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

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ABTRACT

This 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

INTRODUCTION

Monique Truong's first novel, *The Book of Salt*, is one of the most acclaimed Asian-American works of fiction to have been published in recent decades. Set in the 1930s, the novel tells the story of the protagonist narrator, a migrant domestic labourer from colonial Vietnam and a fictional Vietnamese live-in chef for the Steins, the writers Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, during their residency at 27 Rue de Fleurus. Truong is inspired by the real figures of two Vietnamese chefs, briefly mentioned in Toklas' *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book*[1], and imagines her character as "one of the candidates who answered Stein and Toklas's classified ad" (Truong 2003).

The novel's striking first line reads, "Of that day, I have two photographs and, of course, my memories" (p.1). With this, Truong draws attention not only to her protagonist narrator and his "memories", but also the "two photographs" of "that day". The protagonist narrator, Binh, refers here to the day his Mesdames, Stein and Toklas, were leaving Paris and he was accompanying them to Le Havre, to board the SS *Champlain*. But what are the implications of the two 'fictional' photographs in relation to memory? How can we approach photographs and other everyday objects of memory in Truong's novel? This paper will try to address these questions.

"Modern memory," as Pierre Nora (1996) puts it, "relies entirely on the specificity of the trace, the materiality of the vestige, the concreteness of the recording, the visibility of image" (p.8). People engage in accumulating 'fragments, reports, document, images, and speeches – any tangible sign of what was'; we 'refrain from destroying anything and put everything in archives instead" (p.9). The cult of archiving and collecting can also lead to the commoditization of objects of memory. This paper is, therefore, a response to some of these aspects of studying photographs as material culture. In addition, it also seems convenient to take Elizabeth Edwards's materialist study of photographs as a starting point for the discussion of photographs and other everyday objects in the novel. In her article "Photographs as Objects of Memory", Edwards (1999) posits that, 'Photographs have inextricably linked meanings as images and as objects: an indissoluble, yet ambiguous, melding of image and form, both of which are direct products of intention" (p.223).

Referring to the two material dimensions of photographs – "as images and as objects" – that Edwards

[1]In the chapter entitled 'Servants in France', Toklas mentioned that one of the chefs, Trac, 'came to us through an advertisement that I had in desperation put in a newspaper. It began captivatingly for those days: "Two American ladies wish..." (Alice B. Toklas, 2010, p. 186).

suggests, I shall approach the photographs and other everyday objects of memory in the novel as traces of Binh's presence and absence in the Steins' story. The photographs will be analysed as images (what appears on the photographic prints) and as objects (material, form, and display). In addition, as Truong also demonstrates in her text, a photograph as an object can become an artefact of worship and commoditisation. Considering the photographs in this second aspect will then allow me to further explore the concept of exchange and the question of the value of these everyday objects. I shall conclude my study in the third part of the paper by analysing the concept of the gift in order to add to the interpretation of the novel's ambiguous statement, "A Gift or a theft depends on who is holding the pen" (p. 215).

Photographs and other everyday objects of memory

"Every photograph is a certificate of presence," wrote Roland Barthes (1993, p.87) in his tour-de-force text on photography, *Camera Lucida*. Right from the start of the novel, Truong creates two fictional photographs that certify the presence of her protagonist, Binh, in the Steins' history. The two photographs, one taken at the Gare Du Nord and the other on board the ship, record the events on the day of the Steins' departure. "Photography," Barthes also points out, "authenticates the existence of a certain being" (p.107). It seems that putting the figure of Binh in the photographic record of a real event can authenticate his existence and his memories. Even more, it is possible to see Truong's creation of the two fictional photographs as a way of authenticating not only the existence of her character, but also that of the Steins' real-life chefs.

Few critics of the novel have focused on these two photographs in particular. Maud Casey (2010), for instance, in her essay "The Secret History: The Power of Imagined Figures in Historical Fiction" discusses the two photographs in connection to the fictional presence of Truong's character and the co-existence of factual and fictional worlds, arguing that "the 'real' picture and the 'fictional picture' co-exist in this fictional world. […] A true fact and a true fiction. That co-mingling tells a kind of history, too. Not, perhaps, the real history, but the true history" (p.63).

Additionally, Catherine Fung (2012) in "A History of Absences: the Problem of Reference in Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt*" points out Truong's "desire to create presence where absence has existed" (p.96), and notes that Truong "draws attention to the fact that no testimony, data, or any other sort of 'evidence' can be recovered to trace her protagonist's existence" (p.96). Fung also argues that Truong's creation of her protagonist, "as an unidentifiable phantasm in the photo […] constantly defines him by means of his absence or erasure" (p.96). As she further elaborates,

Truong is preoccupied with the inevitable erasures that result in the process of making a particular social history recognizable or intelligible. She invites us to read Binh's narrative as historically plausible, all the while deliberately highlighting its fictionality by reminding us of Binh's absence (p.96-7).

Susan Sontag (1977) in her canonical text, *On Photography*, posits that, "A photograph is both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence" (p.16). Thus, to add to Casey and Fung's readings of the two photographs, I shall focus on the photographs as objects of memory. I shall argue that, despite the fact that Binh's presence is defined by his absence or erasure, as suggested by Fung above, these photographs are material traces of not only his existence, but also his labour. I will focus on the questions of what kind of trace Truong creates for her characters and how the trace affects or undermines the existence of his Mesdames.

The dialectic of surface and depth, the presence and absence, and "the layers of the self and psyche" were among the main concerns of modernist aesthetics in the 1920s (Leslie, 2003, p. 172). Among others, Sigmund Freud's (1997) essay "A Note upon the 'Mystic Writing Pad' " illustrates the interplay between surface and depth and the concept of memory traces[2]. One important aspect is how the apparatus can "provide both an ever-ready receptive surface and permanent traces of the notes that have been made upon it" (p.209). The writing tablet consists of strata of receptive surface – the two layers of transparent sheet – and its depth, which is represented by the wax slab. Upon writing on the surface, Freud observed, "The permanent trace of what was written is retained upon the wax slab itself and is legible in suitable lights. (p.211)" He claimed that the writing tablet could represent "the functioning of the perceptual apparatus of our mind" (p.212), claiming that the layers of transparent sheet functions similarly to perception and

[2]In his short essay, Freud (1997) regards writing as a material way to "supplement and guarantee" (p. 207) the working of memory. Contemplating on various choices of a writing-surface that will grant him "a permanent memory-trace" (p. 207), Freud contends that a sheet of paper and a slate nonetheless contain their own limitation. While the receptive capacity of a sheet of paper is limited, the slate does not allow the preservation of a permanent trace, "to put some fresh notes upon the slate, I must first wipe out the ones which cover it" (p. 208). In the course of searching for an apparatus that will help him to possess a permanent memory trace, Freud comes across the "Mystic Writing Pad", a writing apparatus that requires no ink or chalk to write upon, that materially illustrates his concept of memory traces that he mentions in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1961) and *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1999).

consciousness, while the wax slab acts in the same way as the unconscious.

However, what is crucial in the essay is his conclusion that,

> *If we imagine one hand upon the surface of the Mystic Writing Pad while another periodically raises its covering sheet from the wax slab, we shall have a concrete representation of […] the function of the perceptual apparatus of our mind (p.212).*

Jacques Derrida (2001) posits that, when operated with both hands, this "two-handed machine" signifies that "traces […] produce the space of their inscription only by acceding to the period of their erasure. From the beginning, in the 'present' of their first impression, they are constituted by the double force of repetition and erasure, legibility and illegibility" (p.284). The trace is a disruption and a sign of "the other" (Levinas, 1963) that is on the threshold between presence and absence, existence and destruction. It is this sense of in-betweenness that may well describe diasporic experiences, such as Binh's.

We can approach the question of how Binh is presented simultaneously as present and absent in the photographs by considering other critical viewpoints, such as Annette Kuhn (1991), who points out that, "In order to show what it is evidence of, a photograph must always point you away from itself. […] The photograph is a prop, a prompt, a pre-text: it sets the scene for recollection" (p.18). Likewise, Jens Ruchatz (2010) suggests in his article "The Photograph as Externalization and Trace" that one can approach a photograph as a trace,

> *to take it as evidence of what is shown on it and to reconstruct the situation of its origin. When a photograph refers to the past not as its representation but as its product, it functions more as a reminder that triggers or guides remembering than as a memory itself (p.370).*

Ruchatz seems to reinstate Barthes (1993), who had written, "The photograph does not call up the past (nothing Proustian in a photograph). The effect it produces upon me is not to restore what has been abolished (by time, by distance) but to attest that what I see has indeed existed" (p.82).

Taking the two photographs as traces of the chef's presence and absence, and how he is presented in the fictional world, we find that Binh is not the focal point of the two photographs and his existence as portrayed in the photographic images entails his working status as the cook/servant to his two Mesdames. The indecisive Binh describes the first photograph, taken at the Gare du Nord station, in this way:

> *[I]t shows my Mesdames sitting side by side and looking straight ahead. They are waiting for the train to Le Havre, chitchatting with the photographers, looking wide-eyed into the lens.[…] I am over there on the bench, behind them, on*

the left-hand side. I am the one with my head lowered, my eyes closed. I am not asleep, just thinking, and that for me is sometimes aided by the dark. I am a man unused to choice […]. (p. 9, my emphasis)

While the first photograph is described in graphic detail in the first paper, the readers do not get to "see" the second photograph until the last page of the novel, when the story concludes in a cinematic style. The second photograph is "taken on the deck of the SS Champlain" (p. 261):

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. (p. 261, my emphasis)

The composition of the objects in the photographs suggests the positions of center and periphery, of mistresses and servant. However, the narrator clearly states, referring to the second photograph, that his kneeling down before his mistress is not an act of respect or a submissive gesture, but a performance of his profession as a servant. However, the relationship between Binh and his Mesdames is mutual. Not only do his Mesdames sustain him, but also vice versa. Binh's labour is needed here to sustain the memory of The Steins to be captured on the photograph. Truong illustrates this in the scene when Toklas asks the chef to sew on Stein's shoe button:

"Please, Bin, sew on Gertrude Stein's button. We cannot have photographs of her looking so disheveled in this way!" is what Miss Toklas intends the first palpitation to say. The second, which is thankfully not as blood-stopping as the first, is less of command and more of a plea: "Please, Bin, sew on Gertrude Stein's button. I cannot have photographs of me prostrated before her in that way."[…] I pull the sewing kit from my pocket, and I do my part make sure that Gertrude Stein will continue to travel in style. (p. 255-6)

Despite his peripheral position, Binh's recognition of his appearance in the photographs, by asserting "I am over there" in both photographs, is a deliberate demonstration of his presence in these photographic images. This point is clarified in general terms by Barthes (1993), who writes that the essence of photography is "That-has-been" (p.77), and "the photograph's essence is to ratify what it represents" (p.85).

Apart from the two photographs, there is another object of memory, though it is not visible in the photographic image, but becomes an integral part of it. It is the letter that Binh has received from his oldest brother in Vietnam that arrives on the day of the Steins' departure. With the arrival of this single piece of paper,

the focal point of narrative is shifted, and it becomes apparent that Binh is stricken at the sight of the first and only letter from his family to reach him in Paris. Truong, nonetheless, presents this letter both as a tangible object and a decodable sign.

> *[The letter] was from my oldest brother. No one else back there would have known where to find me, that 27 rue de Fleurus was my home. I sniffed the envelope before opening it. It smelled of a faraway city, pungent with anticipation for rain. If my Mesdames had not been in the room, I would have tasted it with my tongue. I was certain to find the familiar sting of salt, but what I needed to know was what kind: kitchen, sweat, tears or the sea. (p. 5)*

Truong's portrayal of Binh handling this letter evokes its materiality, the fact that, as Elizabeth Edwards (2004) suggests, it "is concerned with real physical objects in a world that is physically apprehendable not only through vision but through embodied relations of smell, taste, touch, and hearing" (p.3). In a similar manner, Daniel Miller (1994) in "Artefacts and the Meaning of Things," writing with reference to the difference between objects and words, argues that,

> *Clearly objects relate to wider perceptual functions than do words. Remarkably subtle distinctions can be evoked through smell, touch, and most especially sight; by comparison, language may appear as a clumsy vehicle for the conveyance of difference (p. 407).*

Apart from the fact that the letter from his oldest brother arrives on the day his Mesdames, and the indecisive Binh himself, are leaving France, this letter from home becomes an "invisible" object alongside the aforementioned photographs. The letter is treated as an object, a token of memory for Binh who folds and keeps it in the pocket of his "only and finest cold-weather suit" (p. 9) throughout the day.

> *I wore them both to the Gare du Nord that day. The suit was neatly pressed, if a bit worn. The letter was worse off. The oils on my fingertips, the heat of my body, had altered its physical composition. The pages had grown translucent from the repeated handing, repetitive rereading. The ink had faded to purple. It was becoming difficult to read. Though in truth, my memory had already made that act obsolete (p. 9).*

How Binh "wears them both" – his neatly pressed finest suit and the letter in the pocket – allows the sharp juxtaposition between his past and the yet-to-come future. The letter becomes a decodable sign. The symbol of an oil-stained letter in the pocket of his finest suit implies that Binh is choosing between the idea of going to the United States with his Mesdames (as symbolised by the suit) or returning home (the letter), or staying

and working in Paris (the oils on his fingertips). He also carries with him the memories of his past, which are divided into the memories of Vietnam and those of Paris. Through Binh's reflection on his oldest brother's letter, readers are allowed to trace back to still another object of memory. Binh's first letter home undeniably captures the condition of his existence in the French metropolis, it is "crammed with details only my oldest brother would be interested in: my health, the cost of underwear and shoes, the price of a metro ticket, my weekly wage, the menu of my last meal, rain bouncing off the face of Notre-dame, Paris covered by a thin sheet of snow." (p. 8) Here is a correspondence in which human physical conditions and the state of the weather are posited next to economic conditions. And it seems inclusive of everything but emotions. Realising the absence of emotion from his letter, Binh finally manages to write down his anxiety and weariness about his job in the "margin" of the letter: "My Mesdames may be going home. I do not want to start all over again, scanning the help-wanteds, knocking on doors, walking away alone. I am afraid" (p. 8).

Beside the two photographs, previously discussed, that Binh holds in his possession, yet some other photographs should be scrutinised. One is a photograph of Gertrude Stein, "[d]ressed in her kimono and her prayer beads […] standing in front of the door of the studio" (p. 213). Bihn's description of the photographic image enhances its auratic quality and portrays Stein as an idol.

> *A half smile graces her face, deepening the dimples in her cheeks. It is a smile that says, Remember me. It is not so much a command but a sage bit of advice, a tip on a winning horse. My Madam 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" (p. 213).*

The display of photographs is subject to discussion. According to Edwards (2004), "Often material forms reflect public and private functions of images. What is displayed formally framed in the semi-public spaces of the home, and what is hidden away in boxes […]? This applies equally to the display of photographs" (p.12). In the novel it is not only this one photograph, but there are also several of the others that are displayed all over the Steins' apartment that portray how Gertrude Stein "carries herself as if she is an object of desire" (p. 28).

Apart from its image, the display of this photograph as one of the objects that are kept "inside the cupboard along with Miss Toklas's typewriting machine and Gertrude Stein's notebooks and papers' renders its status as a relic, placed in a shrine-like cupboard (p. 213). This echoes Binh's first utterance when he enters the Steins' flat that, "*This is a temple, not a home*" (p. 22). Binh also observes

that Gertrude Stein extends her aura to her collection of objects as well:

> *Buttons, seashells, glass globes, horseshoe nails, matchboxes, cigarette holders […] are deposited throughout the apartment. Some are grouped by types, some by years of acquisition, others by sentiment. By the time Miss Toklas moved into the Rue de Fleurus, Gertrude Stein had already acquired a sizable collection. Miss Toklas immediately understood. She did not have to be told that the objects of everyday life become relics and icons once they have touched Gertrude Stein's hands. (p. 35-6)*

Relevant to this is Elizabeth Edwards' discussion of how photographs become objects of worship.

> *The treatment of photographs is in many ways analogous to that of relics. Deemed significant as a bearer of memory or access to a past either real or imagined, the photograph is treated in a special way, for instance in an album or display. It is authentic in that it is traced off the living; that which was there, like the "pignora" of the saints. Like relics, photographs are validated through their social biography: ordinary remains (family snapshots) become treasured, linking objects to traces of the past, the dead, a fetishized focus of devotion (1999, p. 226).*

Illustriously, in addition to the photographic images, Truong's illustration of how photographs are handled as artefact and relics further implies that there might be some other material traces of the chef in the Steins' lives when the photographs become collectible objects. In the novel, the Steins are known for keeping a collection of their published photographs, as Binh narrates, "The clippings, each carefully pressed with a heated iron, especially if a crease had thoughtlessly fallen on my Mesdames' faces, went immediately into an album with a green leather cover" (p. 2). However, not only his Mesdames, but also Binh himself engages in the same act of collecting photographs and acknowledges the mutuality between them.

> *When I saw this [photograph] printed in the newspaper alongside the photograph taken at the Gare du Nord, I cut them both out, and I have kept them with me ever since. My Mesdames, I know, have them as well, carefully pressed in their green leather album, bulging by now with family photographs of only the public kind. (p. 261)*

Apart from Stein's photograph and other relics, in the cupboard lies Stein's notebook with the story of the chef. The notebook, entitled "The Book of Salt", is Truong's own fictionalisation. It is "a thin notebook that to [Binh] says it is small, insignificant, forgettable even. The note-

book is not from the middle of the stack […] but it is not from the very top either" (p. 214). The appearance of the notebook and its position in this cupboard brings to mind Binh's earlier observation that "At 27 Rue de Fleurus as elsewhere, the order of things is very important" (p. 156).

In his reading of artefacts, Daniel Miller (1994) has this to say about the order of things,

> *Objects are […] viewed less in themselves than for their place in an exchange or ritual which will have an effect. […] When we set out to represent a set of objects, the dimensions by which an order is constructed either explicitly or implicitly give meaning to the array of forms. […] If the meaning of objects derives from the orders into which they are incorporated, then the same artefact may change its implications simply by being introduced into some new order (p. 400).*

The objects in the cupboard are indeed part of a ritual and the cupboard itself possesses a shrine-like quality. It is an altar of Gertrude Stein's profession and Toklas' collaboration, as Binh describes how his Madame engages in her daily ritual:

> *When the studio door clicks shut, Miss Toklas appears, not like an apparition but like a floor lamp or a footstool suddenly coming to life. […] First, my Madame pushes in Gertrude Stein's chair and gathers the papers and notebooks knocked off the table by her Lovey's hands. […] Next, Miss Toklas wipes away the ink from the fountain pen, replaces the tip that Gertrude Stein has flattened like the top of a volcano, and returns the instrument to its red lacquer box. Opening up a nearby cupboard, Miss Toklas places the box inside and takes out a typewriting machine. She sits herself down at the dining table, not in Gertrude Stein's chair but in the one to the right of it, and begins to type (p. 146-7).*

The implication of the word "salt" in Stein's book title, as in Truong's novel also, is subject to interpretation. Binh reflects on the notebook's title that, "Salt, I thought. Gertrude Stein, 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, Gertrude Stein, which ones I have tasted on my tongue?" (p. 260-1). In an interview with the author, responding to a question about the origin of the title *The Book of Salt*, Monique Truong (2003) contends, "Salt – in food, sweat, tears, and the sea – is found throughout the novel. The word salary comes from the word salt, so salt is another way of saying labor, worth, value" (n.p.). The connotations of the word "salt" all ostensibly capture the constituent elements of Binh's character as a migrant, a cook, and a domestic labourer. Michelle Peek (2012) also points out in her article that, "As a

recurring motif, salt is meant to be read not simply as mineral, seasoning, or sediment[…]. As the rest of the novel unfolds, salt is also depicted as the material and metaphorical residue of memory of labor, movement, love, and nation" (p. 9-10).

Apart from its metaphorical connotation, Salt is also presented in a material sense as everyday object, an ingredient in the kitchen. Salt, in this respect, has its specific position in the order of things. In the novel, Toklas clearly states that at 27 Rue de Fleurus, "Salt is not essential here" (p. 211). It is "an ingredient to be considered and carefully weighed like all others" and "a taste that Miss Toklas insists is sometimes unnecessary" (p. 212). Whenever salt is needed, it is also important to consider its order in the recipe. This is revealed when Binh reflects on how, "Miss Toklas' approach to knitting is the same as her approach to cooking" (p. 177-8):

> *Intrigue cannot be added at the very end. A sprinkling of sequins, a glazing of glass beads, a handful of store-bought fringes, all suggest a lack of forethought, like salting a roast after it has cooked as opposed to before. My Madame knows that intrigue, like salt, is best if it is there from the beginning. (p. 177)*

Not only is the notebook entitled *The Book of Salt* placed among other objects in this shrine-like cupboard, it seems to also possess an aura of originality, like one of Stein's original works, as Binh singles out,

> *Words are words, I tell myself. Handwritten, typewritten, all were written by Gertrude Stein, and as you would say, anything written by Gertrude Stein is an original. Miss Toklas, I assure myself, must also have her usual three typewritten copies of The Book of Salt. (p. 260)*

What is also worth pointing out here is the issue concerning aura and originality. In "A Small History of Photography", Walter Benjamin (2006) considers "aura" as a quality that linked to uniqueness and distance: "What is aura, actually? A strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close the object may be" (p.250). In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin (2002) adding to his conceptualisation of the gaze, wrote that "the aura of distance opened up with the look that awakens in an object perceived" (p. 314). Therefore, to Benjamin (2006), the effect of the destruction of aura is to "bring things closer to us, or rather to the masses [and] the overcoming of whatever is unique in every situation by means of its reproduction" (p. 250).

However, Toklas's typewritten copies of Gertrude Stein's work are not considered in terms of the destruction of an aura of authenticity. Rather, as Arjun Appadurai (1988) suggests in his discussion of Benjamin's concept,

> *[Benjamin] recognized that the aura of an authentic work of art is tied up with its originality, and*

> *that this aura, which is the basis of its authenticity, is jeopardized by modern reproductive technologies. In this sense copies, forgeries, and fakes, which have a long history, do not threaten the aura of the original but seek to partake of it (p. 45).*

However, the traces of Binh's presence in the Steins' photographs could be regarded as the destruction of their auras. Benjamin (2002) states a contrast between a trace and an aura, as he suggests,

> *The trace is appearance of a nearness, however far removed the thing that left it behind may be. The aura is appearance of a distance, however close the thing that calls it forth (p. 447).*

The photograph of Gertrude Stein that is placed among other objects possesses the qualities of the Benjaminian aura. The gaze and the uniqueness ("*I am the one*") create an auratic distance from its spectators. Nonetheless, the way Binh points out his marginal appearance in the photograph that he describes as "hold[ing] onto her *there*, at the hem of her garment" (p. 213, my emphasis) manifests a conscious act of leaving a trace, which does not only signify his presence and absence from the Steins' history, but also destabilises his Mesdames' presence. This dialectic of trace and aura also brings back to mind the Steins' photo album "with a green leather cover" (p. 2), mentioned earlier, that Binh describes as filled with "family photographs of the most public kind" (p. 2). Traces of Binh ("I am over there") in the two photographs of the Steins' departure day not only bring these objects of memory closer to him, but also diminish the aura of these relics.

The exchange of objects and the question of value

I have discussed so far how photographs and other objects of memory in Truong's text come to possess an auratic quality of relics and how traces of Binh's presence and the implication of his absence can destabilise the Steins' aura. In this part, I shall continue my discussion of artefacts of memory in the novel, however, by considering them as exchangeable objects.

Arjun Appadurai's discussion of commodity exchange and value in "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value" (1988) provides a solid ground for my study of the commoditisation of everyday objects of memory. He posits that, "commodities are things with a particular type of social potential, that they are distinguishable from "products," "objects," "goods," "artefacts," and other sorts of things" (p. 6). He also adds that, "the idea that a commodity is *any thing intended for exchange* […] gets us away from the exclusive preoccupation with the 'product,' 'production,' and the original or dominant intention of the "producer" and permits us to focus on the dynamics of exchange" (p. 9).

My discussion of the artefacts of memory in *The Book of Salt* includes a scrutiny of "two kinds of

exchange that", according to Appadurai, 'are conventionally contrasted with commodity exchange. The first is barter (sometimes referred to as direct exchange), and the other is the exchange of gifts" (p.9); moreover, he also suggests that,

> *[…] barter is the exchange of objects for one another without reference to money and with maximum feasible reduction of social, cultural, political, or personal transaction costs. The former criterion distinguishes barter from commodity exchange in the strict Marxist sense, and the latter from gift exchange by virtually any definition (Appadurai, 1988, p. 9).*

Y-Dang Troeung (2010) contends that Truong's text "expands the concerns of Asian American literature into a wider theoretical register (to intersect with issues of postcolonialism) and into a wider geographical register (beyond North America and Asia to include Europe as a site of diasporic Asian American identity formation)" (p. 114). She also argues that,

> *By portraying the constantly shifting power dynamics that exist between four characters – Binh, Lattimore (Sweet Sunday Man), Toklas, and Stein, The Book of Salt allegorizes not only historical relations between Vietnamese-American and American co-writers, but also between diasporic subjects and colonial/neocolonial powers (such as France and the United States) and between racialized minorities (such as African Americans and Asian Americans) (p. 114).*

I would add to this discussion of Europe as an extended site by pointing out that Truong also address issues of modernity and liberal capitalism in her portrayal of Europe as a site of multinational and multiracial exchange, a free global market that allows any forms of trade, including commodity exchange, barter, and gift exchange of objects and services, among the four characters.

When he first enters this site of exchange, Binh's existence in the novel is, as David L. Eng (2008) describes, "the figure of the Asian coolie toiling anonymously in global streams of migrant labor" (p. 1480). His commodity is his service. The relationship between Binh and his Mesdames is solely based on a fair exchange of labour and wage, as Binh makes it clear, "My Madame and Madame sustain me. They pay my wage, house my body, and I feed them. That is the nature of our relationship" (p. 209). However, when he later discovers the notebook entitled "The Book of Salt", that his Madame has written about him without his approval, Binh is enraged and comes to the realisation that his labour has been exploited. His Madame, apart from the food he serves, has asked for more. Binh's reaction to Stein's notebook demonstrates his frustration at the unfairness of the wage-labour exchange.

> *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. I demand more money for such services, Madame. You pay me only for my time. My story, Madame, is mine. I alone am qualified to tell it, to embellish, or to withhold (p. 215).*

I have discussed above how this notebook, among other objects of memory that are placed in the Steins' cupboard, becomes a relic. When Binh steals it and gives it to Lattimore, his lover and the Steins' admirer to whom he gives the moniker Sweet Sunday Man, in exchange for their couple photograph, the barter then turns this object of worship into an exchangeable object and a commodity. The notebook thus enters a state of "commodities by diversion" that Appadurai (1988) describes as "objects placed into a commodity state though originally specifically protected from it" (p. 16). He states that "commodities, like persons, have social lives" (p. 3). He further emphasises that

> *The commodity situation in the social life of any "thing" [can] be defined as the situation in which its exchangeability (past, present, or future) for some other thing is its socially relevant feature. […] Things can move in and out of the commodity state (p. 13).*

However, this barter requires two objects of memory to be exchanged for one another. Being offered a chance to trade Stein's notebook for a photo shoot of himself with his lover is to Binh, "An even exchange. A fair trade. A give for a take" (p. 212). Nonetheless, it turns out later that this trade becomes an unequal exchange when Lattimore departs soon after he has finished reading Stein's notebook, leaving Binh merely a half-paid receipt for the photograph and a note that reveals the notebook's title, "Bee, thank you for *The Book of Salt*. Stein captured you, perfectly" (p. 238).

The way Lattimore appraises Stein's writing piece could be regarded as an act of authentication. Here he takes a role similar to a critic and an expert who engages with what Appadurai (1988) points out as the "problems of authenticity, expertise, and the evaluation of commodities" (p. 46). It is "the only way to preserve the function of [...] commodities in the prestige economies of the modern West" (p. 45). Even more important is Lattimore's role in this exchange of commodity as a consumer and a customer, as Binh narrates it, "Lattimore wanted me to know that he was grateful for all that I had given him in exchange for what turned out to be a half-paid-for photograph of a satisfied customer and me" (p. 260).

When discussing consumption, it is also relevant to mention demand. Appadurai (1988) also suggests, "looking at consumption (and the demand that makes it possible) as a focus not only for *sending* social messages […], but for *receiving* them as well" (p. 31). Apparently, consumption signifies

reciprocity. Truong seems aware of this dialectic as she illustrates it in the novel when Binh attempts to read his stolen object, *The Book of Salt*. He is only able to make sense of his name and the word "please", about which he reflects as follows:

> *"Please" can be a question: "May I?" And a response: "You may." "Please'" can also be a verb, an effortless act that accompanies Sweet Sunday Man into every room. "Please" is also a plea, a favor that he asked of me. (214)*

This passage clearly illustrates the nature of Binh's service in providing food and fulfilling requests. It also shows that the word "please" signifies both demand and supply. The fact that Binh can "read" only the two English words ("please" and his name) in Steins' notebook causes him to be trapped between "please" and "please", between demand and supply, amidst the vast ocean of commodities:

> *My index finger jumps from "please" to "please." […]I turn the page, and I see there the word "Bin." I recognize it as the spelling of my Mesdames' name for me. I find my American name written again and again on the following pages as well. […] With each sighting, 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 continuous 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. (p. 214-5)*

Apart from the notebook, yet other objects of memory move in and out of a commodity state. One is the photograph of the Man on the bridge, a Vietnamese stranger whose name "Nguyen Ai Quoc" is unmistakably the one used by the young Ho Chi Minh while he lived in France, and the other is the photograph of Binh himself with his Sweet Sunday Man. Binh attempts to trade the latter in exchange for the former. The photograph of the Man on the bridge is part of the displayed collection on the wall of Lene the Photographer's Studio. The lesson learnt – the deceived Binh is completely aware of the nature of exchange and a barter system that seems to operate at full throttle in the French Metropolis, as he reflects on the wall photographs,

> *The walls of the front office were covered with sample photographs. There was a wide range of sizes represented, beginning with those tiny enough for a locket. […] I wondered how they came to be placed on these walls. I tried to find the commonality that brought them all here. Uncanny beauty, soulful carriage, fearless engagement with the camera's lens? Or maybe these sitters also could not pay for the other half of their photographs and had to forfeit their faces and their bodies to the front office of*

the fabricator of their now forsaken dreams. (p. 244-5)

The value of the photograph of the Man on the bridge, when it enters an exchangeable state, is derived from its materiality. It is the photographic technique – Salt Print[3] that according to the photographer is "an old method from the last century", and it takes "a full day of sunlight to develop". Therefore, the photograph costs "four times the usual price" (p. 246). The salt print process apparently echoes the making of sea salt that is the residue of evaporation, a material trace of presence and absence. Binh also describes the image as a material trace on the photograph's surface,

The photograph was printed on paper that had the appearance of something that breathed, with a porous surface that opened with each intake of air, into which the features of the man on the bridge seeped. Less of a photograph, more of a tattoo underneath the skin (p. 247).

It is earlier mentioned in the conversation between Binh and the Man on the bridge that the salt printing process requires as much sunlight. Also, sea salt or *fleur de sel* [Salt flower] is praised for its quality and its taste: "a development, a rise and a fall, upon which its salinity becomes apparent, deepens, and then disappears" (p. 98).

When Binh's request to trade his photograph for the one of the young man on the wall is rejected, the two photographs are removed from their commodity state that is based on monetary value. It is instead the value that John Tagg (1982) refers to when he discusses the concept of "currency" of photographs, when objects are "produced by a certain elaborate mode of production and distributed, circulated and consumed within a given set of social relations; piece of paper that changed hands, found a use, a meaning and a value, in certain social rituals" (p.121). Binh's act of giving away the half-paid-for photograph turns it into a gift, a quasi exchange that can be based on both reciprocity or sharing that I shall discuss further on.

The politics of the gift

Binh explicitly states that, "[A] gift or a theft depends on who is

[3]Salt prints were invented in 1840 by William Henry Fox Talbot (1800-1877) as a direct outgrowth of his earlier photogenic drawing process. A salt print was made by immersing a sheet of paper in a solution of salt and then coating it on one side with silver nitrate. After drying, the paper was placed directly beneath a negative under a sheet of glass in a printing frame and exposed outdoors to sunlight. The length of exposure ranged from minutes to hours. [Gordon Baldwin and Martin Jürgens, *Looking at Photographs: A Guide to Technical Terms* (2009, p.78)]

holding the pen" (p. 215), and that, "A story is a gift" (p. 261). Truong's novel seems to illustrate two different aspects of the gift. On the one hand, the gift is a form of exchange that somehow requires reciprocity; on the other hand, what is emphasised is the spirit of collective consumption and sharing.

Opposing itself to the money-based commodity exchange and the direct trade that barter is known for is the gift exchange that Arjun Appadurai (1988) elaborates,

> *Gifts, and the spirit of reciprocity, sociability, and spontaneity in which they are typically exchanged, usually are starkly opposed to the profit-oriented, self-centered, and calculated spirit that fires the circulation of commodities. Further, where gift link things to persons and embed the flow of things in the flow of social relations, commodities are held to represent the drive – largely free of moral or cultural constraints – of goods for one another, a drive mediated by money and not by sociality (p. 11-12).*

It is through this view that the act of giving away the half-paid photograph might be considered as a gift exchange. By adding his unwanted photograph to the collections on the studio walls, Binh allows it to be publicly shared, liberally consumed, and privately appreciated. This is, however, also a reciprocal exchange as Binh is allowed to gain access to the mode of consumption of his desired photograph.

Binh's act of stealing the notebook from the Steins' cupboard as discussed above can be regarded as a "gift" exchange rather than a theft. However, this does not concern the issue of authority – whether Binh has a claim over his story and is entitled to give it away. From the viewpoint of the gift exchange that I propose here, the act of stealing the notebook is a gift exchange as it entails reciprocity and mutual consumption. A theft is a gift. Truong illustrates this idea when Binh draws a similarity between a writer and a cook:

> *Writers, I suspect, are in this way like cooks. We practice a craft whose value increases tenfold once its yield is shared and consumed. A notebook inside a cupboard is a cake languishing inside an oven long grown cold, unappreciated and in danger of being forgotten. If one looks at it that way, I have done nothing that Gertrude Stein has not desired to do for herself. I have generously increased her readership by one. (p. 235-6)*

This paragraph suggests that the value of their work, a writer's or a chef's, depends notably on consumption. One, thus, can possibly see the pattern of gift exchange between Binh and his Madame. Binh helps increase the value of the stolen notebook "The Book of Salt" by generating Lattimore's readership when Stein brings the Sweet Sunday Man to him, and this starts his Sunday cooking ritual

and increases the consumption of his food.

The reciprocity of gift exchange in connection to objects of memory is portrayed through the depiction of the Steins' relationship with photographers, as Binh points out,

> *[My Mesdames] had an almost childlike trust in photographers. Photographers, my Mesdames believed, transformed an occasion into an event. Their presence signaled that importance and fame had arrived, holding each other's hands. […] I could easily see why my Mesdames cultivated them. Every visit by a photographer would be inevitably followed by a letter enclosing a newspaper or magazine clipping with my Mesdames' names circled in a halo of red ink. (p. 1-2)*

The nature of this relationship and the exchange between the Steins and photographers who "swarmed to the entrance of 27 Rue de Fleurus like honey bees" is not considered barter or direct trade of commodities (p. 1). The fact that both parties mutually engage and sustain one another signifies the reciprocal system of gift exchange. This also seems to echo Elizabeth Edwards's point about photographs as exchange objects,

> *Photographs [operate] as exchange objects and circulate as "memory texts". […] The exchange of the photograph as image itself expresses the social value of the relationship that is maintained and sustained between groups and individuals, which demands reciprocity to consolidate the socially desired memory of images (1999, p. 233).*

Binh's statement that "A story is a gift" (p. 261) also provides another way of approaching the dynamic of the gift exchange. However, it is not Binh's story, but those of his Mesdames and Lattimore that are the exchangeable gifts in question. The discussion here will first need a reference to Marcel Mauss's conceptualisation of the exchange of gifts and the obligation of reciprocity in his key text *The Gift* (2002). As Miller (1994) writes, in summary:

> *Mauss argued that the gift had to be returned because it carried with it a sense of the inalienable – that is, something which could never really be given away. This something involved, among other elements, the sense that the object retained attributes of the person by whom it was given, and, furthermore, the object was seen to embody a relationship which exists between persons by virtue of their obligation to give and return gifts. This also helped to account for the observation that persons might be exchanged as gifts in a manner which did not diminish their sense of humanity or value, since to be so exchanged (as, for example, with the "gift" of a bride in marriage) is not to be reduced to some less exalted, thing-like status (p. 416).*

This long quote seems to explain the nature of gift exchange between Binh, his Mesdames, and Lattimore. In fact, it is curiosity, desire for "stories", which creates this "bizarre love triangle". Binh is a gift that the Steins give to Lattimore in hope for his secret. The critic Troeung is right in pointing out that, "[S]ignificantly, Binh becomes the person Toklas and Stein send out to collect information that will satisfy their perverse curiosity: 'Is Lattimore a Negro?'[…]'" (p. 121). Binh is also aware of Lattimore's interest in his Mesdames' stories. As he puts it,

> *Sweet Sunday Man, I did not consider my stories about my Mesdames then or now in terms of a barter and trade but as an added allure, a bit of assurance. With my "curiosity," I knew that I could offer you something no other man could. With my eyes opened to these Mesdames of mine, my value to you I thought would surely increase, double and sustain itself. Value, I have heard, is how it all begins. From there, it can deepen into worth, flow into affection, and artery its way toward the muscles of the heart. (150-1)*

In addition to the concept of gift exchange, the politics of the gift in the novel can be read through a different form of sharing and consumption that does not imply reciprocity. In her article, Troeung (2010) nods to Monique Truong's writing on "the oral tradition and history of the Vietnamese rural woman" (p. 121), in which Truong quotes Trinh T. Minh-ha's notion of "a gift". According to Trinh (1989), an oral story is "[A]n empty gift which anybody can lay claim to by filling it to taste, yet can never truly possess. A gift built on multiplicity. One that stays inexhaustible within its own limits. Its departures and arrivals. It quietness" (p. 130). Troeung (2010) further argues that,

> *The gift, then, is the story of Binh's intimacies, secrets, and memories that he gives, not to Stein and Toklas, but rather to his imagined community of the underclass, the long line of servants, migrants, and queer exiles who have laid claim this gift in the past (p. 121).*

Through this viewpoint, it is thus possible to consider the politics of the gift in the novel in terms of a tension between the immateriality of pre-modern and the materiality of modernist forms of narrative, and between the anonymous oral history and the authorship of modernist forms of writing such as novels. That a story is "a gift" that is available for all, but belongs to no one, is also subject to the question of authenticity.

However, the authentication of pre-modern relics that "circulate over long periods of time, through many hands, and over large distances" (p. 46) that Appadurai (1988) discusses might be applicable for an oral history that is based on the sharing system as well. As he states,

[T]he cultural regime for authentication is quite different from the modern one. […] it is by and large a matter in which popular understandings about ritual efficacy and folk criteria of authenticity play a central role. Authenticity here is not the province of experts and esoteric criteria, but of popular and public kinds of verification and confirmation (p. 46).

Benjamin (2002) posits that, "In the trace, we gain possession of the thing; in the aura, it takes possession of us" (p. 477). For Binh, it is not so much the question of authenticity and its aura but his ability to assert his right over his own story that seems to be his main concern. Toward the end of the novel, Binh reveals that he was in fact deciding whether to follow his Mesdames to the United States, to stay on in Paris, or to travel elsewhere when he appeared with his eyes closed in the photograph at the Gare du Nord. Binh lays a claim to "the gift" when he reveals his decision to stay on in Paris:

A "memory" was for me another way of saying a "story." A "story" was another way of saying a "gift." The man on the bridge was a memory, he was a story, he was a gift. Paris gave him to me. And in Paris I will stay, I decided. Only in this city, I thought, will I see him again. For a traveller, it is sometimes necessary to make the world small on purpose. (p. 258)

Binh's decision to stay and hold on to his memory of the Man on the bridge seems to suggest his desire for an immaterial concept of the gift and his romanticised perception of the city. However, as I pointed out earlier, Paris in Truong's text is a site of liberal capitalist exchange, for a queer diasporic subject and a postcolonial migrant worker who is in the flux of commodity exchange, the only really meaningful gift that Paris can promise him might be but a material one. It is an object of memory - the photograph of the Man on the bridge in the studio of Lene the photographer who, after turning down Binh's exchange offer, suggests that, "You can come and visit him…anytime" (p. 246).

Edward Casey (2001), in remarking about "the distinction between place and space", takes "'space' to be the encompassing volumetric void in which things (including human beings) are positioned and 'place' to be the immediate environment of my lived body – an arena of action that is once physical and historical, social and cultural" (p. 683). The importance of space and place to the psyche is obvious in diasporic experiences. Monique Truong's protagonist in *The Book of Salt* is perceivably a migrant worker who finds himself lost and longing in metropolitan Paris, which is portrayed in the novel as a space of commodity and labour exchange that induces forgetting and a sense of unhomeliness.

Meanwhile, the concept of "cognitive mapping" can be read in relation to the situation of memory and for-

getting in the contemporary capitalist world. Fredric Jameson (1991) conceives "cognitive mapping" as "a pedagogical political culture which seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system" (p. 54). Jameson puts an emphasis on an individual's ability to "rethink [the] specialized geographical and cartographic issues in terms of social space – in terms, for example, of social class and national or international context, in terms of the way in which we all necessarily *also* cognitively map our individual social relationship to local, national, and international class realities" (p. 52). Therefore, cognitive mapping may be made possible by not just remembering, but imagining and recognizing one's place in the global system as well.

However, it is not always easy to cognitively map one's relation to the real global system, particularly for a migrant worker, such as Binh. An inability to cognitively map one's place in the global system is partly derived from this temporality of consumption in the capitalist era, as Paul Connerton (2009) points out, "The modern world is the product of a gigantic process of labour, and the first thing to be forgotten is the labour process itself" (p. 40), and adds that, "Cultural induced forgetting is reinforced by the temporality of consumption" (p. 53).

Truong's novel, nonetheless, has demonstrated an alternative. The cook's immaterial labour may be among "some human creative capacities [which] appear to leave behind no palpable traces or to leave traces which no sooner appear than they rapidly disappear" (Connerton, 2009, p. 41). Nonetheless, as Connerton further postulates, 'Gift exchange potentiates memory because, as Mauss first perceived, it rests upon a triple obligation: the obligation to give, the obligation to receive, and the obligation to reciprocate" (2009, p. 53). Through the material trace of Binh's existence and that of his labour, as well as his involvement in the gift exchange system, *The Book of Salt*, in its own right, represents an attempt to perpetuate remembering amidst the oblivion-induced commodity exchange.

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