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A Subject of Sea and Salty Sediment: Diasporic Labor and Queer (Be)longing in Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt*

MICHELLE PEEK

> "To say in English that a man has 'lost his country' is not the same as to say in Vietnamese that he has 'lost the nuoc' (mat nuoc). If the English phrase sounds almost abstract, the Vietnamese expression evokes an ordeal by thirst, the despair of a fish out of water."
>
> ——Huỳnh Sanh Thông, preface to
> *Watermark: Vietnamese American Poetry and Prose*[1]

Caught having an affair with the *chef de cuisine* while employed at the home of the governor-general of Saigon, Vietnamese cook, migrant worker, and narrator of Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt*, Binh, is cast out of his father's house and natal home, and sets off for the open sea. Many menial cooking jobs later, Binh winds up on the doorstep of the famous lesbian couple Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas at 27 rue de Fleurus, Paris, with a help-wanted ad in hand: "LIVE-IN COOK: Two American ladies wish to retain a cook."[2] Binh observes that in Paris, there are three types of potential employers: the first, the dismissive, who, "after a cat-like glimpse"[3] of Binh's face, turns him away without so much as a word uttered; the second, also determined in their rejection at first glance but intent, nonetheless, on peppering Binh with intrusive questions as to the curious route by which he left Vietnam and arrived in Paris; and the third, the "collectors," those who "yearn for a taste of the pure, sea-salt sadness of the outcast" whom they ravenously bring into their homes and cast out just as unfeelingly.[4] To the dismissive, the curious, and the collectors,

Binh is at once an abstract source of labor, culinary and sensual pleasure, and curiosity. Ultimately, Binh concludes despondently, his life is "nothing but a series of destinations with no meaningful expanses in between."[5]

Yet, the "expanses in between," most notably in reference to waterways—the Mekong River, the South China Sea, and the Indian Ocean—allude to a central trope of Vietnamese culture. Historically, water represents life source and community; the term *nước* in Vietnamese means both water and country or homeland.[6] In *The Book of Salt*, water also comes to signify and enable diasporic movement, and importantly, is associated with queer desire. Thus Truong's construction of a diasporic queer subjectivity reformulates a Southeast Asian nationalist narrative of compulsory or normative heterosexuality. Furthermore, as David Eng argues, ocean crossings and other "in between" moments stage diasporic queer desire in *The Book of Salt* as both lost and unreadable—a challenge to official, teleological history and an alternative to the space-time matrix of European modernity.[7] Binh can therefore be read through a diasporic queer lens, or through a "queer transnationalism" that does not forgo affective forms of national belonging in favor of a queer diasporic community, but, rather, incorporates Vietnamese symbolism with formative migratory experiences in the very agency of the queer subject. Truong creates a diasporic and oceanic geography of desire, posing a challenge to the inherited inequalities of the past *through* and with allusion to Vietnamese water symbology, as well as the novel's eponymous character: salt.

That Binh is so aptly able to discern between types of salt reflects an awareness of coextensive yet differential queer histories, and posits "the tongue as an organ of [a different sort of] truth,"[8] an embodied epistemology or language in the place of disapproving words. French words, for Binh, if not utilitarian are often accusing or berating, forcefully forming their impression on Binh's tongue as if they were the "seeds of a sour fruit that someone else ate and then ungraciously stuffed" into his mouth.[9] Salt, like other commodities, links "the suffering [bodies of its] producers with the satiated bodies of [its] consumers"[10] and thereby infuses all manner of intimate relations (lovers' quarrels, shared meals, late night conversations, distant letter writing) with multifaceted networks of global and local power. Thus there are multiple meanings and connotations of "tongue" throughout Truong's construction of Binh, a global, diasporic, queer subject.[11] Truong cleverly reverses the terms by which language and taste become markers of the social and racial elite by arming Binh with a *resistant* tongue—not only through his narrative flare and culinary skill, but also through his keen affective sensibility that is able to read racialized and sexual differences through their micro and macro histories of belonging. Economies of movement, desire, taste, and language, then, are "tongued" by Binh through these alternate modes of expression. Extending Truong's title motif, I argue that Binh's sensitivity to differential power and histories enables, in turn, his keen reading of the different types of salt (of tears, sweat, sea). The many resonances of salt within the novel (the sediment of labor and love; the sedimentary deposits of sea and

oceanic crossings; the silt of nation and home), I argue, thus must be considered within the context of a (transnational) modern queer aesthetic. After all, Truong deliberately places Binh in the home of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas—American expatriates living in Paris who have come to occupy a sort of seminal place in queer literary study. At the same time that Binh connects across the ocean to other queer subjects, he continually looks to, and longs for, home.

Binh's movement between national spaces explicitly parallels the process that turns water to salt, the latter described at one point as a "gradual revelation of [the] true self"[12] in which queer desire is able to flower outside of the patriarchal homespace. His sea-travels are a consequence of his (queer) desire, and the means by which he is brought to Paris, where he is able to experience pleasures, both culinary and sexual (the latter often associated in memory with the in-between-ness of the ocean), that he is denied in his father's home. Eng reads Binh's slippage in memory as summoning "an epistemology of the oceanic," shifting our attention to "the sea as history, from 'roots' to 'routes.'"[13] Drawing on Lily Cho's wager that community might be constituted in taste, "in that which has precisely been rejected as too subjective, too individual, and too nostalgic for the formation of community,"[14] I argue that for Binh the sea embodies both of these meanings, rooting him to a gustatory Vietnamese collectivity and routing him to queer terrains (in body and memory). Such an epistemology is borne of intimate working and loving practices, and mindful of the origins of salt, its movements, and its manifold meanings. The formation of community through taste, mobility, and nostalgia has particular resonance for queer studies, as Binh joins other "iconic [queer] figures [who] *turn backward*" (emphasis mine),[15] "looking back on" and refusing to forget history's losses. He also functions as a transnational subject whose sense of belonging or home cannot be singularly located within the frames of nation, family, race, sexuality, or class. Swept up in "global streams of migrant labor,"[16] while departing from and longing for variations of home, I consider Binh a diasporic subject whose labor and love are fundamentally comprised of sea and salty sediment, expressive of histories of nation, global movements, and affective communities.

Modernism and the Mother Tongue

Binh's gustatory engagement with the world can be read through a hermeneutics of embodiment (a way of interpreting the body) that borrows from a theoretical framework that takes seriously the body's capacity for narration, memory, and knowledge.[17] Lily Cho envisions diasporic memory as rooted in and triggered by the sensate body—a body that is both individual and collective in nature, and at once familial and transpacific.[18] Cho's notion of a diasporic community rooted in collective gustatory desire or memory offers my reading of *The Book of Salt* a partial lens through which to understand Binh's recurring memories and references to water and salt: memories/desires that are individually unique, queer even, and nation-based or

community oriented. A complement to Cho's notion that memory materializes history (especially in the body), Elizabeth Wilson's approach to corporeality locates the body as a site of psychic disturbance and knowledge; her "gut" feminism provides an apt analogy for Binh's gustative skill as one that empowers him and situates him as an individualized colonial subject responding, counter-discursively, to the primacy of the visual for racialized bodies,[19] and posing the body and its senses as a provocation against high modernist prose.[20] Binh's body in Paris is indelibly marked (by ignorant others) with an indiscriminate, non-specific, Indochineseness, presenting "an exacting, predetermined life story"[21] of migrant labor. However, as Binh points out: "the spectacle fools the eyes but rarely the stomach, as the latter is always the more perceptive of the two,"[22] foregrounding his own discerning gut in the presence of objectifying gazes. King-Kok Cheung reads these complex motivations, desires, and modes of resistant communication as "textual ellipses, nonverbal gestures, authorial hesitations," deconstructing a firmly held Eurocentric belief in the oppositional valuing of speech and silence.[23] Expanding on Cheung's assertion that some silences ought to be read as "articulate" despite quietude's association with passivity or victimization, I consider Binh to be rife with articulate expression, full of his mother's tongue and taste for stories.

Before Binh orchestrates ingredients into dishes, he must first *imagine* them—a skill learned from his brother Anh Minh, the only one of Binh's brothers who can make him "long for home."[24] Through culinary and improvised fancy, he dreams tastes familiar and foreign, "all on [his] tongue," before crafting them into meals.[25] He tells us: "Every kitchen is a familiar story that I can embellish with saffron, cardamom, bay laurel, and lavender" the result of which, in a reversal of roles associated with the articulate subject and voiceless other, leaves his employers with "slackened jaws, silenced."[26] "Mouths preoccupied with the taste of foods so familiar and yet with every bite even the most parochial of palates detects redolent notes of something that they have no words to describe. They are, by the end, overwhelmed by an emotion that they have never felt, a nostalgia for places they have never been."[27]

That he arms himself with an alternate language to silencing effect, a language both reminiscent and inaccessible, desirable and just out of reach, does not protect him against the taste some employers cultivate for the "pure, sea-salted sadness of the outcast."[28] Nor is such expression unequivocally resistant. Binh quickly learns, working in the kitchen alongside Anh Minh in the French governor-general's house in Vietnam, that the "vocabulary of servitude" is not built upon knowledge of foreign words, but on one's "ability to swallow them."[29] Defiance in servitude becomes Binh's resistance, and enables expression; his culinary skill is forged from "repetition and routine," "servitude and subservience."[30] While Binh's inability to function in French enables those around him to stereotype him as an ignorant laborer, the stereotype of assumed ignorance also permits Binh's defiance to go undetected, so blinded are his employers by their own sense of superiority. As Binh

cleverly and ironically remarks: "the French never tired of debating why the Indochinese of a certain class are never able to master the difficulties, the subtleties, the winged eloquence, of the French language. . . . So enamored of their differences, language and otherwise, they have lost the instinctual ability to detect the defiance of those who serve them."[31]

By placing Binh in the home of famous lesbian couple Stein and Toklas, Truong launches a critique, through Binh, of the different types of labor that undergird a modern literary aesthetic like that of Stein's, hailed in its time for its disruption of a teleological "patriarchal linguistic code."[32] As Truong suggests, Stein's Modernist literary contributions were most likely enabled by varying degrees of domestic support or servitude: Truong uses the scant details of two Vietnamese cooks who actually worked for, and lived with, Stein and Toklas as a point of departure for the fictional character of Binh. Stein's own writing has been celebrated for its unmooring of words from their habitual meanings; Stein spoke of "the need to avoid 'associative habits' whereby words were cast into 'tired, worn forms that prevent perception.'"[33] One might argue that Truong is similarly interested in breaking down "associative habits," even if unwittingly or implicitly, taking to task the often-made association between literary Modernist prose and "novel" or resistant forms of expression, perception, and meaning.

In *The Book of Salt*, the *literary* tongue is not the (only) great arbiter of perception, truth, and artfulness. The laborer's tongue, and in Binh's case the tongue of the hired migrant chef, proves to be most perspicacious of all. Indeed, Binh's narrative authority is achieved both through his discerning attention to the nuances in his employers' language (which often veil class and racial biases) and, as will be discussed later, his keen ability to detect distinctions among types of salt. Binh's own highly polished literary prose is thus often deployed ironically, i.e. to mock the language of the elite while simultaneously stripping it bare of its pretense of hospitality and exposing it for its paternalism. Commenting on Stein's and Toklas' ad for a live-in cook, Binh remarks: "Two American ladies 'wish'? Sounds more like a proclamation than a help-wanted ad. Of course, two American ladies in Paris these days would only 'wish' because to wish is to receive. To want, well, to want is just not American. I congratulate myself on this rather apt and piquant piece of social commentary."[34]

Where Stein's style has elsewhere been described as experimental, turning words and phrases over until they are freed from their habitual meanings to create new ones, Binh does not separate words from the people who tongue them—that is, from their class and racial locations. Stein's own belated recognition as a serious modern writer, gaining wider readership only in the latter half of her life, might be attributed, in part, to her own gendered and sexualized location and expatriate status. Thus while Binh, Stein, and Toklas might all be placed in the same class of queer exiles, such alliances are undermined by profound differences in racialized histories—differences that pose material and economic barriers for Binh, but

differences that arguably heighten his fluency in other epistemological modes rendered inaccessible to Stein and Toklas, both of whom are unable to see past their own privilege. Binh's, Stein's, and Toklas's tongues are thus differently skilled, despite a shared queerness, and reflect their respective locations on a class and racial hierarchy.

Within the kitchen space, Binh becomes a practitioner of his mother's strength, or mother's tongue, in which surviving the domestic, the necessary, and the everyday is at once an act of "perseverance and flexibility,"[35] pairing quotidian daily rituals with the waywardness of stories, words, and bodies. As Binh remarks, "While my mother's hands followed a set routine, her stories never did. They were free to roam, to consider alternative routes, to invent their own ways home."[36] Cooking, then, through bodily modes and interventions (mostly) unencumbered by reason, speech and ocular inspection, recreates and imagines place. For Binh, cooking is oriented homeward and outward, weaving familial histories, gendered constraints, and colonial impositions with future aspirations and longings. The body, gut, and *tongue* are at the center of such engagements, with their capacity for memory, affect, inventiveness, and pain.[37] Binh's gut is especially sensitive to months of loneliness with each summer spent in the countryside of Bilignin, away from his Sweet Sunday Man, and more tellingly, away from any face or body that resembles his own.[38] Binh's isolation results in a loss of appetite, his body thinning, becoming readable like a face with "a forlorn expression."[39] He yearns for the recognition of himself in an unknown other that the streets of Paris afford in shared, passing glances exchanged between Vietnamese migrants. These silent encounters allow Binh to be, even if fleetingly, not *the* "Asiatic" laborer of Bilignin, but simply "a man or a woman like any other, two lungfuls of air, a heart pumping blood"—a body in community with other bodies "hungry for home-cooked food . . . [and] in constant search for the warmth of the sun."[40]

Water: Waterways, Crossings, and Queer (Be)longing

Such longings for home and the warmth of the sun, while certainly in communion with other Vietnamese migrants and their bodily wishes, are also, for Binh, decidedly queer. While Cho argues that cravings or desires for foods that taste like home, are, for the Chinese diaspora, constitutive of larger, historical sadnesses brought on by indenture and dislocation,[41] Binh's longings ought not to be read as nostalgia for happier times and places, but through his specifically queer body and the Vietnamese community and family to which he uneasily belongs. In other words, Binh's feeling of "unhomeliness" in both Vietnam and Paris is not only a condition of being a diasporic subject but also a condition of being a queer subject negotiating filial ties of belonging. As Y-Dang Troeung eloquently writes, "his race and sexuality render him forever unhomely in all of the homes in which he lives, including the supposed 'haven' of America [i.e. the home of his two American employers in Paris]."[42] As with

other Asian American subjects, in his Mesdames' home, Binh is neither afforded unconditional entry or belonging, nor is he free from disciplinary rule, mimicking the delimited hospitality that will be afforded to Vietnamese refugees on American soil as a result of the displacement brought on by the Vietnam War.

While an epistemology of the oceanic with its in-between-ness, drift, and movement of water as constitutive of bodies that are in, of, and between multiple places, certainly leaves room for the sort of queer possibilities Truong envisions, any epistemological exuberance must be tempered by the limits that condition such possibilities. For Binh, the sea is in memory and imagination coupled with expansive desire—at the sight of Binh's Sweet Sunday Man watching him, Binh writes: "I am at sea again, I thought. Waves are coursing through my veins. I am at sea again."[43] Later, he remembers, fondly, a "love lost to a wide, open sea."[44] However, the sea is also the *physical* space into which he pitches himself, reluctantly, as a consequence of the uninhabitable terrain upon which his father's house rests.

Binh sees his own move away from home paralleled in the story of the basket weaver, who takes leave in search of an alternative to the specific silt of his family's land. Village after village, the basket weaver is unable to harvest the hyacinths needed for their stalks. Binh is struck by this story, by how "nonexportable" the hyacinth is, "an indigenous thing, requiring as it does the silt of his family's land."[45] More importantly, why does the basket weaver not simply return home, to "a house surrounded by water hyacinths in full purple bloom?"[46] Binh's home, like the basket weaver's, while pulling at him from afar, is inimical to queer desire: "to take one's body and willingly set it upon the open sea," Binh speculates, "is not an act brought about by desire but a consequence of it."[47] Despite Binh's distance, his father's angry, disparaging words reach him in all places and spaces, with "no respect for geography."[48] This is not dissimilar to the experience of queer Asian Americans who, argues Richard Fung, depend on their families or ethnic communities as "a rare source of affirmation in a racist society"—families who, at the same time, can be heteronormative and/or homophobic and a source of mixed support/conflict. He writes: "In coming out, we risk (or we feel that we risk) losing this support."[49] Home as a referent for safety and belonging becomes dislodged for Binh. The sea provides a safe haven for Binh's imagined (and real) queer desires, operating as it does as a sort of liminal zone of time and space (and of recorded history) with room for different bodies and orientations.[50] Salt water, and the open sea, then, unruly and ever moving, carry remnants of the unremembered or forgotten past, of the many exiles that have boarded its ships.

Binh, however, cannot escape the traumatic recurrences of memory as they are lived out and transported within the body. "Mountains, rivers, oceans, seas," writes Binh, "these things have never kept him [the Old Man] from homing in on me, pinpointing my location, and making me pay my respects."[51] He later comments: "I should have thrown his body into the sea, expelled it and not me."[52] Both the sea and the queer feelings Binh maps onto it encompass belonging and estrangement,

physical immediacy and displacement. Finally, it is fitting that Binh finds a version of home at sea, or (reconstituted) familial belonging. Such a configuration of sea as home recalls two (if unintentionally) of many popular meanings aligned with the word or symbolism of water in Vietnamese culture: *nước*, as mentioned earlier, means country or homeland in Vietnamese (a point to which I will return in more detail), and Ba Thuy, a spirit of the water, is known to inspire fear in locals who, in turn, avoid "speaking her name and are careful to placate her."[53] The "Old Man," who is never named but sometimes referred to as "father" is a persistent, ghostly presence in Binh's life. Like the water spirit, he is impossible to placate, and yet a presence to which Binh consistently bends or responds.

While it is tempting to read Binh strictly through a queer diasporic frame, his own interpretation of the basket weaver's story instructs or cautions us otherwise. Binh's confusion over the basket weaver's departure from home (what could possibly compel someone to leave "a house surrounded by water hyacinths in full purple bloom?") corroborates Huỳnh Sanh Thông's explanation of the *làng nước,* which in Vietnamese conjures images of water and rivers while referring to a broad collectivity or a local community or village: "unless forced by inexorable necessity to migrate, the Vietnamese peasants prefer to live and die in their own *làng* and their own *nước*."[54] One might argue that although Binh is, arguably, forced from his father's home and natal land, the ties he maintains to his *làng nước*, conflicted as they may be, demand further critical scrutiny from the perspective of a specifically *Vietnamese* queer subject and the nationalist sentiment expressed throughout the remainder of the novel.

Salt: Vietnamese Waterways and the Unseasonable Sediments of History

Waterways have mythological as well as historical significance to Vietnam. Along the banks of the lower Mekong delta in Vietnam, settlement has developed over several hundred years as a result of Chinese, Vietnamese, and French colonization. Recent expansion of road infrastructure has begun to drastically change the landscape, bringing changes to the flow in economic, cultural and social exchange.[55] In other words, the waterways of Binh's home ought not to be read as static sites of nostalgia, but spaces that have been and will continue to be sites of negotiation, exchange, and meaning making. Thinking about watery relations in this way also brings us beyond a traditional Cold War narrative and premises of American exceptionalism so that we may seek a view of history that understands the complex relationship between Vietnam and various colonial/imperial impositions within a transnational frame. We might read Binh's move to Paris as enabled by centuries of French colonial incursions into Southeast Asia and the French-Vietnamese mobilities that resulted, trafficking missionaries, French gunships and troops, cargo, foodstuff, and cheap labor between shores. This is not to say that the massive influx of Vietnamese refugees to America following the Vietnam War does not constitute a

significant historical moment with reverberations for Vietnamese American subjects, but that, as Mark Philip Bradley argues, the global discourse and practices of colonialism, race, modernism, and postcolonial state making "at once preceded, were profoundly implicated in, and ultimately transcended the dynamics of the Cold War," often borrowing from the transnational circulation of ideas and beliefs.[56]

Bradley discusses water symbolism in a poem by Ho Chi Minh titled "Majestic Pac Bo." Fusing revolutionary nationalism and internationalism, Ho skillfully brings together modern leaders of internationalism (Marx and Lenin) with Vietnamese symbology: "Distant mountains, distant water / Each immense they must be named anew / This stream Lenin, that mountain Marx / Two sides united into one country (*son ha*)." Both mountains and water, writes Bradley, "were commonly used in elite and popular texts as symbols to express the mythological origins of Vietnamese identity."[57] The Vietnamese often use the phrase *núi song* ("mountains and rivers") to "signify the homeland in both is physical and affective aspects," and in some cases to signal national independence from French colonial impositions.[58] *The Book of Salt* stages the movement of transnational bodies and ideas prior to the Vietnam War through its depiction of Nguyễn Ái Quốc, referred to initially as the "man on the bridge" and only later revealed to be Ho Chi Minh. Ho's stated fondness for bridges in *The Book of Salt* ("I have always liked bridges" he comments while atop the Seine with Binh) foreshadows this kind of fusing of national and transnational sentiment, in his stated appreciation for their connection to two sides, their expression of an "agreement, a mutual consent . . . a monument to an accord."[59] Bridges, like oceanic crossings, enable movement between places. Ho's partiality for them is thus unsurprising given that Ho finds himself in multiple colonial spaces (necessitating travel over different seas, working many menial jobs) before becoming a revolutionary leader and the President of Vietnam. However, Truong's depiction of him in *The Book of Salt*, though clearly in tune with the sorts of internationalist philosophies that will come to influence his own thinking, positions him primarily as a formative figure for Binh's budding queer sensibility and his affective longings for a Vietnamese community.

In Truong's novel, salt seasons and blooms with the taste of home; unfolds on the tongue in expressions of queer desire; and issues forth from laboring bodies in droplets of sweat. As a recurring motif, salt is meant to be read not simply as mineral, seasoning, or sediment, but through its formative processes and movements, through its relation to the bodies that harvest and deposit salt and the larger colonial histories within which those bodies are situated. One of the novel's very first references to salt occurs when Binh receives a letter from his brother Anh Minh at Stein's and Toklas's Parisian salon. He wishes to taste the envelope with his tongue, certain that he will find "the familiar sting of salt" and wanting to know what kind: "kitchen, sweat, tears or the sea." He continues: "I wanted this paper-shrouded thing to divulge itself to me,"[60] reminding us of the literal and figurative salt that seasons our affections, that bears traces of where we have been, and that we attempt and

invariably struggle to put into words. The "paper-shrouded thing," as a "thing" that has travelled and passed through many hands, is soaked in and obscures gustatory meaning. Our usual ways of reading such "things" rely on our sense of sight—not *nearly* as exacting as Binh's sense of taste in divulging and discerning the bodily states from which words fitfully emerge. As the rest of the novel unfolds, salt is also depicted as the material and metaphorical residue or memory of labor, movement, love, and nation.

Binh often muses on the difference between types of salt, concluding that as the sediment of working, loving bodies, salt is a taste many would prefer to be regulated. Nguyễn Ái Quốc, still the inscrutable but vaguely familiar "man on the bridge" at this point in the novel, recalls working in a sweltering hot bakery in Paris in which he was required to tie a cloth around his forehead so that his sweat, the salt of his labor, "wouldn't turn the pies from sweet to savory."[61] Unbeknownst to the guests of the Governor-General's house, as Anh Minh and his crew whisk egg whites into meringue, "sweat beads descended from necks, arms, and hands and collected in the bowls"—"Their salt, like the copper and ice, would help the mixture take its shape."[62] Attempts to contain the taste or use of salt are not merely about the dictates of distinguished culinary taste, but are about the unpalatable spoils or salt of laboring bodies upon which the privileged depend but about which the privileged are enjoined not to think. Most messieurs and mesdames "would prefer to believe that their cooks have no bodily needs, secretions, not to mention excrement, but we all do."[63]

In *A History of Food*, a chapter of which is devoted to the history, symbolism, and production of salt, Maguelonne Toussaint-Samat argues that salt has been collected and put to use for centuries largely at the expense of the peasant or working classes, the arbitrary taxing of whom was to become one of the main causes of the French Revolution. Toussaint-Samat writes that the exploitation of salt labor has for centuries made it of vital interest to colonial, national, and international commercial entities vying for economic power.[64] Thus, salt labor in *The Book of Salt* gestures to a history of exploited bodies in the context of global capitalism. Like other staple commodities (e.g. the sugar plantations in the Caribbean), salt has been crucial to the emergence of Western modernity in that both as a commodity and the byproduct of working bodies, salt signals the essential, colonial mobilities that have been integral to the "formation of world systems of trade and production, but also to the constitution of world systems of consumption."[65] To this day salt-pans and salt-works in France remain subject to taxation laws and it is still "forbidden in French law for anyone to take so much as a litre of salt water without the permission of the Ministry of Finance."[66] Not only are salt-pans themselves caught up in uneven national and transnational economic flows, but it is also the unrecognized or undervalued salt of another's labor that facilitates such exploitative and unequal exchanges in the first place. "Symbolically as well as scientifically, salt is an intermediary,"[67] dividing, rather than reconciling, along economic and racial lines.

Alice Toklas's wish to control Binh's use of salt might be read, then, in an even longer *longue durée* of history,[68] in which those with economic, political, or racial capital have attempted to maintain absolute control over the uses of salt. Toklas exerts her control over Binh through her capitulation to elitist or exclusionary culinary practices, despite her expressed awareness of the origins of salt. Binh describes Toklas's lesson on salt:

> A pinch of salt, according to my Madame, should not be a primitive reflex, a nervous twitch on the part of any cook, especially one working at 27 rue de Fleurus. Salt is an ingredient to be considered and carefully weighed like all others. The true taste of salt—the whole of the sea on the tip of the tongue, sorrow's sting, labor's smack—has been lost, according to my Madame, to centuries of culinary imprudence. . . . "In my kitchen, I will tell you when salt is necessary," my Madame said, concluding the real lesson for that day.[69]

Unlike Toklas, Binh's sensitivity to salt extends beyond the class confines of distinguished culinary tastes. Salt, as Toklas intimates, is the stuff that bodies of water (oceans, humans) leave behind. The taste of toiling, weeping, and loving bodies, is an affront to "civilized" plates, and yet, a reminder that we are all constituted by watery ways, that all desiring, working bodies leave their salt. Upon admiring Toklas's sweaty body for the first time, Gertrude Stein responds: "salt enhances the sweetness. Delicious."[70] Toklas speaks of the salt of sorrow's sting and labor's smack, and Stein savors the salt of her lover's movement. Each, then, is able to perceive how laboring, loving, and cooking call for or produce salt—that we are connected, even, in our mutual deposits of salt. It is Binh alone who shows respect for the ways in which salt (like the bodies from which it is extracted) carries its own knowledge, its own memories of its formative processes and movements.

Over a shared meal with Nguyễn Ái Quốc, Binh inwardly reflects on the numerous types of salt, each with its own depth and sensuality: "A gradual revelation of its true self . . . is the quality that sets *fleur de sel* apart from the common sea salt that waits for me in most French kitchens. There is a development, a rise and fall, upon which its salinity becomes apparent, deepens, and then disappears. Think of it as a kiss in the mouth."[71] Binh detects such differences in sea salt by its taste on the tongue, its development, rise and fall in the mouth, comparing true *fleur de sel* to "a kiss in the mouth"—a phrase repeated shortly thereafter to describe an encounter between Binh and Nguyễn Ái Quốc as they stroll through the Jardin du Luxembourg. Eng reads this passage as raising "the specter of a scandalous, perhaps unthinkable, desire that binds Binh and Ho Chi Minh in their shared queer diasporas." This prompts us to consider how queer diaspora, "as a conceptual category—outside the

boundaries of territorial sovereignty and in excess of sanctioned social arrangements—bring together dissonant desires with the political, thereby forcing in the process a crisis in historicism."[72] My reading differs slightly, in that I argue that Truong's construction of the queer, diasporic subject, though certainly forcing a crisis in the narratives of history and nation, is still a subject rooted *in and between* natal spaces of belonging. Queer possibility and desire, in other words, flowers as does salt, through the sea—but not just any sea, not the abstract ocean that exists outside of time and space, but the sea that makes its way to and from the Vietnamese homeland, geopolitically and affectively. Recall that the term water or *nước* in Vietnamese also means country, nation, or homeland, and in other Vietnamese sayings is used to refer to "a step you take in order to reach some goal. It is a pass you come to, and also a way out of the difficult spot."[73] One might draw a comparison between Binh's diasporic movement, enabled by his sea travels and his expression of queer desire, mimicking the process that turns water to salt, while embedding Binh within transnational *as well as* national spaces of belonging.

It is no coincidence that Binh finds in Ho Chi minh (significantly, a nationalist, anti-colonial revolutionary) a certain sense of home, nostalgia, comfort, queer love, even, for he embodies the kind of unfastened,[74] and yet firmly rooted subjecthood that we see in Binh. Picking up on all of these threads, Truong reintroduces Nguyễn Ái Quốc into the novel one last time in the form of a "salt print" photograph. Binh attempts to purchase the photograph, but the photography shop's proprietor is unwilling to let it go: "'I can't, Monsieur. That print is dear to me. It is, you see, an old method from the last century. I charge four times the usual price for a salt print like that one, Monsieur. It takes a full day of sunlight to develop. A full day of sunlight in Paris! Monsieur, can you imagine?'"[75] Troeung argues that for Binh, not at home either in Vietnam nor fully accepted in the household of Stein and Toklas, "belonging is a state of desire that is perpetually deferred."[76] And yet we are not meant to read this state of unbelonging or displacement as a mark of absolute marginality.[77] For both Binh and Nguyễn Ái Quốc, Paris is a formative site for their development. Recall that the sea in *The Book of Salt* comes to be associated with queer desire, a safe space in between lands already mapped and claimed physically and ideologically by others.[78] Perhaps the salt print is meant to gesture to both forced and *chosen* forms of migration demonstrating the agency expressed through movement between national spaces in which old and new kinship ties are affirmed or created.

In the novel, deposits of seawater are also described as mounds of salt that are borne of, and thus hold within them, memories of the sea. Nguyễn Ái Quốc compares the remnants of sea to the left-overs of bodies; or, put another way, he likens the salty remains of watery bodies (humans and oceanic) to one another, each to be read through their particular landscapes and histories. Attending to the variances in salt, the unseasonable or untimely left-behind traces, as Binh so often does, is to look backwards as one engages forward, to taste and recognize the salt of otherness. Thus, Truong's queer diasporic subject, though uniquely positioned as a

Vietnamese migrant worker, is one of many queer exiles to refuse to turn his back on the (salty) sediments (i.e., bodies) of history. To cast a backwards glance on sorrow, to engage in non-conforming, queer love, is an affront to, as Truong states in an interview with her publisher Houghton Mifflin, the Catholic God who famously turns Lot's wife into a pillar of salt "for 'looking back' at her home, to the city of Sodom" at the moment it is being destroyed, disapproving of the practices of both nostalgia and sodomy.[79] Heather Love argues that a "central myth of queer existence describes the paralyzing effects of loss," originating, in part, in the "lesson" of Lot's wife, which is significant "not only as an account of the violence perpetrated against those accused of the grave sin of homosexuality; it also describes the consequences of the refusal to forget such losses. [. . .] By refusing the destiny that God offers her, Lot's wife is cut off from her family and from the future. In turning back toward this lost world she herself is lost: she becomes a monument to destruction, an emblem of eternal regret."[80] Truong does not steer Binh away from the experience of regret; indeed, it follows him like a "crippling seasickness" across the ocean and onto land.[81] Regret, loss, nostalgia are never far from the surface for Binh, triggering bouts of loneliness and habitual cutting since childhood. However, Binh's story does not replicate the cautionary tale of Lot's wife. It is, instead, as Binh often remarks, a gift. Troeung brilliantly picks up on this idea throughout *The Book of Salt* in her exploration of postcolonial collaborative autobiography, arguing ultimately that the gift Binh leaves us with is "the story of Binh's intimacies, secrets, and memories that he gives, not to Stein and Toklas, but rather to his imagined community of the underclass, the long line of servants, migrants, and queer exiles who have preceded him through the master's door and who have laid claim to this gift in the past."[82] The story of the basket weaver is one that Binh puzzles over and returns to throughout the novel. In the end he concludes: "I, like the basket weaver, looked at the abundance around me and believed that there was something more."[83]

The Book of Salt situates the local, the intimate, and the material within macro-histories of (be)longing, whereby loss does not stifle movement, but is its impetus. Waterways and their salty constitutions are thus similar in composition to Binh's queer subject and his sense of (be)longing: a state or space of both being/longing that never quite settles, that is always in transit, that is infused with the silt of home (watery deposits of his father's infertile land *and* the salt of nation). At sea Binh learns that "time can also be measured in terms of water, in terms of distance traveled while drifting on it. When measured in this way, nearer and farther are the paths of time's movement, not continuously forward along a fast straight line. When measured in this way, time loops and curlicues, and at any given moment it can spiral me away and then bring me rushing home again."[84] The ebb and flow of the sea posits a different sort of relation to time and space, aligning, again, more closely with the circularity of memory and desire than the "straight line" of recorded history. Truong's purposeful use of the "spiral" rather than the circle, suggests that there is no point of return, signaling Binh's movement nearer and further, looping close to

the point of departure but never quite arriving or returning. Such movements, in Eng's words, lack "a particular historical destination or documentary intent."[85] They also situate the sea and the queer subject (of the sea) between and always informed by inherited and chosen forms of destination or (af)filiation.[86]

While the *books* of salt—*The Book of Salt* discovered by Binh and written by Gertrude Stein, and the metafictional version written in the voice of Binh—each take Binh's culinary character as a point of departure, they do so, presumably (we have no access to Gertrude Stein's fictional version), to drastically different effect. The latter, to start, overwrites the former, not in an act of attempted erasure—for the lives of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas are well documented elsewhere—but, for Binh, to preserve a story that is illegible, and distasteful, to official, historical narratives. Christopher Castiglia writes about the politics of memory for the gay community, reminding us that in "telling different stories of the past" we are "avoiding unnecessary loss and becoming present to ourselves. To look back is, after all, to refuse the imperative laid down at the destruction of Sodom."[87] Binh's narrative is not necessarily a reinvention of the past, but a means through which we can "think critically about which stories are credited with access to the truth, to the social 'real.'"[88] Binh's narrative agency is enabled by his fluency in other epistemological modes—his ability to distinguish between the material and metaphorical differences in the body's salt—which in turn encourages us to question not only which stories (and which epistemological modes) are credited with truth, but upon whose salt these stories depend.[89] In the process of telling his story, Binh is present to himself in a way that he is not present to his father, but also in the way that a story such as his would not have been present to those with whom he was most intimate.

An epistemological mode based on the sensate necessitates a melancholic turn backward as a source of both sorrow and strength in the present. Wary of becoming lost in a "sea of absolutes," though, and cognizant of the difficulty of "remain[ing] objective when alone in memory,"[90] Binh's version is also a corrective to the authoritative, teleological line of history, drawing attention to his own story as a work of (sometimes unreliable) memory that narrates and meanders in self-conscious uncertainty. Truong mobilizes the queer diasporic figure to construct a more inclusive mapping of belonging, coupled with an obvious current of feeling for the homeland or national space. Binh's backward glance need not be read as a longing for nation per se, or as a longing for national citizenship or other state-sanctioned forms of belonging, but might be read as feelings of homesickness for a national space that exceeds legal or official configurations of nation, encoding an affective, physical space (mountains and rivers, salt and sea), filial ties, and everyday struggles and intimacies associated with a particular place and a particular history.

In the final pages of the novel, Binh adjures Gertrude Stein to be more sensitive in her use of salt, reprimanding her for using him as fodder or seasoning for her writing and drawing us back to salt as the stuff of stories and bodies, neither free for the taking. Binh writes: "Salt, I thought. GertrudeStein, what kind? Kitchen,

sweat, tears, or the sea. Madame, they are not all the same. Their stings, their smarts, their strengths, the distinctions among them are fine. Do you know, GertrudeStein, which ones I have tasted on my tongue? A story is a gift, Madame, and you are welcome."[91] Binh's description of the important distinctions between salt—in kind (kitchen, sweat, tears or the sea) and in character (their stings, smarts, strengths)—separates his queer sensibility from Stein's and Toklas's. His tongue, like theirs, no stranger to queer love, is nevertheless differentiated by his keen taste for *particular* bodily and geographical locations.[92] Thus, ever sensitive to the taste and varieties of salt, ever hopeful for a "sea change"[93] in affairs of the heart, Binh can be read as a queer, diasporic subject whose desire is cast onto and enabled by the drift and movement of sea, and whose watery and salty constitution bear traces of nation, displacement, and labor. To read Binh this way is to attend to queer expressions of (be)longing that occupy a different time and space of possibility, conditioned and enabled by non-normative sexuality, and comprised of a never fully satiable desire or taste for home, familiarity, and love.

Notes

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[1] Huỳnh Sanh Thông, "Preface." *Watermark: Vietnamese American Poetry and Prose*, ed. Barbara Tran, Monique T. D. Truong, and Truong Khoi Luu (New York: Asian American Writers' Workshop, 1998), vii.

[2] Monique Truong, *The Book of Salt* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004), 11.

[3] Ibid., 16.

[4] Ibid., 19.

[5] Ibid., 18.

[6] Philip Taylor, "Rivers into Roads: The Terrestrialisation of a South-East Asian River Delta," in *Water: Histories, Cultures, Ecologies*, eds. Marnie Leybourne and Andrea Gaynor (Crawley, Australia: University of Australia, 2006), 48.

[7] David L. Eng, "The End(s) of Race." *PMLA* 123.5 (2008): 1479–1493.

[8] Truong, *The Book of Salt*, 178.

[9] Ibid., 11–12.

[10] Mimi Sheller, *Consuming the Caribbean from Arawaks to Zombies* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 72.

[11] I locate Binh in a queer diaspora following David Eng (see: "The End(s) of Race" and *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy*), but use the term carefully. Sau-Ling Wong cautions against the "inherent developmental narrative in the term diaspora" not only as a potentially teleological way to understand global movement or Asian American experience, but also as a privileged or trendy term of cultural criticism that might obscure other modes or phases of Asian American subjectivity. Binh can be read as a transnational subject, a global migrant worker, as well as an expatriate of Vietnam, exiled because of his queerness (and thus a part of a larger queer diaspora), but nonetheless entangled in the history and symbolism of home. Binh's mobile history and conflicted connections to Vietnam and waterways signal multiple modes of subjectivity not easily confined to any one experiential (or institutional) trajectory. See Sau-Ling Wong, "Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical Crossroads." *Amerasia* 21.1/2 (1995): 17.

[12] Truong, *The Book of Salt*, 98.

[13] Eng, "The End(s) of Race," 1489.

[14] Lily Cho, "'How Taste Remembers Life': Diasporic Memory and Community in Fred Wah's Poetry," in *Culture, Identity, Commodity: Diasporic Chinese Literatures in English*, eds. Tseen Khoo and Kam Louie (Aberdeen, UK: Hong Kong University Press, 2005), 102.

[15] Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 5.

[16] Eng, "The End(s) of Race," 1480.

[17] Citing Dipesh Chakrabarty, David Eng writes: "the hermeneutic tradition, relentlessly dominated by the inexorable temporal mark of modernity and the globalization of capitalism, operates within as well as beyond historicism's reach." In Chakrabarty's words, "'it produces what may be called 'affective histories.'" Eng, "The End(s) of Race," 1486. My mapping of a hermeneutics of embodiment, while specific to *The Book of Salt*, gestures to the hermeneutic tradition in its subversion of a historicist or capitalist account of time, place, and body, the latter of which is often only legible through certain forms of (officially sanctioned) labor and ignorant to the sociality of feeling.

[18] Lily Cho comes to these theorizations by way of a close reading of Fred Wah's poetry, drawing on literary and scientific modes of inquiry and the collective or cultural nature of proprioceptive sensory engagements.

[19] Elizabeth Wilson, *Psychosomatic: Feminism and the Neurological Body* (London: Duke University Press, 2004). Wilson argues for a psychological etiology of the body and for a theory of the psyche "that is more extensive and less attached to the primacy of rationality, self-control, good judgment, and sound appraisal," positing, instead, that the

psyche pervades and inhabits the body and can thus be accessed through bodily modes and responses. Wilson, *Psychosomatic*, 41.

[20] In a paper presented at the annual meeting of the *American Studies Association*, entitled "Tasting History in Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt*," Ann Cvetkovich argues that Binh's meals are indeed Truong's "contemporary version of high modernist prose." For an abstract, see: http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/1/1/2/3/4/p112348_index.html.

[21] Truong, *The Book of Salt*, 152.

[22] Ibid., 78.

[23] King-Kok Cheung, *Articulate Silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa* (New York: Cornell University, 1993), 4.

[24] Truong, *The Book of Salt*, 14.

[25] Ibid., 66. Monique Truong states in an interview with publisher Houghton Mifflin: "I cook, like the characters in my novel, to remind me of where I have been. I always cook or rather I always 'taste' the food first in my mind. I approach a recipe like a story. I imagine it, sometimes I have a dream about it, then I go about crafting it." Monique Truong, interview with Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, *Press Release for The Book of Salt*, April, 2003.

[26] Truong, *The Book of Salt*, 10.

[27] Ibid., 19.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid., 13.

[30] Ibid., 154.

[31] Ibid., 13–14.

[32] Shari Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900–1940* (Austin, TX: University of Texas, 1986), 184. See also Stein's "Patriarchal Poetry." This line of inquiry is the result of the helpful comments of an anonymous reviewer.

[33] Ulla E. Dydo, *Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2003), 15.

[34] Truong, *The Book of Salt*, 11.

[35] Ibid., 198.

[36] Ibid., 81.

[37] For a discussion of the ways in which the nervous system responds creatively, and even thoughtfully, to intrusions from without, see Elizabeth Wilson's *Psychosomatic: Feminism and the Neurological Body*, Chapter 4.

[38] Truong, *The Book of Salt*, 141.

[39] Ibid., 138.

[40] Ibid., 142.

[41] Cho, "'How Taste Remembers Life,'" 100.

[42] Y-Dang Troeung, "'A Gift or a Theft Depends on Who is Holding the Pen': Postcolonial Collaborative Autobiography and Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 56.1 (2010): 113–135. See pages 119–120.

[43] Truong, *The Book of Salt*, 37.

[44] Ibid., 74.

[45] Ibid., 56.

[46] Ibid., 63.

[47] Ibid., 59.

[48] Ibid., 12.

[49] Richard Fung, "Looking for My Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Video Porn," in *Q&A: Queer in Asian America*, ed. David L. Eng and Alice Y. Hom (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1998), 115–134. See page 118.

[50] See Eng, "The End(s) of Race."

[51] Truong, *The Book of Salt*, 12.

[52] Ibid., 194.

[53] Taylor, "Rivers into Roads," 48.

[54] Huỳnh Sanh Thông, "Live by Water, Die for Water: Metaphors of Vietnamese Culture and History." *The Vietnam Review* 1 (1996): 146.

[55] See Taylor, "Rivers into Roads." Taylor's article looks at how recent expansion of road infrastructure has begun to drastically change the landscape, bringing changes to the flow in economic, cultural and social exchange. Taylor also assesses the role of foreign donors, local agents, and state actors (carrying out a national agenda) in the transition to land-based communication networks. Taylor's section entitled "Local Perspectives" looks at the cultural, practical, and historical meanings of water for the people of the Mekong delta.

[56] Mark Philip Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam & America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919–1950* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina, 2000), 8.

[57] Ibid., 110.

[58] Thông, "Live by Water, Die for Water," 148.

[59] Truong, *The Book of Salt*, 92.

[60] Ibid., 5.

[61] Ibid., 88.

[62] Ibid., 46.

[63] Ibid., 64.

[64] Maguelonne Toussaint-Samat, *A History of Food: New Expanded Edition*, trans. Anthea Bell (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 426.

[65] For a fascinating discussion of how such mobilities of people, commodities, images, and ideas undergird the construction of Western modernity in the Caribbean, see Mimi Sheller, *Consuming the Caribbean from Arawaks to Zombies*.

[66] Toussaint-Samat, *A History of Food*, 423, 425.

[67] Ibid., 426.

[68] Truong's novel can be read, argues Eng, through a *longue durée* of history, beginning with the tenets of the Enlightenment and traceable to the "colorblind" and postidentity politics of today. Eng, "The End(s) of Race," 1480.

[69] Truong, *The Book of Salt*, 212.

[70] Ibid., 185.

[71] Ibid., 97–98.

[72] Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship*, 62.

[73] Thông, "Live by Water, Die for Water," 142.

[74] Eleanor Ty, *Unfastened: Globality and Asian North American Narratives* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

[75] Truong, *The Book of Salt*, 246.

[76] Troeung, "'A Gift or a Theft Depends on Who is Holding the Pen,'" 119.

[77] Eleanor Ty writes, "I would like to use and recuperate the terms mobility and displacement without misrepresenting the place of Asian North Americans as a whole by situating them in a position of always not at home and marginal. Displacement as

perpetual exile and unbelonging goes against the strategy of 'claiming America' by and for Asian Americans, while displacement as movement, that is, taking the place of something else, suggests agency and subjectivity. Asian North Americans are not always put in situations not of their own volition." Ty, *Unfastened*, xxvii.

[78] Binh's mother, on the other hand, never allows Binh's father "to claim the land that she calls home." Truong, *The Book of Salt*, 198.

[79] Truong, interview by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

[80] Love, *Feeling Backward*, 5.

[81] Truong, *The Book of Salt*, 248.

[82] Troeung, "'A Gift or a Theft Depends on Who is Holding the Pen,'" 130.

[83] Truong, *The Book of Salt*, 249.

[84] Ibid., 190.

[85] Eng, "The End(s) of Race," 1484.

[86] In an analogous context, David L. Eng argues: "Suspended between departure and arrival, Asian Americans remain permanently disenfranchised from home, relegated to a nostalgic sense of its loss or to an optative sense of its unattainability." David L. Eng, "Out Here and Over There: Queerness and Diaspora in Asian American Studies." *Social Text* 52/53.3/4 (1997): 31.

[87] Christopher Castiglia, "Sex Panics, Sex Publics, Sex Memories." *boundary 2* 27.2 (2000): 175.

[88] Castiglia, "Sex Panics," 175.

[89] Y-Dang Troeung comments on Binh's choice of words near the novel's end, when he calls the story of his life a "gift." Troeung argues, "The gift, then, is the story of Binh's intimacies, secrets, and memories that he gives, not to Stein and Toklas, but rather to his imagined community of the underclass, the long line of servants, migrants, and queer exiles who have preceded him through the master's door and who have laid claim to this gift in the past. . . . While history's pen might tell the story of an illiterate, untrustworthy, and inscrutable Vietnamese cook who stole from his employer's cabinet, *The Book of Salt* reminds us that, as Binh aptly remarks, 'A gift or theft depends on who is holding the pen' (215)." Troeung, "'A Gift or a Theft Depends on Who is Holding the Pen,'" 130.

[90] Truong, *The Book of Salt*, 105.

[91] Ibid., 260–261.

[92] Cho, "'How Taste Remembers Life,'" 99.

[93] Truong, *The Book of Salt*, 15.