

The End(s) of Race

DAVID L. ENG

Two American ladies wish . . .

—Alice B. Toklas, *The Alice B. Toklas Cookbook*

Disappearing

THE EMERGENCE OF EUROPEAN COLONIALISM IN THE FIFTEENTH century and the establishment of the Enlightenment project in the eighteenth century mark the rise and expansion of European modernity in the West and elsewhere. As the uncontested superpower on the world stage today, the United States is not just the custodian of empire but indeed the guardian of a European tradition of modern liberal humanism, one now mobilized to declare that the project of human freedom has been accomplished within the domestic borders of the nation-state. Our putatively color-blind moment is marked by the assertion that racial difference has given way to an abstract and universal United States community of individualism and merit—even as (or if) it demands the inexorable growth of the prison-industrial complex and ever-increasing militarization and unfreedom in global locales such as the Middle East, Afghanistan, and Guantánamo Bay (see Gilmore; Kaplan).

Today we inhabit a political moment when disparities of race, not to mention gender, sexuality, and class, apparently no longer matter; they neither signify deep structural inequities nor mark profound institutional emergencies. Yet we continue to struggle with the political, economic, and cultural legacies of empire and its constructions of race as one significant project of Euro-American modernity. At a time when race appears in official political discourse in the United States only as ever “disappearing,” it becomes increasingly urgent to contest such sanguine pronouncements with, among other things,

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this simple fact: ever since the Enlightenment, race has always appeared as disappearing.

In “The Intimacies of Four Continents,” Lisa Lowe examines the sublation of African-slave and Asian-coolie labor that facilitated the rise of modern Europe and structured Enlightenment thought and the universal “rights of man.” Colonial labor relations on the plantations of the New World, Lowe writes, “were the conditions of possibility for European philosophy to think the universality of human freedom, however much freedom for colonized peoples was precisely foreclosed within that philosophy” (193). Modern racial hierarchies “appear to have emerged in the contradiction between humanism’s aspirations to universality and the needs of modern colonial regimes to manage work, reproduction, and the social organization of the colonized” (204). This dynamic stretches back to colonial labor relations organizing the plantations of the New World, but it also reaches forward to our contemporary moment of United States–led globalization, whose political culmination is the official disappearing act of race. We need to investigate this dialectic of disappearance—to reflect on, as Lowe urges, the ways in which the

affirmation of the desire for freedom is so inhabited by the forgetting of its conditions of possibility, that every narrative articulation of freedom is haunted by its burial, by the violence of forgetting. What we know as “race” or “gender” are the *traces* of this modern humanist forgetting. They reside within, and are constitutive of, the modern narrative of freedom but are neither fully determined by nor exhausted by its ends. (206–07)

In this essay, I would like to consider how Monique Truong’s 2003 novel *The Book of Salt* might constitute one archive of traces for a critical investigation of this dialectic of affirmation (of freedom) and forgetting (of race). In its attention to the forgotten, Truong’s novel demands epistemological consideration

of the historical limits of racial knowledge across what Fernand Braudel has described as a *longue durée* (esp. 25–54). Approaching the politics of history from this perspective points to the spectrality of race, which, like capital in Jacques Derrida’s analysis, resists any straightforward narrative of affirmation and presence, any teleological progression from before to after (see also Cooppan). In this light, the advent of color blindness and postidentity politics in contemporary United States society might not be seen as the end of race. Instead, it might be approached as one significant event in a larger historical structure organized by colonialism’s world division of racialized labor and freedom, a division materially and philosophically consolidated by the economic, political, and aesthetic tenets of the Enlightenment. Across this *longue durée*, race has been—and continues to be—rendered ghostly. Color blindness is merely the latest installment in this historical narrative of progress.

This essay seeks, then, to constitute one piece of a larger intellectual endeavor for the study of race and racialization in our color-blind age: the collective rethinking of the Enlightenment project from the perspective of Asia and Africa. In doing so, it attempts to move contemporary United States racial politics beyond the geographic boundaries of the nation-state and, more urgently, beyond the ideological boundaries of United States exceptionalism, which insists on the disappearance of race in the name of freedom and progress. Let us turn to *The Book of Salt* to consider how Truong’s novel advances such an endeavor.

Naming

The Book of Salt, set in early-1930s Paris, focuses its attention on the figure of the Asian coolie toiling anonymously in global streams of migrant labor. Binh, the main character and narrator of Truong’s novel, is a Vietnamese colonial, an exiled queer and a queer exile who is forced to leave Vietnam after an illicit

love affair with the young French chef overseeing the kitchen of the governor-general of Saigon. Eventually, after various travels at sea as a galley cook, Binh ends up employed as household chef to Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas during the couple's famous residence in Paris as American expatriates and icons of the "lost generation." Binh is a fictionalized composite inspired by two historical figures—two Vietnamese cooks who appear briefly in the pages of the eponymous *Alice B. Toklas Cookbook* (1954). Though richly imagined, he is ultimately an unverifiable presence, conjured forth more by American desire, by the call for hired help that Toklas places in the local newspaper: "Two American ladies wish . . ." (186).¹

Binh's dim presence in the archive compels Truong's fictional narrative as a historical supplement, invoking Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's caveat that "the subaltern is necessarily the absolute limit of the place where history is narrativized into logic" (207). Yet *The Book of Salt* is less an instance of the subaltern writing back than an exploration of the limits of such writing for the politics of history. Through the course of Truong's novel, the eloquence of Binh's queer desires comes to entangle and reconfigure the domains of both history and fiction by drawing insistent attention to who and what must be forgotten so that the high modernism exemplified by Stein and Toklas might come to be affirmed.

In chapter 9 of *The Book of Salt*, Binh recollects a curious meeting with a fellow Vietnamese colonial he encounters one evening on a bridge over the Seine. It is 1927, over two years before Binh will find his Madame and Madame and join the Stein-Toklas household in their renowned 27 rue de Fleurus home, the illustrious literary salon of 1930s Paris. The "man on the bridge," as Binh refers to him, is an enigmatic figure (86). Wearing a "black suit, coarse in fabric, too large for his frame, and many years out of fashion," the stranger, whose name we never learn, tells Binh that he has also been a cook, as well as a "[k]itchen

boy, sailor, dishwasher, snow shoveler, furnace stoker, gardener, pie maker, photograph retoucher, fake Chinese souvenir painter, your basic whatever-needs-to-be-done-that-day laborer, and . . . letter writer" (89).

Over the course of a shared evening and meal, Binh learns that this handsome fellow is thirty-seven years old, that he left Vietnam at age twenty-two, and that he has not been back since. Now just a visitor to *la ville lumière*, the unnamed man had once resided in Paris for almost four years. Their supper ends with a steaming plate of watercress, wilted by a flash of heat and seasoned perfectly with a generous sprinkling of *fleur de sel* ("salt flowers"). Binh observes, "A gradual revelation of its true self, as I was beginning to learn, is the quality that sets *fleur de sel* apart from the common sea salt that waits for me in most French kitchens. There is a development, a rise and fall, upon which its salinity becomes apparent, deepens, and then disappears. Think of it as a kiss in the mouth" (98). Thus inspired, Binh shifts his attention once again to his attractive dinner companion, wondering if this anonymous stranger might, indeed, be the long-lost scholar-prince for whom he has been tirelessly searching.

Binh's encounter and Truong's chapter conclude with a slow after-dinner stroll in the Jardin du Luxembourg and a hint of a mutual desire fulfilled:

A kiss in the mouth can become a kiss on the mouth. A hand on a shoulder can become a hand on the hips. A laugh on his lips can become a moan on mine. The moments in between these are often difficult to gauge, difficult to partition and subdivide. Time that refuses to be translated into a tangible thing, time without a number or an ordinal assigned to it, is often said to be "lost." In a city that always looks better in a memory, time lost can make the night seem eternal and full of stars. (99)

Binh's encounter with this stranger is "lost" to time, their desire and brief affair

Left to right: Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, with the photographer George Platt Lynes, in Bilignin, in southeastern France, June 1931. Photograph by Lynes. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. © Estate of George Platt Lynes.



untranslatable “in between” moments of laughter and moaning, movements of shoulders, hips, and lips. Unmatched to any cardinal or ordinal assignment that would render it a “tangible thing”—unmatched, that is, to the abstract time of capitalism or to its calculated wages—their fleeting liaison confounds

the domain of historical understanding if we come to recognize the biographical details Truong sparsely scatters across this ephemeral meeting: that the unnamed scholar-prince is one Nguyen That Thanh, also known as Nguyen Ai Quoc.² Readers familiar with the public life of Nguyen will know that nearly

fourteen years later he will finally return to his homeland, Vietnam, and under the name Ho Chi Minh (“He Who Enlightens”) will become the political leader of a successful anticolonial revolution that will humble the Western empires of France and the United States.

I begin with this episode of the man on the bridge not only to raise the specter of a scandalous, perhaps unthinkable, desire that binds Binh and Ho Chi Minh in their shared “queer diasporas” but also to emphasize how queer desire is not peripheral but central to the narration of race, modernity, and the politics of history in *The Book of Salt*. More specifically, I am interested in how the conceptual category of queer diasporas—outside the boundaries of territorial sovereignty and in excess of sanctioned social arrangements—brings together dissonant desires with the political, thereby forcing a crisis in historicism, in the idea of history as “the way it really was.”³ Queer desire in Truong’s novel enables a productive reading practice that, in Walter Benjamin’s words, would “brush history against the grain” (257). Such action, mobilized through the politics of naming and misnaming in Truong’s novel, is what I would like to call historical catachresis.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines *catachresis* as the “improper use of words; [the] application of a term to a thing which it does not properly denote; [or the] abuse or perversion of a trope or metaphor.” In refusing to name the handsome stranger on the bridge, Truong insists on a consideration of how the politics of naming and misnaming works to stabilize—indeed, to justify—the historical order of things. Through the problematics of naming, historical catachresis works to dislodge a particular version of history as the “way it really was” by denying the possibility of a singular historical context in which the past has transpired and reemerges in the present as a reified object of investigation. Truong’s refusal to name the man on the bridge presents us with a dialectic of affirmation and forget-

ting: How is it that Stein and Toklas appear in history as the iconic lesbian couple of literary modernism and historical modernity while Binh can never appear and Ho Chi Minh must wait to appear? How is it that Stein and Toklas are placed in history while Binh and Ho Chi Minh are displaced from it?

In her analysis of historical catachresis in the context of modern Chinese women, Tani Barlow stresses the temporality of its grammar: the future perfect tense. By focusing on “what [Chinese] women will have been” in the “what was” of sanctioned Chinese history, Barlow seeks to destabilize the force of historicism’s documentary evidence (3). Drawing attention to the “what will have been” challenges the “what can be known” by asking who must be forgotten and what must be passed over, homogenized, and discarded in order for history to appear in the present as a stable object of contemplation. In this manner, the “what will have been” reopens the question of the future in a settled past, while simultaneously transporting that past into what Benjamin describes as a history of the present—the recognition that history is always and insistently “re-presented” to us, mobilized for present political purposes. In the same breath, it recognizes the fact that there are, as Michel Foucault argues, “multiple time spans, and each of these spans is the bearer of a certain type of events. The types of events must be multiplied just as the types of time span are multiplied” (430).

Reflection on historical catachresis in this scene in *The Book of Salt* highlights the imperial ambitions of modernity’s deployments of empty, homogeneous time and space—the endless flow of past, present, and future—in the name of historicism. Truong’s refusal to attribute a proper name to the man on the bridge who will have been Nguyen That Thanh—and only after returning to Vietnam Ho Chi Minh—underscores the logic of waiting that structures European modernity in relation to its colonial others: the “what will have been” of the Vietnamese nationalist

independence movement in relation to the “what was,” and is, of European modernity, liberal progress, and capitalist development.

Even more, Truong’s refusal of the moniker Ho Chi Minh declines a process of nomination, dislodging the proper name from its referent, indeed allowing the problem of historical referentiality to interrupt and reinhabit the accumulated weight of documentary evidence accrued around this famous revolutionary name. (Significantly, we also learn that Binh is a pseudonym the narrator chooses for himself when he first ships out from Saigon; the proper name is one that no one can own.) Through the irruption—indeed, the interruption—of queer desire, Truong thus stages the emergence of an alternative historical time and space discontinuous with the sanctioned historical development, conventional historical narratives, and authorized representations of this hallowed revolutionary hero.

We might also observe that historical catachresis more broadly understood implies that every naming is also a misnaming. Truong’s stranger without a name responds to the “what will have been” of Ho Chi Minh by keeping open a permanent space of differentiation between the proper name and its intended referent. Here the query, Did Ho Chi Minh really sleep with men? is lost, the impossibility of the question and a response opening up a tear in historical time, a space of disappearance and forgetting in which time never quite coincides with itself. Through this slippage in time, Truong not only draws attention to the limits of historicism’s idealization of presence and progress but also creates a queer time and space outside teleological histories, infused with heterogeneity and intractability and lacking a particular historical destination or documentary intent. In short, Truong opens up an epistemological space for a consideration of the unknowable and unthinkable—other possibilities and other possible times and spaces—that inhabit and saturate the emergence of modernity’s now.

In this regard, we might consider how Truong’s crossing of fiction into history and history into fiction is the condition of possibility for the epistemological exploration of subalternity as the absolute limit of the place where history is narrativized into logic. Since the establishment of ethnic studies in the late 1960s as a political movement and scholarly endeavor, the ethnic literary text in the United States has often been said to function as a proxy for history. This has placed particular pressure and urgency on the literary to perform what is “missing” in history and to represent otherwise unrepresented communities. Here the burden of authenticity and the evidence of experience inveigh against the bind and sting of injurious racial stereotypes and the lack of minority presence and power in the academy.

With the unnamed stranger on the bridge, however, we encounter a critical project focused less on recovery of what, in the final analysis, is a lost and irrecoverable past or on the “correction” of historical error through the positing of an unvarnished truth—history the way “it really was.” We encounter less the “real” story of Ho Chi Minh than one in which the unknowable and unthinkable are mobilized under the sign of the literary and become the conditions of possibility by which the “properly” historical, the “what can be known,” is consolidated and affirmed. In short, by refusing to name, Truong asks us to reflect on what it means to answer forgetting and disappearance without insisting on new and ever more narratives of affirmation and presence. She encourages us to reconsider the binds of authenticity central to liberalism’s affirmation of identity and its politics of recognition. Through historical catachresis, she shifts our attention from the problem of the real to the politics of our lack of knowledge.

Indeed, Truong’s emphasis on a scandalous queer desire binding this stranger without a proper name to Binh, the servant-cook, shifts our temporal grammar altogether. It raises the specter of the “what could have been” in relation

to the “what was” of European modernity, liberal progress, and capitalist development as well as of the subsequent Vietnamese independence movement, its revolutionary discourses of post-colonial subversion and resistance, and its gendered discourses of aggrieved masculinity (see Saldaña-Portillo). The past conditional tense of “what could have been” indexes the space of melancholic loss and forfeiture, a privileged time of the possible albeit unverifiable, and a privileged space of the forgotten albeit persistent.

By enveloping the lost stranger in his desirous embrace, Binh opens up a space for the ghostly in the real.⁴ He preserves room for thinking the “what could have been” in the “what can be known” of historicism. We might say that Binh’s queer desires, his melancholic attachments to this stranger without a name, highlight another realm of historical possibility altogether. Disturbing rather than stabilizing identity, Binh’s queer desires stage another time and space of historical becoming. They supplement the dialectic of affirmation and forgetting that subtends historicism’s now, its empty, homogeneous time and space. “Although we strap time to our wrists, stuff it into our pockets, hang it on our walls, a perpetually moving picture for every room of the house,” Binh reminds us in the closing lines of chapter 9, “it can still run away, elude and evade, and show itself again only when there are minutes remaining and there is nothing left to do except wait till there are none” (100). The moments in between, though desirous, are evanescent. Lost and forgotten, they saturate the “what can be known.”

Waiting

Considering such moments “in between” draws attention to the temporal and spatial heterogeneity that both conditions and cuts the “what can be known” of historicism, bringing us firmly into the folds of haunted history, but one in which ghosts and spirits, as Dipesh Chakrabarty emphasizes, “are

not dependent upon human beliefs for their own existence” (111). Such a critical insight demands reflection on the ways in which historicism serves, to borrow from Martin Heidegger, as a type of violent “worlding” process through which certain creatures and things are brought into the time and space of European modernity (worlded) while others are consigned to wait, excluded and concealed (earthed) (see also Khanna).

Chakrabarty observes that historicism enabled European domination of the world in the nineteenth century through a particular logic of time and space embedded in the philosophical mandates of political modernity, in everyday habits of conscious as well as unconscious thought. “Historicism,” he writes,

is what made modernity or capitalism look not simply global but rather as something that became global *over time*, by originating in one place (Europe) and then spreading outside it. This “first in Europe, then elsewhere” structure of global historical time was historicist; different non-Western nationalisms would later produce local versions of the same narrative, replacing “Europe” by some locally constructed center. It was historicism that allowed Marx to say that the “country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future.” (7)

The development of European modernity and liberal capitalism over time, as well as their globalization across space, beginning in Europe and then spreading to the New World and beyond, make the possibility of imagining alternative modernities—different knowledges, alternative political possibilities, and other social communities—exceedingly difficult. They universalize the centrality of European political, economic, and aesthetic thought in relation to its colonial others while presuming that progress and development in the non-West must take place through mimetic fidelity to European images and ideals. Rendered an obsolete remainder of a superseded past, the

perpetually anachronistic non-West is forced to play catch-up with a European present invariably constituted as the here and now.

Chakrabarty explores how historicism employs an analytic tradition (exemplified for him by Marx) that abstracts heterogeneity and particularity by sublating them into a universalizing narrative of European historical consciousness. But he also stresses the necessity to contest and supplement the analytic tradition through consideration of the hermeneutic tradition (exemplified for him by Heidegger) (Chakrabarty 18). The hermeneutic tradition, relentlessly dominated by the inexorable temporal march of modernity and the globalization of capitalism, operates within as well as beyond historicism's epistemological reach. It generates, in Chakrabarty's words, "a loving grasp of detail in search of an understanding of the diversity of human life-worlds. It produces what may be called 'affective histories' . . . [and] finds thought intimately tied to places and to particular forms of life" (18).

These "structures of feeling," to cite a concept from Raymond Williams, are those emergent social forms, ephemeral and difficult to grasp or to name, that appear precisely at a moment of emergency, when dominant cultural norms go into crisis. They invoke one important way by which hauntings are transmitted and received as an affective mood, communicating a sense of the ghostly as well as its political and aesthetic effects. The evolution of modernism in the interwar years might be characterized as such a moment of political and aesthetic upheaval in the face of total war. Nevertheless, it remains crucial to examine how this emergency not only signals a crisis internal to European thought and its history of consciousness but also marks the irruptions of race into a privileged narrative of European modernity and progress, the interruptions of a sublated and spectralized colonial world into the European universal. Here it is important to emphasize how race functions beyond the realm of the visible and the protocols of the

empirical. Race, that is, is more than just an epiphenomenon of Euro-American capitalism's differentiation, division, and management of Asian and African bodies in New World modernity. As Vilashini Cooppan points out, race "mirrors one logic of capital (the body as commodity) while interrupting another (the stages of capitalist development)" (81).

In *The Book of Salt*, queer diasporas challenge the homogenizing march of the analytic tradition, and affective history marks the ghostly and the evanescent of a spectralized in-between. Binh, whose queer desires and narrative voice illuminate an alternative human life-world, reveals the return of the subject. This position is precarious, however, and hardly inured to the annihilating intents of modernity: its discourse of citizenship and rights, its mantra of capitalism and consumption—in Binh's words, its protocols of "[r]epetition and routine. Servitude and subservience. Beck and call" (Truong 154). The disciplining intent of historicism, its abstracting and atomizing of heterogeneity into empty, homogeneous time and space, is revealed in a fascinating scene of travel in the middle of Truong's novel. Here Binh tells us about Stein and Toklas's yearly sojourn in their country home in Bilignin, a trip he is enjoined to facilitate. "When summer comes to Paris," Binh relates,

my Madame and Madame pack their clothes and their dogs into their automobile, and they drive themselves and their cargo down to the Rhône Valley to the tiny farming village of Bilignin. I am left behind to lock up the apartment and to hand the keys over to the concierge, whom I have always suspected of being overly glad to see these two American ladies go. . . . With my Mesdames already on the road for over a day, I pack up whatever warm-weather garments I have that year, and I go and splurge on a hat for the hot summer sun. If I find a bargain, then I also treat myself to lunch at an establishment with cloth on the table and an attentive waiter who is obliged to call me "Monsieur." I then take what is left of the money that

my Mesdames gave me for a second-class train ticket, and I buy a third-class one instead. I sleep all the way down to Bilignin, where I open the house and *wait* several more days—as my Mesdames drive at a speed that varies somewhere between leisurely and meandering—before I hear the honking of their automobile and the barking of two weary dogs. I *wait* for them on the terrace. (135; my emphasis)

Binh packs away whatever warm-weather garments he has for that year, locks up the Stein-Toklas residence, and hands the keys over to the custodianship of the French concierge. Binh's human life-world outside the beck and call of domestic servitude—his new hat, his lunch at an upscale bistro where the waiter is obliged to call him "Monsieur"—emerges only in between the time of his Mesdames' departure and arrival, their disappearance and reappearance. Here the in-between is configured as a privileged and paradoxical key to a hermeneutic tradition, a structure of feeling that defies the temporal and spatial logic of modernity's ceaseless progress, its homogeneous march from before to after. Affective history—a structure of feeling—appears both before *and* after: in between the time before Stein and Toklas's arrival in the rural French countryside and after their departure from the city, in between the space before Bilignin and after Paris. In the process, an alternative human life-world is given shape and form, a worlding of the colonial subaltern that Johannes Fabian might describe as the emergence of "coevalness."

Focusing on modernity's persistent denial of such coevalness, its disciplining of time and space into the political logic of liberal humanism and the economic logic of liberal capitalism, Chakrabarty observes that John Stuart Mill's historicist arguments

consigned Indians, Africans, and other "rude" nations to an imaginary waiting room of history. In doing so, it converted history itself into a version of this waiting room. We

were all headed for the same destination, Mill averred, but some people were to arrive earlier than others. That was what historicist consciousness was: a recommendation to the colonized to wait. Acquiring historical consciousness, acquiring the public spirit that Mill thought absolutely necessary for the art of self-government, was also to learn this art of waiting. This waiting was the realization of the "not yet" of historicism. (8)

The "not yet" of European historicism governs Binh's narrative of simultaneous migration, a process in which the servant-cook is relegated to the imaginary waiting room of history. Through the disappearance of other possible pasts as well as the forgetting of other possible futures, the colonized can only await the colonizer. Binh must learn this art of waiting. And while both must necessarily be "headed for the same destination," as Chakrabarty emphasizes, it is the colonizer who must invariably arrive first, the colonized trailing behind, an anachronistic relic of the not yet of modernity's now.

In this passage from *The Book of Salt*, however, we are presented with a further twist of colonial logic: even when the colonized arrives early, he still must wait. That is, even though Binh is ahead of his Mesdames, he still must work and he still must wait. The first to reach Bilignin, the servant-cook is compelled to resume his domestic duties of beck and call. He opens up and prepares the house for Stein and Toklas's arrival, waiting "several more days" for his Mesdames to arrive at their appointed (historical and aesthetic) destination. The couple, he tells us, are motoring "somewhere between leisurely and meandering," making their way through the French countryside, on their own schedule, according to their own sanctioned time. In between these moments and movements, the details of Binh's life appear only to disappear.

The logic of the ghost characterizing Derrida's analysis of capital applies equally to the racialized dialectic of affirmation and

forgetting that structures Binh's appearance and disappearance within the Euro-American modernity of Stein and Toklas. Like capital, race ultimately exceeds the logic of presence and absence, while evading the sequencing of before to after. I would like to describe the paradoxical effacement of Binh's human life-world in between the visible and the invisible as a type of queer worlding. As cook and caretaker in the couple's residence and inner sanctum, Binh exemplifies the world division of labor that both institutes and queers the distinctions separating public and private, as well as the spheres of work and home, labor and affect, and productive and reproductive labor. These are the fundamental oppositions on which the dialectic of European modernity is constructed, but it is only *in between* the time and space of these oppositional terms that we also come to apprehend the contours of Binh's other life-world, a site of affective density where history and subjectivity are remade as a ghostly structure of feeling. Here we come to recognize the in-between as distinct and separate from, beyond but nevertheless within, modernity's dictates of time and space.

"What would it mean," asks Brian Masumi, "to give a logical consistency to the in-between? It would mean realigning with a logic of relation," indeed endowing the in-between with "an ontological status separate from the terms of relation" (70).⁵ Paying greater heed to the logic of the in-between in *The Book of Salt* facilitates an understanding of how it comes to accrue its own ontological status, its own ontological consistency, separate from the liberal-humanist terms of relation that frame but cannot fully determine it. Brought together with the epistemological effects of historical catachresis, the in-between gives way not only to alternative ways of knowing but also, and equally important, to alternative ways of being, indeed of becoming, in the world. And through this simultaneous realignment of epistemology and ontology, a queer worlding of the lost and for-

gotten desires comes to exceed the dialectic of enlightenment, the dialectic of affirmation and forgetting in *The Book of Salt*.

Mirroring

Binh eventually takes up with one of Stein's winsome acolytes, Marcus Lattimore, a gentleman from the American south but not, as Lattimore avers, a "southern gentleman" (111). In the course of the novel, we learn that Lattimore is a man of dubious racial origins passing through 27 rue de Fleurus and passing for white, his black mother having sold away his birthname: Lattimore's financial security for her silence. Likewise, his relationship to Binh slips in between the cracks of an Enlightenment compulsion to evaluate and interrogate, to organize and know. Hired by Lattimore to be his Sunday cook, Binh is outsourced as borrowed servant by Stein and Toklas for only one instrumental purpose: their desire to identify, to taxonomize, and to name—that is, to turn sameness into a manageable difference and to turn difference into a manageable sameness. "Is Lattimore a Negro?" Stein asks Binh. This, Binh tell us, "is what they [Stein and Toklas], in the end, want to know" (189). And here the question of liberal humanism's racialized past in the colonial slave societies of the New World as well as its ghostly return in the present of 1930s Old World Paris appears as an open secret, an institutionalized regime of passing and privilege, produced but passed over by historicist disciplining.

Let me turn to one last scene from *The Book of Salt*: Binh's initial encounter with Lattimore in the famous Stein salon. Of Lattimore, Binh recalls:

I will forget that you entered 27 rue de Fleurus as a "writer" among a sea of others who opened the studio door with a letter of introduction and a face handsome with talent and promise. You stood at the front of the studio listening to a man who had his back to me. I entered the room with a tray of sugar-dusted cakes for

all the young men who sit and stand, a hungry circle radiating around GertrudeStein. After years of the imposed invisibility of servitude, I am acutely aware when I am being watched, a sensitivity born from absence, a grain of salt on the tongue of a man who has tasted only bitter. As I checked the teapots to see whether they needed to be replenished, I felt a slight pressure. It was the weight of your eyes resting on my lips. I looked up, and I saw you standing next to a mirror reflecting the image of a wiry young man with deeply set, startled eyes. I looked up, and I was seeing myself beside you. I am at sea again, I thought. Waves are coursing through my veins. I am at sea again. (37)

For Binh, this mirror image does not produce a reflection of the self-same. Moreover, it does not present what, after Jacques Lacan, we are accustomed to describing as the poststructuralist advent of the “I is an other,” one mocking and coherent, trapped on the other side of the looking glass (“Mirror Stage” and “Agressivity” 23). This disjunctive mirror image is not simply about the ways in which individuated, egoic subjectivity is given over to *méconnaissance*, a temporal mode of anticipation that Jane Gallop observes is oriented toward the “future perfect” tense, the what “will have been” of the mirror stage (81), or, as Lacan puts it, the “what I shall have been for what I am in the process of becoming” (“Function” 86).

Instead, Binh’s reflection brings together two disparate spaces in the salon, as well as the two disconnected lovers occupying them, aligning Binh and Lattimore beside each other in the mirror image. By displaying a curious and handsome Lattimore reflecting an astonished Binh (a “wiry young man with deeply set, startled eyes”), Truong indexes through this mirror image an alternative space and time, another human life-world within the hallowed space of the Stein salon. In Truong’s reconfigured mirror stage, the temple of high modernism does not reflect on itself. Difference does not return as sameness. Historical understanding is thus transformed into a pro-

cess of what Ranajit Guha describes as capturing “an image caught in a distorting mirror” (333). In Binh’s distorted mirror stage, racial difference endures as that which remains irreducible to the dialectic of enlightenment, a human life-world other to the space and time of “the young men who sit and stand, a hungry circle radiating around GertrudeStein.”

As Binh slips from the simple past to the past progressive and finally into the present—“I looked up . . . I was seeing myself beside you . . . I am at sea again”—he carves out through these grammatical shifts a racialized space and time that he and Lattimore share. This alternative modernity summons the epistemology of the oceanic, shifting our attention to the sea as history, from “roots” to “routes,” in Paul Gilroy’s famous reading of the black Atlantic—indeed, working to queer the black Atlantic. This is a queer diaspora in which the gentleman from the American South and the Vietnamese servant-cook, despite their disparate class positions, can both appear, a racialized space and time they can collectively inhabit and share within and beyond the sanctioned space and time of Binh’s Mesdames. For, as Binh reminds us, the weight of Lattimore’s eyes on his lips transports him to the sea, which, he later tells us, becomes the alternative space and time of belonging itself:

[A]t sea, I learn that time can also be measured in terms of water, in terms of the distance traveled while drifting on it. When measured in this way, nearer and farther are the path of time’s movement, not continuously forward along a fast straight line. When measured in this way, time loops and curlicues, and at any given moment it can spiral me away and then bring me rushing home again. (190)

This space and time of nonmimetic racial identity is radically other to standard post-structuralist understandings of the narcissistic self-other dialectic of the mirror stage, one underpinning the fracturing of Western

Ho Chi Minh,
c. 1930.
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subjectivity and consciousness. From a slightly different perspective, we might say that calibrated against Lacan's future perfect, the "what will have been" of Binh's mirror stage in the "what was" of Stein's modernity questions how race is managed and effaced not just within the development of Enlightenment liberal humanism but specifically through modernism's vanguard and oppositional stance to this very tradition, one dependent on and developed during the height of European colonialism. We might say that what Truong presents us with here is a reconfigured mirror stage in which the spectrality of race emerges as the repressed image of liberal humanism itself.

From a slightly different angle, we might ask how the fracturing of Western subjectivity and consciousness, of which Stein's high modernism is a paradigmatic example, is made possible precisely through this colonial detour, through the forgetting of both Asia and Africa. As an Asian American, postcolonial, and queer text, *The Book of Salt* insists

on a contemporary investigation of race as a comparative project across the *longue durée*. In such an investigation, the United States is not configured as a point of arrival in a teleology about immigrant assimilation and settlement. Neither is it valorized as a melting pot or rainbow coalition undisturbed by cleavings of race, gender, sexuality, and class. Truong does not romanticize the actual or imagined intimacies among Binh, Lattimore, Stein, and Toklas. (Indeed, Lattimore later abandons his young lover after convincing Binh to steal for him one of Stein's unpublished manuscripts, the ironically titled "The Book of Salt.") Instead, Truong highlights their contingent and ever-shifting intersections, facilitating in the process a more sustained consideration of histories of exploitation and domination that unevenly bind Asian indentureship and African slavery to Euro-American modernity.

The Book of Salt thus demands a critical conversation among ethnic, postcolonial, diasporic, area, and queer studies, one bringing together the intimacies of four continents through scrupulous attention to questions of sex and sexuality. Exerting particular pressure on the processes of historicism, the problematic of queer diasporas in Truong's novel illustrates what Carla Freccero describes as "the affective force of the past in the present, of a desire issuing from another time and placing a demand on the present in the form of an ethical imperative" ("Theorizing" 184). In this manner, Truong's novel resists any simple slide—any development "continuously forward along a fast straight line"—from modernism to postmodernism as either a political or an aesthetic movement. Instead, it insists on not just a material and psychic but a formalist investigation of the ways in which the shift from modernism to postmodernism is constituted through disavowed and sublated colonial histories of race.⁶ In short, Truong's ghostly matters rearrange conventional understandings about the dialectic pairing of modern and postmodern and their

constitutive dissociation from the colonial and postcolonial. This disappearance and forgetting is the historical foundation of our color-blind age.

What, we might further consider, is the relation between the *aesthetic* inscription of Stein as the doyenne of literary modernism in her time and the current *political* inscription of Stein and Toklas as the iconic lesbian couple of historical modernism in our time? Given the temporal lag between these two different historical inscriptions, how is it that Stein and Toklas's once debased status as Jewish lesbians in early-twentieth-century Paris can now serve to underwrite the folding of normative gay and lesbian citizen-subjects in the United States into the authorized time and space of the nation-state—what I have elsewhere described as the contemporary emergence of “queer liberalism”? In other words, without discounting the radicality of Stein and Toklas in their time, we still must ask how the two came to be conscripted as the poster children for queer liberalism. What possible pasts and what possible futures must be denied and forgotten in order for this particular narrative of (queer) freedom and progress to take hold? Indeed, how does queer liberalism not only depend on but also demand the “completion” of the racial project, the triumph of a color-blind United States society as an achieved and settled past? At a moment when discourses of color blindness evacuate all racial content in favor of a reascendant form of the abstract individual—the liberal human—*The Book of Salt* insists on a consideration of what remains unassimilable, unrecognizable, and untold in the making of the political and aesthetic realm of Euro-American modernity.

At the same time, *The Book of Salt* resists any simple affirmation of racial identity or any easy positivist recovery of a lost and effaced racial past. It asks how we might move beyond the dominance of the visual register itself, one overdetermining so many of our contemporary debates on race and the politics

of recognition. By creating a mirror image of nonmimetic racial identity—Binh and Lattimore's asymmetrical reflection in the mirror stage of Stein's modernity—Truong opens up a queer terrain of racial belonging outside the authorized terms of dominant representation. She unfolds a viewing practice that obviates the unremitting demand for mimetic fidelity to universal Euro-American aesthetic and political ideals. At the same time, she refuses to substitute such demands with authenticity—with the visibility of race and racial difference. Instead, Truong conceptualizes an alternative time and space—other forms of knowing and being—that are more than just a negation or reversal of the dominant terms of relation. She focuses on the politics of our lack of knowledge, the more extensive forms of disappearance and forgetting that configure the aesthetic and political story of modernism in Stein's time and color blindness in ours.

Binh and Lattimore's relationship—their history—is of another time and space. It is not a history of affirmation but a history of disappearance, a history of ghosts. The cook's Mesdames come to represent the iconic modern lesbian couple of the early twentieth century, paving the way for queer liberalism today as the latest incarnation of “the rights of man.” Binh and Lattimore's relationship cannot assume the lineaments of modern subjectivity or identity. Theirs is a private without a public; through a similar logic, the history of Ho Chi Minh will come to be a public without a private. And while Binh's Sunday pleasures with Lattimore mark a sphere of intense intimacy rivaling that of his bourgeois Mesdames, it is consigned to Benjamin's “dustbin” of history, stretching back to coerced colonial migrations of black slaves and Asian coolies and reaching forward into the ubiquitous circulations of migrant labor under the contemporary shadows of global capitalism. Binh and Lattimore index the intimacies of four continents, but their ghostly presence also signals the incompleteness of their temporal

and spatial transformation under historicist disciplining of time and space.

And so they must wait.

NOTES

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1. Toklas writes, "When it was evident that connections in the quarter were no longer able to find a servant for us, it was necessary to go to the employment office. That was indeed a humiliating experience, from which I withdrew not certain whether it was more so for me or for the applicants. It was then that we commenced our insecure, unstable, unreliable but thoroughly enjoyable experiences with the Indo-Chinese" (186). Toklas tells us that Stein and she employed "a succession" of Vietnamese cooks, but Toklas writes mainly about two men, Trac and Nguyen, the former without his surname and the latter without his given name.

2. Brent Edwards has written on the life in France of Nguyen Ai Quoc, "who may well stand as the most important and prodigious writer in radical circles in Paris during the first part of the 1920s" (33). Edwards connects Nguyen to a diasporic group of anticolonial and anticapitalist black activists, in particular Lamine Senghor, referencing another historical incarnation of Asia and Africa in the metropole. Tyler Stovall has also written about race relations and racial violence in France, more generally, during this period.

3. By historicism, I mean the attempt, found especially among German historians around the mid-nineteenth century, to view all social and cultural phenomena—all categories, truths, and values—as historically determined and thus as understandable only if examined in their historical context, detached from present-day attitudes. For a trenchant critique of historicism, see Benjamin.

4. Giorgio Agamben explains medieval conceptions of melancholia as a process of materializing the ghostly remains of an unrealized object or ideal. He highlights melancholia's compulsion to transform an object of loss into an amorous embrace, thereby magically preserving it in the realm of the phantasmagoric. For Agamben, melancholia opens up an alternative time and space of the phantasm in which lost objects appear lost precisely so that they might become real. In this regard, Agamben's "ghostly matters" supplement what Avery Gordon describes as the haunting of both the "sociological imagina-

tion" and the discipline's abiding fidelity to the empirical. These ghostly matters open onto the terrain of "complex personhood" (4), intricate ways of life and living that fall below the radar of conventional political representation and the protocols of market exchange.

5. Massumi clarifies: "For the in-between, as such, is not a middling being but rather the being *of* the middle—the being of a relation. A positioned being, central, middling, or marginal, is a *term* of a relation. It may seem odd to insist that a relation has an ontological status separate from the terms of the relation. But, as the work of Gilles Deleuze repeatedly emphasizes, it is in fact an indispensable step toward conceptualizing change as anything more or other than a negation, deviation, rupture, or subversion" (70).

6. There is a small but growing body of important scholarship regarding this topic. See, e.g., Bell; Lloyd; Moten; Park; and Wang.

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