

## TRANSTEXTUAL BRIDGE BETWEEN THE POSTMODERN AND THE MODERN: THE THEME OF THE "OTHERNESS" IN MONIQUE TRUONG'S NOVEL *THE BOOK OF SALT* (2003) AND GERTRUDE STEIN'S *THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF ALICE B. TOKLAS* (1932)

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In discussing the processes of the development of postmodernism, the concept of intertextuality plays an important role, the essence of which lies in the fact that any text is a new issue of "past citations". The historical and social determinants of intertexts make the writing of nowadays the iteration, and also re-iteration or re-writing which foregrounds the trace of the various texts it both knowingly and unknowingly places and displaces. From this aspect of re-iteration, postmodernism then appears as the "new" echo of the "old" past. The aim of this article is to trace the transtextual relationship between two texts that represent different literary periods and the blend of different cultures, Asian American and American European. Although the discussion is based on the dimensions of transtextuality, postmodernism and modernism, and cultural and social aspects, the emphasis is put on the notion of the "otherness" in Monique Truong's novel.

The continuous influence that one of the major American modernists, Gertrude Stein, has made on the writers of different generations and

nationalities demonstrates the characteristic aspects of intertextuality. However, intertextuality refers to far more than the "influences" of writers on each other (Chandler, 1). Since its first introduction in the late 1960s by Julia Kristeva, the term "intertextuality" has strengthened its position as one of the aspects denoting postmodernity. Although, as Graham Allen (2005) observes, the term possesses a potential for misuse (as, for example, its reference to intentional allusion, overt or covert, to, citation or quotation of previous literary texts, it still retains its mosaic, absorptive and transformative aspect (Allen, 1). In 1986, Julia Kristeva presented a description of a three-dimensional textual space by pointing out three "coordinates of dialogue": the writing subject, the addressee (or ideal reader), and exterior texts (Kristeva, 37). Gerard Genette (1992 and 1997) proposed the term "transtextuality" as a more inclusive term than "intertextuality". He listed the following five subtypes:

- Intertextuality: quotation, plagiarism, allusion when citing another text is an explicit intertextual relation.

- Paratextuality: the relation between a text and its “paratext” – that which surrounds the main body of the text, such as titles, headings, prefaces, epigraphs, dedications, acknowledgements, footnotes, illustrations, etc.
- Architextuality: designation of a text as part of a genre or genres or framing by readers (in Chandler, 8). This category spans from critical texts (comments, reviews) (Dalgaard, 6).
- Metatextuality: explicit or implicit critical commentary of one text on another text.
- Hypotextuality: (Genette’s term was “hypertextuality” (Chandler, 8)) the relation between a text and a preceding “hypotext” – a text or genre on which it is based but which it transforms, modifies, elaborates or extends (including parody, spoof, sequel, translation).

According to Genette (1997), the defining features of intertextuality might include the following: reflexivity (how reflexive or self-conscious the use of intertextuality seems to be); alteration; explicitness; scale of adoption; structural unboundedness (to what extent the text is presented or understood as part or tied to a larger structure). As John Pier observes, these aspects demand the “mobilization of the recipient’s imagination” (Pier, 2; translation mine).

Thus, the essence of transtextuality lies in interpretative relations, explorative connections and configurative affects. Following Michael Worton and Judith Still, intertextuality presupposes that “a text [...] cannot exist as a hermetic or self-sufficient whole, and so does not function as a closed system” (Worton and Still, 1). The concept covers all different forms of the relation of a given text to other texts, since no literary text is read in a cultural

vacuum (Vitoux, 105). If a literary text is characterized as belonging to a certain genre and may be further subdivided and classified, this can be used as a starting point for tracing transtextual relationships between the texts. Rune Dalgaard proposes the notion of “embedding”, which can deal with the overlapping categories as presented in Genette’s typology (Dalgaard, 7). According to Paul Alexander Aitken, “transtextual analyses are by nature somewhat circular; thus, in order to understand one text, it is necessary to know all other texts, in order to know those texts, it is necessary to consider them individually” (Aitken, 11).

*The Book of Salt* takes the reader on a strange journey, from Indochina to Paris, as the fictional Vietnamese cook for Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas tells his own story echoing the one as related by Gertrude Stein. Both “autobiographies”, one an explicit one in the form of a novel, another a covert one, written with the narrator’s voice of Alice B. Toklas, open up with the same structure: Stein’s novel is divided in the chapters, the structure and content of which is repeated in *The Book of Salt*: “Before I came to Paris”; “My arrival in Paris”; “Gertrude Stein in Paris, 1903–1907”; “Gertrude Stein before she came to Paris”, etc. The theme of arrival and departure is important in both novels, as it represents the aspect of “the otherness” – the specific notion in both novels. Moreover, *The Book of Salt* opens with a quote by Alice B. Toklas, indicating the level of intertextuality as the leading dimension of the novel: “We had certainly luck in finding good cooks, though they had their weaknesses in other ways. Gertrude Stein liked to remind me that if they did not have such faults, they would not be working for us” (Toklas in Truong). Thus, the central character of *The Book of Salt* becomes an implicit someone from the previous novel.

From the aspect of postmodernity, *The Book of Salt* matches its characteristics of eclectic approach and aleatory writing (Cuddon, 734), fragmentation and prophetic pessimism, as suggested by Nicholas Zurbrugg (Zurbrugg, 163). Mostly depending on an uncertain event (hiring a cook), the novel is a perfect example of the re-iteration of true events in Gertrude Stein's novel. Moreover, the format, style and structure in Truong's novel demonstrate the fact that it can be referred to as a "true" sequel to its precursor, which likewise follows "the course of memory rather than chronology (De Koven, 125). Following Rune Dalgaard, it is possible to state that this postmodern novel is "embedded" in the modern one.

Here, it is appropriate to briefly survey the most relevant biographical facts of both the authors. Gertrude Stein (1874-1946), a significant and shocking modernist figure in Paris during the first half of the twentieth century, is known for her strong influence on modernist literature and art. An American, who lived most of her life in France, she was involved in the modern art movement. Together with her brother Leo, she collected the paintings of Cezanne, Renoir, Matisse, Picasso and others. The Stein apartment was a famous gathering place for avant-garde artists and writers from Europe and the United States of America. In her writing Stein often departed from conventional word order and coherence, repetition being her popular stylistic device. For her influence on the movement of Modern Art, Gertrude Stein is called the symbol of Modernism. Her writing and theories about literature liberated language from the nineteenth-century traditions, and moved literature from romanticism and naturalism to abstract styles. She achieved the freedom of language in literature from its grammatical and emotional traditions. Her life-

time companion was Alice B. Toklas, an American, who arrived in Paris in 1907. They started living together in Stein's apartment at 27 rue de Fleurus in 1910 (Stendhal, 58). In 1932, Stein wrote the novel *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, which is, in fact, her own autobiography seen through the eyes of her friend and which can be dutifully renamed into "American in Paris." The novel falls within the boundaries of an "autobiographical novel" for its precision in the representation of time, place and people (Cuddon, 68). However, both chronology and the voice of Alice B. Toklas are manipulated in this autobiographical novel (Copeland, 126). As Carolyn F. Copeland states, "the manipulation of time is, of course, related to the manipulation of the narrator" (*ibid.*).

Monique Truong was born in Saigon in 1968 and moved to the United States at the age of six. She graduated from Yale University and the Columbia University School of Law, going on to specialize in intellectual property. She co-edited the anthology *Watermark: Vietnamese American Poetry and Prose*, and her essay "Welcome to America" was featured on National Public Radio. Granting her an Award of Excellence, the Vietnamese American Studies Center at San Francisco State University called her "a pioneer in the field, as an academic, an advocate, and an artist." Truong was awarded a prestigious Lannan Foundation Writing Residency in 2001. Her short fiction and essays have been taught in universities across the United States. She lives in Brooklyn, New York ("Interview with Monique Truong," 1).

As Poornima Apte observes, *The Book of Salt* has "two narrative threads flowing through it" (Apte, 1). In the first, Binh, a Vietnamese cook, tells about his life at 27 rue de Fleurus, Stein and Toklas's home, and the details of how he got there. In the second, Binh reaches back to his Vietnam days and

recounts what it is that happened that made him leave for Paris. The novel opens in Paris in October of 1934. Binh has accompanied his employers, Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, to the train station. His own destination is unclear: will he go with “the Steins” to America, stay in France, or return to his family in Vietnam? (“Interview with Monique Truong,” 1). Before Binh’s choice is revealed he takes the readers back to his youth in French-colonized Vietnam, his years as a sailor at sea, and his late-night wanderings in Paris. His “memories and musings continually play against one another in an internal monologue that is far more eloquent than he can express with the words that he struggles to master in everyday life” (“Interview with Monique Truong,” 1).

The author seems to be looking for the answers to the particular question – “What led each of the “outsiders” (Stein, Toklas and Binh) to live far from the land of their birth? What, if anything, could bring them back home again?” (“Interview with Monique Truong,” 1-2). As Monique Truong explains, “the answers to these questions are found in Binh’s memories, thoughts, observations, and possibly lies – all of which are continuously asserting and interrupting one another” (“Interview with Monique Truong,” 2). Binh’s stories are told via his internal voice. Binh is shown as a man living in a foreign land, and working for employers whose languages are foreign to him. He struggles with their words, and they win the confrontation every time. Limited and silenced, Binh has only his memories and imagination to keep him company. Gertrude Stein was also stuck to her native language, English, and obstinately did not use French, because she said that “there is for [her] only one language and that is english” (Stein, 77; “english” as in original). In the last chapter of Truong’s novel, “the story

returns to the train station where the readers are in essence asked “to make the same decision as Binh: whether they would emerge from Binh’s life triumphant or in despair, [or] whether they would be pulled together or asunder by the competing stories of Binh’s past, present and future” (“Interview with Monique Truong,” 2).

Monique Truong has stated that when she was in college, she bought a copy of *Alice B. Toklas Cook Book* because she was curious about certain recipes (“An Interview with Monique Truong,” 1). In that book, which was rather a memoir than a cookbook, Toklas wrote about two Indochinese men who, actually, cooked for Toklas and Stein at 27 rue de Fleurus and at their summer house in Bilignin (*ibid.*). One of these cooks responded to an advertisement placed by Toklas in the newspaper that began “Two American ladies wish...” This advertisement is included in Truong’s novel: “Two American ladies wish to retain a cook – 27 rue de Fleurus. See the concierge” (Truong, 11). Binh responds to it and the Steins take him in; Binh is immediately called by Stein “Thin Binh” and becomes a permanent fixture at their place. The apartment at rue de Fleurus is called by Binh “a temple, not a home” (Truong, 23), while in Stein’s text (the action opens in 1907) it is “the home [...] of a tiny pavillon of two stories with four small rooms, a kitchen and bath, and a very large atelier adjoining” (Stein, 10). As the cook watches the famous lesbian couple host tea parties and entertain the Parisian intellectuals – many rituals described in detail in Stein’s novel – “Binh narrates their everyday doings with a sense of detachment laced nevertheless with a wry sense of humor” (Apte, 1). Truong admits that she was then surprised and touched to see a Vietnamese presence in the lives of these two women (“Interview with Monique Truong,” 2). However, according to the author,

in the official history of the Lost Generation, the Paris of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, these Indochinese cooks were just a minor footnote, which serves as an evidence for not being included in Stein's novel (*ibid.*). This idea drove Truong to writing a personal epic, *The Book of Salt*, as told from the perspective of Binh, a twenty-six-year-old Vietnamese man living in Paris in the late 1920s and the early 1930s, who was that implicit person from between the lines in Stein's autobiography. The novel began as a short story "Seeds", which Truong wrote in 1997 ("An Interview with Monique Truong," 1). Truong admits that she felt the need to continue Binh's life story and for this reason her novel materialized (*ibid.*).

In one of her interviews, the writer explains the title of the novel: "Salt – in food, sweat, tears, and the sea – is found throughout the novel" ("An Interview with Monique Truong," 2). The main character, the Vietnamese cook, discusses the meaning of salt: "The true taste of salt – the whole of the sea on the tip of the tongue, sorrow's sting, labor's smack" (Truong, 212); "salt – what kind? Kitchen, sweat, tears, or the sea. Madame, they are not all the same. Their stings, their smarts, their strengths, the distinctions among them are fine" (Truong, 260-261). As the author states, the title is also a nod toward the Biblical connotation of salt, in particular to the turning of Lot's wife into a pillar of salt for looking back at her home, to the city of Sodom (McFarlan, 162, 257). That story, Truong explained, tells that the Catholic God, whom the cook is so wary of, disapproves not only of the activities of the Sodomites, but also of nostalgia. Binh is a practitioner of both. According to G. Hall, "for Binh, salt has always had many meanings, especially, the salt of the sea which represents his separation from home, his beloved mother and a culture where he was not an outsider" (Hall,

1). Thus, the writer acknowledges that the novel was inspired by the departure, the loss of home, the act of refuge-seeking – all of these experienced by the author herself.

Binh's memories of his childhood in Vietnam slowly outline the reason for his forced exile. He is the last of four boys born in the family with an abusive father and a subservient mother. In fact, the father of his brothers is not his biological father. Most probably his father was a teacher, a white man working at a school close to his mother's home. This issue complicates the understanding of identity. Moreover, when he comes of age, Binh and his family discover his sexuality – he is gay, a disease in Vietnam that "didn't have a cure" (Apte, 1). Thus, the circumstances force him out of home.

Contrary to Binh's sensitive understanding of being an outcast or "the other," Stein does not undertake the role of an exile. In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, she appears to be completely and openly satisfied both with her position of a voluntary exile, for she enjoys life in Paris and does not dream of living anywhere else, and with her private life of "the other": in both novels, she indulges in close relationship with Alice B. Toklas, entertains quests from all over the world, travels within Europe, meets interesting people (writers, painters and journalists) – in other words, indulges in Parisian life. She seems to have dismissed any thoughts about being different or belonging to "the other."

As G. Hall observes, Truong's depiction of "Postwar Paris with the Mesdames and their salon at the center of artistic Paris is fascinating", and the inside look at the famous Stein-Toklas relationship is also a treat" (Hall, 1). Binh observes Stein-Toklas relationship with fascination: "They both love Gertrude Stein. Better, they are both in love with Gertrude Stein. Miss Toklas fusses over her Lovey and her

Lovey lets her. Gertude Stein feeds on affection, and Miss Toklas ensures that she never hungers” (Truong, 71; “GertrudeStein” as in the original). As Binh watches Stein and Toklas together, he possibly detects the irony of his situation. As Poornima Apte ironically states, in exile because of his own homosexuality, he must now serve two women with the same “disease” (Apte, 2).

Even more interesting is Binh’s life as an outsider in Paris where his broken French is “the language that [he] dip[s] into like a dry inkwell ... that has made [him] take flight with weak wings and watched [him] plummet into silence” (Truong, 9). There are no other Vietnamese in Binh’s life so his mother tongue is “trapped inside [his] mouth... and taken the pallor of the dying, the faded colors of the abandoned” (Truong, 117). For all of his years in Paris, Binh wanders around trying to reconcile his past with his present. Although he has no fond memories of Vietnam, he is too aware of his social status and the color of his skin in French society. Binh is shown as an outsider, a young gay man who “still clings to the hope that some day his scholar-prince will come” (Truong, 80).

According to Homi K. Bhabha, “dislocation – psychic and social – speaks to the condition of the marginalized, the alienated, those who have to live under the surveillance of a sign of identity and fantasy that denies their difference” (Bhabha, 63-64). Sometimes a range of culturally and racially marginalized groups readily assume the mask or the position of the minority, not to deny their diversity, but audaciously to announce the important artifice of cultural identity and its difference. Likewise, Binh assumes the role of the minority; however, Stein is a complete opposite of this notion and does not take up the role of the outsider.

The theme of the life of an exile in this novel can be interpreted on different layers: the writer, Monique Truong, a Vietnamese, has left her home-land and is permanently living in the United States of America; the characters in her novel, Gertrude Stein and her friend Alice B. Toklas are Americans permanently living in Paris; the first-person narrator, Binh, a Vietnamese, living in Paris. In this case, the writer presents the problem of living in another culture from different aspects. Binh understands his status as an exile and accepts this role humbly: “Pride is, therefore, reserved for the home, if you are a Vietnamese man” (Truong, 57). Amidst his dreams he keeps asking the question, “What keeps him from returning home, to a house surrounded by water hyacinths in full purple bloom?” (Truong, 63).

Monique Truong discusses different interpretations of the outsiders, demonstrating the reaction of the local people to the outsiders: “The farmers in the village are gracious enough and at first simply curious enough to invite me [Binh], the first *asiatique* they have ever seen, into their homes” (Truong, 136). Binh understands that in the rural areas, contrary to the urban ones, people do not feel hostility towards an outsider: “The farmers there ask very little of me, and when they do, they seem to enjoy, unlike their Parisian cousins, the sounds of the French language faltering on my tongue. Sometimes they even ask to hear a bit of Vietnamese. They close their eyes, trusting and sincere, and they imagine the birds of the tropics singing” (Truong, 137). On the other hand, while staying in Bilignin, Stein and Toklas’s summer residence, Binh gets lonesome because he feels out of place, never seeing a face that looks like his. Binh explains this to Gertrude Stein in his thoughts:

“In Paris, GertrudeStein, the constant traffic of people at least includes my fellow *asiatiques*. And while we may never nod at one another,



tip our hats in polite fashion or even exchange empathy in quick glances, we breathe a little easier with each face that we see. It is the recognition that in the darkest streets of the city there is another body like mine, and that it means me no harm.” (Truong, 141)

Thus, despite the people’s friendly attitude, Binh is feeling lonesome, and like an outsider among French farmers. Although Truong contrasts the reaction of people to an outsider in rural and urban places, the author states that the roots of the “otherness” lie inside the person.

Binh understands as being different from other people: he thinks his body marks him, announces his weakness, displays it as yellow skin (Truong, 152). He is well aware of the fact that as soon as people look at him, the very sight of him “dictates to them the limited list of whom I [he] could be. Foreigner, *asiatique*...Indochinese” (Truong, 152). It is this explicit identity that makes Binh long for 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, 152). People whom he sees around him are “very French in its contempt and cruelty for those who are not” (Truong, 69).

Although two different types of immigrants are described in the novel (The Steins and Binh), both types of the immigrants retain their national character. Thus Binh remains a Vietnamese and the Steins, as Binh says, after all these years spent in France, are still Americans. Binh refers to himself and the Steins for whom he worked as travelers whose hearts have “wisely never left home” (Truong, 247). However, Binh remains an immigrant, who always looks back at his past; while, Stein represents an immigrant

group who, probably, never looks back and is happy with the changed place of living.

Very often the issue of identity turns into the discussion of the native language. While Binh longs for Vietnamese, he seems to notice that Stein indulges in the use of her native language:

Over two decades in Paris, and yet with each day GertrudeStein believes that she is growing more intimate with the language of her birth. Now that it is no longer applicable to the subjects of everyday life, no longer wasted on the price of petrol, the weather, the health of other people’s children, it has become for her a language reserved for genius and creation, for love and devotion. (Truong, 30; “Gertrude Stein” as in the original)

In fact, this statement corresponds to Stein’s ideas on the use of English and her constant search for the limits of her native language. However, under these circumstances, Binh communicates with the Steins in French, which is the only language that they have in common.

While Binh is uncomfortable about his broken French, Gertrude Stein does not seem to care. Again, this fact points to the different attitudes of the immigrants to their “adopted” language: some of them are never able to get used to it; while others seem to be quite comfortable about it. Stein’s French, according to Binh, is common:

It is a shoe falling down a stairwell. The rhythm is all wrong. The closer it gets, the louder and more discordant it sounds. Her broad American accent, though, pleases her to no end. She considers it a necessary ornamentation, like one of the imposing mosaic brooches that she is so fond of wearing. (Truong, 33)

The same brooch is mentioned in Stein’s novel (Stein, 9) and is one of many details that constitute the transtextual relationship between the texts.

Contrary to Stein, Binh thinks that French, a foreign language, mocks him “with impromptu absences” (Truong, 35). Binh likens a language to a house “with a host of doors, and [he is] often uninvited and without the keys” (Truong, 155). Thus, he interprets himself as an outsider, with no keys to the door of the culture. Moreover, the concierge, a character from both novels, becomes a symbol and a linking person between the inside and the outside worlds. Binh is resentful to an alien language, the words of which he interprets as being sour:

The irony of acquiring a foreign language is that I have amassed just enough cheap, serviceable words to fuel my desires and never, never enough lavish, imprudent ones to feed them. It is true, though, that 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 them in my mouth, as if they were the seeds of a sour fruit that someone ate and then ungraciously stuffed its remains into my mouth. (Truong, 11–12)

The seeds of a sour fruit determine the character of the acquired identity, which has been “ungraciously stuffed” inside the immigrant who has traveled a long way and remembers the cities that have carved their names into him, “leaving behind the scar tissue that forms the bulk of who [he is]” (*ibid.*). Memories to Binh become the salt of life, and he often shifts back and forth from the reality to the days in his homeland: “The thought – growing stronger with the scent of cloves and sweet cinnamon in the air – takes me out of the past, a border-less country in which I so often find myself, and returns me to Paris, to the rue de Fleurus” (Truong, 23).

Binh is not the only one who lives between the past and the present. Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas have also their Sunday rituals when they “are settled in their dining room

with their memories of their America heaped onto large plates” (Truong, 27). However, their reminiscences are like an ornament, an interesting game, or one of the many ritual activities in their life, recounted in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. These memories have nothing to do with the salt in Binh’s life, actually, they are not salty at all – probably more like sugar. Their memories are completely different from and unlike the salt in Binh’s life that eats Binh’s present away.

Contrary to Stein and Toklas, who are not disturbed by the issue of personal identity, Binh spends every day questioning his identity. In fact, he admits that he has acquired another identity: “In this way, I am afraid, I am very French” (Truong, 39). At the end, Binh remains a lonely figure in the crowd of people boarding a transatlantic boat: he has accompanied his employers, who are going to the United States, to the pier to see them off. During this final episode he is an extremely pathetic figure, with a nagging question on his mind: “What keeps you here?” (Truong, 261).

Concluding, *The Book of Salt* presents a sensitive narrative about an immigrant, an exile, and questions the reasons for his forced displacement. Faith, hope, abuse, love, exile – these are the issues suggested by the author of the novel. However, the most important issue is life in exile, both physical and emotional. Monique Truong determines the emotional exile as the most important one in a person’s life. Contrasting different types of life in exile, the author presents a sensitive analysis of human identity and questions the value of self-concept. Choosing Paris at the age of modernism for the setting of the novel, and drawing implicit parallels between her novel and the one by Gertrude Stein, the author is able to present a rather objective portrait of an exile, at the same time showing the contemporary global aspect of the search for identity.



The transtextual relationships between two “autobiographies”, the fundamentals of which are the lives of the ones belonging to the concept of “the Other,” seem to cover almost all of the five subtypes of transtextuality as offered by Gérard Genette: some of them covered overtly, while the others are not that

openly emphasized. Thus, Monique Truong’s novel offers the transtextual bridge that joins the Postmodern and the Modern, emphasizing the cultural and historical dimensions. The extension of the modern novel to a postmodern dimension suggests of the issue of what has been already found out and known.

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