the world. For example, Katharyne Mitchell’s analysis of transnational capital and Canadian multiculturalism focuses on Vancouver, where supporters of development have accused their slow-growth opponents of racism for objecting to luxury condominiums marketed exclusively in Hong Kong: “[The] attempt to shape multiculturalism can be seen as an attempt to gain hegemonic control over concepts of race and nation in order to further expedite Vancouver’s integration into the international networks of global capitalism” (1996, 223). Yet, as Fire and The Wedding Banquet demonstrate, discourses of multiculturalism that attempt to mediate conflicts between race and nation can do so only if the role of women is not questioned. The subject of women’s duties to the family and the state are taken up in the next chapter.

Paying Lip Service

Narrators in Surname Viet Given Name

Nam and The Joy Luck Club

I began to write stories using all the Engishes I grew up with: the English I spoke to my mother, which for lack of a better term might be described as “simple”; the English she used with me, which for lack of a better term might be described as “broken”; my translation of her Chinese, which could certainly be described as “watered down”; and what I imagined to be her translation of her Chinese if she could speak in perfect English, her internal language, and for that I sought to preserve the essence, but neither an English nor a Chinese structure. I wanted to capture what language ability tests can never reveal: her intent, her passion, her imagery, the rhythms of her speech and the nature of her thoughts.
—Amy Tan, “Mother Tongue”

Languages are not strangers to one another, but are, a priori and apart from all historical relationships, interrelated in what they want to express.—Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator”

It has been the goal of this book to examine the ways that Asian American cinema signifies on cinematic discourses, the conventions and traditions that govern the legibility of movies and supposedly ensure their objectivity. The movies that I’ve examined are very much aware of their implication in cinematic discourses, which is to say, these makers are aware of how their subjectivities have been constituted (to a greater or lesser extent) by
cinema. Another way to put this is to note that each of these movies uncomfortably bears the burden of representation. Asian American movies are still few and far between, so that each movie labors under the expectation that it will represent the totality of "the Asian American experience." No movie can do so much. Nor do any of these movies do so little: each speaks to much more than (an) Asian American experience.

These issues are, of course, connected by darstellen and vertreten, aesthetic representation and political representation. Every aesthetic decision is also political: every choice about how to say something affects those who are spoken for. Trinh T. Minh-ha's decision to employ actors to reenact interviews conducted several years earlier and many thousands of miles away calls attention to the presumed immediacy of the interview, highlighting its mediation. Speaking of Surname Viet Given Name Nam, Linda Peckham notes, "The artificial subject points to the absence of the 'real' speaker, an absence that suggests internment, censorship and death, as well as the survival of a witness, a record — a history" (1989, 33). To make a film, whether a documentary or fiction, is to translate human experience into a text; in Peckham's words, it is to make a speaker into "a record — a history." No text can hope to depict (darstellen) human experience in its wholeness, but can only speak for it (vertreten).

The paradoxes of representation are multiplied when a movie takes on the task of translating speech or adapting a text. A feature film adapted from a novel is, in a sense, a representation of that novel, but the immediacy of the cinematic signifier suggests a closer relationship to the depicted events and characters than the novel could hope to evoke (in George Bluestone's [1957] words, whereas linguistic signifiers bear a conceptual relationship to their signifieds, photographic signifiers share perceptual similarities with their signifieds). So, although we might conceive of a cinematic adaptation as twice removed from the events that it depicts (the diegesis it constructs), cinema's representational immediacy serves to obscure that mediation. A similar dynamic is evident when a literary or cinematic text attempts to marshal a multiplicity of voices to convey diverse perspectives: the more diverse the voices, the more the text that contains them is authenticated as a representation of those voices. Such a movie or book may intend to articulate the limits of its ability to represent, but the filmgoer or reader will receive such a text as a unified whole unless the text's discursive strategies are continually foregrounded and problematized. Amy Lawrence notes, "The ideal of a coherent, unified text mir-

ors the fantasy of a coherent unified spectator" (1992, 179). The spectator's desire for unity, what Christian Metz (1982) calls the passion for perceiving, is served by cinematic conventions that, for example, translate foreign speech via subtitles; spectatorial frustration with a text that neglects or withholds translation arises from the inability to become one with the text.

In this chapter, I seek to compare the different strategies that the makers of Surname Viet Given Name Nam (1989) and The Joy Luck Club (1993) employed in adapting books for the screen. In the first film, an interrogation of cinematic convention serves to affirm the inadequacy of cinematic representation; the second film exploits cinematic conventions to resolve a complicated set of narrative arcs into a single narrative through-line. Surname's narrative fragmentation refuses to articulate a unified notion of Vietnamese or Vietnamese womanhood; such a strategy is especially disturbing to an exile community that turns to film to construct an image of its homeland. By contrast, The Joy Luck Club was promoted as a film in which Chinese American women could see themselves reflected. That marginalized Asian American communities should desire to see themselves represented as coherent, centered subjectivities is not surprising (as we saw in Chapter 7). Metadiscursive movies that depict the difficulty of constructing coherent narratives from fragmented histories are, in a sense, telling their audiences what they already know and in that sense are distinctly unpleasurable.

The Wedding Banquet proposed that Taiwanese nationalist identity is maintained through the appreciation of traditional practices (the banquet) and arts (such as calligraphy); From Hollywood to Hanoi suggests that the filmmaker's father turns to Vietnamese poetry and folklore to preserve Vietnamese culture in exile. Surname Viet Given Name Nam likewise describes the preservation of traditional values, emphasizing the ways such diasporic practices have become commodified, as in a Vietnamese American beauty pageant. Commodification tends to arrest identities in motion, in large part by making ethnicity available for consumption both by diasporic Asians and by U.S. culture at large. Multicultural consumption involves translation, the adaptation of Asian traditions for diasporic contexts, and it is the paradox of translation that it arrests tradition as it distorts it. A number of cinematic conventions attempt to ameliorate the distortions inherent in linguistic translation, literary adaptation, cultural transmission, and multicultural consumption; Trinh T. Minh-ha's Surname Viet Given Name Nam evinces a distrust of cinematic conventions akin to that expressed by Bontoc Eulogy and On Cannibalism (discussed in Chapter 1).
Trinh Thi Minh-ha was born in Hanoi in 1952 and grew up in Saigon. She left Vietnam in 1970 at the age of seventeen, arriving at Wilmington College in Ohio before training as a composer and ethnomusicologist at the University of Illinois, where she earned both an MFA and a PhD. From 1977 to 1980 she taught music at the Institut National des Arts in Dakar: she returned to Senegal in 1981 to shoot her first 16mm film, Reassemblage (1982), a film not "about" but "near by" Senegal. She completed the manuscript for Woman Native Other (1989) in 1983; over the course of the next six years it was rejected by thirty-three presses and eventually published in 1989, virtually concurrent with the first screenings of Surname Viet Given Name Nam. Woman Native Other includes pointed critiques of conventional ethnographic practice, critiques that Trinh had put into practice with Reassemblage and continued with Naked Spaces: Living Is Round (1985). Trinh followed Surname Viet Given Name Nam with Shoot for the Contents (1991) on China. The latter film evolved out of a project that examined India and China; in Cinema Interval, Trinh describes Vietnam as "the site where Indian and Chinese cultures meet" (1999, 201). According to Kaliss, Surname and Shoot for the Contents initiated a series of films about "civilization and culture" that will move on to India and Europe and "explore the relation between video and film" (1989, 30). In 1995, Trinh released her first 35mm film, A Tale of Love, a narrative feature centering on a Vietnamese American woman named Kieu. In addition to teaching women's studies and film at Berkeley and San Francisco State, Trinh has written and edited many books and journals in French and English. Many of her books and virtually all of her films were produced in collaboration with her husband, Jean-Paul Bourdier.

Surname Viet Given Name Nam was germinated when Trinh came across Mai Thu Van's book, Việt Nam: Un peuple, des voix (1983) in a bookstore in France. Mai was born in New Caledonia; her mother was part of a Vietnamese village that had rebelled against French rule and had consequently been sent to the nickel mines (15). Mai arrived in Paris at age twenty-three in the mid-1960s to work and study (18). In the fall of 1978 she traveled to Vietnam to research Vietnamese women (20); it took her several years to earn the trust of the women she worked with (most of the interviews included in the book date from 1981-1982). She translated the interviews into French and published the book in Paris in 1983.

In deciding to "adapt" the interviews in Mai's book, Trinh undertook the somewhat uninituitive task of restaging interviews, interviews that had been conducted in Vietnamese and published in French. Trinh now proposed to reenact the interviews, translating them yet again and casting first-generation Vietnamese American women, most of whom spoke English as a second or third language. In a 1989 interview, she stated: "In the casting process, it was important for me to hear about their own life stories before I decided on the voices that they would be incorporating. Within the range of their personal experiences, which were sometimes worse than those they were reenacting, they could drift in and out of their roles without too much pain. But in selecting them for whom they are rather than simply for whom they can play, I was not so much looking for authenticity as I was interested in seeing how they would draw the line between the differing fictions of living and acting" (1992, 194). Woven through the interviews is super-8 footage shot by Trinh, documentary stock footage, Vietnamese folksongs and sayings, and translated Vietnamese poetry; the sum is a poetic essay on women in North and South Vietnam and the United States.

Việt Nam: Un peuple, des voix includes Mai's essays on socialism and the everyday life of Vietnamese women, but the lion's share of its pages are devoted to interviews. Mai includes conversations with eight women labeled "Les voix du Nord," voices of the North, conducted in and around Hanoi. Another section includes interviews with seven women conducted in Hô Chi Minh City, labeled "Paroles du Sud," words of the South. An interview with Phan Thu An, president of the Vietnamese Women's Union (l'Union des femmes du Viêt nam), divides the two sections; unlike the other interviews, this one is in essay form. The book is illustrated with photos, some of which might depict the interviewees, for example, a photo of women in a hair salon precedes the interview with "Nhung, 23 ans, coiffeuse." However, these photos may simply be loosely associated with the text (and thus comparable to Trinh's use of stock footage and poetry in Surname).
tative sample of the interviews collected in Mai's book (already a representative sample of the “many voices” of Vietnam), Trinh contends with documentary’s foundation on synecdoche, the use of a part to represent the whole.

In staging these interviews for the film, the questions and interjections of the interviewer were edited out. In some cases, the questions were incorporated into the answers, as when Cat Tien says, “You asking me if there are social services to help them? You must be dreaming!” In Mai’s book, Cat Tien responds, “Vous révez chère Madame…” when Mai asks, “Y a-t-il des services sociaux pour les aider?” (1983, 176). By referring to an absent interlocutor, such dialogue calls attention to the textual mediation of the interviews, referring not just to Mai’s book but to the original interviews on which the book was based—the ur-text of the ur-text that germinated Trinh’s film.³

Surname’s overall form is quite simple. The first half of the film is devoted to staged interviews; after a brief voice-over interlude in which Trinh discusses her rationale for selecting and framing the interviews this way, the second half of the film is devoted to “real” interviews with the women who performed the reenactments. Stock documentary footage of women in Vietnam is intercut throughout the film, mostly in the first half, and footage of Vietnamese American women is intercut mostly in the second half. Poems and folk songs are featured throughout the film; the poems are generally presented as intertitles in English translation, and Vietnamese songs are generally translated in English subtitles. Although this overall structure is simple, the absence of explicit signposts, the delayed revelation that the early interviews are staged, and the fluidity with which the film intercuts between texts and various sources of footage all tend to confuse filmgoers on their first encounter with the film. But on close examination, the various logics that govern the juxtapositions emerge.

Each staged interview is introduced in the same manner. A sequence of folk song or poetry illustrated by stock footage (allusively associated with the words on the soundtrack) precedes each interview; over the course of the poem or song, the footage is increasingly step-printed, which is to say that the footage is increasingly mediated as the poem or song progresses.⁴ The footage next yields to a series of stock photographs over which the camera pans; however, unlike traditional documentaries in which the camera moves fluidly to isolate narratively significant detail, here the camera moves in abrupt, jerky movements. This brief interlude is then followed by an English intertitle that functions as an epigraph, excerpting a brief passage from one of Mai’s interviews, and which identifies the interview that follows by name, age, and profession of the interviewee, and the date of the interview conducted by Mai.

The mise-en-scène of the interviews offers the first clue that they are staged; for example, Ly is shown preparing food in an abstract space featuring stylized lighting, while the camera scans away from Thu Van’s face to focus on her hands. The differing degrees of facility with English and the differing abilities as “actors” also hint that these interviews are not genuine. As the film progresses, the stagings become increasingly mediated: Thu Van paces from left to right, occasionally leaving the frame, and her words are superimposed on the image; Ly faces away from the camera.

The second half of the film consists of relatively conventional interviews with the actors: they speak to an off-screen interviewer in fluent English and Vietnamese (we occasionally hear Trinh or Bourdier interject
a question), and these interviews are intercut with footage of the women at work or play. During the “documentary” footage the women avoid looking into the camera as they go about their business, consistent with standard documentary practice. In addition to the four women who reenact the interviews on screen, we also meet the young woman who provides the American-accented English voice-overs; instead of speaking to the off-screen filmmaker, Lan engages a friend in conversation. Thus, whereas in the first half of the film Lan is featured off-screen, as a voice-over narrator, in the second half she is the one character who does not interact with an off-screen voice.6

In a sense, the second half of Surname can be understood as a separate film that refers to the first.7 Kim and Yen both talk about their motivations for agreeing to appear in the film, and Yen also mentions the difficulty she experienced in setting aside time to make the film while simultaneously working, caring for her family, and organizing her younger brother’s wedding (which we see briefly on screen). Kim and Yen both situate acting in the larger context of film production and reception, as when Kim reports that a friend commented “Maybe you’ll act so well that the Americans will notice you and you’ll be a Hollywood star in the future.” Thus the interviews in the second half call attention to the material conditions surrounding the film’s production, conditions that are hinted at in the mise-en-scène of the film’s first half. Of course, there are other elements that can be traced across the film, for example, letters from one of Trinh’s sisters, read by Trinh on the soundtrack in both halves of the film. These letters, and footage of the wedding of one of Trinh’s younger sisters, serve to inscribe Trinh’s own “extracurricular” life in a manner similar, if not precisely akin to the lives of the actors.

The stylized mise-en-scène and framing of the film’s first half convey the ways that meaning exceeds translation and representation in documentary film generally; paradoxically, these techniques of estrangement call attention to Trinh’s intervention, metonymically representing her control in selecting and framing interviews. Trinh has somewhat less control over her actors in the second half. In an interview with Laleen Jayamanne and Anne Rutherford, Trinh reveals, “I asked the women to choose how they wanted to be presented as we moved to their own stories. The choices they came up with were often disturbing to me. I was expecting something that relates intimately to their daily existence and instead . . . . For example, one woman wanted to be seen at a fish pond” (1992, 167). Trinh’s discomfiture with the fish pond relates to her initial desire to show the women in their everyday activities; speaking about the film after its completion, she used this anecdote to illustrate the ways certain conventions of documentary representation structure her own experience, namely, her initial belief that the truth of Khien’s life would be better represented by showing her working-class home and not her desire for a space of serenity: “I realized afterwards . . . . how important this fish pond is, both for her personally and for the film. She is a working-class woman living at the time in a very small apartment with a large family, and having always been such a richly significant symbol in Asian cultures, the fish pond seems to point here to a dream space, a space of meditation where you can rest and retreat from the pressure of daily work . . . . when you want something true to someone’s life, what you get usually goes much further than the mere details of that person’s daily existence” (168). In this interview, Trinh seems to forget for a moment that the artificiality of cinema precludes the possibility of capturing “daily existence.” Indeed, the institution of cinema has often been described by Western commentators in terms similar to those that Trinh uses to describe the fish pond: a dream space, an escape from the mundane. As an independent filmmaker, Trinh thus reveals her desire to make cinema speak the truth of Vietnamese American women’s lives, even as she is aware that cinematic convention traffics not in truth but in truth effects.

In the interview, Trinh suggests that she was forced to adapt to the women’s self-presentation. She connects the selections of setting to the women’s dress in the second half of the film.8 She notes that progressive middle-class Americans (i.e., the audience for political documentary) have internalized a convention of dressing down to signify solidarity with the
working class (a practice that working-class audiences might read ironically):

There is no legacy of pride in dressing down among poor people or among people coming from Third World nations. On the contrary, the latter dress up when they are in a public situation—like being on film and being watched by thousands of spectators. So the women in my film also chose to dress up. I was time and again disconcerted by the combination of showy colors, but finally I stood by their choices because that’s how they wished to be presented. As a result, the question of dressing became one of the threads of the film, as it wove in quite pertinently with the question of (de)territorializing the woman’s body and Vietnam as a nation. So all in all, the person who was very narrow-minded in this instance was myself, not the women. (1992, 168)

In these interviews, Trinh emphasizes the evolution of the film project. In a sense, she suggests that the project has a life of its own (her initial resistance to the women’s attire was ultimately untrue to the film), but in another sense, she is simply using the occasion of the interviews to ascribe a split between Trinh as on-set director and Trinh as editor. The metaphor of weaving implies that she did not have complete control over the colors provided by her collaborators, but just as the weaver ultimately determines the pattern based on the available materials, so Trinh determines the shape of the film by selecting and juxtaposing elements from the interviews.

Although Surname Viet Given Name Nam may call attention to processes of textual mediation, the film does not foreground its own construction to the same extent that it problematizes translation. The actors may have selected their clothes and suggested some settings, but surely Trinh influenced the selection of some of the locations. For example, whose idea was it for Lan and her friend Sue, both students at Berkeley, to climb trees? These images are accompanied by Ho Xuan Huong’s poem “The Jackfruit” (in Nguyen Ngoc Bich’s translation) on the soundtrack, narrated by Lan. Was the poem recorded before this scene was shot, or did the images provide the inspiration to incorporate the poem?

Interspersed throughout the film are scenes of Khien and Hien in the audience of an outdoor festival; it may be the San Jose Miss Vietnam 1988 Pageant that is likewise interspersed throughout. It seems unlikely that Trinh came upon this pageant fortuitously. When one contestant answers a question about what Vietnamese values should be preserved in the United

States, Trinh juxtaposes step-printed footage of the pageant with a folk saying about the “three deferments and four virtues” that should be observed by proper Vietnamese women. Did Trinh suggest that Khien and Hien attend this pageant, did they attend coincidentally, or did Trinh tag along after they had already decided to attend? Trinh may have been thinking of this pageant as well as some of the women’s choices for self-representation when she said, “I have problems with forms of presentation that tend to commodify ethnicity” (1992, 194). How can a filmmaker critique ideologies without condemning the people who reproduce those ideologies? One might read Trinh as exposing the lack of sophistication of the women she recruited for her film; I for one take her admission that “[these choices of self-representation] embarrass me . . . at least initially, but afterwards I understood, because they are so much a part of myself as well” (194) as her acknowledgment that she is interpellated and implicated by the commodification of ethnicity as well.

Faithfulness to the Text

Trinh’s film argues that a critique of ethnic commodification requires a simultaneous critique of cinematic conventions; however, Surname Viet Given Name Nam also reproduces ethnic commodification, as Trinh’s ambivalence about the ways her interviewees chose to represent themselves reveals. Can conventional narrative films (i.e., movies that do not critique cinematic convention) also incorporate an ambivalent critique of ethnic commodification? I want to move now to a discussion of The Joy Luck Club,
a feature-length narrative film that on the surface has little in common with *Surname*. However, in deploying multiple narratives about Chinese and Chinese American women, *The Joy Luck Club* invokes many of the same discourses about representation, representativeness, and women's negotiation of migration between Asian and U.S. patriarchies. *The Joy Luck Club* features multiple narrators who invoke folk sayings to make sense of their experiences, and if we factor in discourses about casting (ranging from the filmmakers' criteria for verisimilitude to affinities the actors express between their lives and those of the characters they play) we have an extratextual equivalent to the metatextual second half of *Surname*. If *The Joy Luck Club* is less critical of ethnic commodification than is *Surname*, this is ultimately due to its uninterrogated discursive structure: whereas *Surname* revealed in the multivocality of the book that inspired it, the film of *The Joy Luck Club* attempts to construct a linear narration from the multiplicity of speaking voices that make up the novel.

Trinh took the discrete interviews from Mai's book and intercut among them throughout the first half of *Surname*; screenwriter Ronald Bass suggested doing the opposite with *The Joy Luck Club*, taking the novel's various short stories and reorganizing them. Amy Tan's best-selling novel—*The Joy Luck Club*—consists of four groupings of four short stories, with each section introduced by an italicized story written in pseudo-mythic style (characters are not named but called "the mother" and "the daughter"). The enunciative present of the novel takes place after the death of Suyuan Woo, the founder of the club; her stories are narrated by her daughter June. Otherwise, the first group of stories is narrated by four Chinese immigrant women and emphasizes their childhood; the second group is narrated by their Chinese American daughters, who tell generally comic stories of their own childhood; the third features the daughters narrating tales of their adulthood, mostly comic stories about their romantic relationships; and the final section returns us to the mothers, who tell mostly tragic tales from their adult years. In their screenplay, Bass and Tan reshuffle the stories, taking the four stories narrated by Lindo and Waverly and grouping them together. They also integrated two of the italicized stories (attributing them to different characters) and invented a party where the seven surviving women mingle as a framing narrative.

The press kit for *The Joy Luck Club* emphasizes—and most articles about the film faithfully report—that Bass agreed to work on the screenplay on the condition that all sixteen stories in Tan's novel were retained in the film, and indeed early drafts of the screenplay do feature elements from all sixteen stories. This plan was abandoned soon after producer Patrick Markey (representing Disney's Hollywood Pictures division) came aboard and cut two of the stories—"The Moon Lady" and "Half and Half"—because, taking place on a lake and at the beach, they would have been extremely expensive and time-consuming to shoot (Hajari, 1993). Furthermore, for unstated reasons, only a fragment of the story "The Voice from the Wall" was retained, with the result that the Ying Ying–Lena storyline was severely compromised. The artistic success of the film's narrative structure can be debated, yet the film generally handles the complexity of its shifting point-of-view structure with aplomb. The screenplay makes canny use of flashbacks, falsely cueing the audience that we are returning to the enunciative present of the party in order to facilitate the narrative shifts from the mothers to the daughters. For example, Lindo's tale of her childhood betrothal is motivated by an interior monologue. When the story ends, we return not to the party but to the recent past; this return is facilitated by a close-up of Lindo staring abstractly ahead, echoing the beginning of the flashback. After shifting to Waverly's story—within which Lindo narrates a story (this time motivated by Waverly's presence as interlocutor)—we return to Lindo at the party after much time has elapsed, again lost in a reverie. Lindo smiles as if she had been replaying a cherished moment with her daughter in her mind. If the entire preceding sequence represents Lindo's memory, how are we to account for Waverly's narration in the midst of Lindo's story? *The Joy Luck Club* presents many narrative conundrums like this one, but these moments pass by barely noticed due to the forward progress of the narrative. Whereas *Surname* foregrounds its enunciation by calling attention to the artificiality of shifts from interview to interview, *The Joy Luck Club* attempts to disguise these shifts, for, generally speaking, commercial cinema prefers not to draw attention to its enunciative techniques.

Identifying with *The Joy Luck Club*

An article that appeared in the *New York Times* the Sunday before its New York opening called attention to another narrative challenge for *The Joy Luck Club*: its large cast. "It is in fact difficult to assemble a large cast in which one character is not mistaken for another. The conventional solution
is to pepper a cast with blonds, redheads and brunettes and different ethnic types. But the 'Joy Luck Club' does not have that liberty.15 Faced with casting over fifty female roles (in two languages, English and Mandarin)—a task made more difficult by the fact that in some cases three actors of different ages would portray the same character at different stages in her life, not to mention the aspiration that mothers and daughters would bear some resemblance—Wayne Wang devised two rules when casting the film:

First, no Caucasians would play roles written for Asians. "During the 'Miss Saigon' controversy," he said, "there were a lot of people who said, 'Talent is talent, and anybody can play any character with makeup.' But it never happens that an Asian actress can go out for a major Caucasian role and get it. Until that day comes, there is no equity, so it was important to me that these roles all go to Asians."

Rule two was that actresses of various Asian backgrounds would be considered specifically for Chinese roles. "Because there are so few good roles for Asians, I didn’t want to eliminate Japanese or Vietnamese or Koreans," Mr. Wang explained. "The important thing was that they felt right for the role and would fit into the ensemble." (Avins, 1993, 2:14)

Wang’s argument, as presented by the Times, is based purely on equity. He never says that a non-Asian actor cannot play an Asian role, only that such casting denies opportunities to Asian actors. However, by formulating the argument this way, Wang sidesteps the implications of casting non-Chinese in The Joy Luck Club; for example, when non-Asian filmmakers cast Rosalind Chao as a Korean on M*A*S*H or as a Japanese on Star Trek: The Next Generation, many Asian Americans are displeased. Wang goes on to argue that there are other aspects of performance that might affect ethnic realism—for example, he admits that an actress was not cast because her speech rhythms were more Japanese than Chinese—conceding that realism is the ultimate deciding factor but leaving open the question of who defines realism.14 After all, did Wang foresee the complaints of some Mandarin speakers that all the Chinese characters in The Joy Luck Club spoke with Beijing accents?15

These and other discourses speak to the appropriateness and ability of the various actors cast in The Joy Luck Club. Promotional materials for narrative films often stress affinities between actor and character, laying claim to performative authenticity. For example, Parade Magazine reported that Ming-Na Wen brought her mother with her when she shot scenes in Shanghai ("A

Mother and Daughter," 1993), and in the New York Times Wen described her first encounter with the novel: "For the first time, I felt I was reading something that was completely talking to me" (Avins, 1993, 2:14).16 It is commonly reported that the narratives of ethnic “cross-over” films resonate with ethnic actors in a way that mainstream projects do not. By mentioning the amateur actors who attended open casting calls for the film, publicity for The Joy Luck Club lays claim both to the authenticity of these narrative representations and to their scarcity in the cinematic marketplace, simultaneously affirming that the narrative is original (insofar as Chinese American women’s experiences have been marginalized by mainstream film) and commonplace (in telling a story that all Chinese American women know).17

In the film’s press kit, casting director Heidi Levitt states, “Every woman who came in had a story, whether it was about a sister, aunt or grandmother, that reflected these characters,” and San Francisco casting director Robin Gurland commented, “When I initially read the book and then the screenplay, I thought that the characters’ tragic lives were unique. . . . if anything the stories in the novel were minimized compared to the ones I heard from the women who auditioned.”18 Indeed, even the story’s central narrative is attested to: in an interview, Wang referred to an extra who, overhearing the dialogue in the film’s final scene, reported that she had left her baby during the war (Tibbetts, 1994, 5).19 Furthermore, actor Kieu Chinh reported that abandoning the babies reminded her of leaving her father behind when she left North Vietnam. (According to Baker [1993], Wang encouraged Chinh to perform this scene in Vietnamese if it allowed her to draw on her experiences.)

The notion of auditors identifying with the stories they are told is alluded to in the film, when Rose tells her husband, “I died sixty years ago . . . for my daughter's sake.” Rose’s identification with her grandmother seems less bizarre in an early draft of the screenplay, where the writers suggest that the same actor should be cast as the adult Rose and as her own grandmother in the stories related by Rose’s mother, An-mei.20 This story is based on the life of Tan’s own grandmother, named Jing-mei (Tan, 1991a), a name that Tan gave to Joy Luck Club’s central character, Jing-mei Woo (also known as June). Like June/Jing-mei, Tan has both an English and a Chinese name: Amy and An-mei. Many critics have assumed that June is patterned after Tan (e.g., Tse, 1996), in part because June’s stories draw from Tan’s experiences with the piano and working as a business writer.21 Thus, readers familiar with the biography of Amy Tan can interpret her as June, Rose’s
mother An-me (who shares Tan’s Chinese name), and Rose (whose grandmother is based on Tan’s grandmother). Perhaps this is what Tan meant when she said, “All Chinese people are family to one another in some unexplainable way” (1989b, 302).

If I find assertions about the authenticity of the film (its connection to “real women’s experiences”) problematic, it is because they echo an assertion in the narrative itself; that daughters can go home again, returning to the motherland and indeed to unity with their mothers. Following a dinner party where the Woo family hosts the Jongs, June comes to realize that her anger with her mother results from misunderstanding her mother’s words. Suyuan had stated that Waverly and June had differing styles, which June interpreted to mean that Waverly was more stylish; in the kitchen, Suyuan makes clear that she means that June is morally superior to Waverly. Suyuan caps off this scene by telling her daughter “I see you,” meaning she sees who June really is. When mother and daughter embrace, it is as if June is able to return from the realm of the Lacanian symbolic to that of the imaginary, where visual apprehension (being seen) supplies a truth that cannot be achieved by language (due to verbal misunderstanding). The Joy Luck Club enacts a fantasy of reconciliation and reunification, and this fantasy is echoed whenever the film’s promotion asserts an identity between actor and character.

There remains, however, one identification that does not deny historical rupture. Tamlyn Tomita reveals her keen awareness of her position in Hollywood when she is quoted in the film’s press kit: “Ming-Na, Lauren Rosalind and I often vie for the same projects because we’re all Asian women of the same age range. . . . And Lisa, Kieu, Tsai and France are the women we grew up watching, they were our role models in the industry. To bring us all together and to hear each other’s stories about surviving in the industry — those are secrets being passed between us.” By mentoring the actors who play their daughters, The Joy Luck Club’s veteran actors become metaphoric mothers. It is, of course, a sign of commercial cinema’s recuperative power that an anecdote about the limited roles Hollywood offers Asian American women is deployed to promote a movie coproduced by Walt Disney and Oliver Stone.

Although many of the promotional discourses for The Joy Luck Club called attention to the film’s production, these narratives did not emphasize the film as a mediation but its continuity with Tan’s novel and with the experiences of Asian American women (the sole exception being Tomita’s commentary, which pointed not just to the material circumstances governing the production of The Joy Luck Club but indeed to the structure of the mainstream film industry generally). These discourses of continuity were in keeping with The Joy Luck Club’s fantasy of cross-generational reconciliation, of unity across historical discontinuity; in short, the affirmation of the movie as an effective and accurate translation of the book is part and parcel of the story’s governing logic of reunion. By contrast, Surname Viet Given Name Nam self-reflexively highlights the mediation of translation and adaptation, thereby emphasizing the discontinuity of the film from the experiences to which it refers. The film’s wariness of translation preserves the fundamental discontinuity of the women’s experiences that it represents. Thus, movies that signify on cinematic conventions (designed to assure legibility, veracity, and authority) work against ethnic commodification, and movies that aspire to transparency of technique promote the consumption of ethnic difference. The words Ming-Yuen S. Ma’s video Slanted Visions uses to describe Oriental cooking techniques in a parody of televised cooking shows—“conceived through ancient wisdom, perfected by generations of practice”—could just as easily describe cinematic conventions. The cooking show, like promotional discourses surrounding mainstream movies, purports to reveal the secrets behind the construction of complex cultural products, but in actuality affirms the mastery of the chef. Rather than highlighting the artificiality of a movie’s effects, promotional discourses flatter the spectator by sharing the filmmaker’s expertise, aligning the spectator with the author figure. By contrast, Trinh T. Minh-ha’s film attempts to construct the filmmaker as reader, remobilizing these texts for her own purposes, setting identities in motion.