

## Diasporic Memory, Commodity, and the Politics of the Gift in Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt*

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### ABSTRACT

**T***his paper is a materialist study of memory in Monique Truong's first novel *The Book of Salt* (2004), which is one of the most acclaimed Asian-American works of fiction to have been published in recent decades. From the novel's striking first line, Truong draws attention not only to her protagonist narrator and his memories, but also to two photographs. Drawing on the conceptualisation of photography and material culture by Elizabeth Edwards, Walter Benjamin, Daniel Miller, and Arjun Appadurai among others, this paper analyses the photographs and other everyday objects of memory in the novel as material traces of the narrator's presence and absence, as well as his labour. Apart from a close look at the images, the photographs are analysed as objects and as artefacts of worship and commoditisation. This allows a further exploration of the concept of exchange and the question of the value of these everyday objects. The paper also engages with a critical analysis of the concept of the gift, based on the novel's ambiguous statement: "A gift or a theft depends on who is holding the pen," concluding that the material traces of Binh's labour and his involvement in the gift exchange system represents the novel's attempt to perpetuate remembering, amidst the oblivion-induced commodity exchange.*

**Keywords:** Memory, Materiality, Trace, Commoditization, Gift exchange