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From and to Paris: Experiences of Migration in *The Book of Salt*

Abstract I: Il saggio si concentra sulle diverse esperienze di migrazione presentate nel romanzo di Monique Truong *The Book of Salt*, ambientato nella Parigi degli anni Trenta con personaggi provenienti dall'Indocina e dagli Stati Uniti, e ne individua le rispettive motivazioni e opportunità, che necessariamente condizionano il modo di relazionarsi con la città. L'analisi vuole sottolineare come tali aspetti siano spesso legati al sentimento di 'sentirsi a casa', che accomuna ricordi, esperienza presente e scelte relative al proprio futuro.

Abstract II: Focusing on the different experiences of migration presented in Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt*, set in Paris in the 1930s but involving characters coming from Indochina and the United States, the essay tries to identify motives and opportunities, and the consequent way the various characters consider the capital city. This analysis reveals that the reasons for leaving and the way migrants face their dislocation is often related to the idea of 'feeling at home', which connects memory, present experience and choices for the future.

Most of the characters that people *The Book of Salt* are either experiencing or have experienced migration some time in their lives. Mixing real, though fictionalised, characters such as Gertrude Stein or Ho Chi Minh, with purely imagined ones, Truong thoroughly examines various stories of migration, each with its own motive, difficulties and impact on identity. A migrant herself, having left Vietnam when she was only six, the author focuses on this theme with great sensitivity, describing migration not as an event that takes place in a specific time and place but, rather, as an experience that, as many sociologists say, involves "a long-term if not life-long process of negotiating identity" (Benmayor 1994: 8). Furthermore, the choice of setting the story in the 1930s in a cosmopolitan city like Paris allows the writer to convey the idea that migration is not only a critical issue of our times, but a phenomenon that has constantly been present in history. Analysing the different experiences of migration presented in the novel, this essay will try to identify motives and opportunities, and the consequent way the various characters consider the capital city in relation to their concept of 'home'¹.

¹ The concept of home we refer to is not simply a reference to the birthplace but to a sense of belonging and sharing, and is taken from *The Politics of Home*, in which Rosemary Marangoly George observes that "one distinguishing feature of places called home is that they are built on select inclusions. The inclusions are grounded in a learned (or taught) sense of a kinship that is extended to those who are perceived as sharing

The Paris in the 1930s represents a particularly inspiring setting to introduce a variety of characters dissimilar in origin, backgrounds and social status. Even though the novel is not focused on historical facts², its characters reflect an authentic panorama of the city in those years. In interwar Paris, in fact, official data report a presence of nearly three thousand Indochinese, some of whom students and others workers, often employed as cooks (Goebel 2015: 28); generally speaking, the city was “a point of transit for colonial populations” (Boittin 2010: xv) where political as well as cultural issues could be debated with considerable freedom. At the same time, Paris also attracted a number of artists and intellectuals who chose to migrate in order to pursue their own artistic fulfilment, inspired by the modernity of the place and by the new ideas exchanged in the many informal meetings, among which the ones at 27 rue de Fleurus, Gertrude Stein’s Parisian residence. Introducing a variety of experiences³, Truong provides a more complex perspective on the city, at the time considered the centre of modernism, since “the novel forces Stein, Toklas, and ‘Paris Modernism’ out of their well-established, Eurocentric line and traces out their intersections with the colonies on whose labourers the metropolis and its artistic networks depended” (Coffman 2014: 169).

Before analysing the way these characters interact in the city, it should not be forgotten that Paris in *The Book of Salt* is also a point of departure for the French who set off for Indochina. The French colony represents another important setting, juxtaposed to the capital city in a narration that follows Binh’s flow of thoughts and memories. The sacrifice of leaving the mother-country is compensated for by economic and social advantages, since it represents an opportunity to improve one’s own social status, as the French wives described in the novel well know: “they, with their government-clerk husbands, were touring their colony, forgetting who they were, forgetting that they had to cross oceans to move up a class” (Truong 2004: 44). The economic motive appears to be dominant for middle-class French people, encouraged by a mother-country that has provided for a domestic environment in the foreign land where, as Binh narrates, in Saigon it is possible to find “the replicas of their cathedrals, erected in a far-off colony to remind them of the majesty, the piety, of home” (17).

Just as Stein’s house reflects the Parisian allure of those years for intellectuals, the Governor-General’s household is a microcosm where the social relationships are typical of the colonial world. On the one hand the ruling class dispensing orders, with little knowledge of

the same blood, race, class, gender, or religion. [...] Homes are manifest on geographical, psychological and material levels” (Marangoly 1999: 9).

² The novel, however, is based on two characters who actually lived in Paris at the time, namely Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas, and on the experience they narrated in *The Alice B. Toklas cookbook* and Stein’s *Everybody’s Autobiography*. The character of Binh is partly based on the descriptions of the Indochinese personnel the ladies had in Paris. The other important character in the novel is that of the Man on the Bridge, whose identity, at first unspecified, is later revealed as Nguyễn Ái Quốc, the name Ho Chi Minh used in Paris.

³ Apart from Gertrude Stein, example of American intellectual *émigrée*, and Binh, her Indochinese cook, the novel also introduces Lattimore, a mixed-race American Southerner who completes his studies in iridology in Paris and enters Stein’s circle, and the Man on the Bridge. Other stories of migration include the Americans in Paris or the Governor General’s chauffeur, former student of medicine in the capital city before going back to Saigon.

the local culture and highly prejudiced towards it, struggling to maintain their lifestyle in spite of the different setting. [...] "As if in France!" is Madame's motto; she shows no desire to know anything about local customs, so that she fails to understand that the title *anh*, or brother, given to the *sous-chef* is just an honour and not an indication of family relationship. She has no intention of adapting her way of life to the place, except when she has to substitute *crème anglaise* with *sabayon*, as she is too suspicious of 'Indochina's milk'. The domestic staff, instead, is made up of local people, fully aware of their subordinate position, yielding in various degrees to the rules imposed. If Binh's brother submits to the colonial power convinced that he will be rewarded, examples of resistance are mentioned, like the carelessness towards Madame's reproach shown by most servants behind apparent repentance, which anticipates the narrator's defiance in the role of cook and of narrator.

Binh experiences the rigid class and race distinction in the household even more as his relationship with *chef* Blériot becomes more intimate. Not only does the *chef* behave "like a typical colonial official [...] walk[ing] several steps ahead" (Truong 2004: 122) when in the streets of Saigon, but, as Binh remembers, he "insisted that I call him 'Chef' or, worse, 'Monsieur', even when our clothes were on the floor" (248). Binh's initiation to a homosexual relationship is intermingled from the very beginning with the issues of race, class, and colonialism, in which he is only the object of Blériot's pleasure. For the *chef* the affair with a domestic is a different form of exploitation, a way of experiencing transgression in a position of power that does not entail any kind of risk.

In a way transgression appears to be a prevailing motive for migration also among the Americans portrayed at the beginning of the novel and actually described at the moment of going back home, unable to afford life in Paris any longer as a consequence of the Great Depression. As Binh points out, "Americans traveled here in order to indulge in the 'vices' of home. First, they had invaded the bordellos and then it was the cafés" (Truong 2004: 7); what is difficult to accept for the French, though, is not their indulging in the excesses of sex and alcohol, but their hypocrisy, their living beyond their possibilities, leaving bills unpaid, as this qualifies as an unfair use of resources that parallels, however, the one carried out by the French themselves in the colonies.

The sexual sphere is involved even if we focus on the motives that lead the main characters of the novel to Paris, as they are, in one way or another, connected to their queer identity and to the longing to feel at home somewhere, a possibility that seems denied in their homeland. Both Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas seem unable to recognise or develop their sexual identity in the United States, while homosexuality is the reason why Binh loses both his job and home, as his father sends him away when he finds out about it. As Troeung points out with reference to Binh, "unhomeliness is a condition that can precede migration" (Troeung 2010: 123); this condition, however, similarly applies, as far as the sexual sphere is concerned, to the American ladies as well.

The Gertrude Stein of *The Book of Salt* leaves the United States after experiencing a sense of alienation and dissatisfaction in her own country. A student of medicine at a time where the presence of female students was hardly tolerated, Gertrude seems unable to recognise or accept her homosexual inclinations and mistakes her being in love for a disease, apparently

accepting the homophobic stance of her culture (Coffman 2014: 157); she fails the obstetrics exam, thus receiving the contempt of both male and female students. Finally, she finds herself out of place in a country that she considers old, as “Oakland, Allegheny, Cambridge, Baltimore, all the cities that she had slept in, but never quite awoken in, had the nineteenth century written all over them” (Truong 2004: 204). Feeling no longer at home, she sets off for Paris, which can offer the presence of her beloved brother Leo and the new century, where she gradually finds her own dimension sexually and professionally. As soon as she arrives in Paris, Gertrude gets rid of the corsets she used to wear, symbol of the claustrophobic atmosphere she experienced at home, and she struggles to have her identity finally recognised: “‘Gertrude Stein’. No longer a diminutive, as female names are doomed to be, but a powerful whopping declaration of her full self, each and every time” (Truong 2004: 207).

Similarly, Miss Toklas has “to travel thousands of miles from home to escape the setting sun” (Truong 2004: 158); having reached the age of thirty she envisions her life as an inevitable decline until she experiences a moment of sexual desire towards a woman. This recognition shakes her identity and finds correspondence with the San Francisco earthquake, an event Alice takes for a sign. Her radical decision to emigrate, rather than being perceived as a journey away from home, is described as a journey to find the very essence of the self: “she thought she was giving in to her instinct to flee, a fear so animal-like that she submitted willingly. Now she remembers it as a homing instinct, a flight toward as opposed to away” (158). The description of the picture, taken one year before leaving the United States, shows her desire to “expose her body to light, a compulsion to wake it” (161).

If the expatriation of the two women shows a desire to feel at home that cannot be fulfilled in their own country, it is nonetheless a meditated, voluntary decision. Binh’s journey away from Saigon, on the other hand, emerges as the result of a traumatic experience, of a decision that is not actually taken, but suffered. His sexual behaviour is in fact the cause of the sudden separation from home. Binh’s home, however, is described in the novel as a place clearly divided into two distinctive areas, with corresponding different emotions. The part of the house where his father usually entertains his guests while drinking is associated in Binh’s memories with episodes of violence and constant humiliations. The ‘Old Man’, as Xu notices, represents not only the patriarchal authority, but also the colonial culture the father is assimilated into through his cooperation with the Catholic missions (Xu 2008: 139). The kitchen, the only space that his mother can consider her own, is for Binh the real ‘home’, the place where he receives attention and tenderness, where he listens to his mother’s imaginative stories while helping her cook.

Though Binh’s memories rarely qualify as nostalgia for a happy past, he admits he “never had a desire to see what was on the other side of the earth” (Truong 2004: 250). By sending him away, his father has deprived him of his home, and the journey to Europe is an escape from his sense of guilt, without any interest for the destination, as Binh’s desire when he gets on board is that of annihilation: “I needed a ship that would go out to sea because there the water is deep, deeper than the hemmed-in rivers that I could easily reach by foot. I wanted the deepest water because I wanted to slip into it and allow the moon’s reflection to swallow me whole. ‘I never meant to go this far’, I said to Bafio. What I meant was that when I boarded the Niobe I had no intention of reaching shore” (250).

The fact that Binh would never have conceived of leaving home as, despite everything, it represented for him something precious, is clear when he reports the basket weaver's story which Bafio tells him on the *Niobe*. The story of a young basket-weaver leaving his village to try, without succeeding, his fortune somewhere else does not entirely convince Binh. The motive of pure adventure put forward by the weaver, 'just to see', does not appear good enough to leave one's hometown, and Binh thus suspects this story could be more similar to his, caused by a sudden traumatic event that also prevents him from going back: "I can imagine the weaver's desire, all right, the geography of it reasonably extending to the next village and over and, maybe, one or two after that. But to take one's body and willingly set it upon the open sea, this for me is not an act brought about by desire but a consequence of it, maybe" (Truong 2004: 57).

Paris does not represent for Binh a welcoming place as, in spite of greater open-mindedness towards sexuality, he finds rigid hierarchies and prejudices related to race and class (Edwards 2012: 174) already experienced at the Governor-general's house. His yellow skin makes him easily identifiable, so that he is different but, at the same time, unable to arouse any interest beyond superficial curiosity as he is immediately categorised and deprived of other possibilities. This is evident in the interviews Binh has with his prospective employers, and even more when he walks in the streets of Paris:

Foreigner, *asiatique*, and, this being Mother France, I must be Indochinese. They do not care to discern any further, ignoring the question of whether I hail from Vietnam, Cambodia, or Laos. [...] Every day when I walk the streets of this city, I am just that. I am an Indochinese laborer, generalized and indiscriminate, easily spotted and readily identifiable all the same. It is this curious mixture of careless disregard and notoriety that makes me long to take my body into a busy Saigon marketplace and lose it in the crush. There, I tell myself, I was just a man, anonymous, and, at a passing glance, a student, a gardener, a poet, a chef, a prince, a porter, a doctor, a scholar. But in Vietnam, I tell myself, I was above all just a man (Truong 2004: 152).

Binh's need to belong finds partial fulfilment when he meets other *asiatiques* in Paris, when they, through their apparent ignorance of each other, state their ordinariness and share their common condition of migrants: "It is the recognition that in the darkest streets of the city there is another body like mine, and that it means no harm. [...] To walk by without blinking an eye is to say to each other that we are human, whole, a man or a woman like any other, two lungfuls of air, a heart pumping blood, a stomach hungry for home-cooked food, a body in constant search for the warmth of the sun" (Truong 2004: 141-142). Apart from these brief encounters, Binh passes unnoticed, except when Lattimore notices him at the market, remembers his appearance and his looking lost; this episode has such great value for Binh that it almost changes his relationship with the city and he asks himself: "How can I carry my body through the streets of this city in the same way again?" (110).

The elements of race and class difference intertwine in the description of life at 27 rue de Fleurus and show their impact on the lives of the protagonists. Miss Stein and Alice Toklas, being two white affluent *émigrées*, can afford to live in a prosperous area of Paris sur-

rounded by commodities like the telephone and the car. Their social status and condition of expatriated intellectuals allow them to make their house a meeting point where Miss Stein is always the centre of attention and the Mesdames' queerness is accepted. As for Bìn, though the position as cook with the Mesdames represents a considerable improvement in his quality of life, his financial condition remains at a level of pure survival, as shown by the fact that he cannot even afford to buy a photograph, already half-paid for by Lattimore.

Moreover, the Mesdames share the white colonial attitude towards their servant, a mixture of exploitation and paternalistic benevolence, and their conversations are not free from openly racist comments⁴, as in the case of the opera singer Robeson or in their curiosity about Lattimore's racial identity. Lattimore, or Sweet Sunday Man as Bìn calls him, is in a half-way position between the Mesdames and Bìn: his economic situation has allowed him to complete his studies and live comfortably; yet, though he passes for white, his mixed race makes him a marginalised subject just as Bìn is. The class and race dynamics that take place in the household thus account for what Coffman describes as Bìn's ambivalent attitude – between identification and distancing – towards the Mesdames, sympathetic towards their queerness, but critical of their class privilege and lack of awareness of their foreignness (Coffman 2014: 151).

Bìn then feels affinity with his employers, as they both share the condition of sexual exiles, but soon realises that “queer identity does not necessarily produce liberal politics” (Cohler 2008: 27) and that theirs is merely a relationship between employer and domestic, where there is no room for greater intimacy. This becomes clear to him the day after his first night of romance with Sweet Sunday Man. At first apparently forgiven by his Mesdames for being late, he lies to protect his newly born relationship, provoking Miss Toklas' reaction: “My Madame's anger registers on her lips, a controlled tremble, which lets me know that, while I have been permitted to stay within the doors of 27 rue de Fleurus, I have been excommunicated yet again from that perfect circle that is at the center of every home” (Truong 2004: 103). His disappointment explains why in Bilignin, where Bìn is the only *asiatique* in town and becomes the target of blatant prejudice, he is almost happy to hear that his Mesdames share with him the condition of outsiders: “What you probably do not know, Gertrude Stein, is that in Bilignin you and Miss Toklas are the only circus act in town. And me, I am the *asiatique*, the sideshow freak. [...] Because of your short-cropped hair and your, well, masculine demeanor, they call you ‘Caesar’. Miss Toklas, they dub ‘Cleopatra’ in an ironic tribute to her looks and her companionship role in your life” (142).

The common condition pointed out by the narrator is not the only one presented in the novel, as Truong also focuses on practical problems and nostalgic thoughts that all migrants share. A case in point is the difficulty of expressing themselves in another language, which regards both Miss Stein and Bìn. However, French is not only a foreign language for Bìn, but also the language of the coloniser and of all his previous employers and is thus connected with forms of power and violence: “there are some French words that I have picked up quickly, in fact, words that I cannot remember not knowing. As if I had been born with

⁴ Both Monique Truong and scholars point out the presence of similar comments in Toklas and Stein's written production mentioned in note 1.

them in my mouth, as if they were the seeds of a sour fruit that someone else ate and then ungraciously stuffed its remains into my mouth" (Truong 2004: 11-12).

Binh's fluency in French has remained very limited because, as he observes, "the vocabulary of servitude is not built upon my knowledge of foreign words but rather on my ability to swallow them" (Truong 2004: 13); he possesses "cheap, serviceable words to fuel [his] desires" but not "lavish, imprudent ones to feed them" (11), and is often compelled to express what he wants in the negative – e. g. 'a pear [...] not a pear' for 'pineapple'. This rudimentary use of language has consequences on his possibility of integration and, ultimately, on the construction of his self-perception: "A man with a borrowed, ill-fitting tongue, I cannot compete for this city's attention. [...] I am a man whose voice is a harsh whisper in a city that favors a song. No longer able to trust the sound of my own voice, I carry a small speckled mirror that shows me my face, my hands, and assures me that I am still here" (18-19).

Given their poor knowledge of French, Miss Stein and Binh try to build strategies in order to compensate for their shortcomings, mainly by using their own bodies instead of words. She uses the tone of her voice and the warmth of her eyes, while Binh uses mimicry and bases his comprehension on the long-practiced ability "to look for the signals and interpret the signs" (Truong 2014: 117). Despite his poor competence, he in fact surprisingly reveals "discerning attention to the nuances in his employers' language" (Peek 2012: n.d.), like the use of *coup-de-grâce* to refer to a finishing stroke (Truong 2004: 69). On some occasions, instead, he follows his friend Bão's advice to "slip your own meanings into their words" (155), a more defiant way of forcefully entering a discourse to overcome his sense of exclusion: "Language is a house with a host of doors, and I am too often uninvited and without the keys. But when I infiltrate their words, take a stab at their meanings, I create the trapdoors that will allow me in when the night outside is too cold and dark" (155).

Another feeling that the protagonists share in Paris is that of nostalgia, a feeling that, as Monique Truong has often stated in various interviews with reference to the title of her novel⁵, is not necessarily to be condemned as it represents a very human temptation, especially for migrants whose adaptation to a new location may not be so easy. In the novel it is frequently conveyed through food imagery⁶, seen in its cultural relevance. Binh cannot help remembering his mother's stories and the moments spent with her in the kitchen, or the spices and ingredients of his country of origin. Similarly, "on Sundays Madame and Madame are safely settled in their dining room with their memories of their America heaped onto large plates" (Truong 2004: 27). In both cases there is a gap between the past memories of the dishes and those tasted in Paris, as they are adapted by Binh and Miss Toklas with the addition of new ingredients. The process of integration of past and present contexts, apparently so natural in cooking, proves however more difficult in everyday life.

In this regard, Binh and Miss Toklas certainly differ in their dependence on memories, as Binh's are too often mixed with pain and sense of guilt, while the lady is freer and thus

⁵ The presence of salt in the title also refers to the biblical story of Lot's wife who, when leaving Sodom, was tempted to look back at her hometown and was thus transformed into a pillar of salt.

⁶ The relationship between food and memory is a crucial issue in the novel, as pointed out in two different interviews by Daniela Fargione and Tamiko Nimura.

more open to the new. Truong underscores the difference in the invisible 'luggage' the two characters have taken with them when the narrator compares his sensations with those of Miss Toklas on the day of their arrival at Gertrude Stein's house: "As she stood outside the studio waiting for an answer, she heard the sounds of leaves batting against the autumn winds. She thought she was hearing Gertrude Stein's laughter. Many years later, standing outside the same door, I thought I was hearing my father's voice. She had left hers behind. I had unfortunately overpacked" (Truong 2004: 160).

For both Miss Stein and Binh, however, Paris also represents a place where they can express their own creativity and find professional success, one as a writer and intellectual, the other as a cook, two activities whose similarities Monique Truong does not fail to specify in the novel, both requiring imagination and implying an addressee. Daniela Fargione in her essay "What Keeps you Here?" argues that, despite the differences that brought the characters to Paris, the reasons for staying are the same, "the awareness that Paris could offer the right stimuli to transform an innate gift into craft" (Fargione 2013: 141), where the distance from the mother-country represents an advantage. For Gertrude Stein the fact of using French in everyday communication allows her to become "more intimate with the language of her birth", she can "dissect" it and mould it with creativity (Truong 2004: 30). Similarly, the art of cooking gives Binh the chance, elsewhere denied, of expressing himself in a position of advantage that implies a reversal of roles: "I am no longer the mute who begs at this city's steps. Three times a day, I orchestrate, and they sit with slackened jaws, silenced" (19). In his *cuisine* he personalises dishes and combines elements of Vietnamese tradition and of his mother's recipes with French or American ones. Cooking helps him connect past and present, memory and desire. Food also acquires symbolic relevance in the lavish meal Binh has with the Man on the Bridge at a restaurant, where what is on the table and the person sitting next to him both hint at an alternative model to face the condition of migrants:

the transcultural mixture of salt-and-pepper shrimp (Chinese), *haricots verts* (French green beans), watercress (Vietnamese), and apple pie (American) presents a kind of cultural exchange and collaboration that is powerfully oppositional to colonialism. Exiles like Nguyen and Binh understand the implications of travel: the importance of remembrance, the necessity to adapt, and the wealth of worldly ways (Xu 2008: 147).

The Parisian context appears therefore not only as a "space of commodity and labour exchange" (Udomlamun 2015: 74), but as a place that offers a chance to understand and develop one's own potential. This sensation is not dissimilar to the one the author herself experienced in her first visit to Paris, as Fargione has pointed out in the essay already mentioned. In the article "The Season de l'Amour" Truong remembers feeling "a gradual easing into [her] own body" and thinking she was finally 'somewhere'. Gertrude Stein needed Paris to make her 'genius' appear, after which she can decide to go 'home' to receive the due recognition as an artist. As for Binh, again Paris is more than a working opportunity if we consider that he, a man 'unused to choices', faces two decisions, one related to the buying of a photograph and the other about where to go after the Mesdames' departure. Both of them go towards the Man on the Bridge, the compatriot with whom he had spent only

one evening, but with whom he had shared thoughts, memories, feelings, enjoyment. The reader is not explicitly told what Binh will do. His state of ‘unhomeliness’, both in Paris and in Vietnam, cause of pain and suffering, represents a form of freedom to explore all possibilities, to find a ‘home’ in the in-between spaces he can find on his way, and to offer the readers, from that perspective, other versions of reality; “Binh resists the allure of a stable home(land) and, in the process, creates a decentered subjectivity that powerfully critiques the contradictions and exclusions necessary to absolute belonging” (Edwards 2012: 181).

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