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Remembering History: Films by Women at the 1989 Toronto Film Festival

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For Trinh T. Minh-ha, Lúcia Murat, and Maureen Blackwood, the relationships between personal memory, public memory, and official history are intimately linked to women and, moreover, to women as central mediators of historical change. In a sense, their films recall Linda Gordon's discussion of historiographical progress, since she notes that it "proceeds by rearranging relationships within old stories, not by writing new stories. The old stories have been ours, too—women's, not only men's—although that is a contested point. . . ."³ It is the investigation of old stories and histories from women's perspectives which structures Minh-ha's, Murat's, and Blackwood's films.

Kay Armatage describes *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989, USA) as "a record of the process of bringing histories and meaning into being."⁴ Minh-ha intercuts newsreel footage and still photos of the Vietnam war, folk dances, family portraits, beauty contests, school children, workers in a field, boat people, etc., with a series of increasingly stylized first-person dramatized monologues performed by Vietnamese women now living in the United States. Minh-ha uses non-professional actresses to recreate the words and stories of her original interviews with Vietnamese women. The actresses thus re-tell the women's memories, and distance those memories from notions of historical objectivity and immutability through their reconstruction. The history of Vietnam becomes, in this film, a rewriting—an intervention of women into the mythological, cultural, military, and other discourses which comprise Vietnamese society in both the present and the past.

In *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*, the border between the North and South disintegrates as the women traverse the landscape of the film and the country of which they speak. Recounting their thoughts on a variety of topics—femininity, the sexual division of labor, party politics, love, and immigration—the film presents a complex portrait of Vietnamese women and feminist filmmaking. While I appreciated Minh-ha's interrogation of the discourses which comprise her text (as a female voice-over asks, "is a translated interview a written or a spoken object?"), it nevertheless struck me less as a compelling conclusion to the film than a different and fascinating film in its own right. Thus, the closing interviews with the actresses from the first part of the film, who tell of their experiences as Vietnamese women living in contemporary America, suggest that an entirely new film emerges from the ending of *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*. It is the joining of these "two" films in Minh-ha's text which is the work's most suggestive and most difficult attribute. The film's structure challenges the spec-

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tator at every turn; it asks us to trace a complex tapestry of threads between the past and present, memory and history, women and men, Vietnam and America, and fiction and reality.

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