

A Subject of Sea and Salty Sediment: Diasporic Labor and Queer (Be)longing in Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt*.

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A Subject of Sea and Salty Sediment: Diasporic Labor and Queer (Be)longing in Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt*

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Abstract

Caught having an affair while employed at the home of the governor-general of Saigon, Vietnamese cook, migrant worker, and narrator of Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt*, Binh, is cast out of his natal home, and sets off for the open sea, winding up as a live-in cook in the household of lesbian couple Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas. As an abstract source of labor and culinary pleasure to those he encounters in Paris, Binh concludes, despondently, that he is, "nothing but a series of destinations with no meaningful expanses in between." Yet the "expanses in between," most notably in reference to waterways, allude to a central trope of Vietnamese culture. Incorporating Vietnamese symbolism with formative migratory experiences, this essay argues that Truong constructs a subject who can be read through both affective forms of national belonging as well as a broader queer diasporic community. It also explores Binh's percipient tongue as one that is ever critical of the dynamics of power and privilege, and ever sensitive to the variances in salt (of sea, sweat, tears). *The Book of Salt* thus mediates the possibility of a gustatory epistemology and community constituted in the sensate, attuned to divergent experiences of mobility, labor, and love.

Main Content

Jump To

Article

- └ Abstract
- └ Main Content

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