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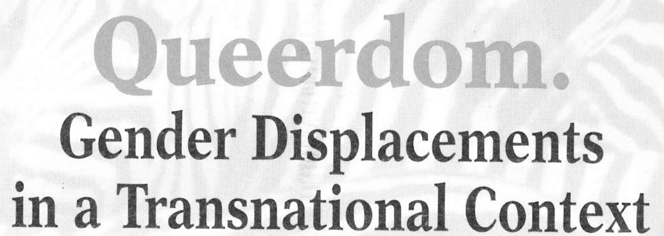

Queerdom.
Gender Displacements in a Transnational Context

Edited by
Mario Corona and Donatella Izzo

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MARIO CORONA

Introduction. What Do We Talk About When We Talk About Queerdom?

This volume appears in the series "Le Zebre" on the tenth anniversary of the foundation of the Center for Studies on the Languages of Identities at the University of Bergamo. The Center, whose totemic icon and wrap-around bookcover motif feature bi-color zebras, was inaugurated in October 1998 at the Faculty of Foreign Languages on the initiative of Liana Borghi (University of Florence), Daniela Daniele (University of Udine), Donatella Izzo (University of Naples), Marco Pustianaz (University of Vercelli), and myself, professor of Anglo-American Literature at Bergamo. Gender was all along meant to be the conceptual roof beam of the Center, so, in order to define the scope of future activities as precisely and as flexibly as we could, a substantial amount of time and attention was spent on mapping out our territory.

From the very beginning, while we acknowledged that for at least a couple of decades gender had become a crucial hermeneutical category in Anglo-American criticism, we felt that it was still inadequately appreciated in our country and in our universities. Hence we thought a Zebra Center in Italy would not be superfluous. We also felt that the relevance of gender as a tool for literary and cultural analysis would be enhanced by weaving it as tightly and as intricately as possible with other major categories already established in Anglo-American and European critical discourse, such as class and race (or, lest we sound essentialist, "race"). The Seminar held in Bergamo on May 18, 1999 by the five founders of the Center produced the first volume of the Zebra series under the complicated title "Incroci di genere. De(i)stituzioni, transitività e passaggi testuali." Its essays were written in Italian because at that time we assumed it was our professional duty to foster the introduction into our country's reluctant culture of some of the most advanced theoretical developments coming from the Anglo-American area. Quite deliberately, we acted as importers, translators, and cultural mediators of these contributions into a country that could nevertheless claim a consistent (though largely neglected) feminist

VINCENZO BAVARO

Coming Home: Rethinking Migration and Queerness in Monique Truong's The Book of Salt.[1]

The issues of home and nation, especially as they intersect with queer subjectivities and Asian American literature, will be the focus of my inquiry in this essay. In my attempt to investigate the complex relation between transnational movement, racial identity, and sexuality, I will follow the lead of some of the questions raised by Monique Truong's novel *The Book of Salt*. How can this novel complicate our understanding of queerness and migration? Among the many intertwined threads running throughout the text – reflections on religion, multilingualism, colonialism, commodification, and more specifically, on cooking *as* writing – the notions of homecoming and displacement, and their relation to sexuality, occupy a crucial position in the novel. In particular, I will try to analyze the consequences of two major decisions made by Truong: the Paris setting and the choice of a gay protagonist and a lesbian household. What is the significance of choosing Paris as a locale for a contemporary Asian American work, and a Vietnamese American novel in particular? And what is the vantage point that a queer perspective can offer in terms of transnationalism and migration?

Before I introduce some conceptual frames that will eventually prove helpful to my reading of the text, I would like to sketch briefly the plot, the main characters, and the setting of the novel. The idea of the book comes from a couple of lines Truong inscribes after the title page, quoting

---

[1] More than a year ago, Raffaella Malandrino and I were trying to organize a panel for the AISNA biennial conference in Macerata, Italy. As two young graduate students, our task was somewhat challenging and unprecedented, due both to our general academic inexperience and to the topics that we were determined to explore. I would like to thank all the contributors to this collection that joined our group, believing in our project, and without whom that experiment would have never seen the light. I am also deeply grateful to Donatella Izzo and Mario Corona, who were willing to nurture our project, investing, as they are used to doing, in a young and emerging group of scholars. Without their professional and financial support, this collection would never have been published.

from Alice Toklas's cookbook, where she wrote that in the house she shared with Gertrude Stein in Paris they used to have Indochinese cooks: "We had certainly luck in finding good cooks, though they had their weaknesses in other ways. Gertrude Stein liked to remind me that if they did not have such faults, they would not be working for us."

The story is set in Paris, at the beginning of the 1930's. The protagonist and narrator is Binh, a young Vietnamese immigrant who works as a live-in cook for two famous American ladies, Stein and Toklas, indeed. Instead of focusing on the two ladies in Rue de Fleurus, and on the various artists and celebrities paying visit at their house, Truong chooses to focus on Binh: this is *his* story. Binh used to work as a *garde-manger* at the Governor-General's house in Saigon. Because of his homosexual rendezvous with Chef Bleriot, and after his father learns that Binh is gay, he loses his job and is kicked out of his house. As a result, Binh leaves Vietnam for a long journey with no destination and a suicidal desire for self-erasure:

> When I signed up with the *Niobe*, I needed a ship that was leaving that same day, as I again had no place to sleep for the night. [...] Believe me, I never had a desire to see what was on the other side of the earth. [...] "I never meant to go this far," I said to Bao. What I meant, was that when I boarded the *Niobe* I had no intention of reaching shore.[2]

The novel begins in 1934 at the *Gare du Nord*, one of the main train stations in Paris. Stein and her partner are about to leave for a tour of lectures in the United States, and Binh has just received, for the first time, a letter from his brother, declaring that it is time for him to come home to Viet-Nam. We don't know where Binh is directed to, either to the States with his Mesdames or to Vietnam to meet his brother again, and we will not know until the very end of the novel. The structure of the book is, in fact, clearly past-oriented, a collage of disparate flashbacks from Binh's life in Paris, his relation with Bao on the ocean, and his childhood and youth in Vietnam; thus, the scene described in the first few pages of the book is nearly the last one to happen. *Gare du Nord*, and by extension Paris, is envisioned as a spatial crossroad between Vietnam and America, the metaphor of a third space where the Mesdames' and the cook's stories may eventually coexist and overlap, a stage where the actors come and go, to which none of them belongs. Another recurring image that

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[2] Monique Truong, *The Book of Salt* (New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 2003), 250. Page numbers will be henceforth included parenthetically in the text.

emphasizes this "neither here nor there" logic is the bridge, the many bridges on the Seine, where the protagonist stands for a long time just thinking of his life experience while looking at the running water.

The Book of Salt might probably be read as a gay novel, representing the young protagonist's journey out of the closet, away from oppression towards his search for happiness and freedom. In this respect, however, it would be unusually pessimistic and static, because there is no real transition from repression to liberation, there is no triumph and no self-empowerment. The novel could also be read as an immigration story, a popular genre in the American literary marketplace. However, the immigration being described is to the wrong place, and the allegedly welcoming and benevolent land is not the pluralist contemporary United States, but a cosmopolitan early-twentieth-century France. Finally, the novel may also be thought of as another representative "ethnic story," where the immigration paradigm is intertwined with issues of racial diversity and assimilation. However, this kind of story is, generally, deeply linked to an autobiographical perspective that emphasizes authenticity and ethnic identity as the utmost form of value, whereas in Truong's work a reading based on the detection of authenticity will soon be frustrated: her novel is clearly a work of creative fiction and there is no essential continuum between the author's supposed life experience and the story being told.

However, the notions of displacement and of homecoming are crucial to the development of *The Book of Salt,* as well as to my analysis of the novel, and they are both declared in the book's acknowledgment and dedication and tacitly embedded in the title. The dedication to the book is "For my Father, a traveller who has finally come home" and this dialogue between movement and home is again stressed in the acknowledgment:

> This book was written on two islands, in two countries, three states, and five cities. It has been a trying, scary, but above all an amazing journey. [...] But in the end the metaphor of a journey is empty, utterly meaningless, without someplace and someone to come back home to. Gratitude to Damijan Saccio, without whom I would not have either.

According to the writer, then, it seems that the journey, while clearly worth being remembered and celebrated, does not constitute a value in itself; rather, it acquires meaning when it leads to an arrival, to a home. Home, however, is not a spatial destination, but an emotional one, a site for intimacy, love, and belonging. Furthermore, as we see throughout the

novel, the word "salt" in its very title has multiple meanings, most of them associated to the idea of travelling and crossing borders; in particular, as the writer herself declared in several interviews, one of these meanings evokes the biblical episode of the burning of Sodom, in which Lot's wife becomes a pillar of salt as she turns back to have a last glance of the city she is leaving. 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, if we think about it in these terms, we could also envision the burning of Sodom as the mother of all queer migrations; and in some ways, as we will see later, the issues of expulsion, migration, and homecoming are concepts crucial to a historical understanding of queer culture. Moreover, as Truong wrote in a pioneering essay on Vietnamese American literature, Vietnamese writers are generally preoccupied with the themes of home and exile.[3] And, in fact, the title of my article is evocative of another, paradoxical homecoming: but who is coming home? And whose home is that?

Envisioning a New Home

Homes are a particularly recurring figure in the imaginary landscape evoked by the novel. One of them is the home of Binh's childhood, and by extension his village in Vietnam, an uncanny point of origin that is also the ultimate point of expulsion: while the narrated story moves away from Vietnam, across the Ocean and through the streets of Paris, the memories of the protagonist lead the readers back to Vietnam, and more and more into Binh's life experience in that country.

Another home is the impossible and idealized home of Binh's arrival, the home that Binh is tirelessly looking for, the home that will motivate his travel, eventually giving him a sense of stability and fulfillment. But in the meantime, home is the trope for his displacement and his exclusion, for his unsteady working condition and his ceaseless swinging from one home to another, from one kitchen to another. The protagonist gives voice to this last understanding of homecoming in a passage that paradoxically casts the homecoming as the ultimate form of dislocation: "I'm becoming more like an animal with each displaced day. I scramble to seek shelter in the kitchens of those who will take me. Every kitchen is a homecoming." (19)

[3] Monique Truong, "Vietnamese American Literature," in *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, ed. King-Kok Cheung (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 231.

Home, however, in the present time of the novel and for a few years in the protagonist's life, is the name he gives to Alice Toklas and Gertrude Stein's renowned residence at the number 27 of Rue de Fleurus, Paris. A home that can be welcoming but, in the end, a home to which Binh will never belong, mainly because of his invisible status as the "asiatique" and because of his class: he is just the Vietnamese cook, after all, and he does not belong there, he is not *sharing* the house with the Mesdames, he is just *working* in that house, not a peer but an employee. Binh tells a joke that effectively conveys his status as a non-member, a subject excluded from – and, in fact, invisible in – an otherwise "progressive" household:

> [T]here is a fire at 27 Rue de Fleurus. When you and the other guests show up for Saturday tea and see the flames, do you rush in to save my Mesdames, the contents of their cupboard, or their cook? The correct answer is Basket and Pépé [the two ladies' dogs]. My Madame and Madame, as everyone knows, can take care of themselves. The cupboard also needs no assistance because Miss Toklas would run back into the burning apartment until every sheet of paper touched by GertrudeStein was safe in her arms. As for the cook, the assembled guests would scratch their heads and ask, "The Steins have a cook?" (150)

He is an invisible inhabitant of the Steins' house, a place where he can find a temporary shelter, but one that ultimately denies him a full membership. Similarly, the city of Paris itself can be seen as a home, a warmer, a more inclusive and welcoming community than Stein's house: the metropolis belongs to everybody, and it gives the opportunity to lose oneself and to find oneself – "Paris is full of men like me," says the young man (128). But what he means seems to be that the city is full of lost and displaced men: in fact, it's exactly the promiscuity and the anonymity provided by the big metropolis that seem to prevent it from becoming a suitable home, a site for intimacy and comfort.

Furthermore, in this novel, the protagonist's trajectory from homophobic rural Vietnam to gay-friendly, metropolitan Paris might seem to confirm the powerful narrative of a liberating Great Gay Migration. This term usually refers to the resettlement of a massive number of American "queers" in the major cities in the US, where the migration and the flight from an oppressive hometown are understood as an emancipating gesture, aimed at acquiring a greater degree of freedom, self-expression, and happiness, and are often associated with "coming-out" narratives. According to this paradigm, the big city and its real and fantasized queer life are the destination of the journey, but they also

represent a symbolic going back to the source of queer culture and history, and in this respect they symbolize, paradoxically, the ultimate homecoming.[4] As the protagonist's story clearly shows, however, moving to the metropolis does not constitute an enthusiastically liberating gesture; indeed, if the destination is self-empowerment and emancipation, the protagonist Binh's travel is likely to have an impossible arrival. The focus on expulsion and migration, on a journey yet to begin and yet to be brought to an end, complicates any simplistic understanding of home – either as origin or as destination. Home is neither here nor there, it becomes a clearly contingent and provisional place of belonging.

Symbolically, however, by affirming, in the title above, that something/someone was "coming home" I had two different ideas in mind: first, as a European scholar of Asian American literature, I meant merely that this literary tradition was coming to *my* home, Europe as a continent, since Truong's novel has Europe as one of its main locales. This is not completely unprecedented in Asian American literature,[5] but it deserves a wider analysis that I will attempt to articulate in the next paragraph. Second, the other home that I was evoking in this title was a metaphor for what Gertrude Stein stands for in "American Letters": she is, today, among the most influential and significant American writers in the history of twentieth-century US literature, she is a legitimate resident of the house of mainstream American letters.

Particularly, she was "the mother of us all,"[6] and the one who coined the term "lost generation," referring to the community of American expatriates in Europe, a generation of writers, on the continent and beyond it, who were bravely experimenting with language and literary expression, shaping what would be known as "American Modernism." If we think of the style and complexity of some of these writers' work, we

[4] See also Kath Weston, "Get Thee to a Big City: Sexual Imaginary and the Great Gay Migration," in K. Weston, *Long Slow Burn: Sexuality and Social Science* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

[5] South Asian American writers, in particular, sometimes set part of their stories in the United Kingdom and in continental Europe, and this habit may mirror the trajectory of a peculiar migratory flow from the South Asian continent. See, for instance, Jhumpa Lahiri, *Unaccustomed Earth* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008). Partly set in a European city – probably Paris – and four continents is also Chuang Hua, *Crossings* (New York: New Direction, 2007 [1968]). The Korean American writer Theresa Cha's novel *Dictée,* to mention another influential example, performed a radically different investment in Europe, particularly in the French language and Greek mythology.

[6] *The Mother of Us All* is the title of an opera by Virgil Thomson, with a libretto by Gertrude Stein. It refers, in fact, to Susan B. Anthony, and to the history of women's suffrage in the US.

can easily understand the label "High Modernism," a label that further conveys its alleged aloofness and detachment from the cultural scene "on earth" and its opacity even for educated readers.

Modernism is among the most established, canonical, and celebrated literary eras, and Stein herself has been appropriated, late but for decades now, by the academic and literary establishment as one of the landmarks of the literary history of the United States. In this perspective, to enter Stein's house as a brown, gay, uneducated cook from a Vietnamese village may mean to challenge the "sanctity" of that house, to disrupt the existing systems of evaluation of a literary diva and the established perspectives on her. If Stein is the embodiment of the American mainstream, or rather if she *IS* the home of American literary establishment, then Asian American literature finds its way through the backdoor, and gives us an unprecedented perspective on what that home could really look like.

Internationalizing Asian American Literature

I would like to consider, now, the position of *The Book of Salt* within the Asian American literary tradition, and highlight the ways in which this tradition has historically confronted the question of national affiliation. In order to do this, I will talk about nationalism and transnationalism, and I will suggest that we can understand Truong's strategy more deeply if we contextualize it in a particular moment in the specific academic scholarship in the field, which can be termed "internationalization." You are probably wondering if I really think that Asian American literature needs to go 'international,' as if it had ever run the risk of being provincial, limited, or regional. Yes, I do. And like me, many scholars believe that an "international turn" in Asian American Studies was long overdue. Even though, apparently, there is already enough "internationality" in that disciplinary label, the field itself has been historically limited to works, writers, lives, and experiences confined within the limited geographical boundaries of the United States. Sometimes, however, influenced by marketing strategies appealing to the exotic taste of US readers, and sometimes, on the contrary, as the distinct product of a political awareness and of a coalitional strategy, the stories, the characters, and the experiences conveyed by Asian American literary texts, have all travelled back to Asia. Most notably in the last decade, Asian American literature has turned to Asia as a major source of inspiration and as a field of inquiry. To "internationalize" means, in this

context, to interrogate explicitly the rationale of these symbolic and material movements across the Pacific Ocean, and to overcome the alleged necessity of a dualism between Asia and America.

From its inception in the 1970's through most of the 1990's, the field of Asian American studies has had as one of its major key-words the notion of *Asian America*, as even a quick glance at any critical bibliography may confirm. This quasi-geographical term, almost a claim for territorial sovereignty, suggests, as Sau-Ling Wong observes, "a yearning for the kind of containing boundaries and contained site enjoyed by the dominant society, a nation-state."[7]

In particular, the nation-state being envisioned was an *American* state, and the history and cultures of the Asian Americans were, in a quite revolutionary way, represented as a crucial part of American history and culture. One of the Manifestos of this inclination in the field is the introduction to the first Asian American anthology in 1974, *Aiiieeeee!*, which is generally considered the starting point and the foundation of Asian American Studies.[8] Central to the agenda of these Asian American activists and scholars was the "claiming of America"; they resisted a tradition of alienation and expulsion from peer membership in the country by emphasizing the "Americanness" of their experiences, of their education, and of their cultural production. The literature of this first wave was necessarily written in English, generally by writers who were born and raised in the United States, and with an almost mandatory focus on the "American" setting, whatever that adjective stood for.

In the last decade, however, the field has witnessed a shifting from a *domestic perspective* that stressed the status of Asian Americans as an ethnic/racial minority within the national boundaries of the United States, to a *diasporic perspective* that emphasizes Asian Americans as one element in the global scattering of peoples of Asian origin.[9] Once again, by browsing a bibliography of critical books published in the field of Asian American Studies in the last few years, the reader can have quite a clear impression of the process to which I am referring. I will just provide a few examples, which by no means constitute an exhaustive list of crucial books: *Displacement and Diasporas* (by Wami Anderson, Rutgers University Press, 2005), *Transnational Asian American Literature* (by Shirley Geok-Lin Lim, Temple University Press, 2006), *New Cosmopolitanism* (by Shailija

[7] See Sau-Ling C. Wong, "Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical Crossroads," *Amerasia Journal* 21:1-2 (1995): 1-27, here 4.

[8] Frank Chin, Jeffrey Paul Chan et al., eds., *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers* (Washington D.C., Howard University Press, 1983 [1974]).

[9] Wong, "Denationalization," 2.

Sharma and Gita Rajan, Stanford University Press, 2006), *Asian Diasporas* (by Rachel S. Parreñas and Lok C. D. Siu, Stanford University Press, 2007).

This new movement was stimulated by the political landscape of the 1990's, which was increasingly influenced by the shifting transnational flows of global capital, immigration, and labor. Retrospectively, however, what this shift in the scholarship highlighted is the fact that the genesis of Asian American Studies was international from its very inception, years before the publication of *Aiiieeeee!*: the Asian American movement at the end of the 1960's had, in fact, its roots in the Civil Rights movement, and it was shaped by the Vietnam War Protests, the Maoist Movement in China and Third World struggles worldwide.

This massive theoretical move within the field, nonetheless, has been criticized as a highly ambiguous gesture: on the one hand, by considering the global dimension of migration and the capitalistic exploitation of the work force, it advocates for a transnational coalition; but on the other hand, by downplaying the specificity of Asian American subject formation in the US, it risks depoliticizing the field, thus allegedly undermining the base for a political action oriented towards a social change in the country. Specifically, by blurring national boundaries, the international turn is running the risk of mimicking the same transnational flow of capital and the expansionistic entrepreneurship of the United States.

Queering Nationalism

It is significant that, similarly to what happened for the beginning of Asian American nationalism, also one of the most interesting experiments in queer activism in the last few decades strongly advocated for a nation-based political action: I am referring to Queer Nation, an organization born out of the Act Up group (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) in 1990, which has been active in some of the major cities across the United States (and in some cities in Canada) for almost a decade. Queer Nation was founded at the *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Community Center* in the Greenwich Village, New York City, and one of its major goals was to oppose and denounce a dramatic increase in crimes and violence perpetrated against LGBT people.[10]

The strategy of Queer Nation was rooted in the recognition that

[10] Some of the Manifestos of the Queer Nation movement are published online at http://web.archive.org/web/19970606011427/www.rfsl.se/texter/queersreadthis.html.

LGBT people were (and are) treated as second class citizens, and are denied some fundamental rights that the nation should guarantee to its members. By appropriating the nationalist rhetoric of security, belonging, and rightful disobedience, and subverting the image of gays as passive victims – two of its famous mottos were "we are a nation of queers" and "bash back, there is no place in this country where we are safe"[11] – , it supported an alliance among queers, denouncing the national failure to secure justice for all citizens, and organizing non violent actions in order to appropriate and to "conquer" homophobic public spaces. In fact, Queer Nation's winning political strategy was strongly oppositional, and its "visibility actions," often based simply on the unconstrained display of homosexual affection, targeted popular straight hangouts, like diners, coffee-shops, and bars, somewhat in the tradition of the civil rights movement at the end of the 1950's.

The New York-based Queer Nation was the tangible expression of a pre-existing, wider "queer nationalism." The latter, as Brian Walker writes, is one of the "new" cultural nationalisms, and the LGBT community presents many aspects of what anthropologists and sociologists call "a people," with a distinctive "culture," and a history; this nationalism, like the ones of ethnic minorities and colonized people, began as a social movement in reaction to discrimination, and out of the struggle for the achievement of equal rights.[12] Part of its newness, however, lies in the fact that it envisions a form of non-territorial nation, and the bonds between its citizens are solely based on a feeling of a common history of oppression and of a common fight for equality, a solidarity that has a strong political potential, forging an alliance of individuals across racial, class, national and social identities. We can appreciate some of the wider implications inherent in conceptualizing queer individuals as a people, if we just try to use "queer people" as a referent in a few expressions: "the struggles of our people," "my people's history," "protect our people," or "stand up for my people." The individual is immediately interpellated into a larger community, s/he becomes a crucial member of a whole "society" and a history, and the sense of cohesion within the group is reinforced.

The rainbow flag is a well known symbol of this nation, and the way it

[11] Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman, "Queer Nationality," in *National Identities and Postnational Narratives*, ed. Donald Pease (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 158.

[12] Brian Walker, "Social Movements as Nationalisms, or, On the Very Idea of a Queer Nation," in *Rethinking Nationalism* (*Canadian Journal of Philosophy* supplementary volume 22), ed. Jocelyne Couture, Kai Nielsen, and Michel Seymour (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1996), 505.

is officially displayed in a city like San Francisco is eloquent: Chinese flags garnish Chinatown streetlamps, Italian flags abound in North Beach, and rainbow flags flourish on the streetlamps in the Castro district to celebrate "the queer people," and to welcome residents and immigrants.[13] Queer People form a transnational nation, and the oppression and the violations its citizens endure are especially powerful and pervasive when they are analyzed on a global scale. However, as the flag example may prove, if it is true that "we are everywhere," it is nonetheless unquestionable that the queer people expresses itself *as a people* within major urban realities, and both in the US and worldwide it highlights a violent dichotomy between *red* states and *blue* states, conservative and progressive countries and governments. The existence and visibility of the rainbow flag worldwide map a history of queer victories, but also one of burning failures. It is probably the marginalization of queers from each national family that enables and invites them to embrace a different form of affiliation, a supra-national one. But whereas diaspora paradigms increase the sense of belonging to an origin, a territorial source, queer people have no place from which to wander, no queer home to come back to, other than their destinations, and the homes that they will manage to build there. On the contrary, the Queer Nation was strongly tied to the national borders of the United States, to the national politics and society, and actually it was exactly within a national perspective that it proved to be a fairly successful experiment.[14]

The emphasis on the national space embedded in both terms – Asian America and Queer Nation – bespeaks an anxiety concerning loss of home, community, and political membership, and a resistance to a long history of displacement and expulsion, in which both queer subjects and Asian Americans have been interpellated as outsiders to the national identity and as non-citizens.[15] In fact, the nation is crucially dependent

[13] The Rainbow flag has a very long history, and it has been employed by different groups in history, from Ecuadorians and Peruvians, who used it to represent the Inca territory (where it is called Wiphala), to the International Cooperative Alliance (1923-2000). It generally represents inclusiveness, diversity, hope and yearning, and like the rainbow itself, it is a symbol of unity in diversity.

[14] Queer Nation was also active in Canada, and it effectively confronted peculiar issues related to pan-Canadian nationalism. See L. Pauline Rankin, "Sexualities and National Identities: Re-imagining Queer Nationalism," in *Journal of Canadian Studies* (Summer 2000) (online edition, no page numbers).

[15] It is interesting, as an illustration of this point, to note that in the closing lines of the Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Angels in America* by Tony Kushner – "A Gay Fantasia on National Themes" – (1992-1994) and its HBO production (2003), the playwright concludes, in fact, "We will be citizens. The time has come." On LGBT's perspectives on the issue of citizenship

on notions of race and sexuality: membership in the nation was traditionally granted to white people, and it necessitated sexual and gender conformity to meet the heteronormative structure of the society. To be *citizens*, Asian immigrants had to conform to the compulsory heterosexuality of the family structure, generating a progeny on the American soil, thus claiming their right to belong there, eventually turning from *sojourners* into citizens; on the other hand, to be a citizen of the Queer Nation, one had to be American first. Therefore, the previous claims for nation-based politics ultimately presume either that all Asian immigrants are straight or that all queers are legal citizens.

These instances of Asian America and Queer Nation seem to reinforce the spatial metaphor of the United States as a point of arrival; they both envision the US as the location where the ultimate struggle for self-empowerment needs to be performed. On the other hand, the diasporic paradigms in Asian American literature that I mentioned above often appeal to a strong sense of "origin" and "ancestry" (in brief, of Asian-ness). In fact, a substantial number of creative and critical works developed in Asian American literature in the last decade counterbalance with a strong investment on Asia the previous emphasis on the United States as a central locus for the legitimate Asian American experience.

Expanding the Archive

While Monique Truong's novel is clearly a product of her particular time and of this revolution in the field, it also articulates an interesting critique to the way we imagine and study Asian American literature and culture. By staging the story in Paris in the 1930's, in fact, Monique Truong is not only challenging the nationalist tradition of claiming America but she is also resisting the diasporic trend of claiming Asia. Simultaneously, however, the writer is working on a distinctive understanding of time and history within the Vietnamese American tradition. She effectively explodes the borders of Asian America, reframing the encounter between Asians and Americans on a truly global scale.

see also Carl F. Stychin, "'A Stranger to Its Laws': Sovereign Bodies, Global Sexualities, and Transnational Citizens," *Journal of Law and Society* 27:4 (December 2000), 601-625. On Asian Americans see Sonia Otalvaro-Hormillosa, "The Homeless Diaspora of Queer Asian Americans," *Social Justice* 26:3 (Fall 1999), 103-122. An interesting article elaborates further on this notion of expulsion, and how it plays a crucial role in shaping culture among queers of color: see Dina S. Georgis, "Cultures of Expulsion: Memory, Longing and the Queer Space of Diaspora," *New Dawn: The Journal of Black Canadian Studies* 1:1 (Spring 2006):4-27 (http://aries.oise.utoronto.ca/dawn/journal/).

The beginning of a significant Vietnamese *immigration* to the United States is generally traced back to the Fall of Saigon, in 1975; as a consequence, many scholars have mistakenly placed this historical marker as the beginning of the Vietnamese American *experience*. In addition, Vietnamese American authors are expected to write mainly about the war experience, or about resettlement in the States. As Truong herself writes in an essay "for the majority of Americans, Vietnam as a self-defined country never existed,"[16] as also suggested by the use of terms like *Vietnam military conflict*, *Vietnam veterans*, *Vietnam era*: they all refer, in the end, to the US.[17]

In *The Book of Salt*, Binh's remembered Viet-Nam, then Indochina, is instead a French colony, and the "ethnic issue" so characteristic of ethnic minority writing in the States, is reframed on a world scale and becomes a wide reflection on class, race, and master-servants relations in a colonialist world order. The author seems to be interested in the *archive* of the east-west encounter; a history of colonies and power relations that long predates the Vietnam War itself. The notion of *archive* is indeed crucial for postcolonial analysis, for critical race theory, as well as for queer studies. As David Roman notes, "the efforts to expand the archive and challenge the authority of official evidence open a critical space for scholars and activists interested in the alternative histories, memories and performances of minority subjects."[18] What Truong is doing in relation to Vietnam (actually in relation to "writing about Vietnam") has a parallel in what she is doing with the two American ladies in Paris. History is not written by cooks, and if we think that for decades even Stein and Toklas disappeared as *persons* because of a tabooed sexuality that the mainstream readers and critics refused to consider, we might recognize that cooks are not the only subjects who disappear from the archive.

The way this novel faces the question of the Lost Generation and of High Modernism is a crucial example of this "expansion of the archive"; since Truong articulates a narrative from the point of view of Stein and Toklas's Indochinese cook, she shifts the focus to their everyday lives, their "off-stage" conversations, and their class and race privileges vis-à-vis Binh's status as a multiply marginalized individual. As a result, even their anti-normative sexuality and their status as migrants in Paris, which

16 Truong, "Vietnamese American Literature," 220.

17 See also Linda Trinh Vo, "Vietnamese American Trajectories: Dimensions of Diaspora," *Amerasia Journal* 29:1 (2003), ix-xviii, here x.

18 David Romàn, "Visa Denied," in *Queer Frontiers: Millennial Geographies, Genders, and Generations*, ed. Joseph Boone et al. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000): 350-364, here 351.

could potentially constitute a mark of a common lived experience, prove instead to be the measure of their distance.

"The Steins" is the way the couple is called by many, but rather than suggesting the solidity of their love relationship, or the mainstreaming of it, this label bespeaks the power imbalances inherent in their relation and the overall heteronormative and, we might say, male-chauvinist "gender order" in the apartment in Rue de Fleurus. The protagonist states that "I never did blink an eye, not even after I saw that 27 rue de Fleurus had a Madame and Madame and not a Monsieur in sight. Though I know that for the concierge, GertrudeStein qualifies for that position" (71). Binh's Madame and Madame, in fact, reproduce some of the most conservative gender roles associated with a husband and a wife, the former locked in the studio working, never entering the kitchen (paradoxically like Binh's father), or in the garage, or again smoking cigars while driving big cars, and the latter in the kitchen, or in the garden watering flowers, or doing anything needed in order to take care of and satisfy her lazy and egocentric...*husband*. And even when guests are invited for a Saturday tea or for a dinner, while Stein is entertaining the men in the studio Toklas takes the "wives" for a tour of the apartment and, eventually, of the kitchen. Their relationship, however, is conflict free, and as Binh says, "my Mesdames cohabitate in a state of grace. They both love GertrudeStein" (71).

If we consider that Stein and Toklas have been appropriated as crucial figures in lesbian and gay history, to think of them in the terms suggested in the novel – and in fact widely documented by their biographers and friends and by themselves[19] – is both disturbing and uncanny, mainly because we tend to associate queer culture with a progressive agenda or, to put it more plainly, with a progressive *way of life*. As queer studies scholars, and as queer activists, we are committed to challenging heteronormative scripts, not to justifying them, to refusing any complicity with the unequal gender order, not to participating to it, and we are finally interested in building new rooms for self-expression and self-understanding rather than in rehearsing old notions of masculine and feminine. Moreover, the portrait of the "Steins" highlights the risk inherent in conceptualizing sexuality, race, and class as discrete categories, and treating them as if they designated coherent objects of inquiry. We should instead investigate the ways in which these categories interfere with each other, challenging our own understanding of racial,

[19] See, for instance, the recent biography by Diana Souhami, *Gertrude and Alice* (London: Phoenix Press, 2000).

sexual and class identity. If we stop considering queerness primarily in association with anti-normative sexuality, even when employing highly theoretical anti-identitarian terms, we should begin to envision the possibility of a racist and a classist queerness.

Oceans to Cross

The novel offers many diverse instances of migration and diverse attitudes to homosexuality, from Binh's travel on the sea from Vietnam to Marseille, to Stein's approaching tour of lectures in the States (with a steady supply of oysters and honeydews at every stop), from the taboos associated with homosexuality in a poor Catholic and patriarchal family in colonial Vietnam, to the relative gay-friendliness of the avant-garde environment in Paris in the 1930's.

In fact, whereas, as Binh reveals, for Stein and Toklas a journey had come to mean "an uneventful shuttle from one site of comfort to another" (4), for the narrator the memory of his past journeys, uttered during a job interview, evokes a quite different set of metaphors: "I 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" (16). Indeed, the characters experience a dramatically different form of dislocation, or rather of border crossing. The internationalism of the Mesdames is a cosmopolitan and in several ways an elitist migration, which we could term a "comfort internationalism"; on the other hand, Binh's flight with no destination is rather a life-threatening experience, and his arrival demands crucial adjustments to a new world and a new life. To some extent, this binary mirrors the uneven relations that still characterize in the twenty-first century the migration of the labor force, on the one hand, and the cosmopolitanism of highly educated – or more often highly professionalized – elites, on the other.

The Paris experienced by Stein, unlike Binh's Paris, is made of dinners with celebrities and famous guests, exquisite and expensive food, and is mainly spent within the safe walls of her atelier, largely because her being an American in Paris allows her to gain access to a city from which Binh is systematically excluded. However, and paradoxically as he puts it, the young cook could theoretically claim to belong to the country in a way the Mesdames could not: "*Her* Little Indochinese? Madame, we Indochinese belong to the French. You two may live in France, but you are still Americans, after all" (142). In these few lines – which Binh never really dares to pronounce – we could see how national affiliation is

reframed by the colonial context, and the nation becomes the owner of its national subjects, rather than a loving motherland; the nation keeps her colonial subjects impoverished and marginalized while she gives the warmest welcome to wealthy and "cosmopolitan" foreign visitors. If we consider literary history more accurately, however, we can realize that Stein's affiliation with France, and her "dis-affiliation" with the United States, was significantly more complex and might remind us of the impact that sexuality and class have on notions of transnationalism and migration.

The presence of American writers and intellectuals in Paris (but also in London) characterizes this period; this generation of expatriate American writers will be known as the "Lost Generation." At the beginning of the twentieth century, the new material prosperity of the United States was still accompanied, especially on the national soil, by conservative and restrictive social codes. Many writers, fascinated by the cultural turmoil in the arts and a greater freedom of expression experienced in some European capitals, chose to move to Europe. Stein was one of the first: she settled in Paris in 1903 (Ezra Pound and T.S Eliot will follow a few years later). Modernism was an international phenomenon *par excellence*, crucially ignited by itinerant international art and science exhibitions (the Armory Show in Chicago in 1913, to name one of the most celebrated) and an unprecedented flow of products, people and cultures across continents. In fact, we cannot underplay the significance of African and Asian art for European and American painters, dancers and musicians: Gertrude Stein and her brother Leo, when they were still based in Oakland, California, at the end of the 1890's, were two avid collectors of Japanese Art. Futhermore, the explosion of the movement of the *Négritude* in France and the Harlem Renaissance in the US shook and shaped the imagination of several painters and writers, from Pablo Picasso to Jean-Paul Sartre. To understand modernism, one can only arbitrarily limit oneself to a single national culture: American modernism could not exist exclusively within the geographical borders of the United States, as a nation-based phenomenon; it was instead crucially implicated in what was happening elsewhere.

The Book of Salt presents a later stage of this movement, and Stein herself occupies a different position from what she had occupied just a few years before. In fact, in 1932 Stein wrote *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, the work that would transform her into a best selling author and household name. Stein was already 58 years old, and despite thirty years of serious literary production, she was still an obscure and largely unpublished author whose distinctive style was occasionally parodied on American newspapers and magazines. Instead, in 1934, she could be represented as a triumphant artist, after the success of her mock-autobiography; she was going back to the United States for a tour of lectures that would have been somewhat unlikely before.[20]

Stein was in fact ostracized by the literary and critical establishment, and by some she was even considered spurious to the modernist movement itself. T.S. Eliot, who already occupied an almost sanctified position in the Anglo-American literary canon, wrote of Stein's writings:

> It is not improving, it is not amusing, it is not interesting, it is not good for one's mind. [...] If this is the future, then the future is, as it very likely is, of the barbarians. But this is the future in which we ought not be interested.[21]

The fact that Eliot called Stein a "barbarian" is clearly relevant to my argument. Her intellectual activity and her cultural production qualified Stein as a barbarian in the critic's eyes. She did not belong to the class of writers and intellectuals Eliot deemed "good," improving, amusing, etc.; to be honest, that class included mostly white, upper-class and refined men. Beside Stein's artistic production, which was clearly controversial and innovative, we must consider the writer's "degenerate" way of life, which cast her out of the circle of respected and appropriate *Men* of Letters. It is interesting that this intellectual class, in Eliot's terms, is represented almost as a national community, besieged by "foreign" threats. *Barbarian* is originally a label that defines an extra-national individual – as is well known, the Greeks called "barbarians" all the non-Greeks; subsequently, it became deeply associated with wider cultural and racial elements. In this quotation, it comes to identify also a gender and sexual non-conformity, a menacing, contaminated, queer future which is about to come, but a future that, according to Eliot's quoted lines, we should rightfully ignore.

Within the academic sphere, Stein was frequently positioned as the "Mother of Modernism," whose claims to genius were ridiculed as a pretentious and even infantile form of self-advertisement. Academic criticism, moreover, often expressed an only thinly disguised fear of and animus toward her lesbianism. As Corrine Blackmer writes in an

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[20] See Corrine E. Blackmer, "Selling Taboo Subjects: The Literary Commerce of Gertrude Stein and Carl Van Vechten," in *Marketing Modernisms. Self Promotion, Canonization, Rereading*, ed. Kevin Dettmar and Stephen Watt (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 245.

[21] Quoted in Blackmer, "Selling Taboo Subjects," 221.

enlightening essay, "this threat was contained by transforming Stein from an original literary Mother into an originary mothering figure whose primary value resided in her capacity to nurture and encourage the genius of her male modernist sons."[22]

This reformulation, repackaging, and simplification of Stein was performed by her contemporaries, and later by the New Critics establishment: only with post-structuralism, feminism and queer theory, from the end of the 1960's, was Gertrude Stein appropriated as a cardinal figure of her era, and ceased being considered by many as a "barbarian," famous for being famous rather than for being an exceptional mind. Her position in the canon and her influence within the contemporary literary history – the very features that I was emphasizing at the beginning of this essay – are, therefore, a particularly recent phenomenon.

In Truong's fascinating portrait of Stein – whom, as I have said before, never actually occupies the center-stage of the novel – readers confront a particular juncture in the modernist writer's career, and look at it through the eyes of a paradoxically recent trend in the scholarship about her. The protagonist of the novel, Binh, in fact, is taught to call her "GertrudeStein," as if it constitutes one word, first and last name together, almost to crystallize her super-human status and the necessary ceremonial relationship with her. Moreover, as contemporary readers, we probably can't refrain from imagining Stein like the mythical figure of her enigmatic portrait by Pablo Picasso, or like the Buddha-like guru of the bronze sculpture that Jo Davidson made for her.

However, while Truong is fascinated by the ways in which Asian American discourse can be reshaped by a wider time frame, her approach to the secondary character of Stein is paradoxically narrow, especially with regards to the chronology of her life and to her contradictory position within the Modernist movement itself. A different perspective could instead have been useful to understand the conflictual relation that links Stein to the United States, and the ensuing dynamics of non-acceptance and expulsion, analogous to the one between Binh and Vietnam, and the similar identification with this "new city" and their desire to find a home and to finally belong there.

Throughout the novel, first in relation to a story his partner Bao had told him on the boat, and then about many travellers he meets in Paris (including his Mesdames), Binh wonders, "What made [you] go?," "What keeps [you] from returning home?," "What keeps you here?" These questions, and the complicated answers one can provide, may

[22] Blackmer, "Selling Taboo Subjects," 222.

constitute an antidote for conceptualizations of migration that are too often critically abstract and that fail to consider the migrants' subjectivities and the impact that the dynamics of desire have on migration processes. Traditionally, studies of immigration have been framed by a view of migrants as individual actors making rational choices based on cost-benefit analysis, models of assimilation, and a generic emphasis on voluntarism.[23] Binh's questions, while apparently evoking a voluntaristic vision, help to show the limits of it.

At the same time, however, Binh's questions are the symptom of an attitude visible throughout the novel, which we could probably describe as an interest in a materialistic perspective. The salt from the title, in addition to evoking a biblical episode, is also a recurring image in the novel, associated with ocean water, food, tears and sweat. All these images are, in fact, evocative of the materiality of experience and deliberately celebrate it: the long journey on the sea, the pleasure of eating and the mastery of cooking, the painful longing for some place and for someone, and the labor which can justify a journey and support a traveler. Sweat is often evoked in the novel in regard to labor, as well as to sex; moreover salt means currency, and it is the root for "salary." As we have seen, this novel effectively highlights the role of class in shaping diverse experiences of both queerness and migration; it also resists an easy celebration of a "global coalition," in this case specifically a global queer coalition, or the simplistic appreciation of a fluid, transnational, and cosmopolitan identity, which too often betrays an upper-class perspective.

The juxtaposition between the characters of Binh and Gertrude Stein is an extremely productive and intriguing gesture, which questions and challenges our understanding of transnationalism, migration, citizenship, and sexuality. Furthermore, what is really fascinating in *The Book of Salt* is the way Truong manages to deal with the themes and issues I touched above while committing herself to the making of a work of art, while "running the risk of literature."[24] In spite of a representational autobiographism so frequently encouraged in minority writers by both the publishing market and the academy, Truong chooses a gay man as the narrator of her novel, thus performing a significant voyage across gender and sexuality, moving away from her personal life experience and her social sphere, and building bridges across individuals, continents, and

[23] See Eithne Luibhéid and Lionel Cantù, Jr., eds., *Queer Migrations: Sexuality, U.S. Citizenship, and Border Crossings* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), xxi.

[24] See also Donatella Izzo, "Running the Risk of Literature: Modernism in Asian America," forthcoming.

decades. Similarly, the setting in the 1930's pushes her to imagine and to invent a Paris she has never lived in, a Vietnam she has never had a chance to see, and finally, a cook whose voice was waiting to be articulated.

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