The Aesthetics of Reticence and Visuality: Reframing Intimacy in Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* and Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*

by

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B.A., The University of British Columbia, 2013

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES

(English)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Vancouver)

April 2016

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Abstract

This thesis examines the relation between race and intimacy, particularly the ways in which intimacy is used in film and literature as an aesthetic strategy to resist heteropatriarchal and colonial constructions of racialized subjectivities, histories, and knowledge. Drawing from Lisa Lowe’s recent *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, I argue that Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night* and Trinh T. Minh-ha’s *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* reframe intimacy by engaging with the residual and emergent to emphasize the lesser known forms of kinship and alliance between different colonized groups of people. In Chapter 1, I trace articulations of reticent intimacies in *Cereus Blooms* and contend that they generate an anticolonial mode of remembering that reimagines intergenerational relationships. Mootoo’s emphasis on historical gaps, fragments, and erasures to reconstruct narratives demonstrates a practice of reticent intimacy that challenges linear narratives and historical memory. In Chapter 2, I explore how *Surname Viet* depicts a transnational feminist intimacy through a narrative arc that reflects a transformation to visuality. The film makes visible palimpsest identities engendered through intimacies-in-motion as Vietnamese American women’s stories are inscribed with traces of the colonial past. This interdisciplinary project not only furthers understandings of the relation between the politics of intimacy and racialized subjectivities, but it also suggests aesthetic strategies of reading for alternative modernities that push beyond limits of inherited genealogies of liberal humanism to reveal possibilities of knowing what has been assumed to be erased, lost, and forgotten.
Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Stephanie Fung.
# Table of Contents

Abstract .......................................................................................................................... ii

Preface ............................................................................................................................ iii

Table of Contents ............................................................................................................ iv

List of Figures ................................................................................................................... v

Acknowledgements .......................................................................................................... vi

Introduction: The Politics and Aesthetics of Intimacy ...................................................... 1

  Deleted Scene: Reflections on Filmmaking ................................................................. 1
  Reframing Intimacy: Residual and Emergent Intimacies ........................................... 2
  “Based on a true story” ............................................................................................... 7

Chapter 1: Articulating Reticence and Reimagining Relationships in Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night* ................................................................................................................................. 11

  Reticent Intimacies ..................................................................................................... 11
  Queer Diasporas, Settler Colonialism, and Disidentification ..................................... 14
  Intertwined Colonial Histories in Trinidad and Tobago ........................................... 18
  Intergenerational Relationships in *Cereus Blooms at Night* .................................... 21
  Traumatic Histories and Community Healing through Reticent Intimacy .............. 24
  “I want to know something, but I don’t know what” .............................................. 28
  Reticent Intimacy as Creating Communities of Care ................................................ 30

Chapter 2: Visualizing Transnational Feminist Intimacies in Trinh T. Minh-ha’s *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* ..................................................................................................................... 35

  Intimacy with the Past, Palimpsest Identity ............................................................... 35
  Việt Nam, Migration to the U.S., and Asian American Film Production ................. 39
  Inauthenticity and the Making of *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* ...................... 44
  Visualizing Intimacy, Translating from Literature to Visuality ................................ 47
  Out of the Frame: Towards Possibilities of Transnational Feminist Intimacies ....... 50
  “If women could trust women, then we could talk about liberation” ...................... 55

Works Cited ..................................................................................................................... 58
List of Figures

Figure 1. Taking off the lapel microphone and handing it to us midway through the conversation .................................................................10

Figure 2. Kim speaking about playing the role of Cat Tien in the film ......................52

Figure 3. Yen speaking about her decision to participate in the film ........................54
Acknowledgements

This thesis was written on the traditional, ancestral, unceded, and occupied lands belonging to the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), źḵ̕wx̱̓wú7mesh (Squamish), and səl̓ílwətəł (Tsleil-Waututh) nations. As an uninvited guest, I am indebted to the Indigenous nations who have made it possible for me to do this work.

Immense gratitude to Carven Li, Jen Sung, Dora Ng, Katie Fung, Justin Saint, and Leroy Wan for sharing your stories with me. Making Radicalizing Intimacy sparked the idea for this thesis and for that I am deeply thankful. 鄭太, thank you for your warmth and generosity. Joanna Yang, thank you for being so supportive from the beginning.

To Dr. Chris Lee, your guidance as a supervisor and insistence on a high level of scholarship have shaped my thinking and writing in profound ways. Thank you for your faith in me and my work. Drs. Glenn Deer and Christine Kim, thank you so much for your patience and encouragement. Your questions and suggestions have helped make this project better.

I would like to thank my friends at UBC (and beyond) whose fierce solidarity and encouragement sustained me as I navigated academia, especially Cynthia Minh, Szu Shen, Sarah Ling, Nashwa Khan, Tina Kong, and Jane Shi. Lucia Lorenzi, thank you for all the heartwork. Laura Ritland, thank you for holding space for me.

Finally, I am incredibly grateful to my parents, Mei and Eddy, for their unwavering love and support, and for believing in me when it mattered the most.
Introduction: The Politics and Aesthetics of Intimacy

Deleted Scene: Reflections on Filmmaking

I begin this thesis by considering what gets edited out of the frame. In Radicalizing Intimacy (2014), a short film I co-created with Joanna Yang, we explored how queer Asians in Vancouver navigate kinship and intimate relations in their lives by conducting interviews with five participants. During the editing stage, a significant amount of footage was left out of the final cut. One contentious decision was the deletion of an interview scene with one of the participants, Jen, in which I asked what “radical intimacy” meant to her. Jen spoke about the politics of space, then took Joanna’s camera, looked straight into my lens, and asked: “If I may, I want to turn the camera back onto you and impose the same question around. What does ‘radical intimacy’ mean to you?”

This question guides my thesis and is one I have carried with me since then in my creative-critical practice. Perhaps “radical intimacies” lie outside the frame, rupturing public spheres of conversation and visibility. But they are also felt, reticently, during the process of shooting and editing the film, and noticed in the gaps, gestures, and awkward silences that happen when no one is really sure what to say. What is most interesting, to me, when the interviews are over and the camera and recorder are turned off are the questions that the interview participants ask. “Have you experienced ‘radical intimacy’ in your life? How? Why did you choose to interview me?” They want to know. These questions elicit a self-conscious response—I realize that in this process where the filmmaker gets unframed, I am reframing myself as well. Filmmaker and feminist thinker Trinh T. Minh-ha states in Surname Viet Given Name Nam, “By choosing the most direct
and spontaneous form of voicing and documenting, I find myself closer to fiction.” Indeed, Jen’s re-structuring of the interview constitutes a disidentificatory practice that interrogates my own position as a filmmaker, unframes perspectives, and opens up space for multiple subjectivities. This thesis investigates intimacy as a means of rupturing modes of being, thinking, and living. It is precisely in such moments of spontaneous, unrehearsed encounters that different sets of realities emerge.

**Reframing Intimacy: Residual and Emergent Intimacies**

Thinking through how aesthetic practices can intervene in and unsettle colonial modes of knowledge creation that privilege authenticity, I question the politics of what makes certain intimacies more visible and dominant than others. My use of the term “intimacy” does not imply a normative intimacy that concerns “public mode[s] of identification and self-development” (Berlant 2000, 3). According to Berlant, categories of public and private are deemed by critics as archaic constructions, derived from Victorian notions that the “world can be divided into a controllable space (the private-affective) and an uncontrollable one (the public-instrumental)” (3). This division, she continues, has served to legitimize other social dichotomies such as men vs. women and colonizers vs. colonized. Certainly, North American discourse of the public and private is linked to gendered labour that preserves and perpetuates gender inequality. Liberal society based on dominant assumptions of what constitutes intimacy privileges certain experiences over others, and marginalizes spheres of life that lie beyond the public and do not adhere to collective expectations of intimacy.
In my intention of exploring histories of relations that have been cast aside by this hegemonic discourse of “intimacy”, I draw from Lisa Lowe’s recent *The Intimacies of Four Continents*. There, Lowe argues that by looking at “the political, sexual, and intellectual connections and relations among slaves, peoples of indigenous descent, and colonized laborers as an emergent ‘intimacies of four continents,’” we may disrupt the notion of intimacy associated with “Anglo-American histories of liberal subjectivity, domesticity, and household” (Lowe 18-19). Lowe’s method of reading across archives and continents moves beyond understandings of temporally and spatially fixed identities and histories. What makes her analysis so compelling is that she argues that world histories of liberal thought are predicated on oppressive practices and colonial conditions that make promises of freedom possible. I am interested in a methodology that challenges the hegemonic idea of intimacy as interiority and pushes up against the limitations of nationalist and colonial modes of archival practices and knowledge production. For there is more to intimacy than love and companionship in forms of familial, romantic, and friendship relations. How have race and intimacy been shaped and informed by colonial and settler-colonial relations? How can we reimagine intimacy as a “contact zone,” as a reading practice of developing understandings of knowledge between and among groups of people who are marginalized and oppressed in different ways? Lastly, how does this intimacy become an alternative mode of remembering that challenges colonial desires for closure and knowability and enables the emergence of different forms of community and affiliation?

In this thesis I look at ways in which intimacy has been shaped between Asian diasporic communities and other groups through an intersectional lens. While gender,
race, and sexual relations between colonizers and colonized have been established and sustained by settler-colonial projects, a question worth considering is how a settler-colonial framework relates to and informs other frameworks such as racial formation and internal colonialism. An analysis of Asian diasporic spaces in the Caribbean, for instance, requires a broader racial matrix than the one understood through North American settler colonialism and its distinct historical and cultural contexts. Indeed, different Asian diasporic sites have specific histories of colonial oppressions even as they have been impacted broadly by Western imperialism and global capitalism. Rather than focus on how different Asian communities are more privileged or oppressed than other racialized groups, I aim to shift conversations by tracing moments of intimacy between them, occasions for solidarity and coalition building across different colonial contexts.

Identifying intimacy through looking at residual social processes and formations is as much an investigation into the dominant as it is the residual. It is precisely because the existence of the residual that the dominant can be sustained as each depends on the other to be defined and understood. This method of conceptualizing intimacy through “the implied but less visible forms of alliance, affinity, and society among variously colonized peoples beyond the metropolitan national center” (19) draws from Raymond Williams’ model of the residual and emergent. In Marxism and Literature, he asserts that the dominant culture never “in reality includes or exhausts all human practice, human energy, and human intention” (Williams 1977, 125, original in italics). To constitute the dominant, the residual needs to be incorporated “by reinterpretation, dilution, projection, discriminating inclusion and exclusion [so] that the work of the selective tradition is especially evident” (123). Williams’ theorizing offers a model of relationality within and
between competing and overlapping cultural processes where “definitions of the emergent, as of the residual, can be made only in relation to a full sense of the dominant” (123). Different cultural processes and formations do not happen in isolation, nor do they remain constant; indeed, it is necessary to recognize that the “residual,” “emergent,” and “dominant” are fluid and interrelated terms. In this sense, “an emergent social or cultural formation does not necessarily require completely ‘new’ subjectivities or constituencies but can comprise elements of residual ongoing conditions like settler colonialism, colonial slavery, and trade” (Lowe 34). These emergent residual formations are re-expressed in other forms and “new” processes. If national liberal discourses continually exclude and silence residual formations and processes that constitute and make possible dominant liberal societies, the act of articulating these residual formations and recognizing them as emergent but also ongoing disrupts a teleological liberal temporality as well as the Marxist concept of historical progress. By reimagining the past, historical gaps and elisions become sites of possibilities that open up spaces for alternative narratives, futures, and modes of being outside of those produced under the influence of liberal politics and capitalism.

Reading for intimacy between marginalized groups requires, to an extent, being attentive to language as well as to the gaps and silences that occur in communication—especially desires and solidarities that cannot be expressed through the colonial tongue. In Chapter one, I examine connections between African and South Asian diasporas in the Caribbean setting of Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night* through the characters’ sense of their “shared queerness” (Mootoo 52). In the text, relationships are shaped by an awareness of what Helene Strauss calls “the impossibility of fully languaging intimacy”
The struggle to communicate is especially apparent when it comes to characters that share the experience of being oppressed, but on different levels, such as through race, class, gender, or sexuality. Their shared struggles at articulation, on one hand, stem from an inability to speak the colonial tongue properly and a reluctance to contribute to a public domain of intimacy that silences and invalidates their realities and histories. On the other hand, this resistance to speaking in the dominant language constitutes a reticent intimacy that unexpectedly becomes a mode of relational survival and solidarity.

Reticence, in other words, does not suggest passivity or willful ignorance, but functions as a “structure of feeling” (Williams), an experience located in the interstitial space between what is known and unknown. Through the characters’ quiet gestures and practices of listening carefully and being attentive to each other’s needs and desires, the text portrays a poetics of reticence that functions as a powerful intimacy. Mootoo’s characters demonstrate the survival of relations that have been erased and marginalized in dominant colonial narratives. These relations point towards how communities of care can be established after traumatic histories of violence. These communities undermine normative modes of memory and affiliation and challenge identities and ideologies imposed by colonial violence.

If reticent intimacies in *Cereus Blooms* function as a form of resistance to colonial impositions of gender, racial, and sexual identities, Trinh T. Minh-ha’s film *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* suggests that imagining relations across temporal and geographic space can challenge dominant representations of Vietnamese female identities. In Chapter two, I explore how Vietnamese American women enact a transnational feminist intimacy in the second half of the film by reflecting on the roles they perform as Vietnamese women.
in the first part of *Surname Viet*. The actresses in Trinh’s film have never met the Vietnamese women they pretend to be. Indeed, their connection to these women is through collective imagination and multiple displacements and translations. Trinh translates from French into English interviews with Vietnamese women from Mai Thu Vân’s book, *Vietnam: un people, des voix*, which are then interpreted and performed by the women actresses in *Surname Viet*.

No singular representation of an authentic Vietnamese female subjectivity is revealed here. Instead, the women engage in transnational feminist intimacies by remembering Vietnamese women and identifying shared experiences of colonial violence and struggles. By performing memories and lived experiences in front of the camera through speaking about the women and their own participation in the film, the actresses shift understandings of the past and temporality. More significantly, through the collaborative making of the film, they visually reimagine and undermine nationalist, patriarchal, and white feminist literary constructions of Vietnamese womanhood. Understanding the politics of visibility in relation to intimacy, we may see how Trinh’s film portrays intimacy through a narrative arc that reflects a transformation to visuality. Through Trinh’s visual aesthetics, *Surname Viet* makes visible palimpsest identities created through intimacies-in-motion as women’s lives and stories are inscribed with residual traces of the colonial past.

“Based on a true story”

As I write this thesis, I am working on another film with Joanna about Chinese seniors living in Chinatown, Vancouver. Questions of theory and practice surround both
projects: how does reading for intimacy in *Cereus Blooms at Night* and *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* inform my filmmaking process? How does making the film inform how I read these texts? While I hope this thesis generates a deeper conversation about the visual dimensions of intimacy, I also hope it provokes new ways of reading and articulating intimacies in order to contribute to a larger project of understanding the relationship between affective life and social formations and systems. As I have learned from my filmmaking, intimacy is an elusive object of inquiry. As such, questions of location and positionality emerge. How does one come to practices of intimacy from embodied histories? Must the reader/filmmaker be able to recognize and acknowledge racialized subjectivities in order to conduct a reading of emergent/residual intimacies? How does having racialized knowledge force one to read differently? *Cereus Blooms* and *Surname Viet* do not reinscribe liberal formations of intimacy and identity. Neither do they attempt to recover a sense of lost origins. Instead, the texts articulate how racialized people can reimagine relationships with each other and the past despite traumatic histories of colonial violence. By portraying forms of intimacy that resist hegemonic ideologies, these texts allude to the transformation to the visual—indeed to alternative narrative strategies—and generate new perspectives of histories and knowledge that have been assumed lost or forgotten.

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“I don’t have anything important to say,”¹ she says with a laugh. It’s Sunday morning. *The leaves in the courtyard outside have morphed into shades of magenta, fiery red, and gold. We’re at her home in Chinatown, setting up for an interview. She’s dressed*

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¹ This conversation took place in Cantonese and Mandarin. I have translated it into English.
up for the occasion, with a red blouse and a pearl necklace and earrings. Just minutes ago, she’d asked me which would look better on camera—the red blouse or the white one.

This could be a story about reclamation. It might even be a story about Chinatown. But she doesn’t want to talk about that. At least not directly.

“What kinds of stories do you want to hear?”

The TV blares in the background. Her son and husband watch us.

“Stories about living in this neighbourhood. What the changes you’ve seen happening here recently are. What kinds of activities you like to do in the community. Your life. Stuff like that.”

“Oh, okay. But my life is really not that interesting.”

[to her husband] “Do you want to be in it?”

[he smiles] “No, I’m not even dressed nicely. I won’t look good in front of the camera.”

I start recording and asking her questions. Somehow we end up talking about the future.

“What are you doing after you finish this? Here, take this fruit home with you.”

[hands me a giant melon]

Where and when real life begins, we do not know.

She takes off her lapel mic, hands it to us, and acts as if nothing has happened. I’m not sure what to do.

She asks Joanna a question.

We hesitate. The mood shifts.

She knows I’m recording everything that’s said.
Figure 1. Taking off the lapel microphone and handing it to us midway through the conversation. From the filmmaking process of Stephanie Fung and Joanna Yang © 2015. Courtesy of Stephanie Fung and Joanna Yang.
Chapter 1: Articulating Reticence and Reimagining Relationships in
Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night*

**Reticent Intimacies**

From romantic love and platonic friendships, to filial bonds and respect. The question of what counts as intimacy is a question of what makes certain lives and relationships worth more than others. As recent scholarship indicates, intimacy brings to mind the liberal private sphere of sexual, familial reproductive, or household relations of an individual person. Less attention, however, has been given to understanding intimacy in relation to the material effects of colonialism, particularly colonial relations built across cultural, racial, class, and gender differences. These forms of intimacy are not mutually exclusive. Neither can they be completely understood through articulation and public discourse. The impossibility of putting intimacy into language reveals the limitations of dominant modes of knowledge and identity formation. While Lowe adds to the work of Ann Laura Stoler, Amy Kaplan, Laura Wexler, and others by studying the relation between intimacies and imperial projects of conquest, slavery, and labour, she uses intimacy as a heuristic to observe how global processes and colonial histories enable the emergence of dominant notions of intimacy as associated with liberal interiority and personhood (17). The “historical division” she claims, “of world processes that develop modern liberal subjects and modern spheres of social life, and those processes that are forgotten, cast as failed or irrelevant because they do not produce ‘value’ legible within modern classifications” (Lowe 17-18) not only prescribes intimacy as associated with a certain “personhood” by preserving race, class, and sexual relations and rendering them
hegemonic. It also threatens to erase narratives that do not fit into the project of liberal modernity, specifically relations that lie outside the framework of bourgeois intimacy imposed by colonial powers. In this chapter, I trace articulations of emerging and residual intimacies in Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night* and argue that these reticent affective experiences not only deconstruct normative approaches to linear narratives and historical memory. Through my investigation of the legitimation of subjects that are not seen as ideal liberal ones, I also generate an anticolonial mode of remembering that reimagines colonial and intergenerational relationships across temporal and spatial contexts.

If we situate intimacy as a “structure of feeling” (Williams), we may understand reticent intimacy as a form of witnessing that occurs “in the process of consciousness between the articulated and the lived” (Williams 2009, 49). Through a reticent intimacy between Tyler and Mala, two characters in the text who struggle to speak in a society that denies their identities and experiences (Tyler feels out of place and pressured to hide his gender and sexual orientation in the beginning, while Mala is stigmatized by the townsfolk), Mala’s story is reimagined and retold by Tyler. Mootoo normalizes her characters’ attempts to “be somebody or something else” (58) as they transgress racial, class, gender, and sexual boundaries constructed by the project of Euro-American modernity. This normalization, I contend, is a kind of “disidentification” (Muñoz) that resists heteronormative sexualities shaped under patriarchal nationalist frameworks. Through a disidentificatory strategy, new forms of kinship and community are created. Acknowledging what Lowe calls, following Williams, “residual” and “emergent” intimacies as “close connexions” between colonized groups of people, I use her framing
and conceptualization of intimacy to explore the portrayal of relations in *Cereus Blooms* through a “poetics of reticence” (Liu, Ding). I borrow this phrase from Liu Jen-peng and Ding Naifei’s article, “Reticent Poetics, Queer Politics.” They argue that homophobia is conveyed through “silent words and reticent tolerance” (33), an aesthetic that preserves heterosexual relationships and the maintenance of alternative sexualities in Chinese-speaking spaces. Liu and Ding investigate how the politics of tolerance and reticence are articulated in *The Unfilial Daughter* and suggest that recent scholarship on gender and queer theory reflect the reticent forces found in these fictional representations. Through the guise of tolerance these studies essentialize “Chinese” non-homophobic representations and display a homophobic reticence. Additionally, positing a non-homophobic space veils the reality of how the “reticent politics of ‘tolerance’” influences “everyday public/private life and is a structuring pressure in everyday speech, acts and feelings” (Liu, Ding 39). While the authors associate reticence with a veiled form of homophobia that risks homogenizing identities, time, and space (“China” vs. “the West”, past vs. present), my thesis takes up a starkly different perspective by questioning how a decolonial method of reading for reticence might enable possibilities of theorizing beyond categories and normative modes of kinship and relation, and ultimately modes of knowledge creation. Intimacy here constitutes an alternative mode of remembering through a queer diasporic archive—of reticent intimacies that displace deployments of normative modes of memory and affiliation and resist identities and histories produced from the political and cultural legacies of colonialism.
Queer Diasporas, Settler Colonialism, and Disidentification

My analysis of Cereus Blooms looks, to an extent, at the concept of “queer diasporas” and how it challenges discourses of racial purity, narratives of longing for origins, and dominant nationalist narratives that naturalize modes of kinship and identity formation. In this chapter, I use queer diasporas as both a body of knowledge and a mode of knowledge production to read diaspora in a non-normative fashion outside the influence of conventional nationalist narratives. While the term “diaspora” has conventionally alluded to the mass movements of Jewish, Greek, and Armenian peoples, it now extends its meaning to associate with other words such as immigrant, refugee, and exile community (Tölölyan 4). Queering the framework of “diaspora” complicates normative accounts of liberal genealogies and globalization by revealing the effects of capitalist exploitation in diasporic sites. The project of liberal capitalist modernity need not be the only viable way of structuring political, social and economic life. Indeed, a queer inflection of diaspora recovers “those desires, practices, and subjectivities that are rendered impossible and unimaginable within conventional diasporic and nationalist imaginaries” (Gopinath 11). Investigating intimacy through a queer diasporic framework sheds light on the possibility for alternative modernities.

Modes of collectivity and affiliation have emerged out of studies of the queer racialized subject from scholars such as Grace Kyungwon Hong, David Eng, Roderick Ferguson, Gayatri Gopinath, Martin Manalansan, and Chandan Reddy. They have significantly asserted that studies of queer racialized subjects in diaspora reflect the paradoxes of nationalist and capitalist narratives, discourses, and knowledge. Gopinath states:
while queer diasporic cultural forms are produced in and through the workings of transnational capitalism, they also provide the means by which to critique the logic of global capital itself. The cartography of a queer diaspora tells a different story of how global capitalism impacts local sites by articulating other forms of subjectivity, culture, affect, kinship, and community that may not be visible or audible within standard mappings of nation, diaspora, or globalization. (12)

Using a queer diasporic lens not only demonstrates the ways in which global capitalism produces and portrays alternative modes of being and relation. It also reveals “the epistemological and ontological limits of the liberal humanist tradition, bringing into relief disparate ways of knowing and being in the world that evade the purview of capitalist modernity” (Eng 15). In mapping subjectivities and relations that contradict the ideologies and practices of contemporary neoliberal capitalism and globalization, we may begin to deconstruct inherited notions of intimacy and regard ways in which marginalized people have worked together to express and validate their identities and experiences.

By invoking queer diasporas to understand reticent intimacies, I would also like to bring it into conversation with settler colonialism—a process that has developed alongside capitalism and globalization. I do so in order to investigate how, in Cereus Blooms, reticent intimacy as an aesthetic practice demonstrates ways of thinking through what settler responsibility may look like. While “‘queerness’ also needs ‘diaspora’ in order to make it more supple in relation to questions of race, colonialism, migration, and globalization” (Gopinath 11), the intersection of queer diaspora and settler colonialism provides a broader framework that addresses all identities and their relationship to each other and systems of power. For Andrea Smith, “the logics of settler colonialism and
decolonization must be queered in order to properly speak to the genocidal present (64). Following Smith’s assertion, I ask: how does a queer diasporic critique acknowledge settler colonialism and “contribute to solidarity work with contemporary indigenous struggles” (53)? Reading for emergent and residual formations not only reveals the unevenness of power within dominant cultures. It also allows us to interrogate the responsibility of queer and racialized settlers in response to “new” or emergent processes of settler colonialism. By thinking of queer diasporas as an emergent formation we can disrupt the linear time of settler colonialism, which posits Indigenous peoples in the past and the assimilation of immigrants and racial minorities as a process of societal progress and improvement. These assumptions constitute a form of ongoing violence. Situating residual and emergent intimacies in queer diasporic experiences alongside an understanding of settler colonialism opens up space for disrupting dominant cultural formations across colonial contexts. By unsettling these formations, these intimacies provoke imaginings of what settler roles and responsibilities may look like. What is at stake is the emergence of alternative modernities and subjectivities, of ways of feeling, living, and thinking that push beyond the boundaries and limits of inherited genealogies of liberal humanism to show that possibilities of knowing lie in what is assumed unknowable, erased, or forgotten.

Indeed, the labour of reworking dominant cultural formations can be seen as a labour of intimacy that involves histories of solidarity and cross-cultural relationship building. In Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics, José Esteban Muñoz looks at film, performance art, ethnography, photography, camp, and drag to explore how queers of colour engage in the performance of politics. He defines
the term “disidentification” as a process that “scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications” (Muñoz 31). To him, disidentification is a mode of building intimate relations, and a strategy of resistance and survival for those who must negotiate a public sphere that suppresses the presence of those who do not conform to dominant identitarian categories. These disidentificatory performances are “emergent identities-in-difference” that originate from a failure of interpellation within the dominant culture (7). The term “emergent,” as theorized by Williams, is understood as a process or formation existing within but apart from dominant culture, not necessarily as part of the past, but also as an active component of the present (1977, 122). In Marxism and Literature, he remarks:

The effective formations of most actual art relate to already manifest social formations, dominant or residual, and it is primarily to emergent formations (though often in the form of modification or disturbance in older forms) that the structure of feeling, as solution, relates. (134)

If structures of feeling are reflected in emergent formations of art, disidentificatory performances that express the lived realities of marginalized subjects facilitate the formation of “emergent identities-in-difference.” Muñoz’s exploration of disidentification affirms that these political performances arise in response to dominant social conditions. But they also, as Williams imparts, reveal emergent formations and feelings that take place outside dominant culture and consumption.

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2 See Norma Alarcón’s discussion of “identity-in-difference” and “sites of emergence” in “Conjugating Subjects in the Age of Multiculturalism,” in Mapping Multiculturalism, eds. Avery F. Gordon and Christopher Newfield (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).
Working within and outside dominant modes of being, the characters in *Cereus Blooms* engage in disidentificatory work by disturbing common notions of identity, knowledge, and histories. Their transgression of racial, class, gender, and sexual boundaries make evident reticent intimacies that resist heteronormative sexualities and interactions shaped under patriarchal nationalist frameworks. Struggles ensue in the text, between “a consciously held ideology and emergent experience” (Williams 2009, 48), between what is learned and what is felt. Reading *Cereus Blooms* through the framework of a queer diaspora not only exposes unacknowledged subjects and subjectivities living in and with the system of transnational capitalism. It also produces a critique of globalization through the very existence of their being, labour, relations, and lived experiences.

**Intertwined Colonial Histories in Trinidad and Tobago**

Although Trinidad and Tobago gained its independence from Britain in 1962, the legacies of colonialism have not disappeared. Rather, in the neo-colonial present, the maintenance of racialized hierarchies, particularly essentialist Indian and Afro-Trinidadian identities, are dominant processes informed by the persistence of colonial relations and economic structures of the past. The migration of more than 1.5 million Indians as indentured labour to the Anglophone Caribbean from 1838 to 1917 after the abolition of slavery in 1807 affected already-established racial hierarchies and socio-economic systems. While accounts differ as to how East Indians in Trinidad were seen at that time (at the bottom of the social ladder and included in the colonial structure or as
outsiders to Trinidadian society), it is clear that a division existed between African and East Indian settlers, one that has been sustained and reproduced by ethnic stereotypes. East Indians were perceived as late settlers to a creolized Trinidadian colonial society, as the social structure comprised of Africans as the majority of the population at the base, people of mixed descent in the middle, and upper-class elites, mostly of European descent (British, French, Spanish) at the top (Brereton).

Contemporary relations between Indo and Afro-Trinidadians remain divisive. Viranjini Munasinghe argues that East Indians continued to be seen as external to Trinidad even under current dominant discourse that defines Trinidadian as being “mixed up” (i.e. Creole)—since this mixing has always focused on and privileged the connection between White and Black (83). Indo-Trinidadians not only resist creolization but also “reject the callaloo model of national culture, in which all ingredients blend into taste, in preference to the tossed salad, in which all the ingredients maintain their distinctive flavours…” (Munasinghe 270). Munasinghe posits that Indo-Trinidadian leaders take up a Pluralist society model, calling for difference as definitive of the nationalist narrative which enables collectivity without giving up one’s ethnic identity. During the 1970s and 1980s, political movements erupted in North America that spilled out into the Caribbean, such as the Black Power movement of 1970 though it deterred Indo-Trinidadians from joining as they viewed such rallies as exclusionary. However, this is not to say that Indo-Trinidadians did not ally themselves with Afro-Trinidadians. Some, in fact, considered that “their rightful place [was] alongside their Afro-Trinidadian brethren in the fight against European domination. For them indenture and slavery represented the same

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3 One example is James Henry Collens’ view of them as the “foreign element” in contrast to the “natives” (which he saw as the African people), in A Guide to Trinidad in the 1880s.
subjugation” (261). While Munasinghe’s critique gives a complex perspective on East Indians in Trinidad by emphasizing how the negotiation of their identities was deeply intertwined with colonial policies, it risks reproducing a reductive binary. The strategy of recuperating one’s history need not always be associated with a reclamation or assertion of ethnic identity that is in opposition to another ethnic or racialized group.

Instead, how given the inheritance of colonial history and its division of East Indians and Africans in Trinidad, can we scrutinize beyond nationalist strategies of essentializing ethnic identity and examine overlooked, less visible relations of reciprocity and solidarity? How might reading for reticent intimacies between various groups of people help us better understand their intertwined colonial histories? Furthermore, what are the roles and responsibilities of settlers towards Indigenous populations in the Caribbean dispossessed of their ancestral lands? Mechanisms of colonial, racist, and sexist oppressions are inseparable. The violence inflicted on Indigenous bodies and the environment run parallel to the violence inflicted on Indo and Afro-Trinidadians bodies as sites of intersecting colonial and gender violence. The ongoing production of nationalist narratives in Trinidad and Tobago risks erasing memories of relationship-building and alliances between different communities whose traumas and vulnerabilities are intertwined and shaped by histories of injustice. By focusing on reticent intimacy as a process of remembering marginalized relations, I look to fragmentation and incompletion as spaces for reimagining alternative possibilities.
Intergenerational Relationships in *Cereus Blooms at Night*

Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night* is set on a fictional Caribbean island called “Lantanacamara,” whose town “Paradise” bears resemblance to Trinidad, while England is depicted as the “Shivering Northern Wetlands.” The text tells the life of an old Indian non-verbal woman, Mala Ramchandin, as narrated by her caretaker Tyler, an Indigenous person of Paradise whom she befriends in a nursing home in Lantanacamara. Both characters are queered by others: Tyler, for his sexual orientation, and Mala, first for the village stigma of her mother’s sexuality and later for her history of being sexually abused and for succumbing to madness. An intergenerational friendship develops between the two characters and Mala’s past unravels through shifts in time and narration. We discover that when Mala was young, her mother, Sarah, developed an intimate relationship with Lavinia, who came from a wealthy white “Wetlandish” missionary family, the Thoroughlys. The two women plan an escape from Lantanacamara to the Wetlands; however, while they manage to escape they are accidentally forced to leave behind Mala and her sister Asha. The sisters are left in the control of their father, Chandin, who when he was a boy, had been adopted by the Thoroughlys as their son and assimilated into their Christian missionary culture and theology. Chandin sexually abuses his daughters (mistaking them at first for his wife when he is asleep in bed) to the point that Asha runs away from home and eventually ends up in Canada years later—losing contact with her sister despite failed attempts at sending Mala letters. Mala grows up and stays living in the same house with Chandin, performing the household duties her mother once did in her father’s attempt to preserve familial and domestic order, until he is killed in a confrontation with Mala and her lover, Ambrose. Mala is traumatized by this incident and
becomes stigmatized by the townsfolk as the old madwoman whose family members violate social and sexual norms. Of importance is Tyler’s role in this narrative. Mala’s story, and other characters’ stories which frame Tyler’s story are eventually reimagined, recorded, and retold by Tyler himself. Ambrose and his son Otoh, who visit Mala at the nursing home, share their experiences with each other and with Tyler, and in doing so they bond and come to a deeper understanding of themselves by the end of the novel.

The excavation of Mala’s story by the younger generation of Tyler and Otoh is a process that is based on fragmentation and reticence rather than a desire for wholeness and complete knowledge. The characters’ lives are tied by the gaps, silences, and elisions associated with shared experiences of displacement and colonial violence that span generations and continents. By layering various characters’ stories in a kind of epistemic investigation, Tyler’s recording of Mala’s past both shapes and informs his own personal narrative and identity, as well as those of others. The intertwining of these stories resonates with Edouard Glissant’s notion of how identities, and similarly, histories, are formed not in isolation but in relation to each other. In *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant illustrates a heterogenous view of language and identity as always being informed and transformed by others. This process is interdependent on the relations between people, for, he states, “sometimes, by taking up the problems of the Other, it is possible to find oneself” (Glissant 18). In *Cereus Blooms*, Tyler listens deeply to Mala as he cares for her at the Paradise Alms House and through the process of finding out her story, develops a greater self-awareness of his own identity.

This intergenerational friendship lies outside social conventions regarding filial responsibility. Rather than assume the roles in a grandchild-grandparent model, each
views the other as a survivor of the legacies of colonial violence. When Mala first arrives at the almshouse, Tyler uses his training abroad to take care of her. But he also recognizes a “shared queerness” with Mala (Mootoo 52). Tyler recognizes her as someone who displays the “symptoms of trauma.” As Ann Cvetkovich observes, “Mala will not speak, but rather than choosing a medical treatment, Tyler seeks to find out who she is by comforting her, playing with her, and trusting her nonverbal language. Instinctively, Tyler sees that Mala has something to say and that they have something in common” (143). Tyler goes beyond his given task of caregiving and chooses to listen to and believe Mala despite the gaps and elisions in this form of communication where she does not fully articulate or verbalize what she wants to say. While the issue of narrative reliability and multiple framings in the text highlights the power involved in representing and re-articulating other people’s stories, in *Cereus Blooms* the younger generation practices deep listening not to simply witness trauma and inherit memories. Tyler and Otoh’s attentiveness to her silences and indecipherable gestures creates a reticent intimacy that enables both parties to collectively reimagine the past and present in ways that are healing and transformative. Rather than being a conscious practice, reticent intimacy entails active listening and being present with others and where they are at emotionally. Indeed, Mala and Tyler’s bond is not a one-way relationship. Mala’s memories resonate with Tyler’s own memories by way of Tyler’s queer diasporic identity, which is traced back to a history of colonialism and the institutionalization of patriarchal heteronormativity. This history is one that structurally impacted Mala’s family and led to the migrations of her loved ones. Her story not only enables Tyler to come to terms with his own sense of queerness. It also emphasizes that his experience is not an
isolated situation. Both share the experience of being queered and stigmatized by others, for being and living outside a hetero-patriarchal system. Their transgressions and Tyler’s documentation of Mala’s story enact a shared “disidentification” that is framed and informed by reticence. The text offers a methodology of intimacy that attends to and uses reticence to articulate loss, erasure, trauma, and oppression in ways that do not simply reproduce and recall the past, but generate imaginings of potentiality and possibility for those affected by colonial violence across spatial and temporal contexts.

**Traumatic Histories and Community Healing through Reticent Intimacy**

Mala’s story is central to understanding and connecting the lives of the other characters in the text who are all impacted by the legacies of colonial violence. I turn now to Chandin’s and Ambrose’s engagement with and immersion in colonial structures and ideologies to explore how the intersections of internalized colonialism, racism, and patriarchy affect different generations and complicate the colonizer-colonized dichotomy. Chandin’s violence towards his daughters is inseparable from Ambrose’s betrayal of Mala when he flees from her house during the confrontation with Chandin. Both men reproduce the colonial-patriarchal behaviour that they have internalized—Chandin through the Thoroughlys’ mission and adoption of him as their son, and in a more subtle way, Ambrose through his inability to stand up for Mala after witnessing her father’s abuse. Ambrose’s attempts to make amends for the past by sending her food and visiting her at the almshouse years later indicate glimmers of hope that relationships can survive and communities can heal from violence. As much as Chandin’s anger and abusive
actions deeply traumatize Mala, she is able to heal with the care of Ambrose, Tyler, and Otoh, who themselves find spaces of care in their relationship with her and each other.

It is through his grandmother Nana that Tyler first gains access to the tale of Chandin Ramchandin before meeting Mala and later figures out the story in more detail from her. Tyler’s recognition of the different ways in which Mala, Asha, Chandin, and Ambrose are oppressed “scrambles categories of guilt and blame, implying that all of them are living with traumas of colonialism that are deeply entwined with those of migration and sexual incest” (Cvetkovich 152). Indeed, the cultural and social factors that enable Chandin to sexually abuse his daughters are not only a result of growing up within and absorbing the colonial and hetero-patriarchal practices, structure and ideology imposed by the Thoroughlys (through their familial, social, and sexual order). The complicity of the Lantanacamaran community in internalized colonialism and their view of Chandin as a victim of sexual transgressions committed by Sarah and Lavinia also allow him to continue his abuse and remain unaccountable for his actions.

Chandin’s own personal history can be traced back to his childhood years when he is chosen to live with the Thoroughlys as their adopted son and grow up in the seminary. Yet, as much as they try to colonize and assimilate him, they are ultimately unable to do so. Chandin saw what he most feared: as "the only person of Indian descent at the seminary. He was, in fact, the only non-white person there" (Mootoo 41). While the colonial project through the Thoroughlys’ mission involves converting “others” to Christianity, Chandin realizes that he is used as a token and can never be fully accepted by the Thoroughlys as part of their family. After Lavinia escapes from the town with Sarah, Chandin, angered by their betrayal and realizing his failed colonial mimicry at
replicating the white ideal of domesticity in his household, tries to hold on to whatever is left of the patriarchal order in the house by forcing his daughters into incest. As Homi Bhabha notes, “(m)imicry is, thus the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the other as it visualizes power” (122). Chandin’s attempts to preserve his authority by abusing his daughters can be seen as a consequence of living through traumas of colonialism and the realization that he can never be fully white. His failure to reconstruct the domestic ideals that he grew up absorbing inadvertently transforms the Ramchandin house into a grotesque “appropriation” (Bhabha) of the Thoroughly household and the patriarchal power it symbolizes.

However, Bhabha suggests that colonial mimicry also provides a space to challenge colonial authority. Ambrose goes to study theology in the Wetlands but becomes an entomologist instead, returning to Lantanacamara and telling Mala his awareness of the arrogance of the theologians’ premise, that “some of us are considered to be much lesser than others—especially if we are not Wetlandish or European or full-blooded white” (Mootoo 214). His refusal to become a theologian can be seen as resistance to colonial assimilation. Yet, his ignorance of the reality of Mala’s abuse by her father and betrayal of her reveals the ambivalence of his character. When Chandin discovers Mala and Ambrose in his house and attacks his daughter, Ambrose’s idealized vision of her and the world collapses:

When Ambrose entered the kitchen, he stood still, trying to make sense of what had been revealed to him. He assured himself that it was he whom Chandin wanted to kill and not his own daughter. He looked feebly around for a knife to
protect himself, all the while feeling shame for her and for himself—as though he had been betrayed by Mala, and at the same time wrestling with the notion that she could not possibly, not conceivably have been agreeable to intimacies with her father. In that instant of hesitation he so distanced himself from Mala that, like an outside observer, he saw the world as he had known and dreamed it suddenly come undone. (246)

In this scene, Ambrose’s distancing from Mala and consequent fleeing of the house despite Mala’s cry to him to not leave implies his inaction and complicity in patriarchal and colonial violence. Years later, when he recounts to Otoh what happened the day he lost Mala, he states that he “lost [him]self also” (255). While Ambrose’s “nonsensical ramble” (255) finally puts into words the past of what happened between him and Mala, it is up to the younger generation to assume leadership in taking responsibility and listen to Mala. “Nonsensical ramble,” incoherent and fragmented, can only do so much in retelling past trauma. It is through a relation centered on reticence and attending to that reticence that they are able to fully care for her.

The recognition of an inarticulate shared feeling of otherness with Mala and an attempt to put together snippets of various narratives creates an intimacy that functions as mode of remembering. “To everyone else, Miss Ramchandin appeared to have a limited vocabulary or at least to have become too simple-minded to do more than imitate” (106), Tyler observes. However, he knows “for a fact she was able to speak and had volumes of tales and thoughts in her head… There was a purpose to it and to all the chatter, and finally a purpose to my listening and to sifting, cutting and sewing the lot” (106–7). Tyler’s re-articulation of Mala’s story is not an isolated experience however. Otoh’s and
Ambrose’s interactions with Mala help Tyler make sense of her reticence, and it is through a non-patrilineal kinship that their relationships thrive.

“I want to know something, but I don’t know what”

Through residual and emergent processes of intimacy, Mala’s story is retold in a way that does not depend on complete understandings or knowledge of the Other in order to take shape. Developing this further, in "‘A Shared Queerness’: Colonialism, Transnationalism, and Sexuality in Shani Mootoo's Cereus Blooms at Night," Grace Kyungwon Hong states that her aim is “not to create a more ‘complete’ history by adding a queer diasporic perspective through a reading of this novel.” Rather, she analyzes the text by interrogating “the presumption that a complete record can exist, and in so doing, identifying the desire for totality, resolution, or wholeness as fundamentally nationalist or colonial” (Hong 76). Hong’s analysis entails imagining relationships between people as “remembering the exclusions and losses occasioned by nationalist notions of community, and in so doing, bringing to light different modes of affinity and affiliation” (76, original in italics).

Hong’s attentiveness to the silences and erasures of the past as a mode of remembering the violent exclusions perpetuated by nationalist attempts at forging community is useful as it queers formations that are both created and pathologized by nationalist and settler-colonial projects. Her reading also makes visible the idea that the novel itself is based on difference while simultaneously acknowledging dominant discourses and histories that enable and participate in the creation of these different modes of sexuality and relations. I take up her reading by attending to the silences in the text as a mode of remembering, and investigating how these silences generate an
intimacy that is shaped by gaps, distance, and estrangement—that does not necessarily reproduce trauma, but puts into language unlikely relations and creative alliances that are healing and productive.

In a conversation between Tyler and Mr. Hector, the gardener of the Paradise Alms House, Mr. Hector tells Tyler that the nurse reminds him of his younger brother whose “voice was soft-soft, just like [Tyler’s]” (Mootoo 79). Tyler’s presence reminds Mr. Hector of his brother who was sent away from the family to live in a church mission because of his perceived non-normative characteristics. Mr. Hector states: “I [am] watching you and I want to ask you so many questions but I don’t even know what it is I want to know. I want to know something, but I don’t know what” (79). His remarks and his brother’s story emphasize how colonized subjectivities, experiences, and histories are marginalized and forced into erasure, leaving questions and inarticulate desires for knowledge. Yet, Tyler’s presence compels Mr. Hector to remember his brother, a “sad feeling” (78), which causes Tyler to feel “from and toward him the caring of a brother” (79). Here, Mr. Hector makes a connection between Tyler and his brother’s experience. His desire to know symbolically points to the intimacy, solidarity and survival shared among those who have been oppressed and displaced by systems of colonialism.

Like Mala’s story, Mr. Hector’s knowledge (or non-knowledge) of his brother’s story opens up space for possibilities to emerge from the gaps and silences. Mr. Hector struggles to know what it is he exactly wants to know. The reticent intimacy between Tyler and Mr. Hector not only becomes an alternative mode of remembering lives and histories elided by dominant archives; their bond also causes unexpected ripple effects and demonstrates that reticent relationships consist of interdependence and reciprocity.
Mala “in her quiet, invisible way.” overhears their conversation (79), and realizing Tyler’s nature, steals a nurse’s uniform for him to wear. There is “more in her head than bird and cricket and frog imitations and childhood chants” (81), Tyler discovers, and it is soon through Mala’s quiet care and persuasion that he comes to more fully understand his sexual and gender identity, and the possibilities that lie beyond the constraints of a heteropatriarchal order in Lantanacamara. The quiet responses to the desire to know what is assumed unknown becomes a dominant aesthetic between Mootoo’s characters. Their recognition and inhabitation of a “shared queerness” transforms their relationships with each other into a poetics of attentive care and listening. Indeed, if Mala’s story is carefully retold and rewritten by Tyler and other characters, we must also remember the role that Mala herself plays in the text. She reciprocates the same care and thoughtfulness that Tyler and Otoh display towards her. Both softly understand each others’ needs and desires, and through their actions, portray what it means to confront the past and be responsible and accountable to themselves and each other.

**Reticent Intimacy as Creating Communities of Care**

“Where Asha?” (84), Mala continually asks Tyler. This question seems to haunt the text as it progresses, and it remains unanswered by the end of the novel. As Tyler gradually pieces together Mala’s story, he ponders over the migrations of Lavinia, Sarah, and Asha, as well as Ambrose’s escape from the Ramchandin household the day that Chandin is killed, wondering “how many of us, feeling unsafe and unprotected, either end up running far away from everything we know and love, or staying and simply going mad.” He concludes that neither of Mala’s loved ones are to blame for leaving her, and “that neither option is more or less noble than the other. They are merely different ways
of coping, and we each must cope as best we can” (Mootoo 97). To these characters, escaping and coping are done for the sake of self-preservation. Indeed, thinking through their departures in this way, queer diasporas are literally acts of displacement in the name of survival. Through Asha, Sarah, Lavinia, and Ambrose’s actions, Tyler comes to realize how they are all impacted, like Chandin, by the traumas and violence of colonialism. Rather than focus on who is guilty and to be blamed, the text shifts attention to how characters are complicit in different ways within hierarchical systems of power. While Cereus Blooms is highly critical of structures such as religion and colonialism, the issue at stake is not the absolving of individual responsibility. Instead, the narrative structure of the text indicates a rethinking of strategies and relations that dismantle those power systems. Mootoo’s narrative aesthetics open up space to reexamine how and what community responsibility and accountability may look like.

In this sense, reticent intimacy as demonstrated in the relationships between Tyler and Mala, and among other characters such as Mr. Hector and Otoh, becomes a practice of care. Tyler creates a space of care not just through the task of caregiving, but also in his practice of listening to Mala’s nonverbal gestures and silences. The role and responsibility of caring becomes important as it guides the process of focusing on less visible relations to connect disparate lives and stories, and to reimagine different modes of affiliation between characters estranged from each other. Indeed, thinking through reticent intimacy as an aesthetic practice of care, the text demonstrates one possibility of how settlers can be responsible and accountable to each other under colonial systems established through violence.
As well, this form of intimacy displaces normative modes of memory and affiliation with potential imaginings of what-could-have-been and what-may-happen. I want to end with Mala’s own reimagining of the past. When the Constable and his men enter the Ramchandin house to investigate rumours of a dead body, Mala reimagines her past traumas and creates an alternative ending to protect herself:

‘Yes, Pohpoh, you take off and fly, child, fly!’

At the top of the hill Pohpoh bent her body forward and, as though doing a breast stroke, began to part the air with her arms. Each stroke took her higher until she no longer touched the ground. She soon found herself above even the tallest trees. High enough, calmed, she glided, dipping to the left, angling to the right… She practised making perfect, broad circles, like a frigate bird splayed out against the sky in an elegant V. Down below, her island was soon lost among others, all as shapeless as specks of dust adrift on a vast turquoise sea. (200-201)

This fantastical imagery of a young Mala flying away from her troubled life over an ocean of possibilities reflects what Lowe calls a “past conditional temporality” where the past becomes “a configuration of multiple contingent possibilities, all present, yet none inevitable” (175). By perceiving the past through a reformulation of spatial and temporal frames, as Mala does in this passage not in order to relive her trauma, but to rewrite it, we may reflect on the possibilities that arise from the process of remembering what is fragmented and incomplete, and through that reimage different modes of knowledge and being. Indeed, the text “acknowledge[s] the structural force of histories of migration and diaspora as traumatic without ‘destroying’ people” (Cvetkovich 155). By pointing to the possibility of communities that “remain livable even when transformed by trauma”
(155), Mootoo suggests that reticent intimacy as a mode of remembering opens up space to reimagine relations including the relationship with one’s past self, of history—of practicing not just care for others but also self-care towards healing from violence.

As demonstrated in the previous scene of Pohpoh flying away from the Ramchandin household, Mootoo aestheticizes care through narrative reimagination and reconfiguring temporality in her authorial practice. Although this may be criticized as escapism and a failure or refusal to confront historical causality, I want to argue the opposite. Running away from home (both literally and psychologically) to reinvent one’s self or to escape from abusers does not necessarily mean not acknowledging the past. It means dealing with the past by reimagining, finding, and creating other conditions to survive that would make life worth living again. The characters confront tragedy through strategies of care that are healing for themselves and others, and that resist the dominance of teleological narratives. The novel does not by any means try to hide past traumas. It depicts, quite graphically, gendered and sexualized violence. But it does so in a way that recognizes the needs of those who witness these stories, like Tyler, to enable them to come and listen as they are—and in doing so, inspire readers to collectively reimagine other ways of living.

To recover relations that have been obscured in the past necessitates an understanding of dominant notions of intimacy that have been shaped and informed by capitalist colonial and settler-colonial relations. It is also to understand one’s shifting position in time and space, how to view from a site of multiple subjectivities, and how to create spaces of care by navigating the politics of being in relation with others and listening to them. Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms* articulates reticent intimacy as a productive
and purposeful silence where normative modes of affiliation are disrupted. It also points to the potential that lies in oftentimes forgotten or deemed unimportant moments of encounters, where powerful possibilities of different communities that care for each other are imagined and realized.
Chapter 2: Visualizing Transnational Feminist Intimacies in Trinh T.

Minh-ha’s *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*

**Intimacy with the Past, Palimpsest Identity**

As *Cereus Blooms* suggests, colonial relations have shaped notions of race and intimacy through the colonial divisions between “minority” communities that keep in operation social, racial, and sexual hierarchies. In an interview with Bhabha, writer, composer, filmmaker, and theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha acknowledges the differences in the histories of settler-colonial violence and forms of oppression enacted against various marginalized communities, yet argues for the usefulness of understanding and connecting these experiences. Grasping border politics, she states, requires travelling across different realities and “[trying] to open up to other struggles, whose concerns and issues may intersect with ours” in transformative ways while keeping in mind the specificity of each context (Trinh 1999, 19). Indeed, Trinh engages with borders or the liminal space between categories, and locates a self-reflexive position between an insider and outsider position in her filmic practice and writings on her creative process.

Occupying this in-between space, or the “contact zone” through border crossing, Trinh’s work dismantles dominant concepts around intimacy and relationships between subject and object—particularly by traversing across visual and oral languages, and the social realities and experiences that arise from navigating them. By moving between “private and public, past and present, the psyche and the social,” as Bhabha states, an “interstitial intimacy” develops “that questions binary divisions through which such spheres of social experiences are often spatially opposed” (Bhabha 19). Reading for an
“interstitial intimacy” pushes us to attend to the nuances of language, including the gaps and silences in communication. In this chapter, through my analysis of Trinh’s 1989 film *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*, I investigate how language works as not just a verbal/nonverbal experience but also as a visual image that complicates the lines “between what is said or read and what is seen, heard and felt” (Trinh 1999, 10-11).

Critic Rey Chow argues that the emergence of cinema intervenes in and transforms developments in the cultural landscape such as literature, and the ways in which they are produced and received. Drawing from her notion of visuality in regards to the cinematic apparatus and its impact on cultural fields, I want to ask how might Trinh’s film, by moving away from written records, offer an anticolonial mode of historical memory by re/inscribing history that expresses the shifting relationship between past and present, and different levels of intimacy? If colonialism and translation are experiences of displacement, how does *Surname Viet* as a film created by and through these multiple displacements, engage with the politics of intimacy under the conditions of violence that have shaped the modern world?

Often, intimacy is associated with interiority, with what is familiar and within. It shares much in common with identity, as both impart degrees of recognition in terms of becoming perceivable to others and to one’s self. Identity is produced through a

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4 In *Primitive Passions* (1995), Chow reads Lu Xun’s turn from a medical student to a writer after he watches newsreels of executions of Chinese people in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05). What is significant in his affective response to cinema and his decision to write, she contends, is not only that he believes engaging with literature rather than medicine would be more effective in shaping China’s future and wellbeing, but that the newer technology of cinema influences him to pursue literature, an older cultural technology.
negotiation between essential comprehensions of self and socially encoded roles, just as intimate lives absorb and resist dominant notions of public spheres. Since Surname Viet is difficult for many to become engaged in let alone enjoy, because its subjects are not immediately accessible and relatable to Western viewers (at least especially during the first half), the argument that the film engages with intimacy seems odd at first glance. Some would even argue that Surname Viet lacks intimacy. The film demands more from its viewers than mainstream Hollywood-style films that employ a clear narrative bounded within space and time where subjects are easily readable and understood. However, this kind of inhibited intimacy in Surname Viet becomes more apparent—indeed arguably revealed as residual and emergent intimacies, following Lowe’s terms—in the second half of the film when the actresses speak about performing their roles as Vietnamese women and how they connect with and differ from them. Echoing Williams’ remark that understanding the emergent and residual requires a full comprehension of the dominant (123), the women’s reflections on the lives of other women can be seen as residual and emergent intimacies that arise as a consequence of their engagement with their appropriation of Vietnamese women in the first half of the film. If intimacy becomes noticeable in the second half of the film—there is a sense of closeness and easier understanding of the subjects because the women’s identities have been revealed to be performances—perhaps intimacy becomes discernable, like identity, when it is lived and enacted.

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5 William E. Connolly argues that identity is a site of struggle between fixed notions of self and socially constructed roles, where “some possibilities of social definition are more suitable for certain bodies and certain individuals, particularly after each ha[s] branded into it as ‘second nature’ a stratum of dispositions, proclivities, and preliminary self-understandings” (Connolly 163).
In other words, the fact that viewers may be frustrated with Trinh’s film because of the flatness and dis-intimacy of its characters suggests there is a criteria for distinguishing levels of intimacy. Dis-intimacy becomes apparent through the course of the film as intimacy is plotted as a narrative arc. How might the women in Trinh’s film perform intimacy in the second half of the film by speaking about their memories and relations with the Vietnamese women whose lives they are acting? And why might visual performances of intimacy and identity be more accessible to viewers in the second half of the film in the first place, especially in a cross-cultural context? Communicating this intimacy involves sharing one’s self and identity. If intimacy—and therefore identity—becomes noticeable when it is lived and performed, the women in *Surname Viet* complicate notions of identity through their enactments and re-enactments of their lived experiences. Rather than simply assume that they reveal their “real” identities in the latter part of the film, the actresses engage in transnational feminist intimacies by remembering Vietnamese women and identifying shared struggles of colonial violence and displacement through acts of imagination. Trinh’s film confronts the question of what happens when residual and emergent intimacies need to develop an aesthetics to resist dominant institutions of intimacy. Certainly, there is a political project tied to how some intimacies are legitimized in the public and others are not. The work done by the actresses of engaging in a transnational feminist intimacy not only alters understandings of the past and temporality, but also transforms how their identities are perceived—not as Vietnamese subjectivities solely constructed through the West through Trinh’s camera lens, but as women complicit in framing their stories and experiences as palimpsests marked by global legacies of colonial rule.
The film, much like *Cereus Blooms*, offers an alternative method of remembering intergenerational relationships. However, it does so through a visual and aural archive that deconstructs homogenous and nationalist notions of Vietnamese female subjectivity and generates productive possibilities of feminist understandings of solidarity between women in Việt Nam and the diaspora. Their situations and struggles are narrated through popular memory, personal stories, songs, proverbs, and sayings—nonofficial, undervalued sources of information that challenge patriarchal modes of knowledge production. Functioning as a palimpsest archive, *Surname Viet* makes visible, as Glen Mimura says, “the cultural circuits along which these stories have traveled and the marks that these displacements have inscribed on the original texts” (76). The film challenges linear temporality and colonial desires for authenticity and “the totalizing quest of meaning” (Trinh). In the process of doing so, it documents fragments of emergent and residual intimacies through the women’s exchanges with each other as they perform memories of their lives and reflect on colonial and imperial legacies in Việt Nam, and the impacts of those legacies on their lived realities.

**Việt Nam, Migration to the U.S., and Asian American Film Production**

While Trinh’s practice has provoked controversies and even outrage for crossing insider-outsider boundaries and for potentially constructing one-dimensional portrayals of other cultures,\(^6\) her films resist the politics of essentialism by crossing multiple borders and generating productive possibilities in theory and practice. As Hamid Naficy observes,

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\(^6\) In the 1986 Fortieth Edinburgh International Film Festival’s conference on Third Cinema for instance, African-American artists and black British filmmakers criticized Trinh for appropriating and flattening the stories of Africans in her films *Reassemblage* (1982) and *Naked Spaces—Living is Round* (1985) (Naficy 71).
“in her film practice Trinh has worked in opposition to binarist limitations by making films about other Third World cultures not her own and by having Third World insiders comment in her films on other Third World insiders not their own” (Naficy 72). This is, of course, not to say that *Surname Viet* does not contain elements of autobiography. In some sense it partakes in self-ethnography through its subject matter. Yet Trinh brings to the surface differences and multiplicities within Vietnamese culture in order to suggest a “Third World culture not her own”. She is conscious of approaching her subjects not from a “legitimized ‘insider’s’ point of view” (Trinh 1999, 30) but from an in-between space, where she has diasporic Vietnamese women speak about other Vietnamese women who are removed through time and space. The film portrays the complexities of Vietnamese women’s realities in a way that exposes their historical and cultural specificities. Through the use of different sources, subjects, and perspectives that are framed in a nonlinear sequence, Trinh frustrates viewers’ efforts to extract a specific meaning that can be applied to all experiences.

In this section, I would like to explore and contextualize *Surname Viet* through three temporal-spatial frames to avoid homogenizing “Vietnam” under Western discourse, to provide a deeper understanding of the complex historical contexts and subject matter that Trinh’s film addresses and alludes to (however briefly or in-depth), and to illustrate the social and cultural conditions in which the film was made. My hope is that by historicizing the film in this manner, we can more readily appreciate *Surname Viet* as a document that performs and archives specific experiences and memories of Vietnamese migrant women in the United States in a way that does not flatten their stories. A brief outline of Trinh’s biography also offers us a deeper understanding of her
filmmaking practice. I will briefly summarize the colonial rule administered by France until the French-Indochina War (1945-1954) and highlight some major events of the Vietnam War (1954-75); then I will comment on the waves of migration of Vietnamese people to the United States following the Fall of Saigon in 1975 and issues of racialization and Asian American cultural production; lastly, I examine Asian American film in conjunction with Third Cinema, a revolutionary film movement started in Latin America in the 1960s in resistance to the capitalist-colonial Hollywood model of cinema (“First Cinema”) for the ways in which Trinh’s film speaks to and deviates from its manifestos and theories. While the following biographical and contextual sketches do not do justice to Trinh’s story and the rich and broad histories of Việt Nam, I nonetheless highlight historical aspects that are relevant towards comprehending the political nuances of the film.

Trinh was born in Hanoi in 1953 but grew up in Saigon, Việt Nam. She migrated to the United States in the 1970s to pursue higher education, where she received two Master of Arts degrees in French literature and music, and music composition, and a PhD in comparative literature from the University of Illinois. Prior to making Surname Viet, she had completed two other films about Africa, Reassemblage (1982) and Naked Spaces – Living is Round (1985), where she interrogated the relationship between African women and their spatial environment through formal cinematic techniques. On understanding the nonbinarist stance of her work—how she does not make explicit the difference between North and South Vietnamese in Surname Viet—Trinh’s familial upbringing where three different Vietnamese political factions existed side by side has affected her perspective and practice. She states, “There are so many complex
positionings within the Vietnamese reality that to discuss it only in terms of north-south duality is to fall prey to seeing within the most obvious form of power relationship” (30). That Trinh does not consider the duality a reflection of her reality and lived experiences speaks to how she portrays the women subjects who tell their stories in *Surname Viet*.

Indeed, Việt Nam’s history of being governed by imperial powers and controlled by multiple different political factions goes back to as early as 200 BC under Chinese colonization. French colonization officially began in 1874; in the early 1900’s Vietnamese nationalist sentiments increased as views of resistance against colonization spread through the dissemination of literary materials. In 1941, Ho Chi Minh started a Communist party that became known as the Viet Minh and successfully negotiated a deal with the Japanese to surrender their rule over Việt Nam in 1945, after the end of the Second World War. The existence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was short-lived as the French returned to resume their colonial rule after the war. This led to the French-Indochina War (1945-1954) where the French lost the battle to gain control over the communists. Although Ho Chi Minh defeated the French, he was only given control over the northern part of Việt Nam because many South Vietnamese resisted communism. This was due to multiple political factors, including the fact that most of the bourgeois Vietnamese resided in the south and felt threatened by the potential impacts towards their socio-economic status and livelihoods. As well, many Chinese settlers lived in the south and did not feel drawn to the Community party’s decrees of Vietnamese nationalist notions of purity. The Civil War (1954-1975), or the Vietnam War, divided the country into two factions: the communist North was led by Ho Chi Minh who was supported by the USSR and China while the non-communist South was backed by U.S.
support as the latter sought to contain communism from spreading. The war ended in 1975 with the Fall of Saigon as North Vietnamese forces captured the city. With the end of the war, waves of Vietnamese refugees migrated to the U.S., with many settling in parts of California and Texas. More fled Việt Nam during the Sino-Vietnamese War of 1979 to escape economic and political instability under the new communist government. Finding work and building livelihoods in North America was particularly difficult as most faced multiple forms of discrimination.

Certainly Asian migrant labourers in the U.S. faced “extraordinary degrees of exploitation, and legal and extralegal forms of racial violence” (Mimura 23). Representations of their struggles and resistance have proliferated through cultural production. These cultural documents make visible the experiences of Asian migrants to the nation-state—narratives which have been obscured and dismissed in national archives—and engender new perspectives on historical formations of the U.S.

Cultural production informs and is informed by social movements. Looking at Asian American film production alongside the tricontinental revolution of Third Cinema, we can see how *Surname Viet* intervenes in the trajectory of Asian American film history by pointing to possibilities of feminist transnational connections. Third Cinema was an international movement in filmmaking practice and theory that emerged in the 1960s and was sustained up to the 1980s. It was influenced by anticolonial nationalist movements in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, and shaped community-based filmmaking during the 1970s. Mimura asserts that *Surname Viet* was a turning point in Third Cinema towards formal experimentalist techniques. Trinh took inspiration from radical writings produced by women of colour communities during the 1970s and 80s to establish diasporic
perspectives in her work that challenged Third Cinema’s patriarchal and heterosexist theoretical underpinnings. *Surname Viet* as such, I posit, is informed by the revolutionary ideas of Third Cinema that rejected white supremacist, colonial aesthetics; however, it also complicates understandings of racialized and gendered subjectivities through a feminist intersectional lens. By opening up space to consider possibilities of feminist transnational intimacies between Vietnam, France, and the U.S., Trinh engages with multiple women’s realities in a way that suggests the possibility for people of colour artists to be complicit in appropriation. Trinh’s film speaks to Third Cinema’s resistance to colonial perspectives but also interrogates the idea that the movement generates authentic portrayals of racialized and gendered identities.

**Inauthenticity and the Making of *Surname Viet Given Name Nam***

*Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989) is a montage of interviews, archival images, poetry, songs, dances, talking heads, on-screen text and sound that both stages and interrogates the conventions of ethnographic filmmaking and documentary genre. Unapologetic in its delivery of multiple subjectivities and without offering any intent to explain in a linear fashion, the film launches viewers straight into a series of interviews. In the first hour of the film, four Vietnamese women narrate their stories and lives on screen. The settings seem to be in postwar Việt Nam; the women speak haltingly in accented English and different Vietnamese dialects; scenes and images of women during the Vietnam War (1954-1975) flicker between and during the interviews. Multiple voiceovers are superimposed when the women speak and subtitles appear in various parts of the film frame—sometimes over the subjects’ faces—that do not always correspond to
what the women are saying and lag behind the diegetic speech. Any simple act of reading or desire to know the Vietnamese female subject is denied as images, text, numerous voices and voiceovers, and songs fracture and compete for attention. Only halfway later do viewers (if they are attentive) realize that the interviews are staged. These women, who come from the refugee community in San Jose, California, have been asked by Trinh to act in the film.

This “relational” shift, in Trinh’s words, is “performative, reflexive, interactive, and deconstructive” (2013, 74). Trinh turns the tables on viewers as they are forced to grapple with the realization that they have been duped. Viewers must reckon with questions of translation, visibility, truth, and authenticity in their interaction with the film. Indeed, Surname Viet rebels against portraying an authentic “Vietnamese female subjectivity” through staged interviews with Vietnamese women in America. As Gwendolyn Foster observes, the film engages with the politics of translation through complicating negotiated acts of speaking and performing “truths” (103). When asked about why she returned to Việt Nam to make Surname Viet, Trinh responds:

My return to Vietnam was not a physical return, I didn’t go back to Vietnam to shoot this film. I was emphasizing the politics of the interview and I was working with a body of interviews that had been carried out in Vietnam by another woman of the Vietnamese diaspora, translated and published in French, retranslated by myself into English and then re-enacted in the film. So there are many sites of mediation, and more than one step of translation and of inauthenticity involved in the making of this film. (1999, 29)
Triply removed from “the original” text, spectators watch Vietnamese American women in *Surname Viet* interpret Trinh’s English translations of Mai Thu Vân’s published collection of interviews with Vietnamese women that were translated from Vietnamese into French. Mai’s book, *Vietnam: un people, des voix*, and Trinh’s film both speak to the double appropriation of women’s voices and the commodification of their bodies. In *Surname Viet*, Trinh reveals how Mai was pressured by French feminists and publishers to include a preface by Simone De Beauvoir in her book, signaling a co-optative gesture to embrace Vietnamese female subjectivities under French feminism. Truth is not only displaced and renewed multiple times, revealing various subjectivities within Vietnamese culture. The women in Mai’s book and in Trinh’s film enact an emergent and residual intimacy that resists French and Vietnamese nationalist attempts to contain and appropriate their voices. These intimacies are emergent and residual in terms of how the women in Trinh’s film reflect on the past and present by way of remembering the lives of Vietnamese women they have never met, whose fragmented stories are removed from them through translation, time, and space. It is not a dominant intimacy in the sense that the connection between these women is through a tangible physical and temporal interaction, or even through the passing down of stories through official archives. Yet through their recognition of the struggles of these Vietnamese women, the actresses perform and imagine an intimacy that mark their identities with layers of displacement and the colonial legacies of Việt Nam. As Lan Duong states, the women in *Surname Viet* are not passively following Trinh’s directions and theoretical engagements. Rather, “an active collaboration between women—the ethnographer (Mai), documentarian (Trinh),
and storytelling subject (women in Việt Nam and the diaspora)—emphasizes a pact of the imagination” (Duong 130).

Certainly, fragments of Mai’s text are echoed in Trinh’s film as residual traces of the colonial violence in which Vietnamese women’s self-narrated experiences were displaced and translated through multiple forms across time and geographic space. However, within these displacements emerge possibilities of alliance between the actresses in Trinh’s film and the Vietnamese women whose narratives they reinscribe. Mai, we must remember, selected, staged, and dramatized their narratives as did Trinh in her filmmaking, while the actresses of her film chose what clothing to wear, the locations they wanted to be filmed in, and how they wanted to be seen on camera. Intimacy, it seems, becomes realized by the women through performance and lived experience as much as it functions as a means to connect forgotten and obscured stories of displacement experienced by women through the impact of colonial violence. *Surname Viet* offers a reading of residual and emergent intimacies that elucidate how liberal archives naturalize the erasure of connections between French/European liberalism, war in Việt Nam, and the displacement and movements of Vietnamese refugees to America.

**Visualizing Intimacy, Translating from Literature to Visuality**

Turning to film as a technology of visualization, I want to examine how *Surname Viet* enacts an “interstitial intimacy” (Bhabha) that considers the ways that translation shifts structures and modes of knowing. Chow states that translation between cultures is never solely dependent on the exchange of verbal languages, but is a “process that encompasses an entire range of activities, including the change from tradition to
modernity, from literature to visuality, from elite scholastic culture to mass culture, from the native to the foreign and back, and so forth” (Chow 1995, 192). Widening understandings of translation beyond the spheres of language, she demonstrates how ideas and experiences can be re-expressed and changed in other forms and fields. In particular, the translation from literature to visuality can potentially dismantle power structures based on literacy practices. She states:

As the viewing of film does not require literacy in the traditional sense of knowing how to read and write, film signals the transformation of word-based cultures into cultures that are increasingly dominated by the visual image… Intersemiotic in nature, film-as-translation involves histories and populations hitherto excluded by the restricted sense of literacy, and challenges the class hierarchies long established by such literacy in societies, West and East. (1998, 174).

Here, Chow expresses how film has the potential to open up space for alternative modes of knowing and understanding—modes that do not privilege literacy as the fundamental skill for reading stories—and hence destabilize the hegemony of traditional social structures that are linked to literary practices. Indeed, *Surname Viet* participates in the politics of reading and translation by willfully mistranslating and misrepresenting subjects by experimenting with textual techniques on screen and fracturing the diegetic sounds from the talking heads. This process disrupts viewers’ expectations of a literal vision or metaphorical understanding of Vietnamese women through the use of visual strategies that undermine representations derived from literary nationalist discourse.
The transformation from literature to visuality complicates notions of visibility, which Chow later takes up in *Sentimental Fabulations, Contemporary Chinese Films*. For her, “visibility” does not simply mean the action of literally seeing. Instead, she regards “visibility as the structuration of knowability” (Chow 2007, 11). Drawing from Foucault and Deleuze, Chow states, “becoming visible is no longer simply a matter of becoming visible in the visual sense as an image or object” (11). It also points towards “the condition of possibility for what becomes visible” (11). Here, Chow emphasizes how visibility in an epistemic sense relies on establishing and affirming what objects are deemed visible and the means of how they are made visible. Understanding the conditions of power that underscore visibility in relation to intimacy, we may discern how the shift from the first half of Trinh’s film to the second half reflects a transformation from literature to visuality, from the staged interviews to the actresses’ agency in making their identities known and performed by revealing their roles in the film. The actresses’ reflections on playing the roles of Vietnamese women constitute a turn in the film towards making visible residual and emergent feminist intimacies as they illuminate understandings of their lives in relation to the struggles of the Vietnamese women in Mai’s text.

While critics have largely focused on the first half of the film as rebelling against “acceptable” ethnographic and documentary practices, and have regarded the second half as merely an extension of Trinh’s theoretical interventions, I would like to focus on the latter for the ways in which it visually articulates transnational intimacies between communities of women who have been affected by imperial and colonial violence. The actresses’ meditations on taking part in the film and interviewing process propose a
collective recognition of intimacy across different temporal and spatial contexts. The “absence” of the “original” stories of the Vietnamese women emphasizes not only how modern histories appropriate, homogenize, and marginalize the voices and bodies of women of colour, but also how the women’s stories open up a critical space for a different way of knowing—“one that does not depend on diagnosis and reification, hence does not limit itself to mere representation” (Trinh 1999, 61).

**Out of the Frame: Towards Possibilities of Transnational Feminist Intimacies**

Looking to *Surname Viet* as a film that challenges ways of seeing and making visible, we see how it interrogates dominant modes of framing and construction, specifically ideals of Vietnamese female subjectivity in patriarchal and nationalist ideologies. When a voice off screen asks Trinh about the interviewing process for the film (“So how many interviews did you do? Whom did you choose? What criteria?”), Trinh responds: “Age, critical ability, spoken, transcribed, and translated. From listening to recording, speech to writing, you can talk, we can cut, trim, tidy up. The game often demands a response to the content, rarely to the way that content is framed.” In this scene, Trinh is the “framer” unframed in the film as she comments self-reflexively on her filmmaking practice. Problematizing how documentaries and ethnographic research naturalize what is visible on screen, the film challenges viewers to confront the notion that ways of making visible and knowable are socially constructed and largely invested in power, just as the idea of Vietnamese women as the nation is a spectacle perpetuated by the state for nationalist and patriarchal reasons. More significantly, Trinh does not exempt herself from “the game.” She is complicit in “framing” content, as are the women
in her film who enact intimacies across transnational contexts as they negotiate their identities in relation to the roles of the Vietnamese women they play.

Diana Taylor asserts, “ethnography not only studies performance (the rituals and social dramas commentators habitually refer to); it is a kind of performance” (75). The formal techniques in *Surname Viet* make obvious this performativity, especially in the second half of the film, and hence interrogate common assumptions about methods of acquiring knowledge such as ethnographic practices that aim to “uncover” / “discover” the “truth” about the Other. The performativity of the women in the film and their commentaries on acting emphasize the degree to which their re-enactments and retelling of stories are performances of their memories and lived realities. In one interview, a woman, Kim, speaks in Vietnamese about her experience of being in the film and acting (Figure 2). She says that at first she was hesitant to become involved but because she cared about Vietnamese women she decided to act in the film. She further recounts the lives of her friends living in Vietnam, and how they differ to that of Cat Tien, whose role she plays in the first half of the film. During this scene while she speaks in Vietnamese, another female voice (supposedly Kim in voiceover) is heard speaking at the same time off screen. The scene is jarring, especially for non-Vietnamese language speakers who struggle to connect one of the voices in sync to the speaking head. Then text appears, in two columns, much later to translate what is happening:
Visually and aurally, the close-up of Kim’s face with the text superimposed on top and the two speaking voices emphasize the degree to which no story or location can ever be “pure” or unbiased. Indeed, this scene critiques the spectacle of Vietnamese women as the nation by exaggerating parts of Kim’s body, close up and in slow motion. The text on the right, which illustrates traditional ideals of Vietnamese women’s roles in society and in her family, gives a sense of the domesticity and intimacy women are expected to perform. Duong observes that the women are engaged in performance, both as spectacles and spectators “in the processes of self-representation” (137) and that they are involved in the partial construction of an “archive of images and stories” that is a filmic “performative process” (135). This “performative process” not only elucidates the ways in which Vietnamese female subjectivities have been constructed in the past; it also denaturalizes hegemonic methods of knowledge and archival production. The structure of
this scene makes it difficult for viewers to interpret Kim’s words at face value and thus accurately “know” her. As well, the formal techniques Trinh employs to set up this visual scene paradoxically accentuate the performativity of Kim’s “unstaged” interview. Rather than convey her “true” identity, the scene visualizes the intimacy that Kim performs. That she states her husband encouraged her “to contribute to [her] native country” via the text on the left reflects and echoes the patriarchal values engendered by the text on the right of the screen (that she must be loyal to her husband and country). The formal visual strategies in this scene emphasize the connections between Kim as a diasporic Vietnamese woman and the legacies of colonialism and patriarchy in Việt Nam on her lived experiences.

Later on, in subtitles displayed at the bottom of the screen, Kim states with a smile:

A friend of mine opened her eyes wide when she heard I was going to be on film: ‘You’ve never been an actress how can you fake it?’ Another friend of my husband teased me. ‘They know you can act. So they have selected the right person. Who knows. Maybe you’ll act so well that the Americans will notice you. And you’ll be a Hollywood star in the future?’

What is telling here in this scene are the phrases, “how can you fake it?” and “They know you can act.” If viewers expect Surname Viet to be a documentary about Vietnamese women, this scene destroys that assumption. Kim’s friends point to the necessary ability to perform identity and intimacy in front of the camera, which she demonstrates in Surname Viet both in her role as Cat Tien and in the unstaged interview.
In another interview, another woman, Yen, speaks in Vietnamese as subtitles appear underneath in the lower third of the screen (Figure 3):

When I accepted to help in this film, it was because its subject concerned Vietnamese women. Since I have always praised their ability to sacrifice and endure, I thought this was an opportunity to speak out, although I was going through a lot of pressure and difficulties at the time. Once I worked on my part, I wanted to give my best because I don’t think it is an individual matter but one that concerns a whole community.

Figure 3. Yen speaking about her decision to participate in the film. From the film *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* © 1989. Courtesy of Women Make Movies.

Yen’s response to acting in *Surname Viet* not only suggests the performative measures and work that went into the making of the film, but also a recognition of the difference in identity between herself and “Vietnamese women.” That she speaks in admiration of Vietnamese women demonstrates her desire for commonality with them.
To her, the subject of “Vietnamese women” is “one that concerns a whole community.” What this community looks like is imagined by Yen and the other actresses in the film as they remember and re-enact the lives of the women whose roles they play. In this way, the second half of the film does not merely make explicit previous identities as performances. It provokes the possibility of transnational feminist intimacies, of women working together to tell stories and generate other imaginings and connections between the diaspora and the homeland. Visually portrayed through Trinh’s aesthetic strategies of combining text, image and sound, the women imaginatively trace the journeys through which Vietnamese women’s stories have travelled as intimacies-in-motion affected by legacies of colonialism in Việt Nam.

“If women could trust women, then we could talk about liberation”

Surname Viet frames and unframes women’s stories in a way that questions ideas of ownership and narrative reliability—who owns the story, who is the storyteller, and who has the authority/can we trust to tell it? Through this questioning, the film undermines the hegemony of documentary and ethnographic genres that attempt to humanize, contain, and ascribe meaning. As a voiceover states while black and white newsreel footage show Vietnamese women walking in slow motion: “There’s always a tendency to identify historical breaks and to say this begins there, this ends here while the scene keeps on recurring. When it changes it hasn’t changed itself.” Not only does the film suggest how narrative form is always partial and necessarily excludes certain experiences, the minimal identification of the female subjects and the stories also creates an uncanny sense of repetition that ties the stories in their fractured segments together.
The absence of titles with the women’s names, for instance, prevents viewers from knowing and thus containing the women and their narratives. The film’s formalist aesthetics offer an imaginative space to connect experiences and realities that have been displaced and translated multiple times. Stories flow from one to another like a collective “stream of consciousness” where they are each, as Trinh notes, “at once a fragment and a whole; a whole within a whole” (Trinh 1989, 123). Retold and repeated scene by scene, these stories both echo narratives of the past and express possibilities for emergent transnational intimacies that rupture teleological narratives of history.

Around the 50-minute mark of the film, an off-screen narrator speaks slowly in heavily accented English: “If women could trust women, then we could talk about liberation.” I end the chapter with this remark to situate understandings of the influence of women’s diasporic connections on cultural and knowledge production. Official archives and nationalist histories excluded and obscured the experiences of women; when they do include them, it is usually through patriarchal narratives that appropriate and homogenize women’s voices and bodies. My reading of residual and emergent intimacies between women in *Surname Viet* uses an intersectional feminist lens that recognizes the layered histories and experiences of racialized women who have been displaced and affected by patriarchal and colonial violence. However, I do not claim to provide a more accurate portrayal of “Vietnamese women” in my reading. Rather, I engage with *Surname Viet* by reading for fragments of intimacy between women and “trusting” their re/imaginings and appropriations of the past. In reading for transnational feminist intimacies through the visual elements of the film, possibilities emerge for other modes of
reading, “seeing,” and knowing that bring attention to the ways in which women’s lives are inscribed by the legacies of colonialism as well as stories of women before them.
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