

Serena Fusco

Synesthesia, Photography, Intransitive Comparison: Worlding the World as Home in Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt*

Introduction

This essay proposes to read Monique Truong's acclaimed first novel *The Book of Salt* (2003) as a work that dramatizes ways to conceive of the world and be in the world, as human beings as well as literary texts. Upon reading *The Book of Salt*, the term "world" takes on several meanings. The world is a spatiotemporal extension that is external to the subject and in many ways beyond the subject's own horizon. Yet the world can also be regarded as a multisensorial space of creative rememory,¹ hence a subjective creation, but wherein the subject encounters, in encounters of different scales, traces of other in/commensurate subjects as its own (meaningful) limit.

More specifically, I propose to analyze two ways in which *The Book of Salt* dramatizes (being in) the world. One, its textual re-elaboration of the photographic medium, in ways that, in my opinion, go beyond thematization and evoke intermediality; this entails, in turn, a conception of time and narrative that values relations yet holds on to a fundamental sense of discontinuity. Two, the novel's structural use of synesthesia, its deployment of a literary style which traverses the fullness of the sensorial spectrum and is grounded in the interdependence of the sensory spheres. Exploring how these strategies work and entwine is especially apt for reflecting on the novel's worldly dimensions, and on these dimensions as suspended between subjective and objective spheres.

¹ Here I am tentatively borrowing Toni Morrison's term (made famous because of *Beloved*) to emphasize the entwinement or, for Morrison, "battle between remembering and forgetting [...] the stress of remembering, its inevitability, the chances for liberation that lie within the process" (Morrison 2019, 324).

Re-cognizing the World, Re-cognizing World Literature

Truong's work illustrates how sensory impressions, the elaboration of such impressions into desires, and the journeys (literal or metaphoric) undertaken to pursue such desires – or undertaken as the consequences of such desires – set human bodies in motion, put them in situation and in the world. The world in *The Book of Salt* is alternatively big and small; it shrinks and expands as the result of forces that cannot be fully controlled by the human characters who fictionally act in the text – neither by the flesh-and-blood actors who exist at the frontiers of the text. Despite all possible detours, the novel's characters, and especially its protagonist, attempt to find their path(s) in the world. This intradiegetic situation mirrors the “border” – i.e. not completely extradiegetic – situation presented in the novel's opening paratext,² where the author reminisces that the “book was written on two islands, in two countries, three states, and five cities”.³ Writing it was, she maintains, a “journey” – one that was made meaningful, however, by having a “home” to return to.

The Book of Salt is set in the 1920s–1930s and its broad geographical spectrum encompasses Vietnam, at the time under French colonial rule, France, and the U.S. Binh, the central character and narrator, is the youngest son of a loving, abused, quietly resisting mother and a tyrannical, abusive, exploitative father.⁴ Hired, thanks to a resourceful older brother, as a cook aide in the French governor general's house in Saigon, young Binh is “[e]quipped with skills and desires that no man would admit to having” (15). When he is dismissed because of the discovery of his sexual liaison with the French chef, he is also expelled by his father and is forced to leave Vietnam. After peregrinations at sea as member of various ship crews, and various short-term employments on land, he arrives in Paris, at 27 rue de Fleurus, to work as a live-in cook for (Truong's fictional recreations of) Gertrude Stein and her partner Alice B. Toklas – whom Binh privately renames “GertrudeStein” and “Miss Toklas”.⁵ Conspicuous yet effaced as the quintessential racialized colonial subject in the metropole, an invisible presence in “the Steins's very public household, Binh seems to find some degree of “home” there and, per-

2 I will synthetically observe, further on, that I regard the author as an explicitly evoked presence at the border of the text.

3 Truong 2004, no page reference. References to the text will be henceforth included parenthetically after the quotes.

4 The novel hints that “Old Man”, as Binh calls him, may not be his biological father, but it offers no ultimate certainty on the matter.

5 On the importance of naming in the novel, see Eng 2008.

haps, love – with Lattimore, a young mixed-race – partly African American – “iridologist” and aspiring writer who attends the Steins’s salon. This fragile equilibrium finally collapses and Truong wraps up the novel on a note of suspension. In the finale – which circularly brings one back to the novel’s beginning, dated October 1934 – Stein and Toklas are leaving Paris for a long tour of the U.S., and it is uncertain, or simply undisclosed, what Binh will do, where he will go, in consequence of his “Mesdames’s departure; or perhaps in consequence of his having been, meanwhile, betrayed and abandoned by Lattimore; or perhaps in consequence of having finally received, with a five-year delay, a reply to a previously sent letter, in which his older brother finally urges Binh to “come home” (8).

Truong’s work can be read at the crossroads of various critical frameworks: Vietnamese American literature, literature of the Vietnamese diaspora, literature of the global south. In 2009, Vincenzo Bavaro read Truong’s novel in the context of the (at least since the cusp of the millennium) ongoing “internationalization” of Asian American literature as a field of study. *The Book of Salt* responded to, and to an extent even anticipated, the growing interest for the works that provide(d) an international dimension to the Asian American experience, thus countering the original historical preference of Asian American criticism for “works, writers, lives, and experiences confined within the limited geographical boundaries of the United States”.⁶ In a comparable vein, reminding his readers that Vietnamese presence in the U.S. is the historical result of global dynamics well beyond a dyadic relation between two nations, Viet Thanh Nguyen has written about ‘Viet Nam’ and its difference from Viet Nam. The latter stands for the country, while the former is a symbol that condenses a plurality of meanings. While some of these meanings are U.S.-centric—one only has to think of the Vietnam war and its central position in the twentieth-century U.S. imaginary—others condense the historical function of ‘Viet Nam’ as a “world hub”: “Viet Nam became the site, and ‘Viet Nam’ became the keyword, for a global clash between radically opposed views regarding freedom, liberation, independence, and the ideologies of capitalism versus Communism”.⁷ After the publication of Truong’s second novel *Bitter in the Mouth* (2011), scholars have started paying attention to her (over the years increasing) self-fashioning as a “southern girl twice over”: from southern Vietnam, “reborn” in the southern U.S. where she arrived as a refugee with her family, and undertaking in *Bitter in the Mouth* an open confrontation with the tradition of the Southern gothic novel.⁸ In other words, in its scope and complexity, and thanks to the reading contexts

6 Bavaro 2009, 177.

7 Nguyen 2014, 367.

8 Truong herself has articulated this position (2019). As critical engagements with this perspective, see Gabler Thomas 2016 and Dykema 2014.

it evokes, Truong's work clearly goes hand in hand with the "globalization" of specific, ethnic and/or regional corpora and concerns that increasingly have – for over two decades now – been regarded as *not* exclusively germane or confined to U.S. culture.⁹

I wonder, though, whether, or how, the globalized reworking of local, U.S.-based preoccupations of various scale(s) can be redeployed in the direction of an attempt to reflect on literature as *basically* a matter of worldly concern. Tendentially drawn into the spheres of the aforementioned critical discourses, *The Book of Salt* has not yet been discussed, to my knowledge at least, as a case of "world literature".¹⁰ I attempt here to reflect on Truong's work as part of a worldly horizon that is not conceived as a sum, or an enlargement, of local concerns, but instead as a basically shared condition from which more localized concerns perhaps not so much descend as they find, instead, an inescapable horizon of sense. This evokes a tension between the imperative to localize on the one hand – also because specific cultural narratives and "traditions", including nation-based ones, still retain their traction and modeling force – and, on the other hand, quoting Wai Chee Dimock (who quotes Gayatri Spivak), "'planetarity' as a never-to-be-realized horizon, a 'catachresis for inscribing collective responsibility' [...]"¹¹ – in literary terms but also, as one would come to expect, in broader considerations.

Needless to say, "world literature" is not a given nor a universally accepted definition. It is, to the contrary, a hugely complex matter and an intensely debated one. As is well known, the paternity of the concept is usually attributed to (an elderly) Goethe. The idea has made a spectacular comeback in the past two decades or so, thanks to a number of factors – among which one could name a broader interest for globalization; and, in more specifically literary environments, the influence of Pascale Casanova's work, the growing momentum of east-west comparison, and, in anglophone criticism, the (very different) interventions of several scholars, among whom the most well known are probably Franco Moretti and David Damrosch.¹²

For the present attempt at reflecting on *The Book of Salt* in the context of world literature debates, I mostly elaborate on Shu-mei Shih, Pheng Cheah, and Djelal Kadir. Shih does not attempt to define a specific type of texts that fall into the rubric of "world literature". Rather, she uses "world", mainly conceived as a

⁹ Recent developments of U.S. regional studies that capitalize on a concept of regionality from a global/planetary perspective also seem to fall within this broad approach. See, for instance, Goodman 2021.

¹⁰ It is worth noting here that an excerpt from the text has been included in Dimock et al. 2017.

¹¹ Dimock 2006, 6.

¹² See Casanova 1999 and, among others, Moretti 2000 and 2003; Damrosch 2003, 2008, and 2014.

“network of power-inflected relations”,¹³ as the necessary backdrop for recognizing/creating “relations” (a term and concept she finds in Édouard Glissant) among distant literary texts, thus forming what she calls “literary arcs”:

My proposal here is to consider *a network of texts as a study of world literature along what I call a literary arc*, which is not a closed circuit but an extendable and contractable trajectory that connects texts [...]. Instead of aiming for global synthesis, the notion of a literary arc links multiple nodes, and a text can enter into relation with other texts anywhere along it, illuminating specific issues within a time period or across time periods. For instance, around the world-historical event of the Chinese coolie trade in the nineteenth century, which crossed the Pacific Ocean to the Americas and traversed the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, we can productively trace an arc of literary texts written during and after the event, which will help us illuminate the much suppressed knowledge about this trade, its human dimensions, and, especially, its humanistic and literary consequences.¹⁴

In programmatic contrast with other theoretical frameworks—for instance, Moretti’s–Shih’s model retains a high level of attention to the analysis of individual texts. Shih also claims the key role of the historical context, but she proposes to historicize and analyze literature from a perspective that questions the way we are used to thinking about history: in fact, despite the current attention to the global dimension, we retain the honored habit of thinking about both history and literary history as *primarily* tethered to a locale or specific “tradition”. Following Shih, who proposes to take “world-historical events” as a ground of comparison, *The Book of Salt* can become a node along an arc that connects it with other texts in the light of world-historical events (and consequences thereof) such as queer migration, colonialism, and photography. World-historical events are thus illuminated, in the sense that (world) history is *rethought* thanks to the powers of literary fiction.

Pheng Cheah’s fascinating argument in *What is a World?* (2016) is also (albeit differently) compelling for my present reflection, because it offers ways to conceptualize—and challenges for conceptualizing—the “world” as an irreducible horizon of (literary) creation. Cheah proposes an alternative approach to those that are, he maintains, the prevalent ideas about world literature. He argues that most theories conflate the world with the global market under the historical condition of late capitalist globalization—an approach replete with (neo)colonial implications. Cheah insists that the concept of “world” is *not* self-evident and that a major weakness of recent theorizations of world literature is exactly their taking the world for granted. In contrast, he builds upon various theories of *worlding*. Worlding the

¹³ Shih 2013, 84.

¹⁴ Shih 2015, 434–435, emphasis mine.

world is, Cheah argues—mainly elaborating on the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, Hannah Arendt, and Jacques Derrida, and the postcolonial narratives of Michelle Cliff, Nuruddin Farah, Amitav Ghosh, Timothy Mo, and Ninotchka Rosca—a *temporal* process that ensures a fundamental openness, a projection into the future, both of “world” and of “time” itself. Cheah considers literature to be a major “force of worlding”. Literary texts exist in and bring about an irreducible temporal horizon, a horizon which resists capitalist globalization and capitalist globalization’s reductionist—i.e. quantifiable and spatialized—view of time. Cheah attempts a “radical rethinking of world literature as literature that is an active power in the making of worlds, that is, both a site of processes of worlding and an agent that participates and intervenes in these processes”.¹⁵

In the background of Cheah’s compelling attempt at reclaiming *time* as a universalizing yet liberating force, a complex question lingers. If literary creativity – including ways to conceive of time and organize narrative – is culturally situated, how can we “world a world” without confirming already-existing teleologies and/or de facto turning the whole world into our own image? In Djelal Kadir’s terms: “Once ‘to world’ is read as transitive [verb], the ensuing question about the binomial ‘world literature’ would logically become ‘which world are we worlding literature into and why?’ And, concomitantly, from what position are we worlding world literature?”.¹⁶ Kadir offers a perspective that can perhaps complement Cheah’s intriguing view. Besides critically considering “world” as a verb, Kadir takes up another verb, *compare*, and suggests that we can regard comparison as inhering in literature, if we consider the verb “compare” – which we usually associate with a human act – as an intransitive verb. It is *literature itself* which compares; and in so doing, I would add, it opens – itself and the world. If this is the case, one can focus on a literary text such as *The Book of Salt* regarding it as a text to which comparison inheres, and which – as I shall presently attempt to demonstrate – simultaneously asks, and demands that we ask, what a world is, or (tentatively) can be: in other words, what the process of worlding entails.

Cheah maintains that we can refrain from a violent appropriation – and reductionist view of world and time – if we presuppose a temporal horizon that precedes and always exceeds the subject in time – a condition that, for Cheah, is paralleled by the very nature of literature. Taking inspiration from Kadir, Cheah, and Shih, I propose to read *The Book of Salt* as a text that compares intransitively and “worlds the world” in historical terms: more than looking head into the opening of a world to come, it looks back *into the past* to retrace and rethink the world that

15 Cheah 2016, 2.

16 Kadir 2010, 4.

was historically made by colonialism, homophobia, and their routes, because this historically made world is, for the time being, what we (still) share and can perhaps turn into something else.

Kandice Chuh offers an intriguing reading of *The Book of Salt* as a peculiar *mise-en-scène* of universality: “The novel gives rise to a sense of the universal as a category not of transcendence but of subtending grounds”.¹⁷ Chuh reads Truong’s novel in the context of aesthetics, remounting to the origins of aesthetics as philosophical reflection on sensibility – a perspective that she rearticulates in order to make room for the sensibilities and desires of those who have been excluded from what she calls (quoting Lauren Berlant and evoking Walter Mignolo) the “historical sensorium”. For Chuh, the historical “subtending grounds” of the universal are (neo)liberalism and colonialism; at the same time, though, the idea of “subtending grounds” is used to excavate the denied or neglected desires of people like Binh, whose presence in the hidden folds of history a text like *The Book of Salt* attempts to – creatively, inventively, fictively – reckon with, and in attempting this, it “correlates” such (imagined) presence to *a question about the world*:

What worlds correlate with the desires incommensurate to normative paradigms of judgment? To what and whose (dis)advantage is the regulation of permissible desires directed?

These are the questions *The Book of Salt* provokes as it organizes sense and sensibility around undocumented figures and desires, specifically those exiled from the normative institutions of the modern nation and the colonial state.¹⁸

Migrations, Desires, and Bodies

From the paratext inward, more than evoked *drawn in* the text by the author’s opening statement, the world in its material and geographical extension constitutes a significant presence, extradiegetically as well as intradiegetically. The novel’s spatial dimension brings together at least three continents: Asia, Europe, America. Attempts at reconstructing Binh’s movements – where did he exactly go after leaving Vietnam? How did he arrive at 27 rue de Fleurus? – repeatedly occur *in* the text, but they prove an ultimately impossible task. Prior to being hired by Stein and Toklas, Binh had been subjected to detailed interviews by many of his prospective employers:

¹⁷ Chuh 2019, 99.

¹⁸ Chuh 2019, 101.

[They] behave as if they have been authorized by the French government to ferret out and to document exactly how it is that I have come to inhabit their hallowed shores.

"In Paris, three years," I tell them.

"Where were you before?"

"Marseilles."

"Where were you before that?"

"Boat to Marseilles."

"Boat? Well, obviously. Where did that boat sail from?"

And so, like a courtesan, forced to perform the dance of the seven veils, I grudgingly reveal the names, one by one, of the cities that have carved their names into me, leaving behind the scar tissue that forms the bulk of who I am.

"Hmm... you say that you've been in Paris for three years? Now, let's see, if you left Indochina when you were twenty, that would make you..."

"Twenty-six, Madame."

Three years unaccounted for! you could almost hear them thinking. (16–17)

Colonialism and the regulation of racialized flows of workforce – Binh, the "Indo-chinese", the colonial subject who arrives on the "hallowed shores" of France – are, Chuh suggests, the very ground of the novel; at the same time, narratives of exile, migration, and attempts at finding a place where one belongs entail an experiential, intimate, corporeal dimension, becoming narratives of (sexual) desire. The basket weaver's story, of which Binh offers an interpretation, is an example. Heard on the first ship Binh boards, it is the story of a young man born into a family whose members have learned to make a living by harvesting the notoriously invasive water hyacinths and using their stalks for making baskets. The young man attempts to leave home and make his own living by replanting the water hyacinths in other land plots, but the family's cuttings do not take to any other spot (54–56). One among the novel's multitude of stories, the basket weaver's works like a parable and evokes its etymological sense of "comparison". Binh compares himself to the weaver – or, to take up Kadir's previous suggestion, the weaver "compares". Most evident is "the obvious contrast between the nature of the weaver's livelihood and mine [...] how nonexportable it is, how it is an indigenous thing, requiring as it does the silt of his family's land" (56). But besides such differences, there are elements of similarity, including, perhaps, a desire that is not always mentioned:

I keep him [the basket weaver] with me because I want to know the part of his story that Bão didn't tell me. What happened in the house, surrounded by water hyacinths in full purple

bloom, that made him go? “Just to see” sounds to me like something Bão would make up, substituting his own vagueness for something twisting and more difficult to say. (57)

Significantly, though, the drive of desire, its sheer expansion, is not sufficient per se to world the world – and the world is not assimilable to a purely subjective projection:

I can imagine the weaver’s desire, all right, the geography of it reasonably extending to the next village over and, maybe, one or two after that. But to take one’s body and willingly set it upon the open sea, this for me is not an act brought about by desire but a consequence of it, maybe. (57)

Binh initially leaves Vietnam finding work overnight on the *Niobe*. Aboard the ship he encounters Bão, whose half-serious streetwise (seawise?) teachings, despite his eventual betrayal, will prove key to Binh’s survival in more than one sense. (It is Bão who, among other things, tells Binh the basket weaver’s story.) Binh intermittently returns to sea for employment, while paying passengers – like Stein and Toklas – cross seas aboard ocean liners. Sea travel is central to the novel also to the extent that its recurrence highlights not only different typologies of movement, but also different forms of access – or non-access – to movement. Besides boats, means of transportation in general are a recurring motif. Binh narrates in detail how Stein and Toklas (and himself) leave Paris once a year to spend the summer in the village of Bilignin, in southeastern France. Stein and Toklas leisurely drive a car to their destination – their journey takes several days – while Binh travels by train to precede them (135). Planes epitomize instead the quintessential new, modern means of transportation which Stein and Toklas expect to experience back in the U.S.: “Their voices especially quivered at the mention of the airplanes. They wanted to see their America from a true twentieth-century point of view” (5).

At the time when the novel is set, though, it is mostly oceanic transportation and maritime routes that connect the world. Water separates distant continents and shores as much as it connects them. As Binh’s story suggests, as the emphasis on transportation implies, the sea is as important as the land, and passages are as important as stays.¹⁹ The omnipresence of the sea clearly evokes the salt of the title. Salt, *the* central motif of the text, not only relates to the sea; it also speaks to the crucial theme of cooking – as well as to other key motifs, i. e. the bodily fluids of tears and sweat. Salt also evokes exile and queerness by virtue of its asso-

¹⁹ The motif of the bridge is significant in this respect. While I shall not have the possibility to fully expand on him, a key figure is the character whom Binh renames “the man on the bridge”. I shall mention this character again in the final part of this essay.

ciation with the Biblical story of Sodom and Lot's wife being transformed into a pillar of salt for looking back: "This powerful image of flight and massacre, of a burning motherland, and the significance of her lethal looking back, is a privileged point of entry in this complex work. Actually, [...] we could also envision the burning of Sodom as the mother of all queer migrations".²⁰

To sum up, the novel's (historical) spatiality is broad, complex, and brought together by forces of capital, colonialism, and desire. The world itself is a space that shrinks and expands according to how desiring bodies negotiate the expanse of the sea; yet neither desire, nor the consequences of desire are fully controllable, nor can they be harnessed for good – nor can they be easily or immediately narrated or reconstructed. Looking back across the wide and salty expanse that connects past and present entails a substantial degree of untold, or barely avoided paths. Toward the end of the novel, in a very moving passage, Binh suggests that the sea, a space whose sheer extension had until then eluded him, became a passage to another place, and not the final (suicidal) destination of his journey, because he had miscalculated how long the journey would last:

Though sea travel I had assumed, was something that generally took many years to complete. The world was enormous before I left my corner of it. But once I did, it grew even more immense. As for that corner, it continued to shrink until it was a speck of dust on a globe. Believe me, I never had a desire to see what was on the other side of the earth. I needed a ship that would go out to sea because there the water is deep, deeper than the hemmed-in rivers that I could easily reach by foot. I wanted the deepest water because I wanted to slip into it and allow the moon's reflection to swallow me whole. "I never meant to go this far", I said to Bão. What I meant was that when I boarded the *Niobe* I had no intention of reaching shore. (250)

Synesthetic Narratives

The world is also experienced, and rendered through Binh's voice, as a fluid space of multisensorial (and, I shall suggest in a while, multimedial) memory, a space alternatively shrinking and expanding, one in which truth is always complemented by imagination and the past exists in tension with the (tricky) need/desire to remember in the present: "It is difficult to remain objective when I am alone in my memory. I place undue trust in my recollections of the past because there is no one here who cares to contradict me, to say in defiance, No, that is not true" (105). The world is the horizon against which – to quote Chuh again – "undocumented subjects" like Binh attempt to coax a small drop of future possibility by

²⁰ Bavaro 2009, 174.

tentatively piecing together fragments of the past, from sensuous impressions to sensuous contact with (as I shall briefly detail more clearly) different medial surfaces (among which the photographic medium). When he receives a five-year-long-awaited letter from his brother Anh Minh, Binh wants to connect with the material/sensorial aspect of the item:

I sniffed the envelope before opening it. It smelled of a faraway city, pungent with anticipation for rain. If my Mesdames had not been in the room, I would have tasted it with my tongue. I was certain to find the familiar sting of salt, but what I needed to know was what kind: kitchen, sweat, tears or the sea. I wanted this paper-shrouded thing to divulge itself to me, to tell me even before the words emerged why it had taken my brother almost five years to respond to my first and only letter home. (5)

Regarding Truong's work, synesthesia has generally been discussed with respect to *Bitter in the Mouth*, in which the protagonist and narrator, Linda Hammerick, is affected by synesthesia in the medical sense, a neurological condition that in her case conjoins auditory and gustatory spheres, so that each word triggers in her mouth the incoming of a specific taste. In her second novel, Truong expands literary synesthesia beyond its specific role as rhetorical figure of speech, making it a central plot element and motif. I suggest that synesthesia as a motif and a stylistic feature is already present (albeit less central) in *The Book of Salt*. Sensory spheres overlap, showing their interdependency and their role for putting the subject in situation, a situation of *physical* openness and vulnerability that accompanies any attempt to make a home for oneself.

Cooking is a "way of remembering the world" (99). Binh's cooking laces the familiar with the unfamiliar, blurring the distinction between here and there, fact and invention: his French employers are "preoccupied with the taste of foods so familiar and yet with every bite even the most parochial of palates detects redolent notes of something they have no words to describe. They are, in the end, overwhelmed by an emotion they have never felt, a nostalgia for places where they have never been" (19). The sensorial experience of taste, which blooms into a multisensorial experience, is situated somewhere between reliving a past and (re)imagining a past, between encountering something for the first time and recognizing something that has been encountered before. Words, which in themselves oscillate between a visual and an aural dimension, evoke tastes, as on the occasion of the first exchange between Binh and Lattimore: "Your [Lattimore's] French was flawless but with a slowness to its delivery, unctuous and ripe. I wanted to open my mouth and taste each word" (40). Gustatory similes and metaphors prevail in the text, but they do not exist in isolation. In chapter four, "GertrudeStein" asks Binh to "define 'love'", as part of a rather peculiar game. She recurrently tests Binh limited French-language skills, asking him to name things, from food

items to daily objects to abstract concepts: not well versed in French herself, “GertrudeStein” acquires a capital of “poetic” expressions thanks to Binh’s creative malapropisms and bodily mimics. In order to “define ‘love’”, Binh points “to a table on which several quinces sit yellowing in a blue and white China bowl. I shake my head in their direction, and I leave the room, speechless” (36). A few pages later, Binh-the-narrator explains, in a style that could not possibly have materialized itself when addressing “GertrudeStein” in French – a richly mimetic and at the same time evocative style, a flourish of synesthetic combination of the senses – taste, sight, smell, touch:

Quinces are ripe, GertrudeStein, when they are the yellow of canary wings in midflight. They are ripe when their scent teases you with the snap of green apples and the perfumed embrace of coral roses. But even then quinces remain a fruit, hard and obstinate – useless, GertrudeStein, until they are simmered, coddled for hours above a low, steady flame. Add honey and water and watch their bone-colored flesh soak up the heat, coating itself in an opulent orange, not of the sunrises that you never see but of the insides of tree-ripened papayas, a color you can taste. To answer your question, GertrudeStein, love is not a bowl of quinces yellowing in a blue and white China bowl, seen but untouched. (40)

(Re)Imagining a Photo Album

The pervasive quality of novel’s synesthetic style, its reflection of the fullness and the gaps of the “sensorium”, calls for a corresponding emergence of multisensory channels, i. e. a literary evocation of *other media*. While the synesthetic horizon of the novel challenges any ingrained prevalence of the visual channel over other sensory channels, a substantial engagement with the medium of *photography* is evident. Photography is an important plot element and is crucial in both thematic and stylistic terms.

With the promise of having a photograph of the two of them taken at a professional studio, Lattimore persuades Binh to “borrow” – with the promise of giving it back after one week – one of Stein’s notebooks.²¹ After the promised photograph is taken, but before it is redeemed, Lattimore absconds the manuscript and

²¹ This manuscript, apparently, is about Binh himself and is titled “The Book of Salt”. Not knowing English, all that Binh can make out in those pages is his own name – misspelled by Gertrude Stein as “Bin” – and the word “please”. In the limited space of this essay, I do not have the possibility to discuss a crucial aspect of *The Book of Salt*: namely, how the novel – thanks to its recreation of Stein and Toklas but also, more broadly, its historical setting and stylistic features – powerfully evokes, mobilizes, and rethinks “modernism” as a historical, cultural, and literary period. On this see Izzo 2011, but also Bavaro 2009, Chuh 2019, Coffman 2014, and Eng 2008.

vanishes. Binh falls prey to Lattimore's scheme because of his understandable, totally human desire to have a photograph sustaining the momentary illusion that the two of them may be fleetingly seen (and sanctioned) as partaking of (in Chuh's terms) "sustained coupledness",²² similarly to how Stein and Toklas have come to be seen since they have been singled out as an iconic queer couple.²³ Very simply, Binh longs for kin, a home, a family portrait.

Never seen nor collected, the promised photo remains a phantasmatic token of Lattimore's betrayal. Paradoxically, though, a photographic image had been prefigured in their first encounter at 27 rue de Fleurus, when the initial visual pairing of the two occurs in a mirror:

After years of the imposed invisibility of servitude, I am acutely aware when I am being watched, a sensitivity born from absence, a grain of salt on the tongue of a man who has tasted only bitter. As I checked the teapots to see whether they needed to be replenished, I felt a slight pressure. It was the weight of your eyes resting on my lips. I looked up, and I saw you standing next to a mirror reflecting the image of a wiry young man with deeply set, startled eyes. I looked up, and I was seeing myself beside you. I am at sea again, I thought. Waves are coursing through my veins. I am at sea again. (37)

Lattimore's mixed-raceness points to the limits of racialized visual regimes – "is Lattimore a Negro?" (157) "GertrudeStein" inquires of Binh. Lattimore's relationship with the "in/visible" Binh, and the way the text, in this passage, blurs the distinction between the two men, point to how the novel also engages the construction of race at the border of visibility and invisibility, while reminding us that photography has been crucial, in modernity, for attempting to locate, "fix" race to certain bodies, simultaneously revealing the impossibility to "solve" race into visibility once and for all – thus corroborating Eng's point that "race functions beyond the realm of the visible and the protocols of the empirical".²⁴ It is worth noting that this "visual encounter" is also presented through a synesthetic style, in-

²² Chuh 2019, 107.

²³ Several scholars (among whom Bavaro 2009, Chuh 2019, Coffman 2014, Eng 2008) have noted how *The Book of Salt* creatively engages queerness in its different manifestations, including historical ones, explicit and/or covert, documented and/or invented. The text obviously presents the contrast between the recognition that is granted to the Stein-Toklas pair in their domestic partnership – a recognition that will make them "pioneers" – and the obscurity to which Binh's desire is relegated. Less obvious, but undoubtedly present, is the possibility (not certainty) of desire blooming between Binh and a man he fortuitously encounters on a bridge over the Seine in 1927, with whom he spends an evening. More will presently be told about this character. This man, whom he privately renames "the man on the bridge", is much later revealed to be called "Nguyen Ai Quoc" – one of the names taken on by the man whom decades later will be called Ho Chi Minh.

²⁴ Eng 2008, 1486.

volving, as it does, not only visual but also gustatory and haptic dimensions. Significantly, this scene presents another textual pairing of motion and desire – “I am at sea again” – yet a movement evoking, as the “imagined” photograph itself will eventually epitomize, *desire as homecoming*.

Next to the implications of Lattimore’s betrayal, which provides “photography” with negative overtones, Truong also suggests other possible meanings and uses of it, and other possible “relations” between Binh and this medium. After Lattimore deserts him, Binh goes to the studio to collect the photo, believing it is already paid for, only to discover that only half of the cost has been deposited. At the studio, he unexpectedly sees the photograph of a man whom he had met on a bridge over the Seine years before, a fellow-Vietnamese with whom he had shared a memorable dinner and – possibly, because the text remains ambiguous in this respect – a sexual encounter, right before the man in question left Paris. Privately renamed by Binh “the man on the bridge”, his name is, Léné the photographer reveals (he used to work for him as a photo retoucher), “Nguyen Ai Quoc”: for Binh, clearly a made-up name, and – readers of several decades later will observe – one of the names used by the man who will eventually become known as Ho Chi Minh. Binh decides, at this point, to try to redeem not his and Lattimore’s, but instead *this man’s* portrait, although it consists of a very costly photographic *salt print*, whom he will perhaps be able to obtain only after considerable economic sacrifice. Through a photograph, the text wonderfully literalizes one of the metaphoric meanings of the salt motif: salt here stands for *salary*, and the “salt” photographic image becomes the objective correlative of Binh’s labor, as well as of his desire.

The novel opens as follows: “Of that day I have only two photographs and, of course, my memories” (1). “That day” is the day of Stein and Toklas’ departure for the U.S. where, after a decades-long absence, Stein, who has finally achieved celebrity, will have a tour of lectures. Photographers accompany this event:

Every visit by a photographer would be inevitably followed by a letter enclosing a newspaper or magazine clipping with my Mesdames’ names circled in a halo of red ink. The clippings, each carefully pressed with a heated iron, [...] went immediately into an album with a green leather cover. “Green is the color of envy”, my Mesdames told me. [...] “Green” meant that [...] the album had been there from the very beginning, impatient but biding its time; that they were now thrilled to fill it with family photographs of the most public kind. (1–2)

The two photographs mentioned by Binh, which he has at some point cut from a newspaper or magazine, frame the novel, marking its beginning and end. In one, Binh is visible in the background, sitting on a bench at the Gare du Nord behind Stein and Toklas, his eyes closed. In the other, his back is seen as he is kneeling on

the deck of the ship about to depart from Le Havre, sewing a button on Stein's shoe.

While the novel's internal temporal structure is highly fragmented, the relation between Binh and the two photos provides a framework. I would suggest that especially the photo at the Gare du Nord is constructed as a liminal space between the inside of the text and its outside. From within the photo, Binh sees and hears a presence "calling" him, asking him the reason behind all his attempts at "staying". He addresses this presence, positioning himself, in this address, inside the photo:

My eyes are closed because thinking, for me, is sometimes aided by the dark. [...] "What keeps you here?" I hear a voice asking. Your question, just your desire to know my answer, keeps me, is my response. In the dark, I see you smile. I look up instinctually, as if someone has called out my name. (261)

Binh addresses a "you" on repeated occasions. In several passages, the "you" is Latimore; in others, the ghost of his cruel father, dead and buried in Vietnam. In others yet, the "you" points towards an extradiegetic presence, whom, more than with an implied reader, I tend to identify with the author herself – who, across the textual border, ventriloquizes Binh yet addresses "him" as if he were real, in a reversal of the auto-fictional-biographic game played by Stein in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), the work which made Stein a literary celebrity and in which her authorial persona masquerades as Toklas to tell her own autobiography "as Defoe did the autobiography of Robinson Crusoe".²⁵ Intradiegetically, Binh's narratorial stance is suspended between an ex-post awareness of the novel's events on the one hand and the embrace of a limited perspective on the other. Throughout the novel, Binh appears to narrate his past from different "now" moments that do not neatly overlap (9, 13, 16, 26, 56, and passim). The "now" in the novel – the moment(s) in time from which Binh looks back and narrates his story – keeps changing, moving, receding, organizing different snapshot of the past in reciprocal perspective, like in a photo album, while never losing the urgency to create a broader horizon of sense. The "now" also corresponds, I would suggest, to the moments when the world, for Binh, "shrinks" and seems to concede a livable situation. The "small world" is, for Binh, the lived counterpart of a world that his migrations expand *ad infinitum*:

The man on the bridge was leaving that night and I, of all men, decided to stay. I wanted to see him again. But the man on the bridge did not tell me where he was traveling to, and the world

²⁵ Stein 1990, 252.

was too vast for me to search for him, I thought. The only place we shared was this city [i. e. Paris]. Vietnam, the country that we called home, was to me already a memory. I preferred it that way. A “memory” was for me another way of saying a “story”. A “story” was another way of saying a “gift”. The man on the bridge was a memory, he was a story, he was a gift. Paris gave him to me. And in Paris I will stay, I decided. [...] *For a traveler, it is sometimes necessary to make the world small on purpose.* It is the only way to stop migrating and find a new home. After the man on the bridge departed, Paris held in it a promise. It was a city where something akin to love had happened, and it was a city where it could happen again. (258, emphasis added)

Concluding Remarks

Cheah argues that “worlding in the derived sense presupposes worlding in the general sense, the prevailing of a world that follows from the sheer persistence of time”.²⁶ *The Book of Salt* privileges a discontinuous over a continuous perspective on temporality, which I see instantiated in Truong’s use of different narrative “now(s)”, in the novel’s intensely synesthetic and recombinatory imagination, and in an underlying intermedial strategy that, by means of an engagement with photography, stretches the borders of the literary medium. *The Book of Salt* recognizes the world as a horizon that is irreducible to any linear narrative temporality or ultimate meaning, yet a horizon that accommodates many different desires – and frequently frustrated attempts – to end a journey and create a *home*. The multiscale narrative of *The Book of Salt* “worlds a world” that alternatively – or perhaps complementarily – expands and shrinks. This entails, as Binh suggests, a nostalgia for places where one has never been. It is tantamount to recognizing, by virtue of a synesthetic openness, the vastness of an expanse one can never really possess nor master, but wherein one must somehow learn to make a home, momentarily shrinking the world to a livable extension by virtue of “ritual[s] in intimacy” (102): “[a] platter of fried eggs and a loaf of bread” (102), a family photograph. *The Book of Salt* demands that we ask what a world is or can be, and how its confines are continuously re-negotiated for making it livable. In Eng’s words, Binh, whose “queer desires and narrative voice illuminate an alternative human life-world, reveals the return of the subject. This position is precarious, however”.²⁷ For Eng, Binh emerges as a subject in the folds of history less as a full presence than as a ghostly supplement, as an interruption to colonial orchestrations of the world. Finally, as a text of Vietnamese American literature that recognizes and engages the world, Truong’s novel contributes to

²⁶ Cheah 2016, 9.

²⁷ Eng 2008, 1486.

expand, shrink, but especially rethink, the geographical and historical dimensions of the Vietnam-U.S. dyad.

References

- Bavaro, V. (2009), "Coming Home: Rethinking Migration and Queerness in Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt*", in: M. Corona/D. Izzo (eds.), *Queerdom. Gender Displacements in a Transnational Context*, Bergamo, 171 – 191.
- Casanova, P. (1999), *La république mondiale des lettres*, Paris.
- Chuh, K. (2019), *The Difference Aesthetics Makes: On the Humanities "After Man"*, Durham.
- Cheah, P. (2016), *What Is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature*, Durham.
- Coffman, C. (2014), "The Migrating Look: Visual Economies of Queer Desire in *The Book of Salt*", in: *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 56.2, 148 – 180.
- Damosch, D. (ed.) (2014), *World Literature in Theory*, Chichester.
- Damosch, D. (2008), *How to Read World Literature*, Chichester.
- Damosch, D. (2003), *What is World Literature?*, Princeton.
- Dimock, W. C., et al. (eds.) (2017), *American Literature in the World: An Anthology from Anne Bradstreet to Octavia Butler*, New York.
- Dimock, W. C. (2006), *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time*, Princeton.
- Dykema, A. (2014), "Embodied Knowledges: Synesthesia and the Archive in Monique Truong's *Bitter in the Mouth*", in: *MELUS* 39.1, 106 – 129.
- Eng, D. L. (2008), "The End(s) of Race", in: *PMLA* 123.5, 1479 – 1493.
- Gabler Thomas, S. (2016), "Synesthetic Storytelling in Monique Truong and William Faulkner", in: *The Faulkner Journal* 30.1, 39 – 61.
- Goodman, A. (2021), *A Planetary Lens: The Photo-Poetics of Western Women's Writing*, Lincoln.
- Izzo, D. (2011), "Estetica etnica: modernismo asiaticoamericano", in: *Ácoma* 1 (Nuova serie), 109 – 124.
- Kadir, D. (2010), "To Compare, To World: Two Verbs, One Discipline", in: *The Comparatist* 34, 4 – 11.
- Moretti, F. (2003), "More Conjectures", in: *New Left Review* 20, 73 – 81.
- Moretti, F. (2000), "Conjectures on World Literature", in: *New Left Review* 1, 54 – 68.
- Morrison, T. (2019), "Rememory", in: *Mouth Full of Blood: Essays, Speeches, Meditations*, London, 322 – 325.
- Nguyen, V. T. (2014), "Viet Nam", in: R. C. Lee (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Asian American and Pacific Islander Literature*, New York, 365 – 375.
- Shih, S. (2015), "World Studies and Relational Comparison", in: *PMLA* 130.2, 430 – 438.
- Shih, S. (2013), "Comparison as Relation", in: R. Felski/S. Stanford Friedman (eds.), *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses*, Baltimore, 79 – 98.
- Stein, G. (1990), *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, New York. Original work published 1933.
- Truong, M. (2019), "The Rarest of Senses", in: *Southern Cultures* 25.2, 120 – 124.
- Truong, M. (2004), *The Book of Salt*, London. Original work published 2003.

