this shore. Read our letters and tell our stories.* Less of a need for citation and more of a yearning for excavation, the grainy footage ceremoniously broadcasts *thông báo* its future unknowability. A choreography of translation. Along this dreamscape of unidentified moving images, streamlined logic quickly disassembles. Instead, viewers are squarely situated in a murky prism of history and memory, identity and nationhood.

Nowhere is it mentioned that *Surname Viet* is itself already an ethnographic re-inscription. In fact, Trinh's genre-bending work is a reappropriation of interviews originally conducted by Mai Thu Van in *Việt Nam: un peuple, des voix*. What are the politics of meaningful re-interpretation, paraphrasing, and translation? How indeed should an artist—film maker, musician, writer, translator, historian—cite experience? In recreating the transcribed and translated interviews through first-person dramatized monologues, *Surname Viet* performs a kind of reassemblage; some hybridization of past and present, truth and fiction. A form of 'minoritarian aesthetics,' Trinh's films enact what Theresa Hak Kyung Cha calls 'a realization of the imprint' (Chung, 2026: 29). The shout of hegemonic perspectivity is relegated to the margins.

In the wake of found footage material we are presented with an extreme closeup shot of a woman. The sharp abruptness of her spliced portrait-like images disorient our perception. Music commences, and consequently a gentle singing voice hums: “I am like a piece of silk, floating in the midst of the market, knowing not into whose hands it will fall” (Figure 5). Like the lyrical fluidity of glimmering sea that handles the solitary boat rower’s paddle, we drift in the current of a light beam to glide across the water’s surface.



Figure 5. Still from Trinh T. Minh-ha’s digital film *Surname Viet Given Name Nam.*, colour, sound, 1989 108’. Moongift Films.

The vertiginous nature of truth and knowledge is a slippery sojourn. And within the first five-minutes of *Surname Viet* Trinh has already furtively outlined the major contours of her interventions. The act of the writer and translator rhyming in step to fathom new ground. Only later in the film will voiceover explain, “The original text is always already an impossible translation that renders translation impossible.” Alongside this hazy ridge of not-knowing-ness lies a world wherein apparitions linger and fade, face and figure: an echo of spells’ cast a space to open, there to be welcomed afloat in our own not knowing. And in this new semiotic arena, the unknowability of longing is paramount. Recollection is its own reckoning.

The oral history interviews that construct the majority of the film begin after a fragmented journal entry that reads: “In principle, a foreigner is already a spy. Even a socialist... Or even you. We live in constant suspicion... There is no mutual trust” (Ly, 37 years old, employee, Vietnam 1982). Throughout the film, these kinds of diaristic notes become a recurring leitmotif and as importantly the exclusive field of definitive identification: name, age, employment, place, year. A world of deception and half-truths, memory like cinema like memoir traffics in the realm of illusions.

As such, film becomes a kind of proposition, an open space of shared care and responsibility. Mutual affinities and concerned dialogues of love configure the ‘subject’ of the work. Empathetic receptivity and critical fabrications negotiate this ulterior domain. Trinh posits, “acts

of creativity and of transformation maintain our relation to infinity” (Trinh 2023: 207). The subjunctive *had it been* or *was it to be* or *if there were* orient this affective mode of film making.

Let us continue by looking at a single still from the first oral history interview of the film (Figure 6). Crouched in some niche corner space, a Northern Vietnamese woman prepares food. The lingering tragedy of war and its shadowy aftermath are palpable. Her headscarf, accent, and somber descriptions of communist ‘victory’ performatively situate her in *miền bắc*, the north. Further forward in the film, Trinh will ponder the tangled politics of the interview: ‘The more intimate the tone, the more successful the interview. Every question she and I come up with, is more or a less a copy of a question we have heard before...’

Cutting vegetables and arranging food, the forlorn comrade recounts her experience of post-war daily life. The uninterrupted three-minute monologue scene is melancholic and quiet. Sacrifice and the gendered tropes of proper Vietnamese feminine behavior orient the rehearsed narration. Bearing witness aside, we remember there always is no winning in war. The mastic residue of colonial subjugation and imperial violence is a splintered wound that only discreetly (and ever-so-unpredictably) reveals its own scarred past. With dignity and grace, Trinh’s interrogative posture silently disbands the transgenerational grip of trauma, granting space for an exhaled breadth in repose.



Figure 6. Still from Trinh T. Minh-ha’s digital film *Surname Viet Given Name Nam.*, colour, sound, 1989 108’. Moongift Films.

**“In tuning in with the forces of a life event, a form is attained only to manifest the formless”** (Trinh 2023: 17; her italics). There is something almost auto-oneiric about this sense of theoretical schema: pictures, video and sound in flux *ad infinitum*. The women pictured threefold and askance here exemplifies this malleability of tuning frequencies and formal visibility (Figure 7). One of Trinh’s primary subjects, she narrates experiences of daily life both during and after the war. Here, the melancholy of singular reminiscence confronts the resilience of collective memory. Trinh is quick to remind viewers, however, ‘my films do not focus on individualistic subjects’ (Trinh 2023: 127). Form and the formless attained and evaporating in alliance.



Figure 7. Still from Trinh T. Minh-ha's digital film  
*Surname Viet Given Name Nam.*, colour, sound, 1989 108'. Moongift Films.

How, then, do we talk about objectivity and subjecthood? If impervious to aesthetic categorization, where is truth? Falsehoods? What constitutes authorship and personal memory? Similar to the film maker's formal re-framing and mis-orientation of this women's diegetic personhood, the trite faces of fiction and fact fall apart.

Speaking further about her own filmography Trinh reflects, "As I have repeatedly mentioned, I don't consider my work simply 'documentary,' 'fiction,' 'experimental,' or 'essayistic' because the creative film is first and foremost a film" (Trinh 2023: 253). Language is precision. And translation obliterates as the tongue rises to dissolve on the mouth's brim in speech. "Looking for the roots of language before it is born on the tip of the tongue," writes contemporary multimedia artist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (Chung 2026: 372). Cha's specter and charge continue to walk in silent absence beside Trinh and our text.

The hazy ground of translation is more than just the disjunctive orientation of character subjects and their fragmented stories. Consider the way citational rephrasing itself often operates interstitially: fragmented sequencing; the dis-alignment of text and speech; a drag or lag time between footage, script, and voiceover on screen (Figure 8). In this way, Trinh disrupts the alleged credibility of *quotational reference*; instead, the echo of codified truth is exposed as indefinite and indeterminate.

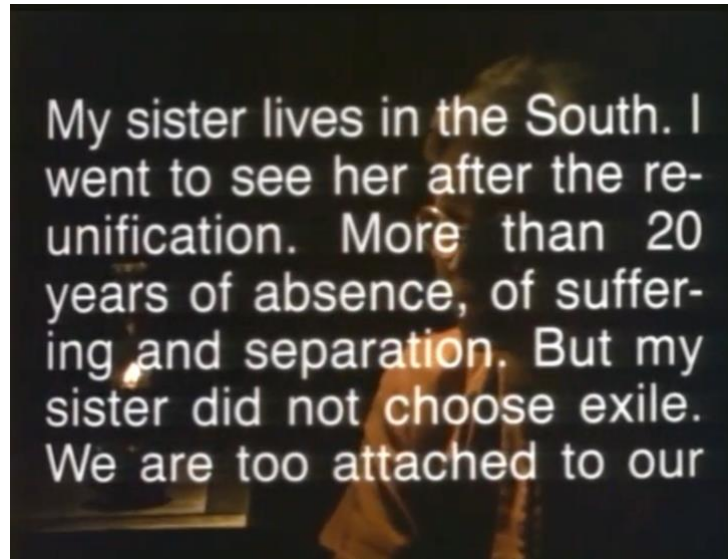


Figure 8. Still from Trinh T. Minh-ha's digital film *Surname Viet Given Name Nam.*, colour, sound, 1989 108'. Moongift Films.

'My sister lives in the South. I went to see her after the re-unification'—words spoken by one of the other central characters from the film emphasize this dislocation of subjectivity. More acutely, as viewers we read these words after they have already been uttered (only just off-kilter enough). This vocalization of textual language at once precedes and unravels its own spoken presence: aural, sonic, visual and verbal landscapes collapse in their own-making. Vietnamese mis-translations further disrupt the diegetic legibility on screen. At one point spoken diaristic Vietnamese words overlap a folksong sung and an English excerpt from a letter. Permanency and stasis are displaced by an elastic form of polyvocality. Language is a conjuring, a cosmos of contingency that refigures the conditions of exile.

Amidst these kinds of shifty cracks and gaps, the fluidity of memory and permutations of autobiographical history form anew in Trinh's work; unspoken 'life event forces' fashioned fresh in imagined frames we will never see or hear. Rearranged in absence, it makes sense that traditional voiceover and authoritative narration implode from within the seams of the artist's aesthetic cauldron. Instead, thick montage and disjunctive aurality configure an original poetics of cinematic movement and migration, (*e*)*motion-al* meaning. 'Decentralizing and diversifying the processes of voicing is what I try to bring about with multivocality,' writes Trinh (2023: 215).

Attuned to the politics operating both (with)*in*-side, and (with)*out*-side of displacement, Trinh's *trans(meta)-vantage* performs an aesthetics of ephemerality. The specific discussion of exile and familial fracture (see Figure 8) only further fold form into content; context back into structure; and meaning into a more opaque aggregate where the sum may at times out-cede its parts.

As to be expected, it is not only *Surname Viet* that interrogates polyvalent identities through voice. In *What about China?* (2021), Trinh's defamiliarizing formulation of personhood collapses diachronic time and the purportedly stable gaze of reportage. 'Three of us speak in the first-person "I." Who is "I" in this film? The "I" can only come in with multiplicity' (Trinh 2023: 215). What then, we may ask, constitutes a primary document, an accurate historical record? Who/How in fact could be called this conjuring one of many or fleeting mass of none?

Fluctuation is an activator of meaning. Through photomontage, ambient noise, and reanimated images the shifty nature of self and reality pause and play.

Composed of grainy textured, low-resolution Hi8-video footage (from 1993-1994), *What about China?* is an experimental audiovisual essay that whirls viewers along a sensory experience of architecture, folklore, and intergenerational rural village life. With the foreseeable loss of China's once-dominant peasant class, Trinh suggests we may wander and waft in the intimate immensities of the fallen and forgotten (Figure 9).



Figure 9. Still from Trinh T. Minh-ha's digital film *What about China?*, colour, sound, 2022. Moongift Films.

Like the morning light that kisses a gossamer draping clothesline to only part its combed rays through a wooden dowel, we too blink for serenity and wonder. Belatedness is an invitation to see. Attending to these kinds of clefts in consciousness, Trinh makes us keenly aware of the infinitely latent potentiality inscribed in film.

Returning to the second-half of *Surname Viet*, Trinh remarks that 'by choosing the most direct and spontaneous form of voicing and documenting I find myself closer to fiction' (*Surname Viet*). Making contact with the past is a tug of war. And in this nearness to falsehoods perhaps we approximate closer still the lost worlds of truth. How to graciously hold the simultaneity of meaning and articulation in the balance is the task at hand.

In other words, Trinh's mode of film-making is an embodied form of re-possession that in effect strives to continually expose the strictures, matrices, and ideological apparatus of the machine that is videorecording. Her acrobatic awareness of structural asymmetries within the medium call instead for an itinerant state of 'ongoing becomings' (Chung 2026: 27). Film as flux.

More too, Trinh's fluid notion of the 'personal collective' rearranges any stable meaning within autobiographical—memoir, singular, first-person—voice. Genre is always bending. Surrogates and proxies are never mere banal registers or cyphers of prescribed and imitative meaning. '[The] work is controversial,' suggests Katherine Gracki 'precisely because it unveils, rather than

masks, how ideologies of authenticity legitimize exclusionary systems of representation' (Gracki 2004: 53). Like Edward Said proffered, abandoning the ego-self to some more spacious field of vision prefigures any meaningful encounter with *the other*.

Most broadly, I read the latter half of *Surname Viet* as a kind of sutured renegotiation; a transparent form of self-criticism. Rehearsing the filmic script from inside the diegetic stage, Trinh exposes the dramaturgical components of acting, staging and editing that constitute the first part of the film. This autochthonous refiguring from within the documentary tradition is almost a kind of fugue or counterpoint.

Trinh questions the actresses about their various roles on screen and deconstructs the praxis of interview production: actors, performers, and onlooker are now re-presented *in situ* living their own agential (purported) lives across disparate Vietnamese-American communities in the United States (Figure 10). The lonely comrade in the corner (see Figure 7) becomes a newly self-fashioned Việt Kiều queen wearing *ngọc* pearls and a *lụa* silk dress.



Figure 10. Still from Trinh T. Minh-ha's digital film *Surname Viet Given Name Nam.*, colour, sound, 1989 108'. Moongift Films.

At one time, Trinh even auto-reflexively positions herself as collaborator and fabricator of the work. An off-screen narrator voiced by Lan Trinh—a second-generation Vietnamese American—questions the film-maker about her *raison d'être* for the project, specifically the uncanny instrumentalization of 'Interview' as a pedagogic tool. Trinh responds: 'Interview: an antiquated device of documentary. Truth is selected, renewed, displaced, and speech is always tactical.'" *The real* is squarely placed in the spotlight.

Recall Trinh's kaleidoscopic sense of History: "But for me, there's no such thing as the mere past" (Trinh 2023: 220). Privileging a conceptual space of disorientation and unboundedness, Trinh's vantage is at once political and visionary. "When you talk about memory, memory is always now. Memory as you construct it is neither merely present, nor past. It's an in-between

reality” (Trinh 2023: 220). The glossy residue of historical time is but a faded dream that propels itself forward to a past long forgotten in silence.

Her oeuvre enacts its own ongoing creation of anti-heroic knowledge. Not mere trickster and surely no *nói đùa* joke to be had, film is a generous mode of address that embraces a landscape of active listening and mutual cooperation. More like an offering than a product, *Surname Viet* asks questions more than makes declarations: curiosity and uncertainty, not mastery and stringent hierarchies, reign true.

The final moving image of *Surname Viet* begins with Trinh’s voiceover (Figure 11). A small and darkened boat is pictured nearly illegible.

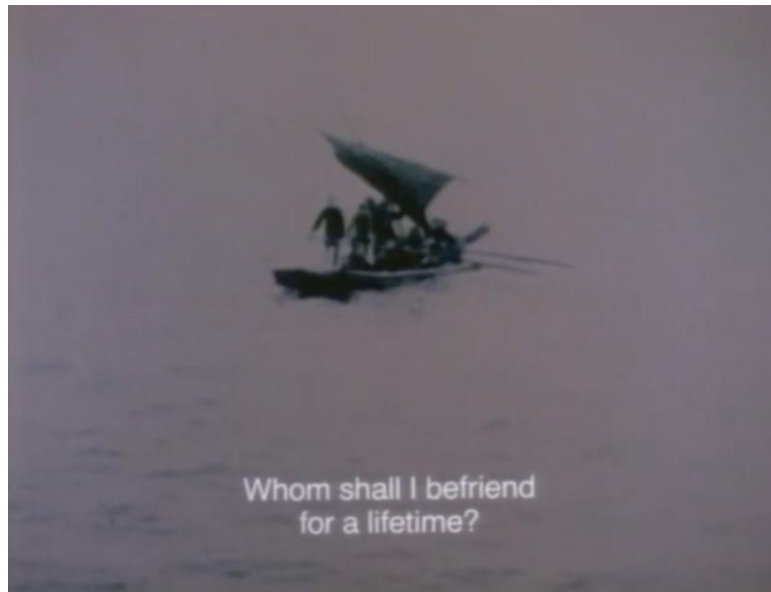


Figure 11. Still from Trinh T. Minh-ha’s digital film *Surname Viet Given Name Nam.*, colour, sound, 1989 108’. Moongift Films.

She pontificates on the meaning of *Truyện Kiều*, Nguyễn Du’s 19<sup>th</sup> century epic poem that “even illiterate people knew long passages of by heart,” reminding us “... each government has its peculiar ways of using and appropriating womens’ images;” laments the refugee crisis and “policy of castaway lives” lost at sea— “the beach people” (not dispossessed ‘boat people’ she suggests); questions the American war of imperialism; and refigures the exodus of Vietnamese post-1975 and ongoing role of conscientious-objectors.

The picture of a small boat lost at sea flutters on as if trapped inside the screen while Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thích Nhất Hạnh’s lullaby-poem ‘Song of the Boat People’ drifts us to darkness. It is haunting scene of loss. A song sung in peace.

*Song of the Boat People*

Lênh đênh ngoài sóng gió  
Thuyền nhỏ giữa đại dương  
Quyết tâm tìm đất sống

Đói lạnh bao ngày đường  
Chúng tôi là bọt biển  
Trôi giạt giữa mênh mông  
Chúng tôi là hạt bụi  
Trong không gian vô cùng

## II. Animation and Disappearance

What we tried to highlight through the spatial juxtaposition of your films is the possibility of multivocality that is generated by moving from one film to another (Bauer in Trinh 2023: 220).

*Forgetting Vietnam* (2015) begins where *Surname Viet* ends—or at least almost nearly, and somewhere nearby. The inaugural shots and opening text read: “Sea and boat: it all began with two” (Figure 12).



Figure 12. Still from Trinh T. Minh-ha’s digital film *Forgetting Vietnam*, 2015, colour, sound, 90’. Moongift Films.

With this referential—even metonymic—statement, Trinh’s reverse-side bookending film departs from the coast: “Leaving shore, boat and waterway / she’s gone, our rower, to get married.” Yet as we will see, worlds turn on the types of boat and shapes of sea that originate in this doubling cauldron of forces. Nevertheless, these eight words—*sea and boat: it all began with two*—announce the film’s intertextual relational with *Surname Viet* and inscribe both the murky lavender horizon and eerily still water of Hạ Long Bay.

A World Heritage site immediately recognizable to most-all Vietnamese onlookers, Trinh’s carefully calculated depiction of the vibrant visitor’s hub (*jewel of Vietnam’s tourist industry*) is unusually empty: the calm and quiet even a shock to familiar audiences. Erased are the common throngs of bustling gawkers and rabid sightseers that typically overcrowd the fabled site and once-pristine ecological marvel.

In its place, a void of uncanny silence: the solitude of a fisherman’s life lived alone and separate amidst open expanses of water (see Figure 2). Traditional Vietnamese music and the diegetic sound of maritime breezes texture the scene before any spoken human chatter.

If *Surname Việt* performs a formal deconstruction of the ethnographic documentary genre—albeit cursorily a mere experimental portrait of diasporic Vietnamese communities and fractured conceptions of womanhood—*Forgetting Vietnam* is Trinh’s altogether dissimilar dream within a dream; a more abstract vision that fantastically reimagines the limits of memory and mirrors, narrative and nation. A sea without a boat. A boat adrift along a dream.

Late in the film this will be made explicit (Figure 13). “There’s a dream dreaming you... a dream in which all the dream characters are dreaming too...” (*Forgetting*, 2015). Water like Buddha memory; daydreams of our future past and forgotten tomorrows. Remember, ‘In *Forgetting Vietnam* I was also working with the ghosts of war....,’ writes Trinh.



Figure 13. Still from Trinh T. Minh-ha’s digital film *Forgetting Vietnam*, 2015, colour, sound, 90’. Moongift Films.

Whereas fractured families and forgotten boat people conclude *Surname*, the opening frames of Trinh’s digital video essay *Forgetting Vietnam* (assembled of various nonfilmic formats—Hi8, SD, HD) situate economy and commerce, ancestral myth and vernacular language as principal symbolic codes. Let us step inside the watery mirror, treading gentle upon the current of liquid light.

Translation—literal and metaphoric—is the wiry adhesive that bridges these two roomy cinematic waterways (Figure 14): “*đất nước vạn xuân* (land of ten thousand springs).” Recall how the Vietnamese words for land and water spill into country—*đất nước*. Across *Forgetting* these two words become their own riff; an anthem of annunciation and loss. Spelled out on screen to only vanish in haste, language literally disintegrates; letters disjoining to then only abruptly reform again from a novel vantage.



Figure 14. Still from Trinh T. Minh-ha's digital film  
*Forgetting Vietnam*, 2015, colour, sound, 90'. Moongift Films.

Choreographing print on screen, *Forgetting* repeatedly draws our attention to both grammatical syntax and verbal materiality. Transposition is key: characters jumble, interweave, and reassemble to form words that quickly drift off frame. A kind of textual and post-production imprint atop the moving image, Trinh diagrams the structural slippage of typography. An alphabetic attack of sorts, this denotative mode of articulation is also a wounding inside the reel: at once incision and trace, the constructive act exposes unseen frameworks embedded within language itself.

With this experimental writerly tool at hand, Trinh correspondingly abandons any voiceover narration. Replacing the pervasive spoken commentary from *Surname Viet*—albeit often disjunctive, transpersonal and dynamic—the formal ingenuity of *Forgetting* sculpts freshly untread paths of possibilities.

More precisely, throughout the film a compendium of single words, phrases, and simple questions propel the narrative trajectory forward. Often horizontally traversing the frame, this scaffolding begins in the allegorical cove of Hạ Long Bay: 'where to;' 'movement of forgetting;' 'leaving;' 'returning;' The diegetic screen becomes an animate tableau; words themselves characters entering and exiting a theatrical stage.

While English words are most common on screen, kin Vietnamese expressions are the ghostly hidden subtext: *đi đâu* where to, *Ra đi* leaving, *ở đây* here, *trở lại* returning, *đi về* coming back, *ở lại* remaining. The dizzying language of coming and going, parting with passing, staying or fleeing, each imbued with multiple meanings and polyvocality. Present participles or gerunds of movement dialogue with the vastness of Vietnamese pronouns—(*tôi/bạn mình/cậu, anh/em, bà/con cô/bác, chú/cháu*; just a cursory list of 'I-you' variant annunciations)—to become an elusive leitmotif of transient selfhood.

'Hạ Long'—the name of the bay but also two words that together mean 'descending dragon' appear coupled on screen; this pairing is followed by 'Thăng Long'/'ascending dragon. Thăng

Long, also a designation for the ancient name of Hà Nội (Vietnam's capital city today) rises; and again the proliferation (*sinh sôi nảy nở*) of prolix signification accrues pathos.

These two proper names—Hạ Long and Thăng Long—are followed by the *motion-ary* phrase: 'where the dragon descends into the sea.' Some amorphous form of metonymy bridges the gap with the ancillary clause: 'thousand islet and islands rise from the water.' In Herculitean flux, each of these four word-chains in succession quickly fade away. Out of grasp. Behind reach.

As the film eventually concludes—tracing its own dragon-tail inward like some gently devouring Mobius loop—Trinh pens an 'S' shaped dragon myth (Figure 15). This calligraphic penmanship floats in the sky like a dream of its own utterance, an iterative expression soon dispelled from the screen.

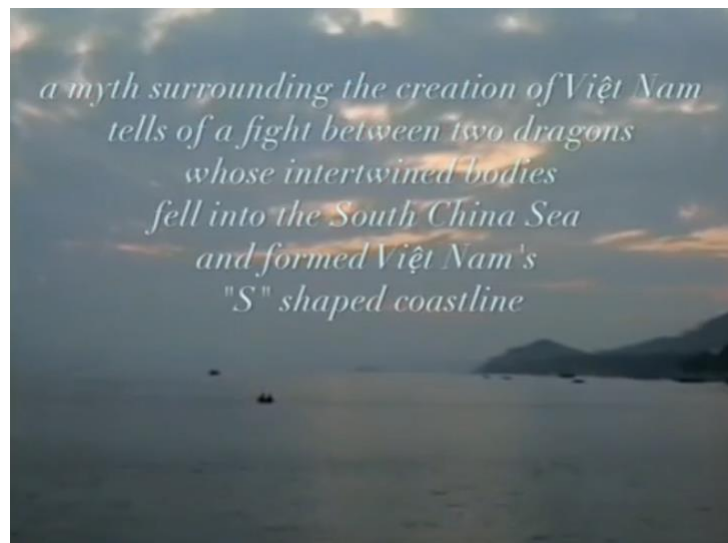


Figure 15. Still from Trinh T. Minh-ha's digital film  
*Forgetting Vietnam*, 2015, colour, sound, 90'. Moongift Films.

In the meantime, we return to the bay's azure seascape. Fittingly, Trinh's rhetorical device of moving-script begins with water, and the ubiquitous place of *nước* in Vietnamese conceptions of collective identity. Rivers, waterways, streams and the sea; as well as tears too, as in when eyes *mắt* stand beside water *nước* to form the Vietnamese word *nước mắt*: *tears*, that strange salty amalgam of watery vision.

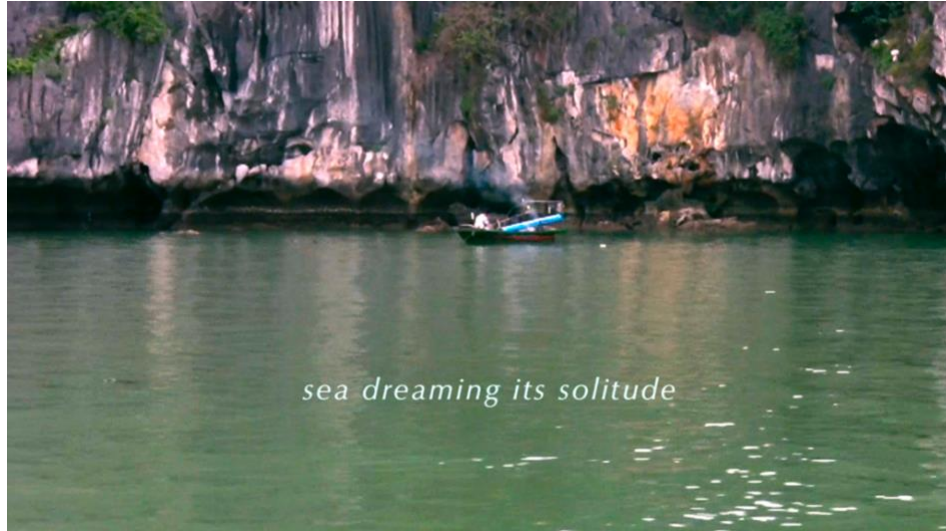


Figure 16. Still from Trinh T. Minh-ha's digital film  
*Forgetting Vietnam*, 2015, colour, sound, 90'. Moongift Films.

Like the 'sea dreaming its solitude,' from a *ca khúc* romantic lullaby, some singular, and ephemeral, vantage emerges: the lonely water lost and still-less, sleeps full and round in reverie (Figure 16).

Here I want to resituate the above-noted publication *Traveling in the Dark* alongside Trinh's library of moving images from *Forgetting*, and in doing so discover threads of silence and erasure, spellcasting and ritual, riffing and citation. Read as an uncanny palimpsest of re-used material from Trinh T. Minh-ha's comprehensive film catalog, the book itself is its own trace. In other words, the materiality of the document performs an indexical act of history: it is at once both echo and utterance.

*Traveling in the Dark* is thus an ongoing tactile refrain that returns into itself; and by doing so, shifts further inward again to form something, and somewhere, new (Ogden 2022: 51). In this way, inscription and the enigmatic process of writing—its manifold meanings, metaphors, and pathways—fundamentally too, organize the manuscript. The artist herself notes the daunting task of the artist, writer: to imagine and create a different *form of writing*.

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's description of her own distant mouthy memory of Korea as "a souvenir, vague, imprecise, unfaithful," is instructive at this point (Chung: 372). From Cha's impersonal and estranged voice, diasporic memory becomes some kind of token; a fraught object of capital imbued with the murky forces of production, history and meaning. Her pensive sentiments, nevertheless, do not prohibit her ongoing surrender to the alchemy of language. It is this errant *in-betweenness*—and blank space of interpolation—that also too mark Trinh's citational memory praxis.

Like Cha's "ultimate pursuit [of] 'that which is stated by Roland Barthes as a "'pluraity of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of language,'"'" *Forgetting* is both entryway-in and gateway-out (Cha in Chung 2026: 28). Gone from refugee stories of *Surname Viet* and into the vertiginous landscape of memory to come: 'Rememory' as Trinh will later transcribe in the film.

Returning to the first seven-minutes of footage at sea in *Forgetting*, a dense tapestry of pixelated content and form accumulate. What begins with one boat in silence gradually transforms to a frenzied panorama of ships and tourists (Figure 17). Trinh's carefully calculated lexicon of visual data and textual syntax is precise. While amassing pictorial and aural textures across Hạ Long Bay, she likewise self-consciously *performs* (conceptually and formally) an accrual of visual capital. Kindred souvenir memories, Cha's adulteress vagaries and miniaturized tokens take shape in the rustic port.



Figure 17. Still from Trinh T. Minh-ha's digital film  
*Forgetting Vietnam*, 2015, colour, sound, 90'. Moongift Films.

Building a surplus of 'goods' via image—a congregation of orange life-vested vacationers in crafted dinghies, a slew of ships hankering for space at the harbor, a proliferation of tourists eager to disembark—the opening scenes of *Forgetting* reach an over-determined tipping point (a perhaps not-so-subtle critique of Vietnam's state-sponsored economy and bloated market-driven commerce post-1986, *đổi mới*.) 'Camera memory for human forgetfulness...or is it the other way around...' Trinh's passing words a tongue-in-cheek critique of libidinal material consumption and the ensuing cultural amnesia; the 'country of memory' (Hue-Tam Ho Tai 2001) lost and fractured in the sway of neoliberal decay.

Departing from this place of anchor, Trinh's camera's gaze shifts registers and immediately situates viewers inside a web of chaotic motorbike clusters in Hà Nội (Figure 18). A mere 100 miles away, the sonorous rumble of urban life is stark juxtaposition to the ambient ocean atmosphere of Hạ Long Bay.



Figure 18. Still from Trinh T. Minh-ha's digital film *Forgetting Vietnam*, 2015, colour, sound, 90'. Moongift Films.

The first frames note specific corporeal substance and historical time of the film itself: '1995: Vietnam via Hi-8 video;' and '2012 High Definition Video.' *Forgetting* sutures together two disparate worlds of lost time. We traverse the city alongside bikers, cyclo-drivers, and Honda-wave 55cc motorbikes. Even the 2012 footage feels still pedestrian-driven and full of robust street life culture (*bụi đời, văn hóa vỉa hè*). In tension and rhythm, these anachronic landscapes of social experience riff off each to create fluid, liquid meaning inside the film.

For Trinh, to create video art is to be engrained in a horizontal dialogue of possibilities. She aspires to operate more as conduit and medium—channeling and mirroring forms of life—than sovereign director performing biopic supremacy. Knowledge is one thing: 'Poetics aims for the space of difference' (Edouard Glissant in Trinh 2023: 85).

Harkening back to the end of the American war in 1975, the subsequent frames read: "1995 twenty-five years after and yet...;" followed by a dissolving cut and matching text "2012: thirty-seven years after and yet..." Cinema as recursion, memory as a psychodynamic and introjected arena for feeling forgotten time.

Trinh's poetic first chapters from north Vietnam conclude with a map and a legend: both a key (set of codes) and a fable (a mythic sword; a golden turtle god) envelop the screen completely atop the Lake of the Returned Sword, *Hồ Hoàn Kiếm* (Figure 19).



Figure 19. Still from Trinh T. Minh-ha's digital film *Forgetting Vietnam*, 2015, colour, sound, 90'. Moongift Films.

The fecund ecological blues and greens that stain the the city-center lake *Hồ Guom, Phố Cổ* welcome the photographic text-based drawing of Indochina to merge composite like a phantom postage stamp from the future. Trinh's uncanny mediation of both memory and technology expose the indexical afterlives of displaced experience: glitchy textual traces, residual inscription, patchy historical footage. Dancing water puppets *múa rối nước*—the ancient art originating in the Red River Delta of Hà Nội—escort us out of the city's epicenter.

With water as stage, our journey southward *nam tiến* accompanied by Trinh and her camera, begins. *Forgetting Vietnam* transforms into a spellbinding downward journey through motley geographies, memorialized colorscapes, and folkloric legend (Figure 20).



Figure 20. Still from Trinh T. Minh-ha's digital film *Forgetting Vietnam*, 2015, colour, sound, 90'. Moongift Films.

First, “I’m not asking for the sublime; I want the terrestrial” (Clarice Lispector in *Forgetting*), then, a long shot of rice farmers reminding us of country, *đất nước*: water and land. Witnessed

from the perspective of a bus in transit, the doubling riff continues. *Forgetting* figures a new scaffolding for migrational aesthetics. A quick cut accompanied by the thimble of a Buddhist gong follows, and we again see the words *đất nước* assemble. In a flicker of flame, paper-money offerings for the ancestors disappear (Figure 21).



Figure 21. Still from Trinh T. Minh-ha's digital film *Forgetting Vietnam*, 2015, colour, sound, 90'. Moongift Films.

This ritual of incense burning and smoldering effigies intimately rhymes with *Surname Viet*. Trinh summons resistance with text: 'Lotus rising from ashes.' Like a phoenix memory reawakening from dust, the country of memory is a subjunctive seed with roots in darkness and soil underground (Figure 22). Prayer beams folding inward from *Surname Viet* recall that "there's no such thing as the mere past," (Trinh 2023: 221), and like nimbus incense cones *thắp những* twirl their own spirited smoke into the future.

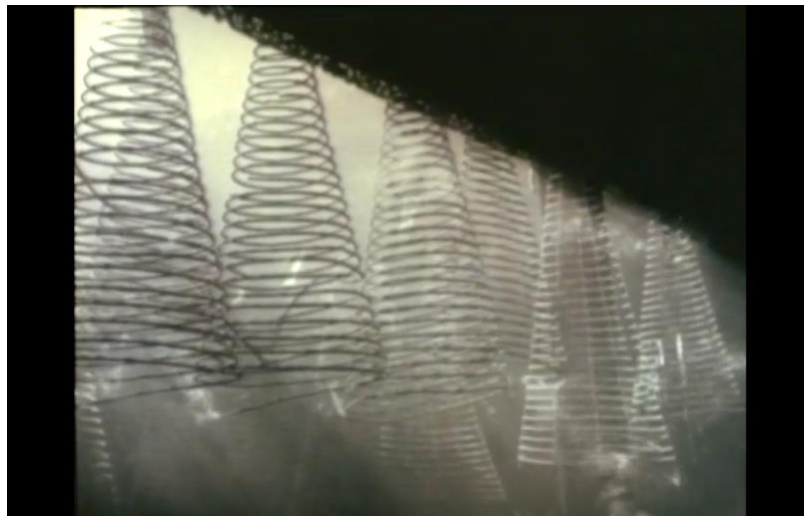


Figure 22. Still from Trinh T. Minh-ha's digital film *Surname Viet Given Name Nam.*, colour, sound, 1989 108'. Moongift Films.

The coiled fragrance rings from 1989 find analog in the flaming *đốt vàng mã, giấy tiền* golden dollars from 2015. Rhythmic sheets of light, their sentient motion lives through intergenerational belief and exchange. On family altars and in communal practices of homage with the dead, Vietnam *đất nước* outlives the platitudes of our earthy memory.

And in so being resiliently attuned with displacement and relocation, the elderly women reciting *đọc kinh* Buddhist scriptural prayers mesmerically transmigrate thirty years backward like bouncing souls (Figure 23). And although surely not the same women interviewed from *Surname Viet*, in Trinh's moving (embedded) frames their mouthing lips are a soundless whisper that bridge the ongoing present with the future's past.



Figure 23, Still from Trinh T. Minh-ha's digital film  
*Forgetting Vietnam*, 2015, colour, sound, 90'. Moongift Films.

The film concludes with a passing dedication placard of sort: 'commemorating: the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the war and its survivors.' The young man (see Figure 2) frameless atop the horizon coast of Hạ Long Bay is here situated on a family altar (*bàn thờ*) festooned with incenses and alive with smoke (Figure 24). Call Trinh's heterogenous video practice a kind of equivocating and queered 'third-eye cinema' (Tobing Rony 1996: 16). Prayer pushes life forward and keeps death alive.



Figure 24. Still from Trinh T. Minh-ha's digital film *Forgetting Vietnam*, 2015, colour, sound, 90'. Moongift Films.

“To really forget, we must fully remember what we want to forget. But how to remember the face of war?” (Phạm Tiến Duật, *Forgetting Vietnam*) So change mummifies (Figure 25), and two small boys remember a missing genealogy from our world's last tear. Memory stains the crease of an eye, yet with hope we clutch their warm nimble hands held near in repair.



Figure 25. Still from Trinh T. Minh-ha's digital film *Surname Viet Given Name Nam.*, colour, sound, 1989 108'. Moongift Films.

Infinitely open-ended, Trinh T. Minh-ha's participatory role as film-maker, writer, and narrator offers a radical alterity to the now-oft blithely regurgitated *decolonial* (-post, -anti, -trans) landscape of discourse and memory-making. Undoing the ethnographer's voice from within, the semiotic architectonics of power are laid bare. As a result, inside her camera's optics imaginative acts of speculation and a plurality of vision unsettle any stable object/subject relations. Learning to see anew, we walk beside our forgotten selves near a *rememory* of what may come.



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