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Can Binh Speak?:
Marginalization, Subversion, and Representation of the Subaltern
in Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt*

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English Honors

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Introduction

Vietnamese American author Monique Truong was inspired to write her novel, *The Book of Salt*, while looking through *The Alice B. Toklas Cookbook*. Truong found – in addition to the book’s famed marijuana brownie recipe – an intimate Vietnamese presence in the household of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas. A series of “Indo-Chinese” (i.e. Vietnamese) cooks were employed in their celebrated Parisian salon in the 1920s and 30s, and Toklas briefly describes them in her cookbook-cum-memoir. The protagonist of Truong’s novel, Binh, is a fictionalized composite of these historical cooks: Truong endows him with many of the same recipes, characteristics, and life events that Toklas attributes to these cooks. Thus, Binh is a figure whose historical presence is both verifiable and unverifiable.

In her brief description, Toklas recounts that two of the cooks, Trac and Nguyen, especially stand out in her memory. Trac and Nguyen were skillful chefs who had “amiable weaknesses” (187). Trac “spoke French with a vocabulary of a couple of dozen words” (186) and only knew how to make a few simple desserts, but when Toklas taught him new recipes, he learned with “a childish joy” (187). His successor, Nguyen, drank “gently and harmlessly, for he cooked marvelously” (187). The other Vietnamese cooks, however, indulged in vices that were “unthinkable in our little home” (187) and therefore did not last long in the Toklas-Stein household.

Toklas’s description of the Vietnamese cooks is problematic on many fronts. Wenying Xu, in *Eating Identities*, argues that Toklas’s description of the cooks condescendingly infantilizes them, or presents them as immoral beings who threaten her peaceful household (128-129). In other words, Toklas’s description subscribes to an Orientalist ideology that alternatively views the Asian Other as a childlike being in need of maternal guidance, or a threatening barbarian whose presence must be eliminated or at least controlled. Such an essentialized portrayal denies these Vietnamese

cooks human complexity. They are one-dimensional stereotypes, confined by the Orientalist lens through which Toklas sees them.

This problem of representation is confounded by the fact that the historical presence of these cooks can only be found in Toklas's account: to my knowledge, there are no other extant textual records that could revise, supplement, or push against Toklas's flat description.¹ As poor, racialized, migrant laborers, these cooks have left no other historical trace. The cooks' unique stories are left untold and their voices left unheard. They have been pushed to the margins of history, which is written by those who have the power to hold the pen. Or in Truong's words, these cooks are "just a minor footnote" to "the official history of the Lost Generation" ("Interview").

This limited presence/non-presence spurred Truong to write *The Book of Salt*. She explained her inspiration for the novel in an interview, "There could be a personal epic embedded inside that footnote, I thought. *The Book of Salt* is that story" ("Interview"). Catherine Fung reads this statement as either "proposing an attempt to fill in a gap in history by excavating the life of a forgotten figure or as articulating a desire to build a fictional story around a marginalized figure in history" (96). Both strategies – whether excavating what is lost or building an imagined life-story – are motivated by "a desire to create presence where absence has existed" (Fung 96).

Given this background of the cooks' marginalization and Truong's desire to bring to light their epic which has been subsumed under the official narrative, *The Book of Salt* can be seen as a subaltern project. The mission of subaltern studies, as articulated in Ranajit Guha's seminal work "The Small Voice of History," is to recover the "small voices which are drowned" (3) in elitist-driven history. Guha's exhortation – to take the "extra effort, develop the special skills and above all cultivate the disposition to hear these voices and interact with them" (3) – has since inspired

¹ Gertrude Stein also writes about an Indo-Chinese cook briefly, but in much the same vein. See Stein's *Everybody's Autobiography* (p. 125) or Xu's discussion of the relevant passage in *Eating Identities* (p. 129).

many subaltern projects that seek to bring historically marginalized voices to the center of written discourses. By richly imagining the character of Bìn, Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt* gives voice to the otherwise voiceless cooks of Stein-Toklas household. Rather than a flat stereotype, Bìn is a complex, dignified, and elusive character who subverts oppressive binaries.

The first part of this paper examines that subversiveness. I explore how, in the context of Bìn's imagined and real relationships, Bìn negotiates the oppressive conditions that work to marginalize him – the same conditions that erase his historical presence. I explicate Bìn's romantic fantasy of the scholar-prince, and compare and contrast the idealized lover with one of Bìn's real lovers, Blériot, and one of Bìn's employers, Gertrude Stein. I focus especially on how Blériot and Stein – who occupy positions of racial and socio-economic privilege – use their control over Western languages as a tool of oppression. However, Bìn and other subaltern subjects are able to transform Western languages into tools of resistance. I bring in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* and Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity to read these moments of oppression and usurpation. Bìn's subversion within the novel mirrors the overarching subversive nature of *The Book of Salt*, which disrupts the official Western history by offering an alternative history of marginalized figures.

Of course, *The Book of Salt* is not actually a historical work. There is a gap between *The Book of Salt* and other subaltern projects, as the former is a literary work and the latter are historiographies. However, the disciplinary distinction begins to blur in the case of *The Book of Salt* (whose protagonist Bìn is neither quite fictional nor historical) and in the field of Asian American studies in general. Laura Kang shows how some historians, in attempting to recover the lost voices of early Asian women immigrants, turn to novels for evidence and to novelistic devices when telling these women's stories. For instance, Lucie Cheng Hirata's influential work on

Chinese prostitutes in the 1800s counts among its archival evidence “popular novels” and “travel narratives” (Kang 155), perhaps because there are precious few other records of these women. Kang also asserts that Hirata “frequently slips into what [Kang calls] a ‘subjectivisng’ mode” (156), endowing the women with human qualities such as agency and desire. Thus, spurred by the lack of these women’s voices to write about them, Asian American historians are limited by the same lack. Because of this lack, some have turned to more imaginative modes to write their histories.

This blurring of disciplinary distinction brings us to an important critique: both historiographies and novels, as constructed narratives displaced from their subjects, cannot ‘recover’ or represent the subaltern in a transparent manner. *The Book of Salt* explores this limit of subaltern representation through Binh’s discovery of a fictive Gertrude Stein manuscript of the same title, *The Book of Salt*. This moment of metafictional displacement reveals the mediated nature of Binh’s narrative. Thus, *The Book of Salt* offers not just a recovery of a lost voice, but a critical exploration of the limits of that recovery. I examine this moment by utilizing textual analysis as well as applying the works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Laura Kang, and other scholars. Through such an examination, I raise critical questions about representing the subaltern subject in the fields of literature and Asian American studies. How can we represent the subaltern, when we *cannot* represent the subaltern? How do we hear their voice, when the subaltern *cannot* speak? These paradoxical dilemmas need not preclude Asian American studies scholars from exploring subaltern narratives. Rather, hybrid narratives such as *The Book of Salt*, when accompanied by a critical examination of their limits, are essential to subverting official narratives and decolonizing the fields of literature and historiography.

OPPRESSION AND SUBVERSION: BLÉRIOT, STEIN, AND BÌNH

Scholar-Prince Fantasy

While cooking side by side, Binh's mother tells little Binh fairytale-like stories of a scholar-prince falling in love with a poor girl. Binh's mother invents many different variations of the story; sometimes the poor girl (who serves as a stand-in for the mother) is a peasant on a rice farm, or a fisherman's daughter, or a servant in the Imperial Palace. All of these different scenarios ultimately reach the same satisfying destination: "'Home,' though, was always the same, the teak pavilion and the scholar-prince, a man who was first and foremost wise and kind" (81). To Binh's mother, 'home' is not simply a place (the teak pavilion) but also a person (the scholar-prince). It is her wise and kind lover who provides her with a true sense of belonging. Binh takes his mother's fairytale and makes it his own, and in doing so adopts the idea of the scholar-prince as his home. Finding a "home" holds a special significance for Binh, whose dramatic expulsion from his family, house, and country showcases his deep homelessness. When his abusive father finds out that Binh is gay, the father disowns him and Binh subsequently leaves Vietnam altogether. This exile shows how Binh cannot find complete acceptance and belonging, even when he is with his family, in his birth home, in his mother country. Binh becomes a transnational exile, and he continues his search for his scholar-prince, someone who can satisfy his longing for home.

In Binh's version of the scholar-prince fantasy, he dreams of an ideal seduction/subversion. It begins with broken poetry. He envisions himself as "a kitchen boy who skipped smooth shards of stone across a silent lake, that as they skimmed the water's surface they would sing" (81). The kitchen boy's pebbles land at the feet of a scholar-prince, who examines the pebbles and finds that each is inscribed with a different word. Being a wise man, the scholar-prince "naturally recognized that they were the broken pieces of a poem. Love was the subject" (82). He is intrigued but he cannot see who sent them; the lake is shrouded in a thick mist. The scholar-prince construes the pebble-poetry to be "a challenge and a game" (82) and responds by rearranging the pebbles and

sending them back. As each “fragment of a rippling, luminous poem” (82) travels back and forth across the lake, the scholar-prince falls in love with the kitchen boy, “who [is] now a man” (82). Binh coyly concludes, “in the end, well, the end for me is always the same” (82).

This imagined exchange reveals the ingredients for Binh’s ideal love: equality, agency, and linguistic pleasure. The lovers’ word game is characterized by equality: it is a fair exchange of pebbles. It is neither a one-sided bombardment, nor a unilateral exploitation. Rather, each lover reciprocates the other’s poetry freely and generously. Their communication happens within a closed economy of a set number of pebbles. This fixedness ensures an equal supply and demand, to the effect that both parties’ desires are equally satisfied. Their communication is a “give” and “take” in equitable amounts: a pebble for a pebble, a poem for a poem. Their word game is also marked by agency, especially on the part of the kitchen boy. It is not the scholar-prince but the lowly kitchen boy who begins the seduction, throwing the first stone and setting the rules of the game. As the inventor of the game, the kitchen boy selects the subject (love), and chooses the specific words to be written on the pebbles.

The resulting game gives both lovers much linguistic pleasure. It is an art: the pebbles “sing” (81) as they kiss the surface of the otherwise silent lake. This imagery is evocative of Binh’s own journey across the sea from Vietnam to France. The fragmented, jumbled nature of the pebbles further evokes displacement: landing at the feet of each partner in a haphazard fashion, the heap of pebble-poems are perhaps displaced from their intended order and meaning, demanding to be interpreted and translated. This deconstructed nature of the linguistic exchange, however, does not hinder the lovers. The scholar-prince and the kitchen boy are not troubled by the instability and multiplicity of meaning created by each rearrangement. Rather, this fluidity of language adds a layer of intrigue to their game that facilitates their love.

This linguistic pleasure leads the scholar-prince to fall in love without ever having seen the mysterious poet's face, body, class, or gender. This is made possible by the thick mist enshrouding the lake which "allows unlikely lovers to meet and forbidden subjects to wander the land" (82). Through the mist, the lovers are able to see each other without seeing each other: they can evaluate each other without the colored lens of stigma.² The fantasy world is not an antiseptic world free of power differences, but the mist allows for a brief suspension of identity markers, a condition that enables a scholar-prince to fall in love with a kitchen boy. Such love is transformative. By the end of the tale, the kitchen boy is no longer a boy but a man. He has been nourished by the fair and unprejudiced exchange of love with the scholar-prince.

This vision of unprejudiced love, while beautiful, may seem naïve and unattainable. The fantasy world is like a pre-lapsarian paradise, a perfect place that cannot be regained. This innocent view is perhaps fitting for a fantasy created in childhood. However, this perceived naïveté is complicated by Binh's acute awareness of the fantastic nature of the story. The mist, after all, is described as a "classic" (82) trope of fairytales. Binh is aware that there is no easy counterpart to the mist in reality, no easy way to suspend power differences. Binh prefaces the telling of the fantasy with his admission,

I lie to myself like no one else can. I always know what I need to hear. What else am I to do, revert to the truth and admit that I am a twenty-six-year-old man who still clings to the hope that someday his scholar-prince will come? (80)

He recognizes that the scholar-prince story is not real (it is a "lie" that he tells himself) and that it is unlikely (it is a hope that he clings to, despite real events pulling him away from such idealism).

² Visibility is often not a positive experience for Binh. Walking the streets of Paris, Binh feels that the French look at him and see nothing more than a stereotypical Indochinese laborer. He states, "[My body] marks me, announces my weakness, displays it as yellow skin. It flagrantly tells my story, or a compacted, distorted version of it [...] I am an Indochinese laborer, generalized and indiscriminate, easily spotted and readily identifiable all the same" (152). His racialized body makes him simultaneously hypervisible ("easily spotted") and invisible ("generalized and indiscriminate"). See page 175 of Edward's "Melancholic Ghosts" for a more detailed discussion of this passage.

Yet, it is also what he “need[s] to hear” (80). His desire to find his scholar-prince and find ‘home’ drives Binh as he negotiates real-life relationships. The archetype of the scholar-prince serves as a model against whom potential candidates are measured. Blériot and Stein are such candidates: they could potentially fulfill Binh’s longing for home. Love and home will not be possible for Binh, until he finds his real-life scholar-prince, someone who can suspend hierarchies and accept Binh for who he is.

Indeed, the scholar-prince story itself is a subversive act that inverts normative hierarchies: it is Binh, the racially and socio-economically devalued kitchen-boy, who gets to set the standard and judge who is worthy of his love. Blériot and Stein must meet Binh’s criteria if they are to be selected as his scholar-prince. This subverts the Western trope of white men saving exotic, passive, and powerless women of color³ in at least two different ways. Firstly, Blériot and Stein’s whiteness does not grant them the right and ability to rescue Binh. Rather, they must be evaluated and chosen by Binh as a worthy scholar-prince. Secondly, Binh’s fantasy queers the mainstream narrative. Binh explains that in his adaptation of the scholar-prince tale, the heroine is not a girl but a boy: “the ‘she’ was undoubtedly a ‘he’” (81). This change in the gender and sexual orientation of the tale challenges the heteronormativity of mainstream narratives and pushes against the erasure of queer sexuality.

Chef de Cuisine Blériot

Binh meets his first lover, Blériot, in the household of the Governor-General of Vietnam,

³ Spivak succinctly describes this trope as “White men saving brown women from brown men” (“Can the Subaltern Speak” 92). She specifically examines the British abolition of the Indian practice of *sati*, in which a widow immolates herself on her husband’s funeral pyre. The British used their abolition of the practice as a justification for their colonization: by taking over India, they were ending barbaric practices and saving Indian women from their terrible fates. The colonizers could justify their colonialism as an “establishment of a *good* society” (emphasis original; 94). Thus, this rhetoric of white-man-as-savior is deeply tied to the white man’s colonizing mission.

placing their love unmistakably in the context of France's colonization of Vietnam. Binh is twenty years old and has been working at the Governor-General's household for seven years as a *garde-manger* (a low-ranking kitchen boy), when Blériot becomes the new *chef de cuisine*. Blériot is a handsome, young Frenchman who is "as commanding in his looks as in his manners" (59). Binh falls head-over-heels in love with him: "I was twenty years old and in love. I mean in love, painfully, involving every part of my body except for my head" (59). He adds that "Talking was difficult [...] Speech was definitely one of the first things to go" (59).

Yet, speech becomes the foundation on which their love affair rests. Blériot appoints Binh as his translator and together they visit the markets every morning to get their groceries. Binh describes their exchange at a seafood market:

"Sole?" Blériot asked.

"Sole," I translated.

"Catfish?"

"Catfish."

"Shark?"

"Shark."

A slow seduction, now that I think about it, amidst the fruits of the sea. (62)

Blériot asks in French, and Binh supplies the answers in Vietnamese.⁴ This "slow seduction" of one-word conversations is evocative of the romantic word game of Binh's fantasy. Indeed, Blériot is a potential scholar-prince. Blériot and Binh share some key similarities that could potentially allow them to overcome their power difference: Blériot and Binh are both queer transnational laborers who become employed in a foreign land. As foreigners, they are marked by racial and linguistic difference. As gay men, they are set apart by their queerness. These similarities provide common grounds upon which a loving and mutually beneficial relationship can be built.

⁴The fact that this French-and-Vietnamese conversation is written entirely in English can appear rather strange. I will address this displacement of language later on.

Blériot, however, is no scholar-prince. The French chef cannot suspend power hierarchies. Rather, he relishes his power over the Vietnamese subordinate. One of their conversations – which Binh calls a “game of words” (241), deliberately evoking the word-game of the scholar-prince fantasy – reveals Blériot’s desire to dominate Binh:

“Tell me the word for ‘sweet,’” the *chef de cuisine* commanded in French.

“Sweet,” the *garde-manger* obliged in Vietnamese.

“Sour?”

“Sour.”

“Bitter?”

“Bitter.” (241)

This much later passage is striking for its semblance to the first conversation quoted above. In both conversations, Binh and Blériot exchange single words in different languages. However, the manner in which Binh recounts this conversation is significantly different. Unlike in the first conversation in which personal name and pronoun – “Blériot asked” and “I translated” (62) – are used, in this later conversation, only impersonal job titles are used to refer to the parties involved. The verbs similarly change in the second conversation. In the first conversation, Binh holds knowledge that Blériot must ask for; in the second, the chef simply demands, and the *garde-manger* obeys. These changes made in the second conversation emphasize Binh and Blériot’s clear socio-economic difference. The second conversation also highlights their racial difference: it explicitly states which speaker is speaking in which language, whereas in the first exchange, the different languages are only implied. These changes thus highlight Binh and Blériot’s socio-economic and racial differences, which result in an unequal power dynamic between the two.

This hierarchical emphasis is even more striking when considering that the second conversation takes place in the bedroom, rather than in the market where the first conversation is held. The market is the professional setting in which Binh works as Blériot’s translator, and thus job titles would have been appropriate. However, this is reversed: it is in the intimate space of the

bedroom that Blériot's insistence on power differences becomes clear. Rather than suspending hierarchies as his relationship with Binh develops, the chef instead relishes his power over his subordinate, demanding that Binh satisfy his linguistic cravings. In the scholar-prince fantasy, both parties willingly and freely participate and both receive and return equal pleasure. In Binh and Blériot's relationship, only one takes and the other must give; they are neither equal lovers nor poets. Blériot extorts bits of language from his subordinated lover, denying Binh's agency and ignoring whether Binh is also finding pleasure in this linguistic and sexual exchange.

Blériot's perpetuation of power difference in the bedroom is made even more explicit by what comes immediately before it – another word game of sorts. Binh recounts that Blériot would say before turning off the lights, "Let's play Monsieur and Madame" (240). Binh, however, is not fooled by this euphemistic phrase, the marital titles connoting a balance of power. Binh discloses that what Blériot "meant was actually a variation on the theme: Monsieur and Madame's secretary" (240). Blériot insists on his socio-economic superiority, assigning himself the role of the employer and Binh the role of the employee. He demands that Binh "call him 'Chef' or, worse, 'Monsieur,' even when our clothes were on the floor" (248). Unlike Binh's fantasy of equality, Blériot's fantasy is about asserting dominance. It is not enough for Blériot in his fantasy to assert control over his own secretary; he is titillated by the possibility of trespassing his spouse's territory, thus allowing him to dominate not just his paramour but his spouse as well.

Blériot's use of language as a tool of oppression exemplifies how language becomes implicated in colonization. Frantz Fanon, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, explores the problem of the colonizer's language (i.e. French in both Fanon and Truong's texts) in colonial settings. He asserts, "To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization" (18).

Speaking the colonizer's language sets one apart from the colonized, highlighting one's superiority and insisting on the other's barbarity. This mirrors how Blériot uses French: he does not use it to communicate or to please, but to assert his position of power over Binh.

Such insistence on the superiority of the colonizer's language, Fanon asserts, results in psychological trauma for the colonized. Fanon writes about how the black man of the Antilles strives to learn French, the colonizer's language. Colonial ideology teaches the colonized man that he "will be proportionately whiter – that is, he will come closer to being a real human being – in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language" (18). Fanon's colonized man internalizes this ideology; through his efforts to learn the colonizer's language, he accepts the implication that the colonized are inferior barbaric beings whereas the colonizers are superior human beings. This leads to a development of a traumatic inferiority complex as well as a "self-division" (17): the colonized man is born with black skin but dons white masks in an attempt to be accepted as human, ingratiating himself with the white man and his culture while strenuously rejecting his own.

The Book of Salt, however, pushes against this idea. Despite Fanon's assertion that this phenomenon extends to "every colonized man" (18), the colonized in *The Book of Salt* subvert the authority of the colonizer's language rather than embracing it. Frequently berated by Monsieur and Madame in French, the Vietnamese servants of the Governor-General's household learn to look repentant, but in their hearts find joy in not understanding their masters' angry rant. Their ignorance of the colonizer's language becomes their bulwark against oppression: they would stand "blissful in [their] ignorance of the nuances, wordplay, and double-entendres of that language that was seeking so desperately to assault [them]" (13). Binh then generalizes this resistance-in-ignorance to include colonized people from around the world. He describes how the "ruling class everywhere" (14) discusses why the colonized "of a certain class" (13) can never seem to master

the more sophisticated, civilized language of the Western colonizers. Binh turns this sentiment on its head. It is not the colonized but the colonizers who are truly ignorant: “So enamored of their differences, language and otherwise, [the colonizers] have lost the instinctual ability to detect the defiance of those who serve them” (14). The colonized people’s inability to speak the colonizer’s language does not prove the colonized people’s inferiority. Rather, their ignorance is a deliberate act of defiance. The joke is on the colonizers, who so blindly believe in their superiority that they do not even see the rebellion happening right under their noses.

Moreover, Binh is unlike Fanon’s colonized man who subscribes to the very colonialist ideology that is hurting him. Unlike Fanon’s psychologically traumatized black man, Binh neither internalizes an inferiority complex nor suffers a self-division.⁵ Even though he learns to speak rudimentary French, Binh maintains his sense of self. Rather than feeling caught between French culture and Vietnamese culture, Binh does not feel the need to choose one or the other. As he walks through the markets every morning with Blériot, Binh receives probing stares from the vendors. Binh narrates that they are “wondering where my allegiance lay. Whether I was the kind who would betray his own to save his Monsieur the equivalent of a couple of centimes. Whether I lived off of their blood or his money” (63). When faced with choosing “us” or “them,” Binh politely declines such binary classification: “Neither, thank you” (63). Even though he is a Vietnamese man who works for the French, this does not mean that he must pledge his allegiance to either. He is neither bound by money, signifying colonial imperialism, nor blood, signifying nationalism. For instance, when Blériot hires three poor street boys to carry the groceries and pays them an enormous fee that is “laughable or larcenous, depending on the mood of your Monsieur” (121), Binh does not intervene but merely translates their interactions. He does not try to save his French

⁵ There are other characters in the novel who suffer Fanonian problems: the chauffeur and madame’s secretary in the governor-general’s household, as well as Marcus Lattimore, who is one of Binh’s lovers.

employers money at the expense of the Vietnamese boys. Binh also does not intervene when later, realizing his mistake, Blériot cuts the boys' pay by two-thirds. Knowing that the fee is still a generous sum, Binh does not try to swindle or influence Blériot into paying the boys more. Binh follows his own sense of morality: he does not try to ingratiate himself with the French or the Vietnamese, refusing to limit himself to an either/or identity.

Rather than a divided being, Binh is a hybrid. He is a transnational subject who navigates Vietnam, France, and later the symbolic United States when he joins the Stein-Toklas household. He does not simply and wholly belong to one of these locales and cultures; neither is he a divided being whose different parts belong to different cultures. Rather his identity is a much more fluid one.⁶ Homi K. Bhabha asserts that “What is irremediably estranging in the presence of the hybrid [...] is that the difference of cultures can no longer be identified or evaluated as objects of epistemological or moral contemplation: they are not simply *there* to be seen or appropriated” (156). In hybrid figures like Binh, the line between “us” and “them” begins to blur: we cannot classify him as simply one or the other. Bhabha writes, “To see the cultural not as the source of conflict – *different* cultures – but as the *effect* of discriminatory practices – the production of cultural *differentiation* as signs of authority – changes its value and its rules of recognition” (156). In the face of hybridity, binary distinctions begin to lose their meaning; hybridity reveals that the demarcation between Us and the Others is an “effect” (156) – a result of the insistence on the part of the colonizers, whose claim to authority is based on that difference. Colonizers must differentiate between themselves and the colonized because their power rests on that claim of absolute difference: i.e. the colonizers are superior humans who bring civilization to the less

⁶ It is perhaps Binh's queer identity that allows Binh to achieve hybridity rather than fall victim to Fanonian self-division. Queerness subverts binary notions of gender and sexuality. It is perhaps this fluidity of identity that allows Binh to subvert colonial binaries as well. For more on Binh's queer identity, Naomi Edwards discusses how Binh queers various normative notions in her essay “Melancholic Ghosts.”

developed others. Hybridity, thus, is an inherently subversive state of being, one that challenges one of the basic premises of colonialism. Bhabha calls it a “spectacular resistance” (162).

Such spectacular resistance can be seen in Blériot’s interaction with the three poor street boys who carry the groceries. On their daily walk back to the governor-general’s house from the markets, Blériot acts like “a typical colonial official” (122), keeping enough distance away from Binh and the boys to assert his difference from the colonial subjects, but still keeping “close enough to relay his exclusive control over the four Indochinese who followed him” (122). He uses language in a similar manner – to keep aloof and to control, rather than to love and to accept in the manner of the scholar-prince. Blériot insists on speaking in French to Binh, knowing that the three boys do not know a word of the colonizer’s language. He places “great trust in the power of his language to elevate him from the fray, to keep his nose clean even when he was rooting in the dirt of someone else’s land” (123). Blériot is at “ease with [language’s] power to exclude, its gate-slaming pronouncements” (123).

However, despite Blériot’s absolute confidence in its exclusionary power, language elides his control. Even though the street boys do not understand Blériot’s foreign tongue, they are still privy to the meaning of his language. They recognize the sexual undertones of Blériot’s comments to Binh and detect their illicit affair, as clearly as if Binh and Blériot “had embraced in front of them and kissed each other with [their] mouths open, hungry” (123). These underprivileged colonial subjects are able to decipher fragments of language thrown their way, even though Blériot intends them to be indecipherable. They laugh and giggle at Blériot, subverting the colonial master’s absolute authority.

This subversion is enabled by hybridity. The encounter between colonial subjects and the French language results in the disruption of authority. Bhabha discusses how, when the English

Bible is received the colonized Indian people, the Bible becomes estranged from its intended meaning. He writes, “If the appearance of the English book is read as a production of colonial hybridity, then it no longer simply commands authority. It gives rise to a series of *questions of authority*” (155, emphasis original). Even though the appearance of the Bible attests to the success of the colonizers in disseminating their ideology, the colonized natives transplant and displace the Bible through their interpretation and questioning of the text. In other words, the Bible becomes hybridized. This process challenges the absolute authority of the Bible and the christening mission of colonizers.⁷ Likewise, the poor street boys are able to hybridize the French language. Despite Blériot’s intention for it to be a sign of absolute superiority and authority, the boys make it something else altogether through their interpretation and resulting laughter.

Their laughter catches the attention of others, who begin to suspect Blériot and Bìn’s relationship. When a rumor arises, Blériot denies their affair and accuses Bìn of maligning him. Bìn is dismissed from his position and his father is notified of Bìn’s homosexuality. The abusive, alcoholic father disowns him, and Bìn leaves his home and homeland, hired as a galley hand on a ship. He eventually reaches France. Bìn’s exile should remind us that hybridity is not necessarily a comfortable and secure position to occupy; it is not an easy fix to the problems of colonialism. Subversion does not equal an escape from the destructive effects of colonialism and other forms of oppression. Bìn is a transnational exile plagued by homelessness, both physically and emotionally. Exiled by his father’s homophobia, Bìn never returns to his mother or his motherland. In France, he barely survives the frequent bouts of unemployment and starvation

⁷ In the novel, Christianity (specifically Catholicism) undergoes a similar hybridization in its encounter with Vietnamese colonial subjects. Bìn’s father turns the religion into a lucrative business, and Bìn’s mother combines Catholic religious practices with indigenous ones. Christianity is also queered. Bìn frequently saturates his description of sexual acts with Catholic terminology (see Jones’s “Eucharistically Queer?”), and Toklas fantasizes about the Virgin Mary.

between jobs. Even when he is employed, he suffers terrible loneliness: being a poor gay Indochinese migrant, Binh cannot find people – his scholar-princes – who are willing to suspend hierarchical differences and offer a true sense of belonging. Instead, he continually faces oppressive systems of racism, colonialism, heteronormativity, and classism at every turn. Binh's subversive hybridity does not give him immunity from the violence of oppression.

Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas: Binh's Madame and Madame

Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas are other potential scholar-princes. Even though they do not have a romantic relationship with Binh, they offer Binh the possibility of 'home.' Before he is employed by the couple, Binh suffers terrible bouts of unemployment and abusive employment. In the three years between arriving at Paris and finding Toklas and Stein, Binh "interview[s] with and even work[s] for an embarrassing number of households" (16). He categorizes his numerous interviewers into three types. The first are those who slam the door after taking a quick glimpse at Binh's face. The second group are those who "insist on stripping [him] with questions" (16) and then decline to hire him after their interrogation satisfies their morbid curiosity. The last group he calls "the collectors" (18). They hire him, and Binh cooks beautifully for them. However, they "are never satiated by [his] cooking" (19). Binh understands what they truly hunger for:

The honey that they covet lies inside my scars [...] They have no true interest in where I have been or what I have seen. They crave the fruits of exile, the bitter juices, and the heavy hearts. They yearn for a taste of the pure, sea-salt sadness of the outcast whom they have brought into their homes. And I am but one within a long line of others. The Algerian orphaned by a famine, the Moroccan violated by his uncle, the Madagascan driven out of his village because his shriveled left hand was a sign of his mother's misdeeds, these are the wounded trophies who have preceded me. (19)

These employers are not content with extracting their servant's labor; they demand pain. They feed

on the stories of migrant laborers who have been uprooted from their colonial homelands – Algeria, Morocco, Madagascar and Vietnam are all former French colonies. The French masters turn their servants' pain into consumable commodities – “fruits,” “juices,” and “trophies” – feasting on their exotic suffering and curating them as souvenirs. Binh does not last long in these households. After a few weeks or at best a few months, Binh begins writing wordless “letters of [his] resignation” (20) by forgetting key ingredients and omitting important steps of his recipes. He then again wanders the streets of Paris until he can find another “Monsieur and Madame” to hire him.

Compared to the cruelty of these other employers, Toklas and Stein offer Binh a much more humane employment, and even the possibility of belonging. Stein and Toklas, for instance, allow Binh to eat the same food as they do: “These two, unlike all the others whom I have had the misfortune to call my Monsieur and Madame, extend to me the right to eat what they eat, a right that, as you know, is really more of a privilege when it is I who am doing the cooking” (210). His previous employers had denied him the food that he cooks and they eat, marking the boundary between themselves and their servants by restricting who can eat what. Stein and Toklas, on the other hand, allow Binh to partake in the same food. Binh explains the significance of such sharing: “When I place that first bite of *boeuf Adrienne* in my mouth and I am brought to my knees – figuratively speaking, of course, as I reserve that posture for love and prayers [...] I know that my Mesdames are on their knees as well” (210). For Binh, eating the same food is much more than just the simple physical act: they are sharing the same highly intimate and even spiritual experience. Such a gastronomic communion unites them with a familiarity – a family-like-ness – that Binh does not find in other places of work.

Binh grows quite fond of Stein and Toklas, referring to them as “my Madame and Madame” or “my Mesdames,” and describing their idiosyncrasies with an affection that he does not exhibit

toward his other employers. He explains that Stein and Toklas provide a special refuge for him: “I have my Madame and Madame. As long as I am with them, I have shelter” (149). This special bond between the trio is perhaps based on their similar exclusions; just as Binh and Blériot share similarities, Binh, Toklas, and Stein also share experiences of otherness. Stein and Toklas are not Binh’s typical “Monsieur and Madame”; they are “Madame and Madame.” They share with Binh the experience of inhabiting the periphery, of being sexual Others. Their home is a queer space in which some heteropatriarchal gender and sexuality norms have been subverted or at least transformed. Stein and Toklas are also transnational subjects like Binh. They are Americans in Paris, self-exiled from their homeland. It is perhaps not surprising then that Binh is able to reside in Stein and Toklas’s queer diasporic household for much longer than he is able to at any other Parisian household.

Binh shares especially with Gertrude Stein a key similarity: linguistic exclusion. Binh states that “her French, like mine, has its limits. It denies her” (34). Speaking only rudimentary French, Stein and Binh share the common experience of denial and rejection; they are marked by their limited French, and cannot participate in ‘normal’ linguistic exchanges. Instead, they have to rely on simple phrases and body language. This does not stop them, however. Stein, rather than being embarrassed, speaks with a “stunning grace” and an “unapologetic swagger” (34), making up for her lack of words with “the tone of her voice and the warmth of her eyes” (34). Indeed, Stein relishes the way she forces the French language to accommodate her; Binh states, “Her broad American accent [...] pleases her to no end” (33). Like Binh, Stein is a transnational subject who negotiates exclusionary boundaries: where French denies her, she responds by transforming it and making it her own. This assertive linguistic play provides Binh with much pleasure: he states, “When I hear her speak [French], I am filled with something very close to joy” (34). It even gives

him a sense of camaraderie with Stein: “I think [her French] a companion to my own. I think we exchange one-word condolences and communicate the rest with our eyes. I think *this* we have in common.” (34) Binh recognizes Stein as a fellow transnational subject. He also recognizes that she, like him, is an eager and skilled participant in language games. The “one-word condolences” evoke the single words inscribed on the pebbles of Binh’s fantasy. Like the scholar-prince, Stein has the ability to play the game of displaced meanings and creative interpretation.

This recognition is mutual. Just as Binh finds pleasure in Stein’s mutated French, Gertrude Stein also becomes fascinated with Binh’s language use. On the day that he is hired by Stein and Toklas, Binh wants to ask for money to buy a pineapple but forgets the name of the fruit as soon as he opens his mouth. He instead offers, “Madame, I want to buy a pear... not a pear” (35). He mimes the fruit by putting his hands on top of his head with his fingers spread out, becoming “the embodiment of ‘a-pear-not-a-pear’” (35). Binh describes Stein’s delight at his phrase, “Already, my Madame was amusing herself with my French. She was wrapping my words around her tongue, saving them for a later, more careful study of their mutations” (35). Stein relishes Binh’s words, and hungers for more. She makes a “habit to test [Binh’s] skills” every day after dinner, pointing at different objects and asking Binh to name them.

These evening sessions inspire Stein: Binh explains, “She is affirmed by my use of negatives and repetitions. She is inspired by witnessing such an elemental, bare-knuckled breakdown of a language” (34). These characteristics – negatives, repetitions, and breakdown of language – which Binh teaches the fictional Gertrude Stein are actual hallmarks of the historical Gertrude Stein’s poetry. Catherine Fung asserts that in this moment, Monique Truong “playfully suggests that Stein’s experimental aesthetics come from her attempts to translate her servant’s speech” (Fung 101). Fung compares Binh’s a-pear-not-a-pear moment with the historical Gertrude

Stein's famous line "Rose is a rose is a rose" (101). Binh enjoys this artistic cooperation, calling Stein his "coconspirator" (34). They are partners in playing word games.

Gertrude Stein, however, turns out to be yet another collector: cooperation soon turns to cooptation. Having exhausted her supply of household objects to point to, Stein asks Binh, "Thin Bin⁸, how would you define 'love'?" (36) Even though this question may seem innocent and harmless, Binh reacts with deep aversion. Stein has transgressed a line; she has made the jump from the objective to the personal, and Binh does not wish to share with her his personal, painful stories. Binh realizes that "GertrudeStein, like the collectors who have preceded her, wants to see the stretch marks on my tongue" (36). She is just like his former employers, who interrogate their colonial servants for their pained stories and satisfy their curiosity with their suffering. Disillusioned, Binh both answers and refuses to answer her question: "I point to a table on which several quinces sit yellowing in a blue and white china bowl. I shake my head in their direction, and I leave the room, speechless" (36). Leaving Stein with a silent enigma, Binh ends the conversation, declining to play Stein's word game and refusing to supply her with his stories.

Stein's appropriative move reveals that she is not Binh's scholar-prince. Even though Stein and Toklas shares their household with Binh, they do not provide him with a true home. Binh's exclusion is highlighted through language: when Stein and Toklas talk in English, Binh is often shut out from their conversation. For instance, Stein has many nicknames for Toklas, which include "Sweetie," "Queen," "Cake," and "Wifie" (155). Binh has "heard them all" (155), and this intimate knowledge could make him feel like a member of their circle, except for the fact that he "do[es] not know what they mean" (155). By conversing in English, Stein and Toklas effectively shut him out of their family circle. They do not invite him to partake in their conversations. Instead, Binh

⁸ "Thin Bin" is Gertrude Stein's nickname for Binh. He in turn gives her a nickname, "GertrudeStein," pronounced as a single word.

must invite himself into their intimate circle. He does so by following the advice given to him by Bão, a fellow diasporic Vietnamese laborer:

“Slip your own meanings into their words,’ he [Bão] said, a bit of advice that has saved me. Language is a house with a host of doors, and I am too often uninvited and without the keys. But when I infiltrate their words, take a stab at their meanings, I create the trapdoors that will allow me in when the night outside is too cold and dark. (155)

Binh follows Bão’s advice of hybridizing language: Binh gives new meanings to words that he does not understand, and in doing so, he transforms them. When he does not understand the pet name “Cake,” Binh associates the name with the English name “Kate” and arrives at his new definition of the word: “A ‘Kate’ who is good enough for GertrudeStein to eat is a ‘Cake’” (155). Through interpreting the English language in this creative manner, Binh invites himself to be a part of Stein and Toklas’s intimate lives. He refuses to stay outside. Not invited to share in the warmth of their house, Binh instead subtly and subversively changes its structure altogether, inviting himself in without the knowledge of the inhabitants. Such subversion allows him to survive; it has saved him.

Stein’s Manuscript

Gertrude Stein also invites herself to forbidden knowledge, except with much more destructive ramifications. Even though Binh refuses to share his personal stories with her, Stein takes them from him. Stein’s ultimate cooptation of Binh’s words is revealed near the end of the book. Convinced by his lover Marcus Lattimore to steal one of Stein’s manuscripts, Binh takes a thin notebook from her cabinet. Binh skims the manuscript, unable to comprehend the English words, until his eyes catch the word “Bin” – Stein’s misspelled rendition of his name – repeated page after page. Binh feels profoundly disoriented:

With each sighting [of my name], I am overwhelmed by the feeling that I am witnessing

myself drowning. There... I am, I think. Here... I am again. I am 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 cast me in there anyway, I think. (214-15)

Spotting his name in the manuscript leads to a linguistic and existential crisis. Binh sees his misspelled name – the only English word he recognizes, other than “please” – drowning in a sea of strange words. This linguistic crisis leads to a feeling that he is “surrounded on all sides by strangers”: he can no longer feel that he knows his Madame and Madam, who have become strangers in their cooptation of his story. He feels as though the lines of words are unravelling and he can no longer hold on to keep himself from drowning in the sea of illegibility; his very existence is threatened by Stein's taking of his story. Gertrude Stein has cast him in the sea, fully aware that he does not know that she has taken his story, and that he *cannot* know because she writes in English, a language that he is excluded from.

His disorientation soon gives way to indignation. In an internal monologue, Binh expresses his outrage at Gertrude Stein's theft:

I did not give you my permission, Madame, to treat me in this way. I am here to feed you, not to serve as your fodder. [...] My story, Madame, is mine. I alone am qualified to tell it, to embellish or to withhold. (215)

Binh's story has been wrongfully taken from him. He had not given her the right; he had not voluntarily offered her the pebbles of his story. Binh believes that he alone has the right and ability to give them away: his story is his, and the choice of gifting them should be his to make.

His story, however, is stolen from him and in doing so, Gertrude Stein forecloses the opportunity for queer diasporic solidarity. It does not matter whether Stein's account of Binh's life may be “affectionate, glowing, heroic, even” (215) as Lattimore reassures Binh that it could be. Even if Gertrude Stein had written the text to immortalize Binh and to give voice to him as an ally,

she is doubly unqualified to tell his tale: Binh has neither told her his stories nor given her his permission. Binh knows that, at the center of this cooptation, is power difference between him and his Madame. Binh caustically tells himself, “A gift or a theft depends on who is holding the pen” (215). Even though they share similar exclusions, Stein occupies a higher socio-economic and racial position – a position that enables her to hold the pen. As a famed white writer of comfortable means, Gertrude Stein can yield authority over Binh’s narrative, shaping it in whatever manner it pleases her. More than that, she has the power to decide for posterity whether his story has been gifted to her or stolen by her. As a poor colonial migrant laborer, excluded from the English language and excluded from the Western textual realm, Binh cannot speak or write back against the renowned white author.

LIMITS: CAN BINH SPEAK?

The Book of Salt

This more-or-less straightforward indictment of a white author’s appropriation of a subaltern subject, however, demands a revision when the title of Gertrude Stein’s manuscript is revealed. Marcus Lattimore, despite having promised Binh that he will return the manuscript the following week so that Binh can return it to Stein’s cabinet, betrays Binh’s trust and departs with the manuscript. He leaves behind a hastily written note: “Bee, thank you for *The Book of Salt*. Stein captured you, perfectly” (238). In this metafictional moment, the dots are connected for the readers: Stein’s manuscript may very well be the book we hold in our hands.

This is a disorienting discovery: if the manuscript and the novel were really the same text, what the readers had believed to be Binh’s words, unadulterated and originating transparently from his rich interiority, are actually Gertrude Stein’s creations. Indeed, it is tempting to reject that

hypothesis, to see the manuscript and the novel as two completely different texts, and to interpret the novel as Binh's reclaimed and rewritten version of Gertrude Stein's appropriative manuscript. After all, how could the fictive Gertrude Stein know Binh's most intimate stories and feelings when he never shared them with her? Moreover, Binh calls her 'a collector,' someone who relishes the sensational tragedies of colonial subalterns but is not genuinely interested in truly knowing them. Given that characterization, it seems highly unlikely that Gertrude Stein would be able to write such a rich, three-dimensional narrative that *The Book of Salt* is. Binh says as much, when he asks Gertrude Stein in an internal monologue after learning the manuscript's title:

Salt, I thought. GertrudeStein, what kind? Kitchen, sweat, tears, or the sea. Madame, they are not all the same. Their stings, their smarts, their strengths, the distinctions among them are fine. Do you know, GertrudeStein, which ones I have tasted on my tongue? (260-61)

Binh does not believe that Gertrude Stein knows the subtleties and nuances of his pained narrative, symbolized by distinct kinds of salt. Gertrude Stein is a collector who wants to see "the stretch marks on [his] tongue" (36), the thick scars left by his experiences, rather than what he had actually experienced and "tasted on [his] tongue." Given Stein's appropriation and lack of true interest in Binh's life, the readers may reach the conclusion that the novel is separate from Gertrude Stein's manuscript. It is much more heartening to imagine that Binh has reclaimed Stein's exploitive and distorted version of his story and has written a truer and more authentic one. And it is less disorienting to not have to question the voice that the readers have grown so familiar with and fond of.

However, this interpretation is unraveled by the problem of language: if *The Book of Salt* were written or somehow voiced by Binh, why would he write it in English, a language that he does not know? Binh's linguistic exclusion is highlighted in the very moment that the readers discover the title of the manuscript. After reading Lattimore's note – "Bee, thank you for *The Book*

of Salt” (238) – Binh is unable to comprehend the title. He explains, “The note was written in French except for the four English words. The title of my Madame’s notebook, I assume. In his haste, he could not even translate it for me” (238). This is a rather dissonant moment, in which the ‘I’ voice speaks in English but cannot comprehend English. This dissonance highlights Binh’s displacement from *The Book of Salt*: he cannot comprehend, let alone write in, English.⁹ Binh’s story has been constructed, or at least translated, by an English-speaking American author. The readers can no longer uncomplicatedly understand Binh’s narrative as his own. The ‘authenticity’ and ‘truth’ of his narrative are shaken to their roots.

Of course, ultimately, the English-speaking American author of Binh’s life story is Monique Truong. By pointing to Gertrude Stein’s authorship of *The Book of Salt*, Monique Truong reminds the readers of her own authorship of *The Book of Salt*. In doing so she shatters the believable conceit of the first person narrative: *The Book of Salt* is not a transparent window into a subaltern subjectivity. Neither does it claim to be. Rather, Truong reveals the novel to be a heavily mediated construction.

Thus, through the metafictional tool of *The Book of Salt* within *The Book of Salt*, Monique Truong engages with larger questions about what it means to write a subaltern narrative. The discovery of the manuscript does not just serve as a critique of Western authors’ appropriation of a subaltern narrative or a celebration of a subaltern’s subversive reclaiming of his own life story. Rather, the moment deconstructs what otherwise can be seen as an ‘authentic’ subaltern story – Binh’s own voice reaching the readers from across a historical void, defying the oppressive systems that have tried to silence him. Instead, his voice is revealed to be a discursively constructed product of an author who cannot possibly know him. Perhaps this moment can be seen as the

⁹ Park also writes about the problem of English language in *The Book of Salt*. She takes a different vein of argument than mine: she argues that Truong’s writing of Binh’s story in English is an oppressive move.

ultimate word game. In the moment of the book's discovery, the shrouding mist is yanked away to reveal the author at the other end, producing the text that the readers are receiving. *The Book of Salt* within *The Book of Salt* thus demystifies (or, de-mist-ifies) the author's active role in shaping a subaltern's story: there is no pure subaltern narrative that recovers 'authentic' subaltern subjectivity. Binh's voice, and the voices of the cooks that he represents, cannot be recovered.

This deconstructive move can be better understood when contemplated in conjunction with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's famous essay and question, "Can the subaltern speak?" In the essay, Spivak critiques an important presumption underlying the recovery of subaltern voices: that the subalterns "can speak and know their conditions" (78) if given the chance to voice themselves. Spivak argues that such a presumption ignores the role of the representer; the authors of subaltern narratives are presented as a transparent and non-interfering medium through which the subalterns speak. Spivak warns against this danger of the "first-world intellectual masquerading as the absent nonrepresenter who lets the oppressed speak for themselves" (87). The first-world representer is far from being a passive and silent medium; rather, they actively construct subaltern narratives, and their Western ideologies inform their construction. For instance, in trying to present the subaltern in a manner comprehensible to the West, the authors invest the subaltern with hallmarks of Western humanism, such as agency, individuality, and subjectivity. Spivak warns against this "danger of appropriating the other by assimilation" (104). Such transformation of the Other turns them into a reflection of the Self. The Western author transforms the subaltern into a subject knowable by the West, translating him to be legible to the Western reader. In Binh's case, he has been literally 'translated' into English. And in this transformation, the subaltern disappears. The subaltern cannot speak, Spivak answers her question. *The Book of Salt* within *The Book of Salt* acknowledges this impossibility by making visible the previously transparent position of the author:

Bình cannot speak, at least not in an uncomplicated manner. He has been represented, translated, and transformed. His voice – and the voices of the cooks he represents – cannot be recovered.

The unknowability of the subaltern is further highlighted when Bình's name is revealed to be a pseudonym. We discover near the end of the novel that when Binh leaves Vietnam and boards the ship headed to France, he adopts the name Bình (243). Like the discovery of the manuscript, this revelation is a disorienting one. The illusion that the narrative belongs to Bình is doubly shattered: the manuscript makes the readers aware of the impossibility of knowing Bình's story, and the revelation of the name makes the readers aware of the impossibility of knowing Bình. His identity slips past our grasp. The 'authentic' subaltern whom we thought we understood disappears. The feelings of intimacy and familiarity that the readers had built with Bình are dissipated. When earlier in the novel Binh laments that none of his employers pronounce his name correctly and that he desires for "another voice to say [his] name" (32), the readers feel that they are part of an intimate circle who can call Bình by his correct name. The revelation reminds us that we are forever outsiders to Bình's interiority: the readers do not and cannot know him.

This inaccessibility of the subaltern presents a dilemma for the Western intellectuals: do we represent the subaltern, and thus transform them into a subject that we can understand (and the subaltern disappears again); or do we acknowledge their unknowability and not represent the subaltern (and the subaltern stays invisible, excluded from the discursive fields which privilege the elite)? Spivak writes, "The radical intellectual in the West is either caught in a deliberate choice of subalternity, granting to the oppressed either that very expressive subjectivity which s/he criticizes or, instead, a total unrepresentability" (17). For the "radical intellectual" – such as scholars and students of women's studies, queer studies, ethnic studies, and many other fields – who wish to push against the privileging of the elite voice, this is a pressing question without an

easy solution.

This is a dilemma that the field of Asian American studies has and must continue to address. Laura Kang discusses the problems of representation that arise when Asian American historians, recognizing the exclusion of Asian American voices (especially those of women) from mainstream histories, attempt to recover them. Kang discusses in particular historiographies of early Asian women immigrants. Kang found that these historiographies “frequently slip into what [Kang] would call a ‘subjectivizing’ mode” (156). For instance, Kang argues that Benson Tong endows Chinese prostitutes of the nineteenth century with “an accessible subjectivity” (157) and presents them as “‘actors,’ ‘agents,’ and ‘survivors’ who ‘desired,’ ‘strategized,’ and ‘chose’ to leave the sex trade” (157). However, due to archival paucity – the same paucity that motivates the historiographer – there is little evidence to back up such claims. There is nothing to be ‘recovered’ or ‘uncovered’: there is no way for the Asian American historiographer to access subaltern subjectivity. Indeed, this metaphor of “methodological excavation” (147) which recurs in the “numerous calls to ‘recover our “buried past”” (147), belies the authorial mediation that these subaltern historical accounts go through. The metaphor posits that subaltern histories exist as “some solid, unchanged thing” (147) and only need to be found, dusted off, and presented. This imagery obscures the historian’s active construction of the subaltern. Following the logic of this implication, Asian American historians have presented their ‘recovered’ accounts of Asian women as “(more) accurately represent[ing] an extradiscursive Asian American historical reality” (46). Such claims, however, fail to examine “the vexatious implication that [the recovered history] too is a partial, situated discursive production” (46). And the Asian American subaltern remains silent and invisible as ever.

The Book of Salt, one may argue, is similarly motivated as these Asian American projects

and similarly subjectivizes the Asian subaltern. Truong was inspired to write the novel because of the paucity in Toklas's account of the cooks' stories, and she gives Binh a rich interiority and a subversive agency which ultimately cannot be supported because of the same paucity, and which cohere to Western humanist ideals. *The Book of Salt* differs, however, in that it recognizes its limits – and potential – as a discursively constructed narrative – an acknowledgement that Kang would call “not undemocratic” (159).¹⁰ When Binh indicts Gertrude Stein of stealing his stories and being unqualified to tell them – “My story, Madame, is mine. I alone am qualified to tell it, to embellish or to withhold” (215) – Binh may be simultaneously indicting subaltern authors, including Monique Truong, of a similar theft, incapability, and distortion. There is no way for the subaltern author to communicate with the subaltern, ask for his permission, and learn all the different nuances and subtleties (the different kinds of salt) of a subaltern's narrative. The line between representation and appropriation (between gift and theft) is a thin, blurred line when it comes to subaltern narratives: in representing the subaltern, the Western author cannot avoid appropriating them.

Affirmative Deconstruction

We cannot disavow representation of the subaltern, however. We cannot simply acknowledge the subaltern's fundamental unknowability and throw up our hands in surrender. Spivak concludes her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” not with a prohibition but with an exhortation to feminist writers of subaltern women's history: the last sentence of the essay reads, “The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with

¹⁰ Kang writes, “I would like to underscore how the realities of the present undertaking of Asian/American women's historical representation force an acknowledgment of certain unknowabilities, and that doing so is not undemocratic” (159).

a flourish” (104). Even though subaltern narratives are severely circumscribed in their ability to ‘recover’ lost subaltern voice, they nonetheless must not be abandoned. Two questions arise at her insistence: why should we not give up representing the subaltern and how should we do so? In an introduction to *Selected Subaltern Studies*, Spivak writes that rather than staying at the level of deconstruction, a subaltern historian can embrace ‘affirmative deconstruction’ as “a strategy” (16). Knowing fully that representing the subaltern as a subject “is theoretically non-viable” (16), the historian adopts a “strategic blindness” (16) in order to pursue “a scrupulously delineated ‘political interest’” (16). Subaltern narratives can thus be pursued and understood as strategic projects undertaken by authors in pursuit of a political agenda, rather than as objective, ‘truth-seeking’ projects that attempt to recover ‘true and authentic’ experiences of forgotten peoples.

The Book of Salt can therefore be read as a political project that opens a productive discursive space that challenges dominant oppressive modes of representation. It offers an alternative – albeit a circumscribed one that also cannot avoid appropriation – to the mainstream narratives that we have of colonial migrant laborers. The concluding paragraph of *The Book of Salt* is instructive of this. In the very beginning as well as in last paragraph of the novel, Binh contemplates two newspaper photographs. These photographs are taken on the day that Stein and Toklas leave France to return to the United States. One of them is taken on the deck of the ship that will take Binh’s Madame and Madame back. Binh describes the photo:

It captures my Mesdames perfectly. I am over there, the one with my back turned to the camera. I am not bowing at Gertrude Stein’s feet. I am sewing the button back onto her right shoe. The button had come loose in the excitement of coming aboard ship. (261)

Binh is found in the photograph simply as a shadowy figure in an insignificant corner with his back turned to the camera; this peripheral and impersonal portrayal echoes the marginalized position of subaltern subjects. To a ‘reader’ of this piece of archival evidence, this shadowy

‘Indochinese’ man may appear as if he were bowing at the feet of a celebrated white author. Binh decisively resists and rejects that interpretation and offers an alternative account, “I am sewing the button back onto her right shoe” (261). Although in both scenarios, Binh occupies a subordinated position, Binh’s account reveals a much more complex relationship between the celebrated figure of the West and the colonial migrant: Binh may work for her, but his labor does not entail that he worship her or grovel at her feet. Rather, Binh’s alternative reveals a nuanced relationship that simple binaries cannot sufficiently describe: Binh and Stein’s relationship cannot be simply reduced to a relationship between the powerful and the obedient, the oppressor and the oppressed, the worshipped and the worshipper, employer and employee. He works for her and he kneels at her feet, but he is neither servile nor worshipful. He can claim a familiarity that allows him to touch her feet and to know personal details about her (she was so excited that her button came off). Indeed, Binh describes the newspaper photographs as “family photographs of [a] public kind” (261), including himself as a member of Stein’s family. Despite this familiarity, however, Binh as her ‘Indochinese’ cook, can only exist as a nameless and faceless figure in the margins of the official documents of the Lost Generation.

Thus, Binh’s alternative interpretation of the photograph – a subaltern reading of marginal archival evidence, if you will¹¹ – brushes against the grain of normative narratives. Just as Bhabha’s English Bible is challenged and transformed in its encounter with the subaltern, the photograph as a Western artifact is transformed in its encounter with Binh. This hybridization accomplishes three things. First, it decenters the center. Even though the photograph documents Stein and Toklas, Binh does not focus on them but only briefly states, “It captures my Mesdames

¹¹ There are precedents for such subaltern readings of photographs in the field of Asian American Studies. See Chapter 1 of David Eng’s *Racial Castration*, in which Eng examines the exclusion of Chinese railroad workers from photographs of railroad completion ceremonies. Even though the railroads were made possible by the backbreaking labor of Chinese workers, official visual records render them invisible.

perfectly” (261). The rest of the description centers on Bìn, his actions, and the nature of his relationship with his Mesdames. Second, the authority of the photograph is challenged: Bìn’s alternative explanation makes explicit the perspectives and ideologies informing the creation and reception of the archival document. Even though as a newspaper photograph, it may claim to represent objective reality, the photograph is not a transparent and objective representation of ‘truth.’ There is a reason why Bìn is only captured as a shadowy figure in the margins: class and race inform the artistic choices of the photographer. And there is a reason why Bìn must specify that he is not bowing at Gertrude Stein’s feet. Bìn’s racially marked “body offers an exacting, predetermined life story” (152); people only see him as a type – an Indochinese laborer – and make quick, distorted judgments about who he is and what he is doing. Bìn’s alternative account makes us aware of the interpretive frameworks informing both the creation and reception of the photograph. Third, Bìn’s account opens up the possibility for different perspectives and different stories than those told by dominant narratives. It makes us aware of the existence of the figures in the margins, whom could have been easily missed, and allows us to question why they are there and what their stories could be.

Bìn’s description of the second photograph revolves precisely around such a question. This photograph is taken at Gare du Nord, as Bìn and his Mesdames wait for their train. He explains that in the photograph, his eyes are closed because he is thinking at that moment. In his head he hears a question, which he describes in the very last sentences of the novel:

“What keeps you here?” I hear a voice asking. Your question, just your desire to know my answer, keeps me, is my response. In the dark, I see you smile. I look up instinctually, as if someone has called out my name. (261)

Even though this question is previously asked by one of Bìn’s love interests,¹² I like to imagine

¹² Man on the Bridge (who is later elliptically revealed to be Ho Chi Minh) asks Bìn this question (85).

this moment as Bìn's interaction with the readers – the second-person “you” pointing to us the readers – across the immense dark mist that separates us. This interaction can perhaps be understood by again considering Spivak, who exhorts writers of subaltern women's history to “learn to speak to (rather than listen to or speak for) the historically muted subject of the subaltern woman” (“Can the Subaltern Speak?” 91). The readers, in asking Bìn the question “What keeps you here?”, examine the oppressive conditions that keep him where he is – in the margins of history. Such desire of the readers to know the condition of the subaltern keeps Bìn from disappearing into the folds of dominant narratives. Such a desire provides Bìn with an anchor, a home. We have the potential to be his scholar-prince.

However, in the end, Bìn does disappear. After this brief interaction, the novel ends, reminding the readers that we do not and cannot know what happens to Bìn after this point. Bìn remains elusive. The ending reminds us that we do not know who Bìn is: Bìn feels as if he hears us calling his name, but we do not know which name Bìn is referring to. Both Bìn and the readers' desires remain unfulfilled: neither the readers' desire to know him nor his desire for us to call him by his name can be fulfilled. This unresolved nature of the interaction keeps us, in both senses of the word. Our unresolved desire to know the subaltern *keep us close to* Bìn, striving to hear his voice and know his story. And the impossibility of resolution *keeps us from* him, from claiming that we hear him and know him. This tension creates a productive space, in which the readers can speak *to* the subaltern and interrogate the conditions that marginalize him, while fully acknowledging that we cannot listen to him or speak for him. Thus, ultimately, interacting with the subaltern allows us to turn an inward eye, to our own systems of oppression and our roles in perpetuating them. Speaking to the subaltern allows us not to interrogate him, but us.

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