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The Migrating Look: Visual Economies of Queer Desire in *The Book of Salt*

Chris Coffman

Monique Truong's 2003 *The Book of Salt* crosses the lives of three queer migrants to early twentieth-century Paris: Gertrude Stein, Alice B. Toklas, and their Vietnamese cook, Binh. Highlighting the role of perception in subject-formation, the novel tracks how the play between the look and the gaze registers its characters' experiences of embodiment. Truong makes imaginative use of details from the biographical and scholarly literature on Stein and Toklas: their fondness for photographers, reporters, and admirers who treat them as celebrities; the pet names and gendered divisions of space and labor that mark their butch/femme relationship. However, the novel also features three fictional characters whose stories reframe received images of Stein and Toklas: Binh, the novel's first-person narrator and an imaginative composite of two "Indo-Chinese" cooks that worked for them; his first lover, Jean Blériot, a French chef whose appearance in Binh's Vietnamese workplace prompts his desire and eventual expulsion; and Binh's lover in Paris, Marcus Lattimore, a mixed-race iridologist who passes as white at Stein's and Toklas's salon and who initiates an affair with Binh to gain information about the writer (Toklas 186). Recontextualizing Stein's salon from within Binh's backstory, the novel engages "the dominant culture" to "expose and critique" its conventions from the perspective of subjects "whose experience of identity is fractured and split" by colonial rule (Muñoz 31). The result is a narrative fragmented by Binh's "queer hybridity"—a space "of productivity where identity's fragmentary nature is accepted and negotiated" (Muñoz 77–79).

Displaying deep knowledge of the material and psychical consequences of French colonial rule in Vietnam and framing its narrative by imagining that a brief affair with Ho Chi Minh convinced Binh to stay in Paris, *The Book of Salt* enacts what David Eng calls a "historical catachresis" that "shifts our attention from the problem of the real" lives of historical personages (that is, from the question of whether Ho Chi Minh or any of Stein's and Toklas's cooks slept with men) "to the politics of our lack of

knowledge” about modernist Paris’s relationship to the colonial subjects and “alternative modernit[ies]” on whom it depended (1484–89).¹ Truong marks Binh’s name as fictitious and has him narrate in English despite his incomprehension of the language.² And by making Lattimore an aspiring writer and obsessive collector of Stein’s work, *The Book of Salt* implicates its own readers in the act of constructing modernism. Calling the truth-value of its own narration into question and including Lattimore as a figure for readerly obsessions with early twentieth-century Parisian avant-gardes, *The Book of Salt* asks contemporary readers to reexamine the politics at work in Eurocentric histories of Parisian modernism—and of modernity more generally—in order to envision literary history anew.

As narrator, Binh is the “central consciousness” of the novel (Xu 129). Using his position to reenvision Eurocentric accounts of modernism, he offers an alternate staging of the scene of early twentieth-century Paris that Stein sets in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. Like that book, *The Book of Salt* enacts a queer “impersonation” and destabilization of the categories of woman and man, “wife” and “genius,” in its portrayal of Stein and Toklas (Hovey, *A Thousand Words* 101). Moreover, as Gilmore argues, when *The Autobiography* uses “Toklas” as a narrator to survey the scene of a predominantly male modernist movement, the text does so from the queer lenses of the two women’s mutually constitutive but split subjectivities.³ Truong also employs this strategy, further tilting the lens by inventing “Binh” to shift readers’ view of the period. And like *The Autobiography*, her novel surveys the scene of modernist Paris from a feminine subject’s psyche by making Toklas a locus of Binh’s uneasy and necessarily fractured identification. This offers a fresh look at a literary and artistic movement that is most often associated with the European and North American men whose works achieved early fame. Unlike Stein’s book, however, *The Book of Salt* poses the heretofore unasked question of the impact on modernism of the colonial subjects on whose labor its better known figures depended. Truong thereby offers an alternative view of Parisian modernism that, while no more “authentic” than Stein’s, fragments modernism’s Eurocentric image and invites readers to envision it anew.

I. Narratives of Queer Migration

Truong’s most important characters—Binh, Stein, Toklas, Lattimore, and Ho Chi Minh—are queer diasporic subjects whose lives cross in Paris. However, they differ in their relation to sexual, gendered, racial, and colonial power. Narrating from France, Binh considers both his surroundings and his childhood in Vietnam, and in so doing, explores queer diasporic desire. Gopinath argues that “[r]ather than invoking an imaginary homeland frozen in an idyllic moment outside history” in the manner of heterosexual narratives of diaspora, “what is remembered through

queer diasporic desire and the queer diasporic body is a past time and place riven with contradictions and the violences of multiple uprootings, displacements, and exiles" (4). In so doing, Binh exposes the "submerged histories of racist and colonialist violence that continue to resonate in the present and that make themselves felt through bodily desire" (Gopinath 4). *The Book of Salt* thereby offers a way of reimagining the early twentieth century that challenges Euro-American cultural hegemonies and offers a discursive space in which Eurocentric narratives can be "imaginatively contested and transformed" (Gopinath 4).

Taking Hanif Kureishi's *My Beautiful Laundrette* as paradigmatic of the dominant structure of "queer diasporic desire," Gopinath observes that "often diasporas are narrativized through the bonds of relationality between men," solidified through the exchange of a woman (5). Gopinath explores much-needed alternatives to this plot by focusing on queer women. *The Book of Salt* takes a different approach by turning on the perspective of a male narrator who—while preoccupied with his rejection by his cruel father—identifies with rather than exchanges women. Binh displays a strong identification with his mother; this response carries over to and is reworked within his depiction of Stein and Toklas. While he shows that their lives are organized around the cultivation of Stein's genius, he does not present her masculinity as oppressive. Instead, he implicitly contrasts her treatment of Toklas to his mother's abuse by his father. In contrast to Binh's mother, who recognizes her husband as the source of her misery, Toklas views Stein as a source of joy, and prods the writer to act on their mutual attraction.

Binh also emphasizes the way both he and the feminine Toklas—who types Stein's manuscripts and cooks on his Sundays off—are engaged in embodied forms of artistry that enable the latter woman's writing and stature as the host of a highly respected modernist salon. Binh's identification with Toklas is as evident as his resentment at the pair's domination of him. However, while registering Toklas's capacity for cruelty to servants, Binh also offers a largely sympathetic portrayal of her embrace of the role of what we now call a "queer femme."⁴ He presents her subordination as active and chosen, a strategy for claiming power.⁵ Yet *The Book of Salt* also underscores the difference between her voluntary embrace of the role of being Stein's "wife" and Binh's involuntary submission to colonial rule. Nonetheless, Truong's decision to make Binh the narrator gives him a form of power that he does not have in his life as a servant: that of using narrative to shape the way readers view his and his employers' lives.

The novel's emphasis on Lattimore's investment in hegemonic whiteness and Euro-American modernism also compels a complication of his and Binh's queer diasporic desire. Eng rightfully observes that their initial exchange of glances produces neither "a reflection of the self-same" nor the kind of misrecognition Lacan calls *méconnaissance* (Eng 1489). Instead,

their looks mobilize “an alternative space and time, another human life-world within the hallowed space of Stein’s salon,” in which “the temple of high modernism does not reflect on itself,” but points to the “alternative modernity” of queer diaspora (1489). However, Eng misses the novel’s attention to the women’s very different relationship to the hegemonic white gaze—one whose *méconnaissance* Binh’s narration systematically challenges but that Lattimore sustains.

Binh’s desire for Lattimore has different implications than that for Ho Chi Minh, even though an “alternative modernity” emerges through both. The latter inspires Binh’s faith even though he is not always truthful: early on, Ho Chi Minh lies about the identity of a ship on which he worked under the false name of “Ba” (88). Upon hearing this, Binh laments, “Real names, I know, are never exchanged during such encounters, but I was hoping for one all the same” (91). As if delivering on this hope, Ho Chi Minh keeps his promise to treat Binh to dinner after losing a bet. This gesture—and the sex that follows—restores Binh’s faith in love and inspires him to stay in Paris. A similar trajectory drives his memories of a former shipmate, Bão, whose person and yarns are frequent subjects of Binh’s longing. The novel persistently questions Bão’s reliability and loyalty, rendering the content of his stories less important than their significance as traces of diasporic desire. Binh, too, eventually reveals that he sailed under a pseudonym, stating—in language that echoes his reaction to “Ba”—that “I never meant to deceive, but real names are never exchanged” in such settings (243). Paradoxically, then, the Vietnamese migrants Binh, Bão, and Ho Chi Minh are associated with unreliable narration, but are also the characters in whom the novel places the most hope. Binh does not subject them to the kinds of criticism that he levels at the novel’s other three migrants—Stein, Toklas, and Lattimore—whose investments in hegemonic white culture the novel challenges.

Crucial to this critique is the novel’s treatment of the colonial melancholia that drives Binh’s narration. Xu observes that his “subjectivity” is “melancholic and masochistic at the same time” for its mixture of “desire, anger, and hate,” but she overlooks the effects of these affects on his ambivalent attitude toward Stein and Toklas (140). While Binh takes a sympathetic stance toward their queerness, his criticism of their class privilege and lack of awareness about the implications of their foreignness points to the limits of his identification with them. For instance, he criticizes Toklas’s condescension in calling him “her ‘Little Indochinese,’” and says that “we Indochinese belong to the French,” not to Americans (Truong 142). He scatters such remarks throughout the novel, using them to ironize the orientaling construction of him as “Indochinese” and to expose his employers’ lack of awareness that they, too, are outsiders in France.

Though the novel illuminates similarities between the trajectories of desire that have landed its characters in Paris, Truong does not equate

Binh's situation with Stein's or Toklas's. Highlighting the uneven forces at work in their lives, the novel depicts Toklas as having been "lure[d]" from San Francisco to Paris by having witnessed a scene of "open desire"; Stein as having left the United States for France in search of artistic and bodily freedom; and Binh as having arrived in Paris after having been forced out of his job and home because his relationship with Blériot was revealed (158). These situations all complicate the "ethnocentric model that views queer migration" to Europe and North America as "a movement from 'repression' to 'liberation'" (Luibhéid 170). Illustrating Luibhéid's observation that "most migrations . . . straddle choice and coercion," Binh foregrounds the mix of compulsion and volition that led him to leave Vietnam and put down roots in Paris (178). Presenting his own migration as a consequence of his sexuality *and* of his need to earn a living, Binh states that his decision to take his "body and set it upon the open sea" was "not an act brought about by desire but a consequence of it, maybe" (57). He also points to the restrictive climate for women and queers that led his employers to want to escape the United States, and to the economic privilege that enabled them to do so. Thus, as Cohler argues, *The Book of Salt* rejects an identitarian and universalist model of "gay internationalism" in favor of a "transnational" approach to its characters' migrations (25–26).

II. Visual Economies of Queer Migration

The Book of Salt pays close attention to vision and embodiment in its account of the disparate power dynamics at work in its characters' migrations. The novel resonates with Ahmed's phenomenological account of the embodied experience of spatial orientation, calling attention to the way "bodies are gendered, sexualized, and raced by how they extend into space" (*Queer Phenomenology* 5). Binh highlights the alignments of his, Stein's, and Toklas's desiring bodies. His own body is oriented toward the kitchen and toward men: in Vietnam, toward Blériot; in France, toward both Lattimore and Ho Chi Minh. Whereas Binh portrays Stein's body as directed toward writing and women, he describes Toklas's body as oriented toward Stein, her manuscripts, the kitchen, the garden, and Spain. Binh presents visual images as phantasmatic traps for the reader that make of the characters' bodily orientations conduits—however fractured—for aesthetic, spiritual, and sexual desires. Filtered through Binh's unreliable narration, these lush images draw the reader into the novel's project of imagining the "alternative modernit[ies]" that subtended Parisian modernism (Eng 1489).

The imagery that Binh uses to depict Stein's and Toklas's home illustrates "the ways we have of settling; that is, of inhabiting spaces that, in the first instance, are unfamiliar but that we can imagine—sometimes with fear, other times with desire—might come to feel like home" (Ahmed 10–11). In the kitchen at the rue de Fleurus, Binh is the "village elder"

surrounded by familiar spices (19). He aligns Toklas's cooking with his own, portraying her Sunday dishes as sites of homecoming: "On Sundays my Madame and Madame are safely settled in their dining room with their memories of their America heaped onto large plates" (26–27).

In rendering bodily orientations, Binh's narration also mobilizes what Lacan calls "the gaze" and "the look." Binh often emphasizes his sense of being seen: while walking with Blériot in the Vietnamese market and at the governor-general's mansion; while navigating the streets of Paris; and while being interviewed by prospective French employers. Highlighting the role that vision plays in his constructions of others, he frequently underscores the capacity of photographers and photographs to mobilize the gaze and affect their subjects' ways of presenting themselves. Binh's storytelling, too, moves between a general sense of being seen—of "photographing" Stein and Toklas through his narration and his depiction of photographs; of sensing himself as "photographed" by those around him and as sitting for a photograph with Lattimore—and his awareness of being looked at by specific others.

Mirzoeff points to the danger of imperialism at work in positing a singular and totalizing gaze. He proposes instead that one look "with a transverse glance from multiple viewpoints across and against the imperial perspective" (16).⁶ The visual economy of *The Book of Salt* turns on this "transverse glance." At points, Binh registers the effects of various hegemonic gazes—those of heteronormativity, whiteness, and French imperial ideology, for instance. However, at other moments, his attention to specific instances of looking is crucial to the novel's analysis of homophobia and colonial domination. In Vietnam, the difference between being seen with Blériot by a closeted gardener and by a homophobic chauffeur means the difference between having their secret kept and having it revealed. On the streets of Paris, the difference between being seen by a fellow "*asiatique*" and being seen by a French person means the difference between an empathizing look and one that fixes his race and social class (152).

Moreover, in interviews with Binh, prospective employers' looks deploy what Ahmed calls "stranger fetishism" (*Strange Encounters* 4–5). Whereas the phobic discourse of "stranger danger" strips the subject of an individual history and rejects him or her "as the *origin of danger*," an ostensibly celebratory but equally problematic form of fetishism solicits "the stranger as the *origin of difference*" (4). Binh's potential employers, acting like interrogators, fear gaps in his narrative as signs of "stranger danger," whereas the "collectors" voraciously elicit his story as an offering of "the fruits of exile" whose "bitter juices" they can consume (Ahmed, *Strange Encounters* 4; Truong 19). Ahmed views "stranger fetishism" as a means of refusing to grapple with social "processes of inclusion and exclusion, or incorporation and expulsion, that constitute the boundaries of bodies and communities" (*Strange Encounters* 6). Bhabha theorizes stereotyping

as driven by a fetishistic logic of disavowal that both suppresses and acknowledges the implications of difference (Bhabha 74–75). *The Book of Salt* challenges such depictions by fleshing out Binh’s backstory and critiquing his treatment by Parisians.

Calling attention to the camera as what Silverman calls an “apparatus” for the gaze, Binh highlights the duplicitous nature of images and thereby fractures and reenvisions Stein’s, Toklas’s, and his own stories (*Threshold* 168). He deploys the look and the gaze to trace out the trajectories of desire that animate the characters’ experiences. “[S]exuality lies less in the content of what is seen than in the subjectivity of the viewer”; accordingly, the novel registers the process of perception that connects its characters’ desires and migrations (Rose 227).

The novel begins and ends by emphasizing the two women’s fondness for the status of celebrity that photojournalism confers.⁷ Whereas they believe that photographers “transformed an occasion into an event,” Binh does not trust the camera (1). Photographers’ flashes, he feels, are “lights that feigned to illuminate but really intended to blind” (3). He points to the way the women remain opaque to their admirers even as the paparazzi construct them as desirable. He also suggests that not only Stein’s fans but also she and Toklas are “blind[ed]” by the effects of their celebrity (3). His observations about the flash resonate with Lacan’s account of the dialectic through which subjectivity is constituted through the Other’s gaze. Using the camera as a metaphor for its function, he writes, “What determines me, at the most profound level, in the visible, is the gaze that is outside . . . the gaze is the instrument through which light is embodied and through which . . . I am *photo-graphed*” (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 106). Though he emphasizes light’s capacity to illuminate, he also highlights the opacity of the “screen”—the image the gaze highlights. Silverman explains that the screen “intervenes not just between the gaze and the subject-as-spectacle, but also between the gaze and the subject-as-look” (*Threshold* 134). The screen is “opaque” and “substitutes itself for” what it “obstructs” (134). The gaze itself is not only “the manifestation of the symbolic” but also the mark of the *unrepresentable*: what Lacan calls the “impossible real” (Silverman, *Threshold* 168; Copjec 34–35).⁸

Through the “screen,” representation plays a “constitutive role . . . with respect to the subject” (Silverman, *Threshold* 174). “[T]he site at which the gaze is defined for a particular society,” the screen is “responsible both for the way . . . the inhabitants of that society experience the gaze’s effects, and for much of the seeming particularity of that society’s visual regime” (135). Because “[t]he values which we impute to the gaze . . . are the result of the cultural screen,” it can register not only hegemonic messages but also “all kinds of oppositional and subcultural representations” (168, 178–79). The “human subject” can exert agency over them by “‘playing’ with the screen,” and the novel uses depictions of photographs of Stein,

Toklas, Binh, Lattimore, and Ho Chi Minh to do so (174). Offering up images of differently situated queer diasporic subjects, the novel multiplies the perspectives that readers can take toward them.

Visual images stage the gaze and engage viewers' looks. Lacan writes, "Looking at pictures . . . you will feel the presence of the gaze"; at the same time, as "a trap for . . . the eye," the picture solicits the looks of its viewers (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 101).⁹ Silverman argues, however, that the photograph as material object is not the sole source of the image, which is part of a "cultural image-repertoire" that "inhabits each of us, much as language does" (*Threshold* 221). Though looking at an artwork mobilizes this received "image-repertoire" and its fixed ways of seeing, the look is also "subject to a complex series of conscious and unconscious 'vicissitudes,' which can completely transform the value of what is originally seen, and which cannot easily be predicted in advance" (223). Thus as Rose notes, "The relationship between viewer and scene is always one of fracture, partial identification, pleasure and distrust," and within this "unease" with the false image of a "singular visual space" lies the possibility of resistance (227).

Bhabha delineates how the play between the eye and the gaze can undercut hegemonies of gender and colonial status. And if *The Book of Salt* invokes its characters' "orientations" in Ahmed's sense, Bhabha demonstrates that their topographies are more complicated than she implies. Bhabha explains that within a Lacanian framework, "the place of the Other" is not "a fixed phenomenological point opposed to the self, that represents a culturally alien consciousness" (51–52). Rather, the subject is split and the resultant redoubling of perspective offers a strategy for resisting the hegemonic look (47). Reading a poem by M. Jin, he highlights the persona's ability to turn the hegemonic gaze upon itself by remaining "Invisible" when others "look" at "but never see" her "empty eyes" that "endlessly hold their menacing gaze" (Jin qtd. in Bhabha 46). Though Bhabha emphasizes the way "the subject cannot be apprehended without the absence or invisibility that constitutes it," he also argues that the gaze offers the opportunity to challenge hegemonic looks (47). He states that "the migrant woman can subvert the perverse satisfaction of the racist, masculinist gaze that disavowed her presence, by presenting it with an anxious absence, a counter-gaze that turns the discriminatory look, which denies her culture and sexual difference, back on itself" (47). The sign of her resistance is not "ontological"—it does not point to her "being"; it is not "a revelation of some suppressed truth of the postcolonial psyche/subject"—but rather is "a discursive strategy" that emerges from within "signification and desire, culture and politics" (49–50). This sign is a "disturbance of" the reader's "voyeuristic look" that "enacts the complexity and contradictions of" the "desire to see, to fix cultural difference in a containable, *visible* object" (50).

Similarly, the images Binh offers to the reader are phantasmatic traps that fracture and reenvision images of Parisian modernisms—and, more broadly, of the relationship between France and its colonies—in an intricate pattern of redoubling that turns on interlocking yet incommensurate looks. As Eng observes, *The Book of Salt* deploys a “reconfigured” version of Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage (1490). The novel uses shared looks between differently positioned queer diasporic subjects to enact a play of recognition and difference that figures “the spectrality of race . . . as the repressed image of” the Western European discourse of “Enlightenment liberal humanism” within which Stein’s modernism emerged (1490). The screen reflects what Silverman observes to be the currently “dominant fiction’s most rudimentary binary opposition” between masculinity and femininity, yet also highlights the pleasure that Stein and Toklas take in toying with gender (178–79). Much like Stein’s *Autobiography*, *The Book of Salt* highlights her and Toklas’s playful displacement of hegemonic constructs of masculinity and femininity. Yet Binh also registers the colonialist stereotypes he encounters in France, calling attention to the women’s lack of awareness of their privilege. He uses his narration to turn the screen in ways that cultivate alternatives to racist images, questioning the dominance of the colonial gaze in which the women play a part and resisting it through ambivalence toward them.

III. Visual Economies of Gender

Binh reacts differently to each woman because of the divergent roles they take on within the household’s domestic and visual economies. He shows a marked identification with Toklas throughout the novel and emphasizes their shared experience of femininity. He underscores the way the gaze of the Other, formed through the conjunction of colonialism and homophobia, places him in a position that has some similarities to hers, despite some important differences. Binh works as a domestic servant to earn a living. Toklas, too, subordinates herself to Stein, for whom she cooks on Sundays, types manuscripts, and distracts the other “wives” of the “geniuses” that visit their salon (184). However, Binh emphasizes that Toklas voluntarily serves her partner. He says that

my Mesdames cohabitate in a state of grace. They both love GertrudeStein. Better, they are both *in* love with GertrudeStein. Miss Toklas fusses over her Lovey, and her Lovey lets her. GertrudeStein feeds on affection, and Miss Toklas ensures that she never hungers. In exchange, in the fairest of trades Miss Toklas has the satisfaction of being GertrudeStein’s only one. (71)

Elsewhere, Binh shows Toklas volunteering to type Stein’s manuscripts and pushing out rivals. Toklas does so not out of economic necessity but

out of a desire to claim and exercise control from her place as Stein's exclusive object of love. By figuring his identification with Toklas's "feminine" strategy of subordination, Binh suggests that his technique is similar to hers. He also finds ways of exercising power in a situation that leaves him few options: he cuts himself and bleeds into Stein's and Toklas's food, for instance. Though Toklas contains this act of resistance with a sharp rebuke, he nonetheless exercises power by narrating all of their stories.

In contrast to his strong identification with Toklas, Binh depicts Stein as having a complex relationship to masculinity and femininity, and displays some ambivalence toward her version of what Halberstam calls "female masculinity." When he first discovers that Stein is a published author, he is "impressed" when he realizes that Toklas has found her "scholar-prince": an ideal of Vietnamese masculinity that he wants a partner to embody (145). And most frequently, he emphasizes that Stein's and Toklas's gender roles are chosen. He portrays Toklas as encouraging Stein—who believes that "there can be only one" genius "in any given family"—to take that part: "Then for the Steins, it is you, Lovey," Toklas says (207). Here, "the Steins" refers not only to Stein's and Toklas's marriage but also to Gertrude's extended family. The passages preceding this statement detail her rivalry with her brother Leo, with whom she lived in Paris until Toklas's arrival, and also the former woman's rejection of women's limited roles in late nineteenth-century American culture.¹⁰ Toklas's insistence on Gertrude's role as the sole genius among "the Steins" thus signals not only her willingness to organize their domestic life around the cultivation of her partner's ambitions but also her support of Stein as a masculine female staking claim to a place typically occupied by men.

Binh's narrative of Stein's migration emphasizes the issues of sexual and gender identity that led her to leave the United States. Focusing on the romantic tangle in which she found herself while a medical student at Johns Hopkins, he underscores the way she initially filtered her experience through the sexist and homophobic medical theories she encountered there. Explicitly comparing her to the homophobic chauffeur at the governor-general's mansion, Binh tells us that "Gertrude 'Gertie' Stein, twenty-nine and almost two hundred pounds, was in love, and she mistook it for a disease. She, like the chauffeur, believed in the power of strenuous exercise and a modified diet" (205). But boxing and restricting her diet did not change her desires, and she told Leo not that she failed Obstetrics but that "Obstetrics failed *me*" (205).¹¹ Binh thus suggests that unlike the chauffeur, Stein came to see the inadequacy of fin-de-siècle theories of gender and sexuality, whereas her professors took her failure as confirmation of their misogynist views. Fleeing her feelings and the university's hostile environment, Stein sailed for Europe and soon came to view America as stuck in the past. In Paris, she immersed herself in a modernist movement bent on rejecting the nineteenth century. Thanking Leo "with a slap

on the back and a hug that made his crushing lungs wheeze" for his gift of Japanese kimonos, Gertrude "discarded" the ones "embroidered with cranes, peonies, and cherry blossoms and began wearing" the plain ones, which "allowed her to dispense with a corset altogether" (206).¹² She also wrote "Melanctha," the novella in which "she placed her broken heart in the body of a man," Jeff Campbell (206). This account associates Stein's masculinity with both modernity and the rejection of antiquated ideas about gender and sexuality.¹³ *The Book of Salt* thus makes clear that Stein refuses patriarchal constructs and resignifies masculinity.

Despite Binh's awareness of Toklas's agency in the relationship and of the painful trajectory through which Stein struggled to establish her female masculinity, he occasionally flattens the complexity of the two women's dynamic by presenting the latter as uncritically reproducing misogyny. For example, when he calls attention to the sharply gendered division of space through which bodies are oriented within Stein's and Toklas's salon, he attributes this practice to what he presumes to be the former's sexist attitude toward women: he claims that with the exception of Toklas, "GertrudeStein tends to avoid the company of women. Tiresome, GertrudeStein thinks" (183). He explains that women's aspirations to reach the salon never come to fruition because "GertrudeStein considers these women all merely 'wives.' . . . Wives are never geniuses. Geniuses are never wives" (184). Unlike scholars that argue that Stein's account of her salon in *The Autobiography* destabilizes rather than uncritically reproduces sexist constructs of gender, Binh interprets her behavior as driven by tautological reasoning.¹⁴ His account of her thought process echoes her texts' characteristic reiterations without the linguistic slippage that they produce. He attributes fixed meaning to Steinian language, rather than the poststructural repetition-with-difference that many scholars view as the driving force in her texts—and as the means through which she reworks hegemonic ideas about gender.¹⁵

Binh also attributes an objectifying look to Stein. He portrays her as viewing "wives" as "amusing in small doses, distracting even, especially when their shapely legs arrive at the Rue de Fleurus slipped into sheer stockings, a barely present mist that GertrudeStein knows can be made to disappear with several waves of her hands" (184). This passage—which echoes her well-known remark that her fellow writer Djuna Barnes had "beautiful legs"—endows Stein with the scopophilic look that Mulvey attributes to masculinity and distinguishes her from the feminine stance that Binh finds in Toklas (Barnes qtd. in Salvato 138).¹⁶ However, these looks need to be seen in the context of the book's broader portrayal of Stein's masculinity. Unlike his account of Stein's level of interest in the minds of "wives," Binh's descriptions of her relationship to the visual make use of but also complicate Mulvey's distinction between masculine and feminine ways of seeing and being seen in the same way as have theorists writing in her wake.

Binh emphasizes that while Stein wields “the male look” in her apprehension of femmes, she frequently moves into the feminine position herself. After describing her physical features, he declares that she “carries herself as if she is her own object of desire. Such self-induced lust is addictive in its effect. Prolonged exposure makes those around them weak and helpless” (28). This passage places Stein in the feminine position of staging herself as an object for the gaze. Portraying her as taking a similar stance with photographers, he offers a humorous account of her enticement by their cameras (233). He claims that if it weren’t for Toklas’s vigilant gate-keeping, Stein would open her “typewritten copies and her own notebook originals to all those who cared to see,” and “would drink tea with” the journalists “while reclining on her bed, covers undone, sheets untucked, pillows unfluffed” (235). This passage highlights the way Stein, by staging herself for the camera’s gaze, places herself in a position whose implicit sexualization is highlighted by her willingness to be interviewed in bed. Binh implies that Stein is selling herself to the public for nothing but the cachet of celebrity status, and notes that Toklas “reminds” her “never to give it away for free” (235). In barring Stein from engaging in a promiscuous relationship to the camera, Toklas protects her partner’s cachet as the elusive object of public desire, and takes on an active role in tutoring her in techniques for exercising feminine power.

Similarly, the women hide a particularly telling photograph from view. In it,

GertrudeStein is standing in front of the door of the studio, and she is waiting. For Miss Toklas, I imagine . . . GertrudeStein’s hair is abundant and continues to grow thick and lush inside this image. A half smile graces her face, deepening the dimples in her cheeks. It is a smile that says, Remember me . . . My Madame is staring into the camera so intently that I imagine it was she who willed the shutter to close and open back up again, fixing her in that moment when she declared, “*I am the one.*” (213)

This image shows Stein as very comfortable in her body and awakened by her and Toklas’s mutual desire. Like Binh’s image of Stein cultivating “self-induced lust,” his evocation of this photograph situates her as staging herself for the gaze—as staring “so intently” that she appears to will the camera’s movements (71, 213). Both Toklas’s desire and that of Stein’s fans are at play here. Stein appears in the same pose as with journalists: open to and inviting of intimacy. Pointing to her desire for historical importance, Binh remarks that her smile is not “a command” but rather an invitation to memorializing (213). Earlier we saw Toklas blocking her from exposing her intimate spaces to the journalistic gaze. This passage, too, foregrounds the tactic of withholding that Toklas cultivates in Stein, even

as Binh reveals the latter's desire to be the object of the gaze. This view of Stein contrasts to the passages that portray her as wielding an aggressive, objectifying look, and reveals the complexity of Binh's portrayal of her gender.

Moreover, as Silverman observes, "the look has never possessed the mastering and constitutive functions that have traditionally been attributed to it," and it comes as no surprise that Binh portrays Stein and Toklas as occasionally misrecognizing each other (156). For instance, speaking of one of the Sunday meals that Toklas has prepared, he presents Stein as finding it "unfathomably erotic that the food she is about to eat has been washed, pared, kneaded, touched, by the hands of her lover," but he claims that Toklas, by contrast, experiences those meals as a "High Mass" in which "her spirits soar" (28). This gap between Stein's erotic and Toklas's spiritual experience of the pleasures of food widens in Binh's account of Toklas's orientation toward gardening in Bilignin. Stating that Toklas's "heart lies in the gardens," Binh portrays her as having a deeply embodied involvement in the cultivation and consumption of fruits and vegetables. Her bodily positioning is crucial to this portrayal. He states that he has "heard her cooing from the vegetable plots. She does not know that she emits the sound of lovemaking when she is among the tomatoes. I have heard her weep with the juices of the first strawberry full in her mouth" (138). He interprets her behavior as spiritual because of her stance toward the garden and its foods. Claiming that Stein has seen Toklas's posture but misinterpreted it as mere work, he asserts that he has "seen her pray" in the garden, and that Stein "has seen her too" but "thinks that my Madame is on her knees pulling out weeds" (138). He infuses his depictions of her interiority with the idea that gardening is a form of worship. He asserts, "The god that Miss Toklas prays to is the Catholic one. I have seen the rosary wrapped around her wrist, the beads trickling one by one through her fingertips" (138).¹⁷ By contrast, GertrudeStein "looks out from the second story windows of the house" to see "her lover toiling in the garden, vines twisted around her hands, seeds falling in a steady rhythm from her palms" (138). Binh's imaginings of Stein's perspective expose his own interpretation as a flight of fancy and also call attention to her own creative interpretation of Toklas's activities: he portrays the reiterative writer as picking up on the "steady rhythm" of the seeds' fall (138). Implicitly countering Stein's project of repudiating interiority and using iteration to convey character, Binh insists that Toklas's activity is spiritually driven. He asserts that she "is in a garden, GertrudeStein, but it is divine. The Holy Spirit is in her when she pulls tiny beets, radishes, and turnips from the ground. When she places their limp bodies in her basket, she believes that she knows the joys and anguishes of the Virgin Mother" (139). Binh's decided preference for Toklas shows as he mobilizes the misrecognition that he believes to obtain between the two women.

This inscription of split subjectivity redoubles perspective and challenges the notion that either Stein or Toklas has mastered the other.

The Book of Salt also presents Toklas as quite aware of and receptive to Stein's mode of vision. Binh suggests that Toklas stages herself as an object of desire and strategically deploys self-subordination as a strategy for snaring Stein. He tells us that

Miss Toklas knows that GertrudeStein appreciates wives in her own ways . . . When Miss Toklas first visited the rue de Fleurus, she felt Gertrude Stein's "appreciation" on her like a ribbon of steel. She felt her flesh rubbing against it, felt sweat dripping down her back, sliding down the inside of her thighs. She crossed her legs, and GertrudeStein looked at her as if she knew. (184–85)

This passage depicts Stein's look as so overt that "blind men can even see GertrudeStein looking" (184). And when Toklas feels Stein's look, she is turned on by its aggression. Toklas's response is tactile, as is Stein's incorporative metaphor for their exchange: "Delicious" (185).

Binh locates the source of Toklas's response—and the impulse behind her migration to Paris—in a moment from her past. He depicts her desire as initially incited by seeing, from a San Francisco streetcar, a flush-faced woman "with her shirt unbuttoned, revealing the line between her breasts like a soft velvet string" as a policeman holds her arms (158). Telling us that Toklas "could not comprehend" this unprecedented "vision," Binh presents this moment as akin to what Freud called the "primal scene": the traumatic and unassimilable childhood moment at which sexuality first comes into view (Truong 158). Not least because Toklas is an adult woman during this encounter, the scenario offered in *The Book of Salt* is quite different from Freud's. But as with all primal scenes, this image gains significance from Toklas's position as its viewer. Staging patriarchal law as suppressing the woman's sexual expression, she underscores the scene's mixture of "violence" and "open desire" (158). Identifying this moment as the reason for Toklas's departure from the United States and migration to Paris, *The Book of Salt* presents it as enabling her to become a desiring subject.

There is even more to this moment than its role as Toklas's primal scene. Silverman contends that "memory" is the source of "the eye's transformative potentiality—its capacity for looking from a position which is not assigned in advance" (*Threshold* 182). And Cowie reminds us that women, too, can experience the scopophilia that Mulvey identifies with the male look (194–95). In the memory from San Francisco, Binh presents Toklas as enacting scopophilia from within the feminine subject position: she is looking, and the other woman is unknowingly present for view. Yet Toklas's perception of the woman also prompts a bodily response. Toklas

faints “into the arms of a stranger”—abandoning conscious attempts to control her body and making herself vulnerable to the other—but remembers her experience long afterward (159). Telling us that she “held onto” the image of the woman’s “broken face” and “the soft velvet string” between her breasts “as a talisman and a lure” (159), Binh’s language resonates with Lacan’s depiction of the “lure” at work “in the dialectic of the eye and the gaze” that determines that “*what I look at is never what I wish to see,*” but rather an image that stands in its stead (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 103). Yet if for Toklas the image propels her desire to find a lover, her memory does not represent her actual object of desire. Rather, the image is what Lacan calls the *objet a*—the opaque obstruction around which her desire circles.

In moving from this image to a discussion of the photograph in which Toklas presents herself for view, Binh breaks down the putative distinction between desire and identification. He suggests that rather than imitating the objectifying look and desiring a feminine object, she eventually identifies with the unknown woman by staging her openness to being the object of another’s desire. Describing the one image of Toklas alone that is in her and Stein’s home, he employs ekphrasis—“the verbal representation of visual representation”—to figure desire (Heffernan 3). Heffernan observes that the object of ekphrasis is frequently feminized, so it comes as no surprise that Binh uses this technique to develop his picture of Toklas’s feminine subjectivity. However, his focus on her femininity operates quite differently from the objectifying look that theorists of ekphrasis emphasize. Silverman observes that “the pose puts the subject who assumes it ‘in the picture’”—that is, on the “screen” that stages the subject for the gaze of the Other—and Binh focuses on the way Toklas’s pose both solicits and fools this gaze (*Threshold* 203). He notes that “[h]er head is turned sideways, and her gaze is directed down toward the lower, left-hand corner of the photograph” (160). However, insisting on the image’s ability to trick the reader, he observes that her posture could only snare “those who do not know her” into believing that she is “shy,” aversive, “modest even” (160). She is dressed in a silk Chinese robe that “cover[s] her” and makes her feel “seduced . . . every time she slips it over her skin” (160). The robe is Toklas’s means of staging her own seduction: “pure theater,” its sleeves’ “bell-shaped openings” are “accentuated by the photographer’s lights” and highlight her arms’ delicacy (160–61). The robe’s “sleeves, ample and suggestive, serve as a proxy for an open neckline, bared shoulders, nipples arched against the swirling patterns embedded in the silk. A proxy, I imagine, for her desire to expose her body to light, a compulsion to wake it. This we have in common, I know” (161). Here Binh aligns himself with Toklas and compares her pose to that of the woman she saw on the street in San Francisco: their bodies are sexualized and open to view. Yet Binh’s attention to the photographer’s exaggerated lighting of Toklas’s sleeves

also recalls his opening remark about light's blinding function and Lacan's insistence on the image's opacity, which points to sexuality's unsymbolizable dimension.

Binh's depiction of these two photographs of Toklas differs in other ways from the sexualization at work in many canonical examples of ekphrasis. Mitchell observes that in many instances, "[t]he voyeuristic, masturbatory fondling of the ekphrastic image is a kind of mental rape that may induce a sense of guilt, paralysis, or ambivalence in the observer" (169).¹⁸ But whereas John Keats's Grecian urn—perhaps the most famous example of ekphrasis as rape—is an "unravish'd bride of quietness" whose mysterious body is forced into (and "out of") signification through the poet's verse, Binh's depictions of Toklas accomplish something quite different (Keats 905–6). Though Diehl notes that women's ekphrasis complicates canonical male poets' deployment of an aggressive, heterosexual gaze, her critical framework—and that of the larger collection of which her essay is a part—minimizes the possibility that men can enact similar challenges.¹⁹ It is significant that *The Book of Salt*, though authored by a woman, features a male narrator for whom ekphrasis is not a form of sexual aggression. Binh positions himself not as a masculine subject desiring mastery of a female object, but rather as a man who identifies—albeit ambivalently—with the woman whose image he invokes. Though his evocation of Toklas's memories from San Francisco locates her sexual awakening in her perception of a scene of violence, his ekphrastic descriptions of photographs of Toklas do not themselves enact "mental rape" (Mitchell 169). Rather, they construct her as deliberately staging herself for the gaze: as embodying the desire to be desired.

Moreover, Binh explicitly aligns himself with the self-exposure and desire for bodily awakening that he finds in Toklas's stance. This highlights their overlapping trajectories as queer migrants to Paris. However, he also underscores the ways her subordination and migration are chosen and enjoyed, whereas his are a function of circumstance. Mitchell argues that ekphrasis is a "utopian fantasy" that seeks to overcome the fundamental "differences between visual and verbal media" that stand in for the broader range of differences—ethical, epistemological, and social—that obtain between subject and other (161–63). In so doing, ekphrasis produces ambivalence. The ambivalence of Binh's own relationship to Toklas—who is both the site of his identification and an agent of his own domination by French colonialism—drives his portrayal of her desire to be desired.

Ambivalence is also at work when Binh calls attention to other photos that present Toklas as challenging the look and the gaze. Well positioned to notice her wielding of class privileges that he does not have, he implicitly challenges Silverman's assertion that the feminine subject's posture points to her "exclusion from symbolic power and privilege" (*The Acoustic Mirror*

31). He is familiar with her capacity for authoritative action because she occasionally rebukes him for household transgressions, and his portrayals of her power disprove Silverman's claim that the feminine subject's "passive relation to . . . scopic and auditory regimes" manifests in her "'receptivity' to the male gaze and voice" and her "incapacity for looking, speaking, or listening authoritatively" (31). Diverging from these traits, Binh's Toklas combines her "receptivity" to Stein's look with a willingness to match its aggression. He imagines that when Toklas first met Stein, "her countenance was steady," and her "expression . . . the same as the one that she wears now in all of her photographs" with her partner: "her eyes looking up, partially veiled by their heavy lids; her lips, fuller than one would expect, pressing together to ask silently, Well? Why must you stare?" (160). Toklas's challenging look in this image differs from the open and inviting posture she assumes in the one in the Chinese robe and that Stein takes on in photographs. Moreover, the stance that Binh attributes to Toklas in this passage reveals that her tactic of staging herself to be desired can also be a means of exercising power.

Toklas wields power along two separate axes here. A montage of Binh's reading of her photograph with an imaginative construction of her first encounter with Stein, this passage makes visible Toklas's desire for women and for her own femininity. Meeting Stein's look, Toklas dares her to act on her desire. She also challenges the hegemonic, homophobic gaze that would construe her and Stein as freaks: she recognizes and defends their difference with a defiant look that runs parallel to the "menacing eyes" that Bhabha finds in Jin's poem (46). Toklas's stance and look imply and challenge the gaze of a hostile general public.

Moreover, by emphasizing Toklas's ability to be critical of the camera's powers, to challenge the hegemonic gaze, and to match Stein's objectifying look, Binh highlights the former woman's broader defiance of the gaze as locus of the Other. As Silverman argues, the gaze indicates for Lacan "the presence of others as such" and so marks "the intrusion of the symbolic into the field of vision" (*Threshold* 133). "The screen" is thus "the site at which social and historical difference enters the field of vision" (134). As such, it is a site at which cultural significations are both inscribed and contested—as Toklas does here. Importantly, the particularity of Binh's subaltern look at the photograph of Stein and Toklas enables this reading of the latter's challenge to the gaze. Though Silverman's account of the screen refers to the gaze as it plays out in the visual arts, her linking of it to the symbolic order is also pertinent to literature's linguistic medium. Binh puts into language the homophobic mockeries whose effects Toklas registers only through the defiant look that is legible in the photographs.

This is especially apparent when he describes Stein's and Toklas's "seasonal migration" from Paris to their summer residence in the village of Bilignin—a place that he characterizes as subjecting them to an espe-

cially intense version of the hegemonic gaze (134). In *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed defines queerness as a tendency to diverge from, rather than to follow, established lines, or patterns, of behavior, and Binh observes that his employers “like routines and schedules” (134). Though his language suggests a preference for bourgeois regularity, the women’s bent is less conservative than it seems. Explaining that Stein and Toklas “do not like to deviate from the *chosen* paths of their lives,” Binh echoes Weston’s notion of queer “families we choose” (Truong 134, emphasis added; Weston 17). This implies that his employers’ love for routine represents a commitment not to the spatiotemporal regime of reproduction and child-rearing that both Ahmed and Halberstam associate with straightness, but rather to their own inflection of what the latter calls “queer time”: one designed to sustain Stein’s role as an avant-garde writer (Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place* 1).

But if—much like Stein’s own writing—her and Toklas’s trips to the country repeat straight, bourgeois norms with a queer difference, these displacements are far more pleasurable for the two of them than for Binh. The women’s enjoyment of control over the schedule of their “seasonal migration” contrasts sharply to his unhappy subjection to it and to the irregular temporality that governs his life. He observes that the secret ingredient of his cooking is the regularity of a cook’s life of “[r]epetition and routine. Servitude and subservience. Beck and call”; but in the larger scheme of things, this rhythm is periodically disrupted by firings and other displacements (154). More often than not, his paths are not chosen. Frustrated by summers spent in a town with no fellow Asians, he takes to drinking with the villagers. This makes him privy to information about local attitudes toward his employers. After he meets with Toklas’s disapproval when he returns drunk and incapacitated, he reacts with a lengthy tirade that mocks the way the two women and their friends are oblivious to the way they are viewed as an entertaining freak show within the local residents’ Eurocentric and homophobic gaze. His invective overtly addresses “you”—Stein—but is actually only directed to his readers. He declares, “What you probably do not know, GertrudeStein, is that in Bilignin you and Miss Toklas are the only circus act in town. And me. I am the *asiatique*, the sideshow freak” (142). He goes on to detail how the villagers are amused by Stein’s and Toklas’s butch/femme relationship and by the eccentricities of the painters and other guests that they host; the entire household provides entertaining spectacles of difference that the villagers contain through fetishistic stereotypes. These reactions demonstrate that the apparent straightness of Stein’s and Toklas’s “seasonal migration” is not nearly as straight as it may seem at first glance—a pattern that persists in *The Book of Salt* as a device for pointing to and then undermining simplistic ideas about their normativity. Binh’s tirade also exposes his frustration with the cultural and economic privileges that enable Stein—though not Toklas—to avoid seeing the villagers’ response.

IV. Visual Economies of Race

Binh shows that cultural, economic, and sexual differences determine that he, Stein, Toklas, and the villagers do not share the same way of seeing. His observations encompass both Bilignin *and* Paris. In Parisian streets, French passersby quickly fix his identity as an “asiatique” and as a domestic laborer (152). He writes that his “yellow skin”

[f]lagrantly tells my story, or a compacted, distorted version of it, to passersby curious enough to cast their eyes my way. It stunts their creativity, dictates to them the limited list of who I could be. Foreigner, *asiatique*, and, this being Mother France, I must be Indochinese. They do not care to discern any further, ignoring the question of whether I hail from Vietnam, Cambodia, or Laos . . . To them, my body offers an exacting, predetermined life story. It cripples their imagination as it does mine. (152)

In the gaze formed through the looks of the French, Binh reads a “distorted version” of his story that renders him “generalized and indiscriminate, easily spotted and readily identifiable all the same” (152). In an observation that resonates with Silverman’s claim that the gaze is the locus of the symbolic, Binh points to the way its hegemonic form turns on a limited range of signifiers that mark his identity as “an Indochinese laborer” and admit no further differences between ethnicities (152). His narration both reveals the hegemonic gaze’s blind spots and offers alternate ways of looking by making available a more precise set of signifiers for difference.

Binh also invokes his suffering under the stereotypes at work in the hegemonic gaze, and takes solace in the empathetic looks he shares with fellow Asians on Parisian streets. He notes that Paris’s “constant traffic of people at least includes my fellow *asiatiques*”; their presence means that “we breathe a little easier with each face that we see. It is the recognition that in the darkest streets of the city there is another body like mine, and that it means me no harm” (141). Binh figures his comfort in Paris in bodily terms—as facilitating breathing, facial recognition, and bodily recognition. One such look prompts his crucial encounter with Ho Chi Minh.

Binh’s experiences in public diverge markedly from those of Lattimore, who seeks to pass as white. Whereas the “yellow” Binh “hide[s]” his “body in the back rooms of every house that I have been in,” Lattimore “hide[s] away” inside a body that is “a near replica” of his white father’s, trying hard not to show his “mother’s blood” (151–52). Binh emphasizes that Lattimore’s act of passing turns upon his ability to strike a readily recognizable and plausibly white pose. Speaking to the reader as if to his lover, Binh declares that he envies

the way that you carry yourself when you are in the studio, surrounded by the men who think you are one of their own. The looseness of your limbs speaks of physical exertion for sport and not for labor. Your movements, large and deliberate, signal a life that has never known inhibition. You, Sweet Sunday Man, take full advantage of the blank sheet of paper that is your skin. (151)

In the salon, Lattimore's pose feigns the embodiment of white male prosperity to support the lies that he tells about himself: that he is a writer; that he has led a cosmopolitan life of privilege.

However, Lattimore does not fully succeed in passing, for Toklas detects him. Butler argues that blackness sometimes registers not through the "visible marking" of skin color but as a "matter of being able to read" a linguistically "marked body in relation to unmarked bodies," where the latter "constitute the currency of normative whiteness" (*Bodies* 170–71). In *The Book of Salt*, Lattimore's origins only surface in language. Binh makes elliptical reference to Lattimore's "mother's blood"; Stein and Toklas invoke blackness through the same kind of stereotypical dialect that facilitates racial masquerade in "Melantha" (151).²⁰ The two women also discuss Lattimore's flight from a conversation in which Stein challenges Paul Robeson for singing spirituals rather than "requiems and oratorios" (188). The racism at work in Stein's hierarchy of art forms appears in Toklas's reaction as well. Suggesting that he may have fled not out of a disinterest in music but because he either has "no interest in" the singer or so much interest that he "does not want to let it show," she mockingly observes that "[w]hen one looks at Mister Paul Robeson, the first thought that comes to mind is not music" (188). She then follows the observation with mimicry of his speech that marks him as black. Through this maneuver, Toklas also suggests that Lattimore may be revealing his own blackness through his avoidance of Robeson. Thus Stein eventually asks Binh the question that Lattimore "warned" him "would come," as such queries "always do": "Is Lattimore a Negro?" (157).

Stein's and Toklas's behavior makes apparent the viciousness of the racist gaze that Lattimore seeks to avoid by passing as white. Yet he does not always attempt to perform white male embodiment. "[M]arvel[ing]" at the way Lattimore's embodiment "can change from room to room," Binh observes that in the privacy of the garret, his lover attempts to shed his pretenses, his body becoming "more like mine" (151–52). Notably, however, Binh does not describe the way Lattimore's embodiment approximates his own. Instead, Binh focuses on the difficulty Lattimore experiences—even in private—when he attempts to rid himself of the stance through which he stages himself for the hegemonic gaze. In the garret, Lattimore may "try" to rid himself of his body's "assumption," to "shak[e]" himself "free" from it and return to an embodiment more like his lover's, but the adopted

pose still “clings” (51–52). Binh’s language thus suggests that Lattimore’s act of passing is not merely a temporary performance that covers over an authentic self that he can reveal in private. Rather, passing is the practice of linguistic and bodily iteration through which Lattimore *constitutes* himself. Caughie calls attention to the way passing entails a socially contextualized process of performative iteration that characterizes *all* subjectivity (20–39).²¹ This performativity runs parallel to the strategy of “impersonation” that Hovey views as crucial to the deployment and destabilization of heterosexual gender categories in Stein’s *The Autobiography* (*A Thousand Words* 101). Yet Binh’s account of Lattimore’s behavior in the garret suggests that however performatively constituted and available for resignification all subjectivity may be, the cumulative effects of repetitions are hard to shake off. In the garret, Binh perceives the difficulty of this process as he witnesses the painful undoing of Lattimore’s embodiment of white male entitlement. Lattimore thus becomes legible to Binh only through the public embodiment of his ambition and its private erasure. Binh states that in reinventing his life story for the scene of Stein’s salon, Lattimore uses “the swift lines of a pencil rather than the considered stroke of a pen,” avoiding “the permanence of ink” (151). Much like the scratchings of a pencil that persist as palimpsests even when erased, the traces of Lattimore’s aspirations remain in his embodiment even when he seeks to shed them.

Binh’s awareness of the gap between Lattimore’s background and aspirations is mirrored in his remarks about the difference between his own hopes for their relationship and the reality of the latter’s use of him to fuel his obsession with Stein’s celebrity. Commenting on Lattimore’s request that he purloin a manuscript entitled *The Book of Salt*, Binh draws a parallel between his lover’s activities as a “collector” of Stein’s texts and the fetishistic mind-set of the Parisian employers, who view their foreign employees as objects with poignant stories to be collected (146). In an address that is ostensibly to Lattimore but actually to the reader—and therefore to the broader public obsessed with Stein—he wonders, “am I but one within a long line of others?” (146). Binh’s question raises the possibility that Lattimore is “orientated”—in Ahmed’s sense—toward collecting both books and lovers (*Queer Phenomenology* 1).

When Binh goes back to the photographer’s studio, his disappointment with Lattimore’s attitude is apparent. He discovers that his lover left the second installment of charges for the image unpaid and also notices a far more expensive “salt print” of *The Man on the Bridge* (246). In this scene, Binh and the readers learn that the man’s name is “Nguyen Ai Quoc,” the person that would later call himself Ho Chi Minh. Moreover, Binh reveals his preference for Ho Chi Minh and his rejection of Lattimore’s compliant relationship to the hegemonic gaze. When Binh sees the price of his picture with Lattimore, he tells the photographer to keep it: “I would rather save

my money, the sweat of my labor, for" the pricier salt print of the revolutionary (247).

V. Reenvisionings of Parisian Modernism

Binh's decision in the studio shows that even though he is the object through which Lattimore—and, by implication, we other "collectors"—make Stein their object of desire, the cook's narration shifts the dynamics of this circuit to expose the colonialist practice in which Stein, Toklas, Lattimore, and the novel's readers alike are implicated. Here, it is important to note the double significance of *The Book of Salt*, which is the title not only of Truong's novel but also of the unpublished manuscript that Binh purloins from Stein and rages against for stealing and misrepresenting his story. The latter text—which does not actually exist in Stein's *oeuvre*—is a fictional creation that appears within a novel that is itself a work of historical fiction. Binh classifies Stein and Toklas among the employers he labels "collectors," and upon discovering *The Book of Salt*, implies that Stein's creation of his story is a part of that process of collection. Binh says that when he sees his name repeated in Stein's manuscript, he feels like he is being "surrounded on all sides by strangers, strung along a continuously unraveling line that keeps them above the water's surface. It is a line that I cannot possibly hold onto. Gertrude Stein knows it, and she has cast me in there anyway, I think" (214–15). His migration has made him no stranger to the adjustments that are made during what Ahmed describes as the process of moving between different "lines" of orientation (*Queer Phenomenology* 20–21). But as he sees Stein's text wrenching him out of his own line of experience and onto her page in a language that he cannot even read, he insists that he did not give her permission to use his story and that only he gets to tell it. Truong's *The Book of Salt* is the text in which he does so, refusing the context of Euro-American modernism into which she would throw him. Paradoxically, though, this is one of the "lines"—though significantly, not the only one—into which Truong's *The Book of Salt* places him, and a context that the book uses to excite the interest of Eurocentric readers. By including Binh's backstory in Vietnam and history of migration, however, Truong's novel importantly forces Stein, Toklas, and "Paris Modernism" out of their well-established, Eurocentric line and traces out their intersections with the colonies on whose laborers the metropolis and its artistic networks depended.

The fact that "Binh" himself is Truong's fictional device reminds us that *The Book of Salt* is itself a ventriloquization in which he traces out and contests his own erasure. Focusing our attention on the "politics of our lack of knowledge" to which Eng refers, Binh becomes the phantasmatic and ultimately vanishing object of readerly desire who uses his

apparent subordination to orchestrate readerly interest in subaltern lives (1484). His narration challenges his own disappearance from the historical record by using Stein's celebrity as a lure to draw readers into the project of reenvisioning Parisian modernism.

As Eng observes, however, "*The Book of Salt* is less an instance of the subaltern writing back than an exploration of the limits of such writing for the politics of history" (1481). The book's politics of vision is crucial to this inquiry, and Binh's preference for the salt print of Ho Chi Minh over his photograph with Lattimore is especially significant. As Binh observes, camera flashes both "illuminate" their subjects and "blind" the resulting image's viewers (3). His rejection of his picture with Lattimore constitutes a repudiation of the hegemonic symbolic's visual regime, which supports a narrative of modernism that privileges the viewpoints of white European and North American writers and renders unsymbolizable what Eng calls "alternative modernit[ies]" (1489). Moreover, Binh's elevation of the salt print as an emblem of hope at the end of the novel marks a turning of the "screen." Pointing to the Real that the dominant symbolic has made unrepresentable, this gesture reorients the gaze. Binh's tilting of the screen is anamorphic, enabling readers to imagine modernism from "multiple viewpoints" that include those of colonial subjects (Mirzoeff 16). As Bhabha reminds us, this is not an ontological claim about the "truth" of colonial subjectivity (or, by extension, of history), but rather a "discursive strategy" that comes from within and transforms representation (49–50).

Modernism is famous for having reoriented vision—a turn that *The Book of Salt* addresses by focusing on a significant difference between Paris and Bilignin. Whereas the former transforms Stein into a celebrity, the latter turns her into a "circus act" (142). It is not only Stein's and Toklas's sexual orientation and butch/femme relationship, but also the behavior of their guests, that makes them stand out to the permanent residents of Bilignin. Certainly Stein's female masculinity defied expectations for women, as Binh makes clear. But he also says that the villagers view the women's guests as an "added attraction," and "especially enjoyed the painter who hiked through their fields with clumps of blue paint stuck in his uncombed hair" (142). The painter's hair serves as an index of Stein's and her friends' differences from the region's social and aesthetic norms, and figures the cultural shock initiated by her colleagues in the visual arts. His hair provokes a response that parallels the initial reception of Matisse's 1905 *Woman with a Hat*—a painting whose bright colors defied prevailing artistic conventions and, in so doing, heralded the innovations of subsequent modernists (Daniel 56).

Picasso took this reorientation of vision one step further by forcing viewers into a new way of seeing. Recent studies of his and Stein's work suggest that they may have used visual and linguistic shifts to deflect

anxieties about her queerness onto depictions of race. As Lubar argues, Picasso's process of painting her 1906 portrait may have been driven by anxiety over her masculinity and sexuality, which he resolved by painting her face in the style of Iberian carvings, rendering it a mask whose hollow eyes allow the viewer to avoid meeting her look (7). And in her 1909 "Melanctha," Stein cross-writes herself as a heterosexual black man, Jeff Campbell, while allowing desire between women to resurface in the "wanderings" of his bisexual lover, Melanctha. As Blackmer argues, the story does not so much hide lesbianism as refract it.²²

The Book of Salt, too, refracts previous versions of Stein's story through Binh's narration and affair with Lattimore, thereby reorienting readers' views of modernity. Though the latter man's race is the object of Stein's fascination, Truong's framing of the narrative reverses this dynamic by hinging the plot on his obsessive relationship to her celebrity image (157). Allowing him to achieve his aim of purloining Stein's manuscript, *The Book of Salt* refuses the "tragic mulatto" plot that would make his passing the cause of his downfall. His success highlights Stein's vulnerability to those upon whom her life as a writer depends. Nonetheless, this plot twist neither blocks her racist practices nor sets her writing on another course. Though he does steal a text that she otherwise might have published, he does so to enjoy her writing and to bring himself closer to her celebrity. This only reaffirms Stein's value within Parisian modernism.

Not coincidentally, Lattimore is an iridologist who examines people's eyes for signs of their health. Iridology entails an alternative way of viewing the body that is premised on the claim that "skin and bones can lie" and that therefore seeks "to diagnose the potential for breakage, the invisible fault lines, the predisposed weaknesses" by examining the eyes rather than the entire body (113). Iridology shares some similarities with Lattimore's efforts to pass as white: both iridology and racial passing depend on the notion that the body can conceal rather than reveal. The play of vision at work in these two practices functions quite differently, however. Whereas his act of passing turns on his light skin and ability to perform white male embodiment in a manner that fools the hegemonic gaze, his practice of iridology focuses the look on spots in the eye. He claims that "[f]lecks, streaks, spots, or discolorations within a particular section of the iris indicate that there is a trouble spot, a weakness in the corresponding area of the body" (114). In Lacanian terms, the spots that Lattimore sees in eyes are "stains" that function as anamorphic objects: when approached from another angle, they present a different view of the body than the image that initially gives itself to be seen, and in so doing make apparent the subject's split nature. Lattimore's *own* eyes—like those of his patients—challenge the frame of representation that supports fantasies of consistency and wholeness. He sees signs of "impotence" in the eyes

of the Emperor of Vietnam and the Crown Prince of Cambodia (115–17). Yet as the novel emphasizes by singling out southeast Asian royalty for these diagnoses, Lattimore's iridology does not challenge the hegemonic European gaze or the terms of the symbolic order that support it. Instead, he sustains that gaze. His method involves matching up flaws in the eyes with bodily ailments by using a map whose topography is set out in advance. Lattimore's vision thus functions much like that of Lacan, who—in attending to the anamorphic object in Holbein's *The Ambassadors*—finds nothing more original than his preconceived notion that the subject is “annihilated” by “castration” (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 88–89). Much as Lacan cannot conceive of the possibility that lack could be predicated on something other than castration, Lattimore cannot detect illnesses that are not already inscribed on his maps.²³

By contrast, Binh offers a far more powerful challenge to the hegemonic symbolic order because his role as narrator allows him to reconfigure the frame through which we see modernism and modernity. His exposure of Lattimore calls attention to the same kinds of “invisible fault lines” and “predisposed weaknesses” that the latter finds in his patients (113). Before describing Lattimore's appearance when passing, Binh declares that “you, Sweet Sunday Man, are flawed like me. You are a dubious construction, delicate but not in a fine-boned way. Delicate in the way that poor craftsmanship and the uncertainty resulting from it can render a house or a body uninhabitable. Dubious, indeed” (151). Much as Lattimore finds in his patients' eyes the signs of their body's weaknesses, so does Binh find in the former's varied performances of embodiment the splits that subtend his subjectivity. But the word “dubious” does not necessarily have a negative valence in this passage. The narrator's emphasis on the iterations through which Lattimore aspires to white male embodiment makes clear that his body is not naturally “dubious” in its “construction” but rather is produced as such by the constructs to which he aspires. Binh's attention to the way both he and his lover suffer under the dominant gaze suggests that hegemonic whiteness is ultimately uninhabitable to both of them: it is as “dubious” as the received accounts of history for which it serves as a prop. Unlike Lattimore, however, Binh calls attention to and questions the racial regimes at work in colonial power.

Binh emphasizes that Stein and Toklas, too, are split subjects whose appearance challenges dominant constructs of gender and sexuality while sustaining hegemonic whiteness. Stein's masculine demeanor troubles the heteronormative gaze; Toklas's presence with her partner and glare at the camera openly challenge hostile looks. But just as Lattimore's manipulations of vision sustain rather than contest the dominant racial gaze, so do Stein's and Picasso's reorientations of vision leave hegemonic regimes of whiteness intact. North has demonstrated that their challenges to the formal con-

ventions of European and American literature and art force viewers and readers into new ways of reading and seeing, but their tactics merely displace and intensify—rather than break away from—“the contradictions of European colonialism” that drive their appropriations of primitive masks (76). Picasso’s masks and Stein’s use of dialect may reorient our manner of looking and hearing, but they do not challenge the terms of hegemonic whiteness. Yet whereas Picasso’s painting—as notorious for its depiction of women as it is celebrated for its aesthetic innovations—sustains rather than challenges hegemonic regimes of gender and sexuality, Stein’s writings work quite differently by resignifying such constructs rather than uncritically repeating them.

Lattimore is a figure for readers drawn to the novel by a preexisting interest in Stein’s modernism. And much as the novel uses Binh’s invocations of Toklas’s photographs to construct his identification with her and to highlight the text’s imaginative rather than mimetic relationship to historical fact, so does it use Lattimore to call attention to the role aficionados of Stein and modernism play in envisioning that historical period’s meaning. Like those who come to the novel with received ideas about modernism’s Euro-American roots, Lattimore is deeply invested in Stein’s version of modernism despite his own origins. However, by offering readers Binh’s perspective as a queer diasporic subject who challenges rather than sustains the hegemonic gaze, the novel nudges them away from the established “line” of orientation toward the period. As a result, the novel calls attention to readerly—and scholarly—complicity in the Eurocentric construction of Paris as the center of modernism. In so doing, the novel points to readers’ and scholars’ potential roles in reenvisioning what Eng calls the “ghostly” shapes of the “alternative modernit[ies]” that existent accounts of modernism obscure (1489–90).

Thus if Eng is right that *The Book of Salt* calls attention to “the politics of our lack of knowledge” about Euro-American modernism’s colonial underpinnings and the “alternative modernit[ies]” upon whose exploitation it depended, the “historical catachresis” through which the novel does so turns on its politics of vision (Eng 1483–91). Neither Lattimore’s nor Stein’s reorientations of vision challenge hegemonic whiteness or colonial ideology, whereas Binh does so by narrating from his queer, hybrid perspective. His narration traces out desires—sexual, racial, and epistemological—that go unfulfilled and that expose the dubiousness of received accounts of history. With his own story driving the fractured and ambivalent images that the novel gives us to be seen, Binh collapses the symbolic edifice that sustains the dominant gaze. He thus prompts the reader to look “from multiple viewpoints across and against the imperial perspective” that celebrates Paris as the center of early twentieth-century queer culture and avant-garde innovation (Mirzoeff 16). The resulting fragmentation throws

readers' looks out of their established lines and challenges the Euro-American image of modernist Paris, forcing its readers to reorient their vision and to imagine modernity anew.

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NOTES

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1. See Eng and Xu for further analysis of Ho Chi Minh's appearance.

2. See Park for a discussion of the fact that *The Book of Salt* is written in English.

3. See Gilmore for an account of the queer inflection of split subjectivity at work in the *Autobiography*, and Hovey (*A Thousand Words*) for an argument that the *Autobiography* enacts a destabilizing gender masquerade. For examples of similar thinking, see Andersen, Blackmer ("Lesbian Modernism"), and Meese. This scholarship responds to more hostile portrayals of Stein's masculinity by Benstock, Gilbert and Gubar, and Stimpson. Stimpson's articles on Stein—while pioneering during their time—demonstrate ambivalence toward her masculinity, though the more recent pieces ("Gertrude Stein and the Transportation of Gender" and "The Somagrams of Gertrude Stein") view it more sympathetically than the earlier work.

4. In reading *The Book of Salt* as portraying Toklas as a "queer femme," I take exception to Xu's facile claim that Binh depicts Stein and Toklas as assimilating to heterosexual culture by miming patriarchal gender roles and to Linzie's more sympathetic portrait of them as challenging heterosexuality through ambivalent mimicry of its norms. Butler demonstrates that although heterosexuality may be dominant, it, too, involves an imitation of gender that renders it no more original than queer sexualities; see "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," *Gender Trouble*, and *Bodies That Matter*. Moreover, if Stein, Toklas, and others play with sharply distinguished gender roles, their activity exposes the way all gender is open to resignification. For analysis of lesbian butch/femme relationships, see Case, Munt, and Nestle. For Butlerian discussions of Stein, see Blackmer, "Lesbian Modernism," and Hovey, *A Thousand Words*. For analysis of Stein and Toklas via Case's theory of butch/femme aesthetics, see Gilmore.

5. Gilbert and Gubar offer a similar view of Toklas as using "the role of subordinate to sustain her own power and serve her own ends" (*No Man's Land*, vol. 2, 253).

6. Though Mirzoeff offers a much-needed account of the imperial gaze and an antidote to the dangers of transhistorical universalism at work in some interpretations of psychoanalytic theory, his discussion of the gaze is problematic. He conflates Lacan's account of the gaze as grounded in the symbolic order with Foucault's account of the gaze that is installed through the disciplinary power of the Panopticon. For a critique of this line of reasoning, see Copjec.

7. The invention of photography was key to the rise of celebrity culture: see Braudy. See Curnutt, Glass, Goldman, and Leick for analysis of Stein's celebrity.

8. Lacan's early accounts of the "symbolic" and the "Real" eventually evolved beyond the claims that have been so controversial in queer theory. He presents the symbolic as the realm of signification. With propping from the imaginary order—the realm of the visual and its misrecognitions (*méconnaissance*)—the symbolic structures fantasy and desire. The Real, by contrast, undercuts the stability of the symbolic's significations and disturbs the scene of representation. It is also the locus of the drives that animate desire.

Although Butler and others have rightfully challenged Lacan's privileging of the Name of the Father and the phallus as signifiers that anchor the symbolic order, much of this discussion draws on his early, structuralist texts—such as his 1958 essay "The Signification of the Phallus" and his 1955–56 seminar, *The Psychoses*. These signifiers become less dominant in the middle stage of his work, appearing only infrequently in seminars such as *The Four Fundamental Concepts* (1964). My own use of the concept of the "symbolic" assumes that it is more flexible than Lacan's early work allows, and that its hegemonic forms can be contested and transformed.

My use of the term "the Real" foregrounds its usefulness in accounting for the limits of representation, and backgrounds the questions of sexual difference at stake in Butler's, Copjec's, and Žižek's disagreement over its significance. See Butler's and Žižek's exchanges in *Contingency, Hegemony, and Universality* as well as Copjec's *Read My Desire*. I take up the problems underpinning all of their accounts of the term in "Queering Žižek." For an interpretation of Lacan that discusses the "symbolic" and "Real" at length and that emphasizes his work's utility for accounts of queer desire, see Dean. For work that uses the concept of the Real to point to the impasses of representation created by heterosexist symbolics, see Hart and Rohy.

9. I follow Silverman's reading of Lacan in distinguishing between the "look" and the "gaze," which are conceptually distinct in *The Four Fundamental Concepts* even though they are both designated with the French phrase "le regard."

10. See Wagner-Martin for a biographical narrative of Stein's response to Victorian ideas about womanhood and her move from the United States to Europe. See Corn and Latimer for a detailed discussion of shifts in her sartorial self-presentation during this time.

11. See Wagner-Martin for an account of the climate of misogyny at Johns Hopkins during Stein's attendance, and for a discussion of her failure of Obstetrics.

12. See Corn and Latimer for a thorough discussion of Stein's choice of clothing.

13. Berry and DeKoven both argue that Stein's modernism—unlike that of her male contemporaries—enacts a systematic challenge to nineteenth-century literary genres and gender constructs. Though subsequent work in queer modernist studies has complicated the dichotomous thinking at play in efforts to differentiate between "male" and "female" modernisms, these scholars' attention to Stein's challenge to nineteenth-century ideologies of gender remains useful for understanding her response to the context within which she lived and wrote. Unfortunately, some otherwise valuable feminist scholarship also contains threads that pathologize Stein's female masculinity by framing it as antifeminist "male identification" (DeKoven 136). In addition to DeKoven, see Benstock, Gilbert and Gubar, Glass, Ruddick,

Rule, Smith, Stimpson ("Gertrice / Altrude" and "The Mind, the Body, and Gertrude Stein"), and Wagner-Martin for examples of this line of thought.

14. For scholarship on Stein's destabilization of gender, see Andersen, Blackmer ("Lesbian Modernism"), Gilmore, Hovey (*A Thousand Words*), and Meese.

15. See Hovey's *A Thousand Words* and Berry for poststructural readings of Stein.

16. As Grosz notes, Mulvey's formulation of the objectifying look as "the male gaze" is a misnomer. For a discussion of the problems these confluences raise, see Silverman, *Threshold*. To avoid reproducing Mulvey's error, I will designate Stein's mode of seeing as her "look."

17. Binh's construction of Toklas's psyche interprets biographical information: despite her Jewish parentage, she converted to Catholicism in 1957 (Malcolm 197).

18. See Heffernan for discussion of ekphrasis as rape, as well as a challenge to Mitchell's suggestion that *all* ekphrasis turns on the image's Medusa-like power. As both acknowledge, this model best accounts for masculine invocations of a feminine object. In my view, a further problem is the heterosexual structure of desire on which this theory turns. My own use of Mitchell assumes that ekphrasis's "utopian fantasy" can seek to overcome differences other than those between masculine and feminine, and can work in ways other than the "Medusa" mode.

19. A notable exception to the collection's occlusion of men's challenges to ekphrasis's dominant paradigm of enacting masculine aggression is Loizeaux's essay, which points to examples of "feminist ekphrasis" by men (122). Diehl's framework is problematic because it reduces the textual enactment of gender ambiguity to nothing more than a strategy adopted by an author whose sex remains certain. In distinction from that collection's interest in distinguishing between the strategies adopted by male and female writers, I emphasize not the sex of the author of *The Book of Salt* but rather the feminine gender positioning of its male narrator.

20. On the transfers between visual and linguistic masks, see Gates; see North for a discussion of racial masking in Picasso's painting and Stein's "Melanctha."

21. See Ginsberg for an overview of theories of passing, from essentialist accounts of identity to the poststructural approaches in whose wake Caughie writes.

22. See Stimpson for an argument that "Melanctha" obfuscates Stein's sexuality. Hovey, too, conceives of "Melanctha" as a "displacement" of lesbian desire "onto racial drag" ("Sapphic Primitivism" 548). See Blackmer, "African Masks," for analysis of the mutual implication of sexuality and race in "Melanctha," and Hackett for an argument for the centrality of "Sapphic primitivism" to modernist writing by queer women.

23. Silverman's *Threshold* presents a more complicated version of this problem. Despite her openness elsewhere to theorizing the symbolic order as the site of inscription of a broader range of differences, Silverman's reading of Lacan's comments on Holbein remains attached to the account according to which "desire . . . is necessarily grounded in castration" (169). While I have no quibble with her suggestion that "subjectivity . . . is predicated upon lack," I see the rest of *Threshold* as pointing to a wider range of forms of lack than this reiteration of Lacan's fixation on castration makes available (169).

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