The Language of Food in Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt*

In the biblical story of Sodom and Gomorrah, God destroys the sister cities in a wrath of scalding sulfur—punishment for their inhabitants' "deviant" sexuality. Job's wife, in a moment of affected longing, looks back on her burning home; as promised, God turns her into a pillar of salt. Monique Trương's *The Book of Salt* explores these connotations of sodomy and nostalgia. The novel's protagonist practices both. As a homosexual man, Bình suffers the torment of exile from his native Vietnam after his staunch Catholic father disowns him. Bình tacitly understands that "to take one's body and set it upon the open seas…is not an act brought on by desire, but a consequence of it." The novel spans two continents, three cultures, and an expanse of ocean in between. Salt—in food, sweat, tears, sea or blood—seeps through the entire novel. Before serving five years as a live-in cook for "two American ladies" in France (the two women turn out to be literary icon Gertrude Stein and her lesbian partner, Alice B. Toklas), Bình works in Saigon as a lowly *garde-manger* in the governor general's kitchen, toils as a kitchen-boy aboard a ship and makes entrances and quick exits from several French households. No stranger to service, Binh must deal with the values affixed to his work. The word salary comes from salt. Salt-cakes were an ancient method of payment for slaves—*a salarium*—and implicitly connotes a person's labor, value and worth. *The Book of Salt* unravels these very concepts knotted into Bình's odyssey as he embarks on the discovery of self-worth. Trương uses the language of food to convey the complexities of Bình's story, which cannot be reduced to stock narratives of the immigrant, servant, or gay man.

Yet Monique Trương is a Vietnamese-American woman and English-language writer who assumes the internal voice of a homosexual Vietnamese man. She lends her first-person narrator an impossibly agile and elegant language he does not possess in spoken English or French. With this move, Truong claims a fluent space within her character, teasing him out of the shadows of history and language. The irony—and unreliability—of this move is prickly, but forgivable. Bình's narrative, after all, is a narrative of difference. He comes to understand himself in the same way readers come to understand him—through negatives. A pineapple is not a pear, a partridge is not a chicken, and "love is not a bowl of quinces yellowing in a blue and white china bowl, seen but untouched." Bình is not his father's biological son, not straight, not Caucasian, not without a degree of suffering. In this way, Bình sets himself off against the backdrop of what he is not. One could argue it is appropriate that Trương is not who she writes of, if we accept that her intention is to destabilize fixed and preconceived notions of identity. This novel is her attempt at amending the limited concepts of Vietnamese immigrants in the eyes of foreigners, as "a series of destinations with no meaningful expanse in between."

Trương unpacks Bình's story—his sexuality, family background, secrets—in a scattering of lucid flashbacks. The scathing voice of Bình's father occasionally cuts into Binh's narrative with caustic,

biting remarks. When Bình recalls brothers or former lovers, the language grows nostalgic but restrained. Binh's internal dialogue is consistently wry and witty, if a touch bitter. And except for the maudlin tones Binh uses to recall his self-sacrificing mother cowering in the kitchen (a persistent cliché), Trương mostly resists the urge to build a story off of a long sob or scar-tissue. Bình's destitution is never explicit, but alluded to in his threadbare suits; his loneliness apparent in episodes where he listens to the talk of lovers with his ears pressed up against the wall, or as he sits drinking alone in noisy bars, surreptitiously snatching up bits and parts of others' conversations. What Bình does possess is an uncanny knack for locating any point in the Paris city-grid. In exchange for a drink, he tells the other bar patrons (in pidgin French) exactly where it is that they live from the address they offer. It is a game, and they are always amazed. But, they quickly become enraged that an Indochinese can know *their* city, so profoundly, by heart. But even his ability to map the labyrinth cul-de-sacs, side-streets and alleyways of Paris betrays Bình as a vagabond outsider. Bình's familiarity is with the city's exterior. He comes to know the city in the long pockets of time in which he finds himself alone, homeless and without work. His mapping game is the trick of the lonely stranger attempting to locate a sense of belonging as he passes each closed door of their homes. For Bình, "language is a house with a host of doors, and I am too often uninvited and without keys." And as "a man with a borrowed, ill-fitted tongue, I cannot compete for this city's attention."

Trương rescues Bình from invisibility through food, the other language of the tongue. More akin to the sensory expression of music in its affective potential, Bình composes arias, fugues, and symphonies of food. His cooking allows him to orchestrate narratives, evoke emotions, and determine the eaters' sensual itinerary. Bình gains a measure of power and expression. Rapturously described recipes like paper-thin slices of pineapple caramelized to smokiness and delicately sautéed with shallots and beef stands in for the fractured and hapless French he speaks. Trương constructs food as Bình's sanctuary and primary trope: "Every kitchen is a homecoming, a respite where I am the village elder, sage and revered. Every kitchen is a story I can embellish with saffron, cardamom, bay laurel, and lavender. In their heat and in their steam, I allow myself to believe that it is the sheer speed of my hands, the flawless measurement of my eyes, the science of my tongue, that is rewarded. During these restorative intervals, I am no longer the mute that begs at this city's steps."

Through that other lexicon, Bình gains entry into the lives and home of the American expatriates Stein and Toklas. Trương is smart enough to keep Bình's narration remote from the literary jargon of the famous Paris salon. As far as Bình is concerned, those evenings are a blur of attractive, anonymous young men who flocked to 27 rue de Fleurus to bask in his Mesdames' grace and glory, a place he already holds court, but for different reasons. With his talent for the sweet and savory, Bình crosses the frontier between outsider and insider and the reader, likewise, is privy to the profoundly intimate exchanges between the two women. It is in the minute domestic details that Trương reveals herself as a sensitive and observant writer. She does not fail to note the silent gestures of devotion that bring authenticity to the story—for one, the wearing of your lover's brand new shoes to break and soften the leather for their feet.

Through the language of food, Bình subtly subverts the linguistic implications of colonialism. Bình possesses an arsenal of eloquent and sophisticated culinary expressions he could never deploy in spoken English or French. After all, French is the language of servitude for a Vietnamese man employed in French kitchens; a means by which the imperial culture maintains its power structure of uneven exchange and demarcation. For Bình, French words "were the seeds of a sour fruit that someone else had ate and then ungraciously stuffed its remains into [his] mouth." Like his brothers and father in Vietnam, Bình holds an abstract belief that the French language would save them. But Bình is quicker to see through the way language limits, denies and betrays: "the vocabulary of servitude is not built upon my knowledge of foreign words, but my ability to swallow them." Stifled and silenced, Bình exacts a quiet retribution through the flawless food he creates: "Three times a day I orchestrate and they sit with slackened jaw, silenced. Mouths preoccupied with the tastes of foods so familiar and yet with every bite even the most parochial of palates detect redolent notes of something they have no words to describe. They are, by the end, overwhelmed by an emotion that they have never felt, nostalgia for places they have never been."

One is tempted to accuse Trương of the same indulgence in emotions and nostalgias that do not belong to her. In a fairly recent Time Asia article, Trương admits to having never been back to Vietnam since leaving it as a 6 year-old at the fall of Saigon (1975), and feels discomfort when speaking in her native tongue. But if Trương is guilty of doctoring and exoticizing Vietnamese culture, it is because she approaches narrative in the same manner she approaches food: imagined, crafted, and orchestrated to transport the reader towards new possibilities, experiences and places unfamiliar to them. The language of food provides entrance into landscapes and memories that conventional vocabulary cannot access authentically. Bình recalls wrapping bananas and sticky rice in lotus leaves in his mother's cramped kitchen. The ethereal taste of *fleur de sel* at a dinner with a poetic stranger, transports him to the mounds of glittering, white crystals heaped on watery grids along the Vietnamese coast. The Saigon market provides a backdrop of lush fruit and vegetables for Bình's secret bourgeoning romance with the young chef of the governor-general's kitchen. But Trương halts just before the landscape itself becomes a main character of the story, a reflex many of her contemporaries cannot resist.

Her dialogues can sound stiff and mannered at times, but this is legitimized by Binh's characteristic vanity and pride. The Vietnamese sensibilities and the French idiosyncrasies she evokes feel right. Trương writes in a high-modernist prose that is at times delectably exalted, and at others, overwrought. Her diction is seductive and delicious as food-writing ought to be, if at times too heavy and rich on the tongue. Yet Truong's unctuous idiom is precisely what yolks the reader along. Like the other characters in the novel, we are offered a taste of Bình's melancholy, and then wryly admonished for craving "the fruits of exile, the bitter juices and the heavy hearts."

At every turn, Trương exposes the restrictive cultural typecasting, or orientalism, that diminishes Bình as an individual: "[My body] marks me, announces my weakness, displays it as yellow skin. It flagrantly tells my story, or a compacted, distorted version of it, to passersby curious enough to cast their eyes my way. It stunts their creativity, dictates to them the limited list of whom I could be." All of Bình's employers provide him with a different moniker, unable to pronounce his given name properly. His lovers perform this very same act of displacement. The individual dissolves

beneath a predetermined, generalized identity dictated by those in positions of power. Trương reveals orientalism as a limiting structure that cripples as it denies the complexity of the Asian individual by refusing to recognize heterogeneity within race.

Cooking allows Bình to compose nuanced identities that express his complex dimensions. In a bowl of his "best Singapore ice-cream," Miss Toklas detects a deeper note nipping at the tongue. That "bite," as it turns out, is peppercorn steeped in the milk for an entire day to impart character. The depth of flavor makes "the eater take notice, examine this dish of sweet anew." In food, as in language and humans, a hint of irony makes the story more complex. Gertrude Stein, for instance, wants to serve grouse to the man being hunted by the authorities.

More than anything, Trương focuses on food and sensual motifs to disrupt the clean, comfortable models of exchange between the dominant culture and its colonial subject, revealing the traumatic, complex and often messy mingling of cultures and histories. Lattimore, a young man who frequents the famous Paris salon, initiates a love affair with Bình under the pretense of looking to hire a chef to cook at his home on Sundays. Because Bình is invited to cook for (and sleep with) Lattimore under the guise of service, Lattimore places them on uneven footing from the start. Bình sees the irony of this perverse power structure yet eagerly anticipates his time with "Sweet Sunday Man," and the chance to be seen and felt by another if only behind the closed doors of Lattimore's residence. As a pantry boy in Saigon, Bình witnesses the hierarchies and betrayals in the governor general's kitchen where his brother "Minh the sous-chef" also worked. The French colonial presence in the novel is personified to a degree by Bình's former lover, a young French chef named Blériot. With Blériot's arrival, any hope Minh the sous-chef nursed of one day becoming head chef are crushed. Bình and Blériot sleep together. Yet despite their trysts in the kitchen at night, in the morning streets of the Saigon market, Blériot "walked several steps ahead, keeping enough distance between us to say, we are not one." Although in the dark their bodies blur social frontiers, each of Bình's lovers enacts the role of imperialist. But by not observing the rules of social-cultural divide, by not denying himself, Bình implicitly chooses desire over servitude.

Bình's sexual transgressions decisively negate the terms dictated by social, cultural and religious hierarchies. Trương has her character trading the religious ecstasies of Catholicism for the rapture of food and flesh. For Bình, the exchange of food and body is faith in the possibility of love. In food, Bình practices his own form of communion with god. He creates meals that figuratively bring the eaters to their knees—an image iconic of religious devotion. Bình's escape into the sensual world remarks against the limiting, colonially-imposed religion that condemns who he is. Trương zeros in on the idea that there can be no true faith without blind risk. Parables strewn throughout the book convey the distance across risk and loss—the cost of desire. One parable in particular tells the tale of a basket-weaver who uproots his family's water hyacinths and heads to new villages to make his fortune, only to discover that the plants would not take properly to alien soil. He travels from village to village, but no matter where he raises the plants, the hyacinth stalks crumble in his hands when he tries to weave them. At a loss, he takes to the sea to seek out new destinations. This tale evokes the risk of displacement and the failures of immigration. But for Bình, the curse of the basket-weaver's "boundless search" was a "steadfast belief that there exists an alternative

to the specific silt of his family's land." Binh's desire and difference propels him across an ocean to discover whether or not there is another land where he can root and evolve.

Trương's novel wrestles with the possibilities of transnational identity. An enigmatic stranger Bình meets one evening on a bridge overlooking the Seine turns out to be a traveler with the alias "Nguyễn Ái Quốc." Bình and the stranger share a dinner, their longing for home, and thoughts about the French in the course of an evening. A faint undertone of eroticism drifts between them. The dinner, prepared by another Vietnamese chef, expresses the complexity of a man who has traveled and lived abroad, a man who can chart his itineraries with food, a man who cooks to "remember the world." Food again serves as the poignant metaphor for fuller experience. Trương is more interested in the poetic stranger Bình dubs the "scholar-prince" than the man he is to become known as in later years (Hồ Chí Minh). As Truong assures us, her fictional Nguyễn Ái Quốc was the man who lived in France in the 1920s, who read Shakespeare and Dickens in English, wrote plays and newspaper articles in French, made his living as a cook, a pastry chef, a painter of fake Chinese souvenirs and a photographer's assistant. Trương's affective approach to history concerns her, not with Hồ Chí Minh the nationalist, but with his former international identity before it was fixed. Nguyễn Ái Quốc is literally, "the man on a bridge," in transition and standing between two places. Trương herself grapples with her dual Vietnamese-American identity, and with her debut novel, insists on a fuller, more nuanced language that can effectively represent racial and sexual subjects in a transnational framework. Her food-narrative expresses both love and dissent. Food, like identity, comes not only from history—something inherited, or passed on from an archive of failures—but from the hard-earned experiences that are fought for, and wrested from, living by one's own measures. With *The Book of Salt*, Trương fashions a sturdy vessel from and for her own diverse roots and stalks.