Eating Identities

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“Here, my ramekin,” he’d order, “lick this!” And he’d drop his white pants, invariably covered in flour so that a small cloud of white dust enveloped him, giving the illusion that he was some sort of genie rising out of the white-tiled kitchen floor. He would pour some delicious elixir from a small silver pipkin over his penis and well, it was difficult to deny him.

—Marianna Beck, “Only Food”

The common thesis in these novels by Monique Truong and Mei Ng reiterates the inextricable involvement of food and sexuality. Both novels delineate via food and sex a desiring subjectivity that is deeply immersed in ethnicity, coloniality, diaspora, class, gender, and space. In *The Book of Salt* (2003), Truong juxtaposes two cases of diasporic gay existence in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s, one of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, and the other of Bình, their Vietnamese cook, both of which unfold chiefly via culinary tropes to reveal the truth that the ability to practice sexual transgression heavily depends on one’s race and class. While *Salt* portrays three characters whose sexuality is as subversive as it is stable, in that the hetero/homo divide remains fixed, Ng’s *Eating Chinese Food Naked* (1998) presents a contemporary character whose sexuality evolves from hetero- to bisexuality, a fluid identity that critiques the rigidity of the hetero/homo bifurcation. Matching *Salt* in its political dimension, *Eating* operates in a nexus of sex, food, and ethnicity, in which Ng frames the search of her protagonist, Ruby Lee, for sexual identity. It is also through similar alimentary imageries and tropes that Ng dramatizes the tensions between the ethnic, domestic space and the cosmopolitan space of streets, diners, and cafes—tensions that interlock motifs of food, ethnicity, and sexuality in this novel. The four-pronged language of food, ethnicity, space, and sexuality constructs Ruby’s movement from a hetero with a subconscious desire for women to a queer consciousness that disobeys the either/or demand.¹
Fittingly, *Salt* tells the stories of three diasporic lives having crossed oceans to arrive in France—lives submerged in cooking, dining, and desiring. Keeping the rhythm of the sea—the ebbs and flows of memories—*Salt* lures the reader into these three lives to taste their salt—salt of “kitchen, sweat, tears or the sea” (*Salt* 5). Set in Paris between the late 1920s and 1934, the tale travels along two interconnected story lines—one of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas and the other of their Vietnamese cook Bình, all three having traveled across the sea to find fame or livelihood. Truong’s fictional Stein and Toklas are largely based on the historical figures at their residence of 27 rue de Fleurus, one of the most celebrated salons in Paris during their time. Truong’s imagination of Bình seems inspired by the account of the two “Indo-Chinese” cooks in *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book* (1954) and in Stein’s *Everybody’s Autobiography* (1937). In the midst of describing numerous cooks in their employment, Toklas briefly mentions Trac and Nguyen among several nameless “Indo-Chinese” cooks. Trac came into the Steins’ household through a newspaper advertisement. Toklas remembers him as “a person with neat little movements and a frank smile. He spoke French with a vocabulary of a couple of dozen words” (186). Toklas’ detail on how Trac communicated by negation supplies Truong with interesting materials, such as Trac “would say, not a cherry, when he spoke of strawberry. A lobster was a small crawfish, and a pineapple was a pear not a pear” (186). When Trac married and left, Nguyen replaced him. Toklas tells us that Nguyen was “a servant in the household of the French Governor-General of Indo-China, who brought him to France” (187). Truong’s Bình character derives yet departs from these two models. Bình is a servant in the kitchen of the French governor-general in Saigon but gets fired and banished after his affair with Chef Blériot becomes exposed. Bình is a fabulous cook who drinks to forget his sorrow, just as did Nguyen, Toklas remembers, who “would drink gently and harmlessly, for he cooked marvelously” (187). Toklas’ mentioning of Trac’s sea travel as a cook from Marseilles to his home and back again corresponds to Bình’s experience of sailing from Saigon to Marseilles and then to Paris.

Truong is accurate in describing Stein’s and Toklas’ arrogance, ignorance of the culture from which Bình comes, and condescension toward him. Colonial attitudes are amply evident in their narratives. For instance, without bothering to learn where her cooks came from and how different their culture was from other Asian ones, Toklas simply describes both Trac and Nguyen as “Chinese cooks” and their cuisine Chinese (188), not discriminating between Indochinese and Chinese cultures. Echoing the colonial discourse that polarizes the native into the noble, childlike savage or the menacing and corrupting
villain, Toklas describes Trac as full of “childish joy” when she taught him several desserts, and the other Indochinese as full of vices (187).

We had a succession of them [Indochinese servants]. Each one in turn was either a gambler, which made him morose when he lost (and he always lost, for he did not work when he won), or he drank, which was unthinkable in our little home, or he loved women and would become dishonest, or he was a drug addict and he would not be able to work. (187)

The gentility and moral purity of “our little home” are clearly threatened by the bad elements working in their kitchen.

In Everybody’s Autobiography, Stein briefly describes “an Indo-Chinaman,” explaining that she and Alice prefer Indo-Chinamen because “[t]hey are French but not so absorbing not so yet being Frenchmen,” which can be interpreted to mean that they are convenient because they cook French but demand much less attention than the “real” French (125). The split between being and not yet being French signifies the colonial ambivalence that Homi Bhabha describes as “the disturbing distance in-between [the Colonialist Self and the Colonized Other] that constitutes the figure of colonial otherness,” and this colonial otherness envelops both the colonized and the colonizing (45). Participating in the colonial discourse, Stein is as ambivalent as the French toward the Indochinese. Caught between disdain and paternalism, she describes her Vietnamese cook in a jesting, belittling manner: as the historical Stein describes Trac to be “little that is he is a little man” (Stein 125), so does Truong’s fictional Stein call Binh “Thin Bin” (Truong 32). Although based upon these two cooks minimally present in Stein’s and Toklas’ writings, Truong’s Binh occupies the central consciousness of the novel, unfolding two worlds in which his joy of cooking makes tolerable his pain in being a marginal man in matters of race, class, and sexuality.

“I kneel down to see what he hungers for”

Truong’s sensual description of food and its preparation infuses the relationships between cooks and diners with erotic possibilities. By employing abundant culinary descriptions highly suggestive of sexuality, she constructs three desiring subjects whose different backgrounds in race and class determine their profoundly different emotional states. In Salt the two sets of erotic and culinary relationships are Binh and his American lover, Marcus Lattimore, and the Steins, as their friends call them. Lattimore is one of the young men who gather Saturday evenings at Stein’s salon. The mutual attraction between Binh and Lattimore results in the former’s employment by the latter on Sundays,
Binh’s only day off from the Steins. The first meal Binh cooks for Lattimore is figs stewed with duck, so exquisitely described that its sexual connotation can hardly be missed. This dish consists of “Twenty-four figs, so ripe that their skins are split, a bottle of dry port wine. One duck. Twelve hours” (75). The number of the figs stands, in Binh’s fantasy, for the only day of the week when he and Lattimore have each other, ripe with desire as figs ripened to split, to relish without rush and disturbance.

He plans a meal for such an occasion to maximize pleasure and satisfaction. “The figs and the port I will place in an earthenware jug ‘to get to know each other’” (76).

Twelve hours will be sufficient for a long and productive meeting. By then the figs will be plump with wine, and the wine will be glistening with the honey flowing from the fruit. The port is then ready to be poured onto the duck, which should sit in a clay dish. […] The duck is then placed in a hot oven for one hour and basted, every ten minutes or so, with spoonfuls of port that have grown heavy with drippings and concentrated sugars. Before the wine reduces to nothingness, the figs are added, and just enough stock to evaporate and moisten the heat in the final moments of cooking. (77)

With ambiguous diction like “productive meeting,” “heavy with drippings,” and “moisten the heat,” Truong’s language is impeccable in staging Binh’s erotic fantasy framed by a culinary drama. But reality disappoints. The first thing Lattimore tells him when they meet is that in the future Binh has to let himself in (implying that he spends Saturday nights elsewhere) and that “dinner should begin no later than eight” (78). Lattimore’s “terse” tone sets the distance between master and servant. In planning the dessert, Binh reflects on the kind of lover Lattimore is (78). “A soufflé is most definitely out of the question. Too temperamental, a lover who dictates his own terms” (79).

No longer sure if there is any possibility for intimacy between them, Binh begins to imagine Lattimore’s involvement with someone else, and such imagination moves fluidly between cuisine and sex.

Then, once the duck has been served, I will leave your garret for the night, for a café and a glass or two of something strong. Very strong, and you and your someone else will be alone at last. My departure will signal that intimacy has joined the party. […] you two can now dispense with the forks, knives, and spoons. Your hands will tear at an animal whose joints will know no resistance. The sight of flesh surrendering, so willing a participant in its own transgression, will intoxicate you. Tiny seeds from heart-pregnant figs will insinuate themselves underneath your nails. You will be sure to notice and
try to suck them out. You will begin with each other's fingers. You will end on
your knees. (80)

Since Bình now believes that his fabulous dishes will only enable someone
else to love and enjoy Lattimore, he begins to evoke the element of violence
inherent in the discourse of cuisine to vengefully mix pain with pleasure. The
tearing of flesh is as sexual as metaphorical of his painful humiliation. Only
after Bình finishes preparing the elaborate dishes and steels himself to leave,
however, does he find out that no one else is coming to dinner. He and Latti-
more “celebrated Sunday by drinking wine from each other's lip. [...] Pleasure
for pleasure is an even exchange. Lust for lust is a balanced scale” (83). From
here on Lattimore becomes Sweet Sunday Man, who misnames Bình “Bee.”
Bình sums up their relationship this way: “I cook for him, and he feeds me.
That is the nature of our relationship” (213). To frame this statement in the
consistent sexual undertone, one could interpret the nature of their relation-
ship as “I cook for him, and he penetrates me.” This sexual role-playing is
consistent with Bình’s role as the submissive partner to the French chef, Blériot,
in Vietnam (52–53).

Their asymmetrical relationship is further demonstrated in terms of Sweet
Sunday Man’s culinary demands and Bình’s creativity in meeting them. Revealing
his ignorance in matters of the kitchen and his custom of being served by
others, Lattimore asks for foods that are out of season, such as “[r]ipe figs when
there is frost on the ground, lamb when all the trees have already lost their
leaves, artichokes when the summer sun is fast asleep” (236). For Bình, who is
unaccustomed to making choices over what he cooks or with whom he has sex,
the only form of agency is creative compliance. To keep his lover happy, Bình
must improvise.

I have simmered strings of dried figs in bergamot tea. I have braised mutton
with bouquets of herbs tied in ribbons of lemon rinds until their middle-aged
sinews remember spring. As for the artichokes, I have discarded all the glass
jars of graying hearts afloat in their vinegared baths that I found hiding inside
his kitchen cabinets. Sometimes [...] it is better to crave. (236–237)

Compared to Bình’s earlier meditation on figs stewed with duck, this culinary
description exudes labor and frustration. At the end it is as if Bình were offering
himself a lesson that sometimes “it is better to crave,” for gratification demands
a price he cannot afford.

Soon into their Sunday relationship, Bình realizes that Sweet Sunday Man's
real interest lies in Gertrude Stein, her work, her travel, and her guests. Bình at
first thinks of his lover’s interest advantageously.
The honey that he craves is the story that he knows only I can tell. Last week when I told him about the cupboard and what my Mesdames have stored inside, his breath left him. Sweet Sunday Man wanted to know the exact number of notebooks. He wanted to know the order of the typewritten pages. He wanted to know the exact words that Gertrude Stein had written and that Miss Toklas had dutifully typed. (149–150)

In time Bình finds out that Lattimore not only wants the details but also wants him to steal one of Stein's notebooks, his reason being “she is the twentieth century [...]. What she keeps and what she does not will tell you about the future” (209). Bình begs, “Ask me something else,” for “what you ask of me, I cannot do to my Madame and Madame. The infidelity, the betrayal, the savagery of it, even I am not capable of it” (211, 212). When Lattimore coaxes Bình by offering a gesture of love and intimacy—a photograph of both of them—knowing how empty Bình's emotional life is, Bình becomes helpless, reversing the position of power he used to fantasize in the metaphor of honey and bee: “Sweet Sunday Man is a honey talker, and I am his Bee” (212). What makes him decide to take the notebook later, however, is not Lattimore's bait of a photograph; rather, he takes it because he sees his name, “Bin,” Stein's misnomer for him, “written again and again and again” in the pages (214). He is angered by Stein's use of him: “I did not give you my permission, Madame, to treat me in this way. I am here to feed you, not to serve as your fodder” (215). Bình takes the notebook to Lattimore, with the rationale that “[t]his notebook may belong to my Madame, but the story, it belongs to me” (215). Nothing prepares Bình for the consequence of his act. He returns to Lattimore's residence a week after he offers him the notebook only to find the place vacant, repainted for a new tenant. A note folded together with the receipt for the photograph says, “Bee, thank you for The Book of Salt. Stein captured you, perfectly” (238). Chilled by the realization, Bình thinks coldly, “He did a meticulous, well-thought-out job until the very end” (238). Once again he is manipulated and used by a lover.

Truong's choice of Bình's sexuality is significant. His queerness is constructed as a critical terrain upon which are mobilized overlapping differentiations, such as race, class, and coloniality. In turn his queerness gains its meaning and discursive consistency precisely through these elements. Richard Fung points out that “[r]ace is a factor in even our most intimate relationships” (116). Bình and Lattimore's relationship is one of power in which factors of race and class preclude any possibility of reversibility of roles. The poor Vietnamese serves mainly as an instrument with which the wealthy American achieves pleasure, alimentary and sexual. The clichéd scenario of an “Oriental” houseboy serving his master, however, is complicated by the fact that Lattimore
is black passing as white. His mother’s blood has exiled him from America. With her money, which she has earned from his white father by being silent, Lattimore is able to receive a good education and to live in Paris hobnobbing with world-renowned artists and compatriots. Truong makes Lattimore less a villain than he could be by having him reveal his history to Bình, exposing his vulnerability to his lover. Upon learning of Lattimore’s secret, Bình admires and envies his self-invention. “Sweet Sunday Man, I marvel at the way that you can change from room to room. I envy the way that you carry yourself when you are in the studio, surrounded by the men who think of you as one of their own. [...] I see your stance, its mimicked ease and its adopted entitlements” (151). Bình’s envious marvel at his lover’s successful passing only deepens his own pain and feeling of alienation. He reflects,

[M]ine marks me, announces my weakness, displays it as yellow skin. It flagrantly tells my story [...] 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. 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. Indochina, indeed. We all belong to the same owner, the same Monsieur and Madame. [...] To them, my body offers an exacting, predetermined life story. (152)

Evident in Bình’s melancholia is the shorthand to the colonial subjectivity that renders itself salient through self-objectification. His anguish echoes Fanon’s widely quoted line, “What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood?” (Black Skin, White Masks 112). Bình’s melancholia stemming from epidermal overdetermination brings to light the instability of the colonial discourse. Contrary to its ideology of ontological differences among the races, the colonial discourse relies heavily on the metonymic trope of the epidermal surface. And when that surface fools the eye, the trope of darkness, standing for degeneration, inferiority, and immorality, collapses.

In contrasting his fate with his lover’s, Bình highlights the economic layer in the racial/colonial discourse. There is no arguing that Lattimore’s money makes possible his escape from discrimination and his life in Paris of leisure and dignity as a (white) man. Bình, however, bears the unshakable yoke of poverty in addition to that of race. The stratification among the colonized is made particularly apparent in Mother France, where poverty disallows Bình from assuming any identity other than that of a domestic servant. In a series of negations, he arrives at the singular identity he is allowed to assume.
My eyes, the passersby are quick to notice, do not shine with the brilliance of a foreign student. I have all my limbs so I am not one of the soldiers imported from their colonies to fight their Grande Guerre. No gamblers and whores joined to me at the hip so I am not the young Emperor or Prince of an old and mortified land. Within the few seconds that they have […] they conclude that I am a laborer, the only real option left. (152)

Binh seems to be particularly disturbed by the absence of depth, of mystery, and therefore of intrigue in his identity in the eyes of the French. Such absences are not due to any lack in his identity, but rather to its wealth of racial and class signifiers. Unlike Lattimore, who is “a blank sheet of paper” in Paris, whose enigma lies precisely in its emptiness, Binh carries his country, his race, his class and servitude in his body—an antitext that yields one fixed meaning (151). For Binh this antitext is antihuman. When a man is robbed of mystery and unpredictability, he is no longer a man. Thus, Binh muses nostalgically that in “a busy Saigon marketplace […] I was just a man,” whose identity is indeterminable “at a passing glance” as “a student, a gardener, a poet, a chef, a prince, a porter, a doctor, a scholar” (152). What Binh says suggests that it is the fantasy of becoming that nourishes the subject and underwrites humanness.

The fantasy of becoming plays a major role in enabling Lattimore to live in Paris as a man of society. His self-introduction as an iridologist, trained to predict future illnesses by reading irises, and as a writer opens the doors of such people as the prince of Cambodia, the emperor of Vietnam, Gertrude Stein, and others. His popularity in the circle of exiles depends on the secret he keeps. Then why does he offer that secret to his Sunday cook/lover? Is it a gesture of trust or an act of bribery? Or is it his arrogance that Binh does not have enough French and credibility to share his secret with anyone that matters? Truong’s narrative offers no definitive answer to these questions, but she makes two moves with the Stein character that maneuver the reader’s sympathy toward Lattimore. The first is Stein’s curiosity about Lattimore’s race; she quizzes Binh, “Thin Bin, is Lattimore a Negro?” (157). Truong’s juxtaposition of Lattimore to Stein vis-à-vis Binh indict both for using Binh to spy on each, but Stein’s racial curiosity makes her more despicable than does Lattimore’s curiosity for Stein’s work in progress. As though this particular detail were insufficient in steering the reader toward this judgment, Truong designs another racial moment for the Stein character. In her conversation with her lover about Robeson, Stein can hardly disguise her racism. “I asked him why he insisted on singing Negro spirituals when he could be performing requiems and oratorios. Do you know what that curiosity in a suit said? In that basso profundo voice of his, he replied, ‘The spirituals, theys a belong to me, Missa Stein’” (188). Such details demonstrate that even in the liberal-minded Stein, racial discrimination
remains a powerful force. Race, thus, along with food and sexuality, structures the characters’ identities and relationships in *Salt*.

Just as between Binh and Lattimore, Truong also creates a gastronomy-structured relationship between Alice Toklas and Gertrude Stein that is highly suggestive of eroticism. For six days of the week Alice serves her lover’s culinary needs by choosing menus and directing Binh. On Sundays, when Binh cooks for Lattimore, Alice goes to the kitchen and “gets butter and flour underneath her fingernails, breathes in the smell of cinnamon, burns her tongue, and is comforted” (26). Truong describes Alice as a traveler in the kitchen, infusing American dishes with places they have been to, or in Truong’s words, “Her menus can map the world” (27). A good balance between adventure and sensuality is her signature; for instance, she “puts absinthe in her salad dressing and rose petals in her vinegar” (27). The result is a feast of seduction, and the mere fact of her having handled the food is sufficient to excite her lover.

Gertrude Stein thinks it is unfathomably erotic that the food she is about to eat has been washed, pared, kneaded, touched, by the hands of her lover. She is overwhelmed by desire when she finds the faint impressions of Miss Toklas’ fingerprints decorating the crimped edges of a pie crust. Miss Toklas believes that these nights are her rewards. (27)

Truong’s erotic language of cooking and eating not only constructs the desiring subject but also normalizes the homosexual relationship. The Steins’ sexuality is described as so normal that it no longer signifies transgression. Remarkably different from her presentation of Binh’s queerness, which gains its critical energy through factors of race, class, and coloniality, the Steins are complacent, conforming, socially accepted in their same-sex arrangement. Their relationship indeed largely mirrors that of a white and propertied heterosexual couple in the early twentieth century. Without ever entering their bedroom, Truong’s novel conjures up the erotic and sexual in the lives of these two women through the highly suggestive language of food. Alice is described as emitting “the sounds of lovemaking when she is among the tomatoes” in their Bilignin garden and weeping “with the juices of the first strawberry full in her mouth” (138). Alice serves Gertrude “the omelet” (Binh has made), “the curved edges still humming heat […] , a song of a temptation” (154). “Miss Toklas believes that with every meal she serves a part of herself, an exquisite metaphor garnishing every plate” (155).

The heterosexual domestic drama plays out in this lesbian relationship in the culinary site that reveals tenderness as well as pedestrian tensions in marriage. In her wifely capacity, Alice loves her “Hubbie” by banishing cream and lard from their diet six months before Gertrude goes to lecture in America to
ensure her good appearance. Along with fatty food, salt, alcohol, and cigarettes are also banned. While helplessly submitting herself to such a regime, Stein, however, exacts revenge by not eating meals until they are tepid, knowing gleefully how important it is to Alice to eat while the food is hot. Each lover asserts her will over the other in feeding, eating, withholding food, or refusing to eat. Their union so much resembles a heterosexual marriage that their friends think of Alice as a Stein.

**Food and Blood**

Compared to the Steins’ life, however, Bình’s is anything but normal and pedestrian. In depicting the complex psychic drama of this Vietnamese chef, Trương relies heavily on culinary signifiers. Memories of life before exile are often evoked by kitchen activities, the partition between past and present rendered porous by food, smells, and tastes. Bình has been born to a father who is so successful in colonial mimicry that he has turned Catholicism into a profitable business and to a mother who has quietly endured poverty, abandonment, and abuse. Growing up in French Indochina, Bình has been coerced into accepting the myth of racial hierarchy, but his identification with the powerful and “beautiful” is mainly mediated through his older brother, Anh Minh, who plays the father figure in Bình’s boyhood. Being abused frequently by their father (“the Old Man”) because of his illegitimate birth, the boy attaches his love and admiration to his older brother partially because of the latter’s “success” in the world of the French.

Anh Minh’s identificatory relationship with the French is grounded in the kitchen of the governor-general. Bình recollects years later, “Anh Minh believed absolutely and passionately that the French language would save us, would welcome us into the fold, would reward us with kisses on both cheeks” (14). Saving Bình from their father’s brutal abuse, Anh Minh obtains for his youngest brother the lowly position of a garde-manger in the household of the governor-general, where Anh Minh believes lies the future for both of them. He promises their father, “Even the lowest-paid helpers get two meals a day and a chance to wear the long white apron someday” (51). Anh Minh’s mastery of French cuisine leads him into believing that he has become sufficiently French to assume the position of chef de cuisine after the old French chef has died; a taste of his “omelette à la bourbonnaise, his coupe ambassadrice, his crème marquise would convince Monsieur and Madame that there is no need to send for a chef from Paris” (14).

Anh Minh’s disappointment offers Bình the first lesson on the fixity of colonial stratification. Now that the young chef Jean Blériot has arrived and Anh Minh remains an assistant in the kitchen, dignified by the Old Man as
“Minh the Sous Chef,” Binh begins to see the dead end on his own path to glory. “[W]hat was I supposed to do? Twenty years old and still a garde-manger” (14). In Binh’s eyes, Anh Minh has fallen as a father figure, made melancholic and pathetic by the colonial power structure. What Binh experiences through this loss is his own mourning for the lost object of identification. In psychoanalysis, mourning is healthy compared to melancholia, as Freud points out that after we lose our object-choice, mourning offers the assurance “that after a lapse of time, it will be overcome” (240). Binh's mourning for the loss of his object-choice (the assimilated Anh Minh) prepares for a new object-choice to displace the old.4

Binh's identification with his brother soon shifts to one with the new French chef, Blériot, whose beauty and youth enchant him. In the language of cuisine, Truong describes Binh's desire that “no man would admit to having”— “carving chunks of turnips into swans, the arc of their necks as delicate as Blériot's fingers, fingers that I wanted to taste” (15). Blériot picks Binh to be his translator at the market, and their mutual attraction becomes apparent “amidst the fruits of the sea” as Binh translates fish names. Seduction is like cooking. “For tenderness, we all know that braising is better than open flame” (62). Binh's transference to Blériot of his attachment to his brother is described as a trade. He thinks to himself, “My dear brother, I did not waste the time that you gave me. I traded it away for Blériot's lips counting down the notches of my spine, parting at the small of my back […] as he brought us both heavenward without shame” (52–53).

Without being explicit, Truong nevertheless makes clear the sexual scene, in which Blériot is the dominant partner. Although Binh experiences ecstasy as the submissive partner, we don't know that he wouldn't enjoy more or equally being the dominant partner. But that is of course unthinkable between a white man and a “yellow” man in the colonial world of Vietnam. Their relationship soon becomes exposed, and predictably Blériot denies any such affair when confronted and lets Binh be fired for lying. The world as Binh knows it comes to an end when the Old Man severs their relationship and banishes him to the streets. Binh thus begins his exile as a sailor on a ship to France.

Though banished from his country, he can never banish the faithless French lover from his mind. Binh never gets over Blériot. In distinguishing mourning from melancholia, Freud describes the latter as pathological because the melancholic ego is unable to displace its object-choice and move on to a new object relationship. Consequently, “[t]he ego wishes to incorporate this object into itself, and the method by which it would do so, in this oral or cannibalistic state, is by devouring it” (Freud 250). Ironically, the ego's situation of being stuck and therefore impoverished also proves to be nourishing, for as Anne Anlin Cheng points out, “The melancholic eats the lost object—feeds on
it” (8). But such consumption of the lost object necessitates self-denigration: as “the libido turns back on the ego, so do the feelings of guilt, rage, and punishment. […] The melancholic’s relationship to the object is now no longer just love or nostalgia but also profound resentment” (Cheng 8–9). Depending on the power positions of the melancholic, this psychic drama stages different social scenes. For the racially degraded and socially powerless Binh, resentment must be turned inward against himself, and it manifests itself as self-revilement.

What is peculiar with Binh lies in his self-punishment by resuscitating the corpse of his first lost object—the father, whose voice becomes the son’s unceasing castigation and self-mockery: “Only a fool like you would believe that that French sodomite was going to save you. Out of love? Out of lust for your scrawny, worthless body?” (193). Every day he imagines the Old Man’s tirade no matter where he is. “[T]he Old Man’s anger has no respect for geography. Mountains, rivers, oceans, and seas, these things […] have never kept him from homing in on me” (12). Although Binh argues fiercely to defend himself, he can never put an end to the Old Man’s voice. In other words, he keeps alive the Old Man’s voice to punish himself, thus further deepening his anger and self-hate. It “was my mistake,” he acknowledges,

from the very beginning, the fatal flaw in my design. I thought that I could suffocate the Old Man with shovelfuls of dirt and mud. […] I should have thrown his body into the sea, expelled it and not me. My anger keeps me digging into the earth, pulling at its protective mantle, eager to see his body decaying deep inside. […] This is as close to being immortal as the Old Man ever had the right to be, and I am the one, the only one who keeps him that way. (194–195)

Hatred, an eloquent expression of melancholia, tethers Binh to the Old Man in a bitter relationship of mutual consumption, with his melancholic ego devouring the lost object that consumes him.

How is it that the Old Man is dragged into Binh’s melancholic landscape over the loss of Blériot? What does the Old Man have to do with the French chef? Why don’t we simply regard the caustic voice of the Old Man as the evidence of Binh’s melancholia toward his father alone? It is correct to assume that Binh has never gotten over his father, whom he has lost long before his death. As a child Binh desperately longs for paternal love and kindness, but in return he experiences mostly abuse and humiliation.

“Look at Stupid over there […],” the Old Man says, as he spits out the thin red juices flooding his lips. […] He misses the spittoon. I jump up to wipe the floor clean. […] He points his chin at me, offering me up to his cohorts
as he had my mother. The laughter is now high and pitched. I am standing in the middle of a room of men, all drunk on something cheap. I am looking at the Old Man as he is spitting more red in my direction. The warm liquid lands partly in the brass pot and partly on my bare feet. I am six years old, and I am looking up at this man’s face. I smile at him because I, a child, cannot understand what he is saying to me. (45)

For a child coming to self-recognition, the father figure is vitally important, but this particular father instills in the child nothing but feelings of inadequacy and shame. Nevertheless, he remains the authority figure to the child, who consequently internalizes self-abjection and never acquires competence in distinguishing love from hate.

Why does the Old Man continue to grip Bình’s psyche in his adulthood? In addition to the usual interpretation that because of his childhood experiences he has never developed a mature ego, I want to supplement by considering the factor of colonialism. The Old Man as a child is taken away from his parents and into the Catholic Church to be indoctrinated for the priesthood. Although he never becomes a priest, his conversion rate is higher than a priest’s, because his gambling business is an ideal environment to make and save lost souls. The Old Man’s assimilation into the colonial culture through religious conversion has established his (resented) authority among his people and his children, an authority that speaks in the dual voice of patriarchy and colonialism. Bình’s racialization is partially attributable to his father’s constant castigation of him for his “failure” and praise of Anh Minh for his “success” in serving the French. “Every day, I hear the Old Man’s voice shouting at me from beneath the earth […]. The moment that he took his blood from mine, separated it as if his were white and mine the yolk, I placed him there” (193). The egg metaphor suggests vividly the gravity of race in the father-son relationship. The Old Man’s othering of the Other in order to preserve the delusion of having transcended his race has inevitably shaped Bình’s aspiration and sense of worth. Unable to hate or forget the faithless French lover, Bình transfers his recent melancholia to the already melancholic relationship to the phantom of the Old Man, whose voice serves to condemn on behalf of the colonial power: “How dare you use the word of God to describe the things that you practice. […] It sickens me to think about what you do, shaming my name” (193).

Bình’s daily conjuring of his father’s voice clearly bespeaks his own melancholic relation with the colonial power. Helplessly desiring to identify with the French despite their cruel rejections, he reviles himself both for being a “loser” and for longing to be accepted by the French, a soul-splitting ambivalence of psychic identification. In theorizing colonial ambivalence, Bhabha writes, “The very place of identification, caught in the tension of demand and desire, is a
space of splitting. The fantasy of the native is precisely to occupy the master’s place while keeping his place in the slave’s avenging anger” (44). Such raveling of desire, anger, and hate in the racialized and colonized psyche produces a subjectivity that is melancholic and masochistic at the same time.

Truong weds food metaphors to the politics of language to describe the deep invasion of colonial power into Bình’s subjectivity. “[T]here 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 else ate and then ungraciously stuffed its remains into my mouth” (11–12). Truong’s brilliant metaphor offers a precise picture of the hideous coercion in the name of civilizing the Other. The seeds planted so “ungraciously” in the colonized sprout vines and branches to crowd out and suffocate indigenous cultural consciousness. In time these seeds are bound to bear “sour fruit” of racial grief. In another alimentary metaphor, Truong reiterates this point. This time it is Bình’s relationship to Alice that is the colonial context.

Believe me, it has not been easy for me to work for these two. Miss Toklas is a Madame who uses her palate to set the standard of perfection. In order to please her, her cook has to do the same, an extremely difficult feat. Her cook has to adopt her tongue, make room for it, which can only mean the removal of his own. (211)

In interlocking language and taste with the pun of “tongue,” Truong reiterates my argument that food contributes to the constitution of subjectivity. Sovereignty is exercised through practicing one’s foodways as well as one’s language and doing it with confidence and joy. In Bình’s case, however, the constant demand of colonial assimilation corrodes his agency, and the attempt to preserve his foodways is sometimes accompanied by humiliation. For the first dinner at the Steins, he decides to cook his mother’s favorite: pineapple sliced “paper-thin” and sautéed “with shallots and slices of beef” (34). In requesting money for pineapples, he stumbles; instead of pineapple, he says “pear.” “I lost […] the French word for ‘pineapple’ the moment I opened my mouth. Departing at their will, the words of this language mock me with their impromptu absences. When I am alone, they offer themselves to me” (35). It is almost as if the French language has more “will” or agency than Bình does, toying with him and shaming him in public.

As an exile in the interior of his colonizers, a domestic chef for hire, and a sexual minority member, Bình has very limited space for the exercise of agency. Cooking seems to be the only site where he enjoys some self-determination and dignity.
Every kitchen is a homecoming, a respite, where I am the village elder, sage, and revered. Every kitchen is a familiar story that 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 who begs at this city's steps. Three times a day, I orchestrate, and they sit with slackened jaws, silenced. (19, emphasis mine)

Sometimes Bình's assertion of agency takes on the form of subversion in the kitchen, where he willfully commits errors or is negligent. He can conveniently forget “how long to braise the ribs of beef, whether chicken is best steamed over wine or broth, where to buy the sweetest trout” or “neglect the pinch of cumin […] the scent of lime” (20). Even such limited agency in the kitchen comes with a price. To enter and stay in someone's kitchen, Bình must tell his stories to feed curiosity as well, a kind of prostitution of himself to eke out a living. His employers “are never sated by my cooking. They are ravenous. […] They have no true interest in where I have been or what I have seen. They crave the fruits of exile, the bitter juices, and the heavy hearts. They yearn for a taste of the pure, sea-salt sadness of the outcast whom they have brought into their homes” (19).

With his labor, his art, and his stories devoured by his employers, Bình becomes an allegory for the colonized vulnerable to the cannibalistic practices of colonialism—practices that nourish the Self by consuming the Other. Truong clinches this allegory with another kitchen episode, in which Stein and Toklas taste human blood in their food. Alarmed, Toklas reproaches, “Bin, have you been drinking?” and “Have I not given you enough time?” (70). One may argue that Stein and Toklas being Americans cannot represent the colonial power. But to do that one has to willfully ignore that the Steins, both real and fictional, comfortably identify with the French in their attitudes toward the “Indochinese” and that their power relation with Bình mirrors certain aspects of the relationship of the French with the colonized. The Steins’ symbolic value for the coercive, exploitative, superior, and yet benevolent performance of colonialism upon the colonized (Binh) is one of the central themes in Truong's novel.

Bình is a cutter, spilling his blood in other people's meals. His racialized and exploited body experiences so strongly the loss of legitimacy that it takes pain and the sight of running blood to recognize its existence and evoke home. In studying Louis Chu and David Wong Louie, David Eng foregrounds male hysteria as a critical rubric. Eng supplements Freud's analysis of female hysteria grounded in the sexual body by considering the racialized body of men. He asks, “What exactly does hysteria imply socially and politically about male...
subjectivity?” (173). In speaking of the character of Ben Loy in Chu’s novel *Eat a Bowl of Tea*, Eng remarks, “Male hysteria and racial hysteria are constitutive and intersecting discourses that mark his symbolic disenfranchisement from the normative national ideals of white masculinity” (181). Bình’s habit of cutting may be interpreted as a hysterical expression of his disenfranchise ment from the normative ideals of both white and Vietnamese masculinities. Interlocked with his sexual deviation from the norm is his racialization by the colonial regime that results in a deeply splitting ambivalence in his psychic identification. Contrary to Žižek’s understanding that hysteria is “the effect and testimony of a failed interpellation,” Bình’s hysteria is the very effect and testimony of the success of colonial/racial interpellation (*The Sublime Object of Ideology* 113). Reduced to an arrested history and humanity, the colonized become ossified in their inferiority. As Bình understands it, a person cannot be truly human when denied the possibility of becoming, and he must mutilate himself frequently to be reminded that he is a sentient being, not an object.

Steven Levenkron suggests after studying clinical cases that most self-mutilators regard self-injury as “reward” because “pain was somehow connected to the idea of home and comfort” in the past. “If the familiar happens to be painful or harmful, that rarely stops someone from seeking it out” (27–28). Indeed, Bình sometimes cuts himself to remember his mother, who is the only love in his loveless world, and this comfort of recalling her love is associated with pain. Cutting and cooking are entangled in Bình’s life, for his habit begins as an accident when he is nine: he is cutting scallions to help his mother make a soup. While listening to her humming, “I thread silver into my fingertips for the first time. […] I am floating away, and a sea of red washes me back” (73). His mother stops cooking to apply lime juice to the wound as an antiseptic. The pain from the lime juice is so immense that Bình thinks his fingers are on fire (73). Yet this intense pain elicits Mother’s care and love. “She sits down and wraps herself around me, pressing my stooped back into herself” (73). Mother’s embrace, symbolic of the enclosure of womb, thus becomes associated in Bình’s mind with cutting, with the safest place he knows: “I see there on my fingertips a landscape that would become as familiar to me as the way home” (73, my emphasis). Exiled overseas, without knowing if he would ever see his mother again, he cuts himself frequently to remember her.

Curiously, the language describing the habit also has a strong sexual undertone as though the remembrance of mother’s love evokes remembrance of sexual love.

In the beginning I preferred the blade to be newly sharpened, licked against a stone until sparks flew […]. Now I know that such delicacy would only deny me that part that I savor most, the throbbing of flesh compromised, meeting
and mending. And sometimes when it is deep enough, there is an ache that fools my heart. Tricks it into a false memory of love lost to a wide, open sea. I say to myself, “Ah, this reminds me of you.” (74)

Although immediately following the flashback of the kitchen accident at age nine, this quoted passage directs our attention to adult sexuality—“the throbbing of flesh compromised, meeting and mending.” Who is the “you” that Bình refers to? Why is it “a false memory of love”? Is it possible that Bình is really thinking of Blériot, the French chef who has introduced him to homo-eroticism? Or is it Sweet Sunday Man, who has bedded Bình and also used him as a pawn in his game? Perhaps Bình’s melancholia toward both lovers also manifests itself in self-mutilation, as though a knife entering his flesh is a simulation of their entering his body, leaving behind wounds that refuse to scar, but an experience of love nevertheless in his world. Pain, both physical and psychic, has simply become a necessary condition of intimacy.

Almost all of his human relationships being asymmetrical, with him serving as an instrument for others’ pleasures, Bình can only momentarily overcome his profound sense of alienation with the act of self-mutilation. Whether as a lover or a chef, he is perpetually at other people’s mercy. Despite a small measure of agency in the kitchen, he cannot help but perceive himself as no more than an object in other people’s homes.

My presence, just inside the entrance to my Mesdames’ kitchen, ensures that all the cups are steaming and that the tea table stays covered with marzipan and butter-cream-frosted cakes. Always discreet, almost invisible, imagine that when the guests look my way they see, well, they see a floor lamp or a footstool. (148)

At times like this, the phantom of the Old Man reappears to ridicule Bình. “You’re not nearly as bright or useful” (148). Such acts of self-abjection are often followed by cutting; as Bình remarks, “red on the blade of a knife” is a proof “that this body of mine harbors a life” (149). Invisibility thus becomes a condition of disembodiment and dismemberment, both real and symbolic, and this happens only when he enters the scene of racial hierarchy—the yellow race serving the whites—a scene that dominates his existence and consciousness.

The relationship between food and blood echoes that between food and murder. This relationship, a prominent motif in Salt, further substantiates Truong’s allegorization of Bình as the racialized Other exploited and devoured by the colonial power. In the figure of pigeons, Truong constructs a traveling symbol standing for Bình, his mother, and the colonized Vietnam. Truong’s reference to pigeons traces to The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book, in which Toklas
recalls a French cook, Jeanne, teaching her how to smother pigeons. The scene in the market resonates with the pigeons’ symbolic value in *Salt*. When Jeanne proceeded to demonstrate this practice, “the crowd of market women who gathered about her began screaming and gesticulating” (39). Facing these women’s anger, Toklas retreated. But later, upon receiving the gift of “six white pigeons,” Toklas did what Jeanne had shown her: “I carefully found the spot on poor innocent Dove’s throat where I was to press and pressed” (39, 40). Toklas’ elevation of the white pigeons to “innocent Dove” seems to inform Truong’s symbolization of pigeons for the innocent, helpless, and powerless Vietnam embodied by Binh and his mother. In *Salt* Toklas orders pigeons for dinner one day and shows Binh how to smother them to ensure juicy tenderness: “If you cut off their necks, you will lose all the blood. Done this way, those birds will come out of the oven plumper and tastier than you can ever imagine. Exquisite!” (67–68). For Binh, who has cut many throats to feed others, this task is too murderous to be tasteful. Binh thinks silently, “I am fine when I have a knife in my hand, when it is the blade that delivers the coup de grâce” (69). Now his hands shake because “[t]he pigeon squirms under my fingers, its blood pumping hard, pressing through” (67), and Toklas instructs on the side, “Steady yourself. Stop shaking. Keep pressing down. Harder, that is right, harder” (67).

The association of pigeons with his mother begins in this scene as he remembers how he learned to kill chickens from his mother. “First, my mother would nick the skin until the blood flowed. If the knife was inserted deep enough, there is a red arc that falls neatly from the notch to the awaiting bowl” (68). Economy and mercy are the only principles for his mother in killing for food. Four pages later, Binh recalls the first time he cuts himself in his mother’s kitchen, slicing scallions while his mother “is humming, and I think that I am hearing birds” (72). The association of his mother with both birds and killing birds renders the task of asphyxiating the pigeons deeply disturbing. Near the end of the novel, another scene involving pigeons folds back upon this association.

On a snowy February day, Binh sits on a bench in Jardin du Luxembourg, deeply depressed about the uncertainties lying ahead after the Steins sail for America. “Snow makes me want to sleep, not in my bed but on the corners of busy boulevards, in alleyways, underneath the awnings of crowded shops […] when my body says, Please, no more” (217). Burdened by his death wish, Binh observes a troubling scene in which children are toying with an injured pigeon. “A pigeon, an ordinary, city-gray pigeon, stumbles between the girl’s black boot and tries to spread its wings. […] It lies there while the children become excited” (218). As he watches the pigeon’s death struggle, he experiences intimations about his mother’s dying. “I see you half a world away. I hear fever parting your lips. I feel your shiverings, colorless geckos running down your spine. I smell the night sweat that has bathed you clean” (220). Now the
scene returns to the pigeon that refuses to die a “soft, concerted death,” just as the pigeons in the Steins’ kitchen squirm and linger under Binh’s fingers (220). The finishing touch on the pigeon’s symbolic value for his mother is the color of her áo dài (a traditional Vietnamese tunic for women). “I know you are in your best áo dài. […] Gray is the color you wanted […]. […] I am holding your hand, leading you out of the front door of his house. You step out into the street, and you are a sudden crush of gray” (221). This picture of his mother echoes the scene of the dying pigeon in the park—“a flourish of white, a crush of gray” (218). Also, in his only letter to his brother, Anh Minh reports their mother’s passing: “God has given Mâ wings” (230).

His mother, associated with the dying pigeon in the garden, with the pigeons slaughtered in the kitchen, is tightly linked to Binh, who entertains a death wish in his hallucinatory exit with her, leading her by the hand out of her husband’s house where both of them have suffered abuse and humiliation: “We swore not to die on the kitchen floor. We swore not to die under the eaves of his [the Old Man’s] house” (221). Powerfully juxtaposed to the pigeons that suffer bloodless deaths for human consumption, Binh commits symbolic suicides by bleeding himself into the dinners of his masters. Their consumption of his body aptly symbolizes the French colonizer’s consumption of Vietnam—its resources and people. For Binh at the individual level, being the object of others’ consumption—sexual, alimentary, and literary (Stein’s use of him)—makes his hysterical habit all the more compelling.

Thus far the story of Binh is deeply tragic. I would be remiss if I didn’t discuss the single uplifting moment in Salt that implies an anti-imperialist comraderie over a fine dinner, and Binh shares this moment with none other than Ho Chi Minh himself. In chapter 9, Binh finds himself distraught with hunger and despair (in 1927 before his employment by the Steins). Truong suggests his contemplation of suicide as he stands on a bridge over the Seine, “on a day when this city had the foregone appearance of a memory, as if the present had refused to go to work that day and said that the past would have to do” (85). At this critical moment he meets a stranger on the bridge, a fellow countryman who addresses him as a friend. Although the stranger’s identity is not directly offered until much later in the novel, Truong’s details regarding this man are unmistakable to anyone who is familiar with the life of Ho Chi Minh. In their conversation, Binh finds out that this man has been a “[k]itchen boy, sailor, dishwasher, snow shoveler, furnace stoker, gardener, pie maker, photograph retoucher, fake Chinese souvenir painter” (89). Ho did almost all these jobs in his early years overseas. Binh also finds out that this man has been trained to make pastries—a historical fact about Ho whose specifics historians debate. The man on the bridge also reveals that he lives on rue des Gobelins, another historical fact about Ho. In addition, he further reveals that he has worked on the ship...
Latouche Trevillé, which is documented as the ship on which Ho earned his passage from Saigon to Marseilles as a kitchen assistant. Binh recalls the story about a man named Ba sailing on the ship Latouche Trevillé (90–91), and Ba was one of the aliases that Ho Chi Minh used (Nguyen Van Ba) when he was traveling to Paris. Once in Paris, Ho changed his name to Nguyen Ai Quoc, which means Nguyen the Patriot. Truong refers back to this stranger near the end of the novel and offers his identity as “Nguyê˜n Ái Quô´c” (246). It was with this very identity that Ho signed and presented the petition to the Paris Peace Conference in the summer of 1919 for the independence of Vietnam.

Truong presents Binh’s meeting with Nguyen Ai Quoc as a lifesaving encounter that alters Binh’s fate. Food is central to this scene. To a starving and suicidal Binh, Nguyen Ai Quoc offers a delicious dinner at a Chinese restaurant, through which Binh tastes for the first time the fulfillment of fellowship. The meal consists of a pink pile of “the salt-and-pepper shrimp with the shells still on,” “haricots verts sautéed with garlic and ginger, [. . .] watercress wilted by a flash of heat,” white rice, a bottle of good wine, and the dessert of an apple pie (96). Both delight each other with their fine palate “that had spent time in a professional kitchen” (97). “Morels?” Binh suggests. “Yes, he nodded.” “An unexpected addition [. . .]. Rich with the must of forest decay, these mushrooms were hidden below the haricots verts until their aroma gave them away” (97). On the surface, their conversation and thoughts seem to center on food, but reading between the lines, we hear an undertone of nationalism and anti-imperialism. In savoring the watercress, both men stare at each other, as though they recognize some unexpected ingredient. Binh thinks, “Watercress is unmistakable, bitter in the mouth, cooling in the body, greens that any Vietnamese could identify with his eyes closed” (97). Watercress is a vegetable that evokes the diners’ love of and longing for their homeland, a vegetable that conjures up the aroma and taste of the flooded land of Vietnam. At a symbolic level, this vegetable also stands for the people of Vietnam, who are misunderstood and overpowered by their colonizers. Binh’s thoughts on watercress take this symbolic turn.

The recipe is a deceptively simple one that calls for oil heated till it smokes, seasoned with nothing more than a generous sprinkling of salt and the blink of an eye. Any more contact with the heat, and the stalks turn themselves into ropes, tying themselves up in your mouth, making it impossible to swallow. (97)

Watercress, a delicate water vegetable, will rebel when overpowered by heat. No different from watercress, Vietnamese people will fight back when dominated by foreign powers, making the latter swallow the tough consequences of their
actions. Anyone attempting to impose ways of life alien to Vietnam will have more than he can chew. This metaphoric connotation of watercress reminds the reader of the violent colonial attempts and failures by both the French and the Americans.

After watercress their conversation moves on to the salt in the dishes. Nguyen Ai Quoc mentions that it is “fleur de sel,” “salt flowers” or “sea salt” (97–98). He explains to Bình the formation of sea salt by taking them “into a landscape of saltwater basins, rice-paddy-like when viewed from a distance” (98). “When seawater is evaporated by the sun in this way, it leaves behind its salt, in the same way that we will leave behind our bones” (98). Nguyen’s remark is poignant of the aesthetics of the exiled and their woeful nostalgia for homeland. The images of rice paddies and the sea (the Pacific Ocean) transport both men home, sadly juxtaposed to the picture of bones bleached by the sun left behind on foreign soils. This cluster of images brilliantly conveys the pathos of the exiled men and of their inability to return home. Their dinner, however, suggests a more inviting metaphor for the existence of the exiled. 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 Bình understand the implications of travel: the importance of remembrance, the necessity to adapt, and the wealth of worldly ways. In answering Bình’s question about the identity of the chef of this restaurant, Nguyen says,

“First of all, friend, the chef here is Vietnamese. He’s like me, thought that he would be a writer or a scholar someday, but after he traveled the world, life gave him something more practical to do. He now cooks here on the rue Descartes, but he will always be a traveler. He will always cook from all the places where he has been. It is his way of remembering the world.” (99)

Equally displaced, this chef finds a new passion that sustains him as he travels from continent to continent. The original ambition to be a writer or scholar now becomes translated into being an artist, whose culinary memoirs are daily composed and ravishingly consumed.

**Food, Sex, and Space**

No reader of Mei Ng’s novel *Eating Chinese Food Naked* can miss the tie between food and sex, as its title explicitly invites such a connection. But some may miss the title’s other connotation about vulnerability and anxiety in practicing ethnic foodways. Implicit in this title is the intersection of sex, food, and ethnicity, in
which Ng frames the search for sexual identity of her protagonist, Ruby Lee. It is often through culinary imageries and tropes that Ng stages tensions between sexuality in the ethnic, domestic space and sexuality in the urban space of streets, diners, and cafes. Ruby’s journey from Manhattan to the Chinese laundry in Queens and back to Manhattan, punctuated and differentiated by food, signifies her movement from her heterosexuality troubled by a subconscious desire for women to a burgeoning queer, bisexual consciousness.

*Eating* begins when Ruby moves back to her parents’ laundry in Queens after finishing her degree in women’s studies at Columbia University. The main conflict of the narrative sets off to be her uncertainty about her future, but soon the reader realizes that deeper than that lies her uncertainty about her sexuality, which is underlined with an ethnic anxiety. And both uncertainties are articulated through food references in conjunction with spatial tension between the heterotopias of business and home that is the Chinese laundry and the urban space of anonymity and permissiveness in Queens and Manhattan. Resolutions to these conflicts also depend on culinary references and spatial movement.

The ethnic, domestic space in Ng’s novel features various conflicts, between two immigrant parents, between parents and their American-born daughter, and within the daughter between love of and shame about her background. This domestic space often comes to life via food descriptions. Ng introduces these tensions at the very beginning of the novel in her description of the first dinner after Ruby’s return. Ruby finds out for the first time that her parents no longer eat together: “her mother fixed a plate for herself and went down to the basement while her father ate in the kitchen by himself” (11). This detail sets the novel’s forlorn tone and foreshadows familial frictions in which Ruby will find herself embroiled. It also serves as a metonymy for the separate lives her parents lead—their long history of estrangement and sexual incompatibility.

Although Bell, Ruby’s mother, is thrilled that “her baby had come back to her,” she is tensely aware of the discord between them, for Ruby sits there “so stiffly, as if afraid of her own family” (11). With such brevity Ng succeeds in picturing Ruby’s ambivalence toward home—one that is filled with ethnic and class tension as well as tenderness. In other words the Lees’ ethnicity and class position structure their expressions of love and affection, as Ruby remembers that “[s]he and her mother had always loved each other through sacrifice and worry” (14). Not that being Chinese American entails the absence of joy and happiness; rather, their being immigrants and minority members in this country means economic disadvantage and vulnerability to racism and exploitation.

In the near absence of verbal or physical expressions of affection, the Lees communicate their love mainly through food. From a young age, Ruby is made aware of the difference between her family and her classmates’ families. While other families kiss and hug, with parents sharing one bed, her family displays
no outward expression of affection, with Bell and Franklin sleeping in separate rooms. Largely because of the lack of affection at home, adult Ruby desires but fears intimacy. Despite the lack of physical affection, however, she never doubts her parents’ love for her, because through food her family has exhibited abundant love for each other. At the welcome-home dinner, Bell “picked out a choice morsel of chicken and placed it in her daughter’s bowl” (11). Ruby's ambivalent emotions about her family are vividly portrayed by what follows.

Ruby was so used to fending for herself that when the sweet white meat appeared in front of her, she nearly broke down and cried at the table. It didn’t matter that she liked dark meat better. Her mother was chewing on a chicken foot. “You eat,” Ruby said and tried to put some meat in her mother's bowl.

Bell waved the foot in the air. “More sweet near the bone,” she said.

(11–12)

Bell's sacrifice moves as well as burdens Ruby, who wants to express her love for her mother while maintaining independence. The fact that Bell doesn't know Ruby's preference for dark meat reveals the distance widening between them since Ruby has left home for college. Now as an adult, Ruby notices that her “bowl is piled high with all the good bits, and there in her mother's bowl a heap of bones. But now that she's grown, for once in her life she would like to push away the full bowl and eat from the other, the one her mother guards with both hands” (14). Ng uses this image of Bell guarding her bowl with “a heap of bones” in it to suggest not only how sacrifices constitute Bell's identity but also the family dynamics resulting from her sacrifices. Ruby's guilt is palpable in her contemplation about why she has come to live with her parents. “The nagging feeling was stronger than ever [...] and it was then that she realized that it was her mother she had forgotten; it was her mother she had left behind and had finally come back to get” (16).

Now that Ruby is home, there is testing between mother and daughter about who they have become. Interestingly, Ng employs food in conducting such testing. While helping Bell with the dishes, Ruby notices and touches the “dried salted flounder hung on a string” (13). Bell comments, “Remember you used to love salty fish?” (13). Ruby quickly responds, “I still like it” (13). She accurately senses in Bell's voice something “that she needed to defend herself against, as if her mother were accusing her of something that had nothing to do with fish” (13). What Bell is really asking is whether college has educated Ruby out of the ethnic ways of life in favor of assimilation. Unlike Sterling Lung in The Barbarians Are Coming, Ruby is a character with political awareness of ethnic identification, although she experiences a certain degree of unease about her ethnic and class background. To impress upon her mother that she has not
forgotten who she is, Ruby ventures to ask, “How do you make salty fish?” even though she knows she will never make it (13). Her interest in and appreciation of Chinese cuisine convinces Bell that Ruby hasn’t been changed too much by her college education. To put Ruby at ease, Bell starts talking about how she used to make salty duck on the farm (13). Through such food references, mother and daughter communicate their mutual trust and reestablish their intimacy.

Food and ethnicity bear a visceral link that is more powerful than certain discursive performances, as I have demonstrated in chapter 1. Often when we think about the constitution of a subject, we tend to consider the social norms acting upon it from birth, norms that are maintained largely through discursivity. Food as a nondiscursive norm nevertheless cannot escape ideological and discursive manipulation. The discourse of racial superiority of whites often insinuates itself into ethnographical dietary interpretation that confirms the inferiority of nonwhite races. It is worth mentioning again what Den Fujita, McDonald’s partner in Japan, said in 1987: “The reason Japanese people are so short and have yellow skin is because they have eaten nothing but fish and rice for 2,000 years. If we eat McDonald’s hamburgers and potatoes for a thousand years, we will become taller, our skin will become white and our hair blond” (qtd. in Reiter 169). These racialized foodways play an essential role in legitimating transnational capitalism and globalization.

Although Ng’s novel doesn’t deal with transnational capitalism, it certainly points our attention to how racial hierarchy and capitalism work hand in hand in diminishing the normative power of ethnic foodways. As a teenager Ruby is often ashamed of the way her family eats. Ng pictures the instance in which the Lees make crabs in black bean sauce.

Ruby watched the claws opening and closing, watched her father gather five legs in one hand and then push the shell away from the body. There was a cracking noise as the shell ripped away from the soft insides. The clear jelly heart still pulsed. He reached for the next crab. Bell chopped the crab into four pieces and still the heart pulsed. Ruby stirred garlic and scallion into the hot oil, then left the kitchen and practically ran around the corner to Jack’s. She stood in front and ate a handful of Sno-Caps. [...] Ruby wished she had been born into a family that didn’t kill its own food and didn’t live behind the laundry and where the father and mother talked to each other once in a while. (41)

Granted that most American teenagers would be disgusted by witnessing the killing of their food, Ruby’s disgust also comes from her family’s class position and ethnicity. Killing one’s own food, in the teenage Ruby’s mind, is one of the things that separate immigrants from “regular” Americans, a practice belonging to an agrarian society and obsolete in advanced capitalism. In this transna-
tional capitalist market, meats often appear in forms disassociated from their sources, and produce appears in markets remote from its origin. To overcome the disgust and shame over killing one’s own food, Ruby rushes to the corner store, purchases Sno-Caps, and stuffs herself with them. It is as though payment for someone else’s labor in making one’s food restores the normalcy of the capitalist system of exchange and thus sweetens one’s sense of belonging.

In addition to centering on issues of ethnicity and class within the domestic space of food, Ng explores Ruby’s sexuality against the tension between the domestic space and the urban space. The domestic space, straddling the border between the public (laundry business) and the private, knows little intimacy and sexual freedom. There heterosexuality is offered to Ruby as a compulsory position but imparts to her the lesson of pain. Ruby’s parents are long estranged, repelling each other in an unbreakable union of bitterness and sorrow. Ruby learns the lesson well and wants sex without marriage. She doesn’t want her relationship with Nick to be more than sexual. While wandering in the city, she finds herself near Nick’s apartment but decides against seeing him even though she is starved for sex. “It felt dangerous to see him while she was living at home—she might be tempted to stay with him; days and weeks and then years would pass without her noticing, and one morning she’d wake up and look out the window and there, surrounding the house, would be the dreaded white picket fence” (115). Ruby’s fear of heterosexual monogamy and of the confinement of the domestic space propels her toward brief sexual encounters outside home. Living at home she feels sexually stifled, for there her desire is unspeakable, and any noise will arouse suspicion and guilt. Even after she moves out of her mother’s bedroom into the basement, she still feels watched and chastised. Whenever she can, she walks the streets of Manhattan hoping to find a stranger to go home with. Ng offers an interesting fact to allegorize and naturalize Ruby’s desire and behavior. One evening Ruby joins her father in watching a TV show about the hermit crab. “Strangely, these crabs lived in the forest and made their homes in trees. Thousands were scuttling out of the forest, across roads and highways, even, in their yearly exodus to the sea” (84). When they reach the sea, they mate. Like these hermit crabs, Ruby cannot engage in sexual activity at home. As she watches the show, “she was dying for a café where she might find some halfway decent person to go home with. That’s what she needed to feel alive again” (84). Ng creates a comical moment here. Watching the hermit crabs mate, Franklin says, “I bet they’re good eating. [...] I bet they’re sweet” (84).

The association between food and sex is essential in delineating the character development of Ruby from someone confused about her sexuality to someone coming into full consciousness of her bisexuality. Initially, a subconscious preference for women frightens her. “Women were dangerous. Ruby knew a
woman could break her heart just by looking at her” (87). At first she doesn’t understand why she has returned home. “It was only partly that she didn’t have money or a job or a house of her own. There was something else, something she couldn’t quite place that had pulled her away from mornings where she would reach out and touch the hair of the one sleeping next to her” (24). Her restlessness and active sexuality are described through food metaphors. “Day after day, croissants and omelettes and pancakes with cream on top. One day the butteriness was too much for her stomach. No one could hold her down long enough to keep her from running” (24). Ruby runs from one sexual partner to another until she ends up home. It doesn’t take long for her to realize that it is her mother that has pulled her home. In her relationship with Bell, Ruby’s lesbian inclination finds a displaced but safe site for articulation. Her love and desire for Bell are often invested in food references too. Years ago when Bell had an operation, it was Ruby, only ten, who followed her mother’s instructions and cooked for the family. “In the kitchen, Ruby had found a grace she didn’t have with double Dutch or softball or flirting. Those things baffled her, but she had a way with ginger and black beans and garlic” (48). She kept cooking even after her mother recovered. After she finished cooking, Ruby would run to the factory to fetch her mother. “Bell was so proud she thought she would burst. It didn’t matter so much then that her husband didn’t say hello when she came home; at least she had her little girl” (49). Now at age twenty-two, Ruby imagines living with her mother in a “two-bedroom in Manhattan. With lots of windows and wood floor. […] Maybe they would live up the block from a bakery where they could get apple turnovers for dessert” (19).

Just as the domestic space is given texture by the frugal practices of ethnic food, so is the urban space by rich pastries and desserts that suggest sexual freedom and liberal choices. “Apple turnover” is not an accidental signifier for intimacy or sexuality, since Ruby introduces herself to a potential sexual partner as “a coconut-custard kind of girl” (117). It is in Manhattan where Ruby associates desserts with sexual freedom and choices. Walking on Broadway, she stops at a bakery in which “she looked with longing at the little strawberry tarts and the apple turnovers and fancy cakes like Easter bonnets” (170). She envies “the people who walked right into the store and pointed confidently at something in the window and came out with a cardboard box that they held carelessly by the string” (171). With this cluster of images of food and city shoppers insinuating desire, sexuality, and its casual consumption/consummation, Ng suggests Ruby’s longing for sexual freedom and envy of other people’s certainty. She wishes that she knew what she wanted and could take what she desired. Is it her mother, Nick, men, or women that she wants?

Ruby loves and desires her mother, entertaining a fantasy of rescue that takes (elopes with) her mother away from her father to the paradise of Flor-
ida. She works as a temp to pay for the trip. Her fantasy reaches its climax in a dream where “she was having sex with her mother” (168). Ng treats such homosexual, incestuous fantasy as unproblematic by stating, “When Ruby was a kid, around the time when other little girls were being dandled on their daddy’s knee […] thinking about marrying him when they grew up, she was dreaming about marrying her mother and taking her away” (18). Ng’s destabilizing of the taboo against incest reminds us of Foucault’s remark in the context of the Western history of sexuality: “Incest was a popular practice […] widely practiced among the populace, for a very long time. It was toward the end of the nineteenth century that various social pressures were directed against it” (154). Interestingly, when Ng must make Ruby aware of the social taboo against incest, she resorts to a food taboo to make the point. Ruby finds in a book on food rituals in which there was a tribe of people who grew yams and piled them up in the yard. When you visited your neighbor, you brought along a basket of yams […], and when you left, they gave you some of their yams […]. You weren’t supposed to eat your own yams. Or your own dogs. Or your own sister or mother. Your own yams, your own sister, your own mother you may not eat. Other people’s sisters, other people’s mothers, you may eat. (168–169)

Framed against the arbitrariness of this particular food taboo, our incest taboo loses its rigidity as a law of nature. Ruby learns through this food taboo that it is a social demand that she transfer her desire for her mother to other women. Ruby’s love and desire for her mother are often described as conflicting with her need for freedom, for her mother is associated with the kitchen and the basement, a domestic space that makes Ruby restless. She longs for the urban space of anonymity where “diners with murals of the Acropolis splayed across their walls appealed to her in the early-morning hours […] where she found herself sitting across from someone she might never have talked to if she hadn’t fucked him” (86). To Ruby the space of the laundry/home, with its ethnic food and its customs and its poverty, is a different America from Broadway, so much so that she feels she can be “a regular American girl” only when she lives elsewhere (25). Her love and desire for her mother endure such spatial tension between the ethnic, domestic sphere and the city of casual contacts. Although ethnicity and poverty bother Ruby, these are not the only reasons that she longs for the urban space. For home, being the space saturated with demands and failures of heterosexuality, requires her to be complicit with her mother’s suffering. She feels anger and shame when her silence condones her father’s verbal abuse of her mother, and she feels guilt and shame when she opposes her father to protect her mother. On Broadway, however, she can look
into people’s eyes without shame. “Her eyes were full of tenderness and regret that she would never know their names or what was inside the packages they carried” (170). Almost always, food accompanies such street scenes, and the urban space is often associated with casual sex.

Ng has established the code that food is sex. Therefore, city, food, and sex form narrative nodes from which Ng’s major motifs develop. When the narrative moves toward a resolution, Ng begins to utilize more heavily the intersection between food and sex. One major conflict must be resolved before Ruby can come to a full consciousness of her queerness: her relationship with Nick. By any standard Nick is a decent guy, but Ruby’s fear of committing to monogamy constantly drives her into the arms of other men. Nick says again and again, “If only she wouldn’t fuck other people, they would be happy together” (119). To Ruby, however, her affairs with men mean nothing, for “she loved Nick as much as she could love any man, but she had a feeling that if she ever met a woman, she would leave him for good” (120). Toward the middle of the novel, this conflict begins to move toward a resolution, for Ruby begins to see Nick’s flaws, which are often food related. Ruby finally relents and lets Nick visit her at home. The scene at dinner offers Ruby the first sign that Nick is not the right person for her.

Ruby had forgotten to tell Nick not to start eating until her father picked up his chopsticks. Nick reached across the table and helped himself to a plump morsel of chicken from the far side of the plate, the side right in front of her father. Ruby half waited for her father to rap Nick across the knuckles. No, no, Nick, Ruby said in her head, only pick in front of you, no matter what it is, even if it’s the chicken head or chicken butt. (129)

Nick’s poor table manners reveal him to be selfish. After this episode, Ruby moves into an all-women apartment building, the first subconscious choice to cut Nick off—subconscious because Ruby still consoles Nick that she is always at his place anyway. The last time they are together, again it is during a meal that she comes to realize their incompatibility. “She was talking and not eating. He was eating all the good meaty bits and leaving the bony parts for her. This made her quiet, and she felt sad suddenly that she loved a man who took the good bits for himself” (234). Ruby cannot help comparing Nick to her family, whose members demonstrate love through giving the best to others. In one of the dinner scenes, Bell “slipped a nice fat shrimp into Franklin’s bowl. […] Franklin picked up two pieces of the tender white breast and laid them in Ruby’s bowl. ‘One for your mother,’ he said” (207). Their different table manners illuminate the different values inculcated by their families. Something as trivial as table manners reveals one’s character, as Bell points out: “Not knowing how
to eat was worse than going with another woman” (241). Although Ruby's disappointment in Nick's table manners plays a large role in her decision to stop seeing him, the more important reason arises later when he reveals his racism. Nick confesses that when he is angry he thinks, “Who is that ugly Chinese woman standing in my room? But now here you are and you're beautiful, I don't even notice your Chineseness” (236). His remark evokes in her a suppressed memory of racial trauma in elementary school. In the final scene between them, Ng uses the prop of food to signify Ruby's complete lack of sexual interest in Nick. “For the first time, the sight of his soft penis didn't seem to fit with the tins of dumplings, noodles, rice. It had just been in her mouth, but suddenly she didn't want it so near her food” (233). Food and sex, always working hand in hand in Ruby's apparatus of arousal, become disengaged at this final moment of their relationship.

When she comes to fully realize her queerness, it occurs at the narrative nexus of food, space, and sex. At a party in Manhattan, Ruby meets Hazel and becomes intensely attracted to her. “God, who knew that touching someone's hand could make her so wet” (231). Her desire for Hazel finds its expression in references to food. “She was seized with a sudden desire to shop at open markets for her, to buy only the most beautiful string beans and patty-pan squash and red bliss potatoes and herbs from Amish farmers. She also wanted to run out and buy some phyllo dough and wrap up something fancy in it and bake the whole thing until it was golden brown” (230). She tells Hazel proudly that she's going to attend a cooking school. To spin off from Bell's remark about the relationship between eating and being, we can venture to say that knowing how to cook, eat, and feed others is knowing how to love.

Now that Ruby finally comes to a self-understanding and sets off on the path of finding her happiness away from home, away from her mother, in the urban space of Manhattan, one may ask, What about Bell, whose life is more miserable without Ruby around? Ng's narrative offers both Bell and Franklin character development as well. Franklin at Bell's sixtieth birthday presents her with a pair of tickets to Florida. Bell herself begins to walk the streets of Queens as if her daughter's restlessness has infected her. Now she goes to American fast-food joints to drink tea and eat snacks, something she has never done before. Ruby is filled with love and comfort as she imagines her mother running in the sneakers that are her present to her.

She'd run around the whole neighborhood, up and down every little side street. [...] she would keep on, past the junior high school, past the library and the supermarket, past the catering place and the hamburger joint and the bar with topless dancers. [...] She'd run past all the familiar streets, Main, Cedarhurst, Hollis, Union. She'd keep running, past streets she had never
seen before, past houses with people cooking and eating, talking and yelling, fighting and loving in dark rooms. She’d keep running, the sound of her own breathing in her ears, arms and legs pumping their long easy stride, taking her away to another place. (247)

Bell’s journey outward into the urban space folds back upon Ruby’s return home from college at the novel’s beginning. Ruby describes her own journey with the same landmarks addressing the reader as though she were a tour guide for a trip from Manhattan to Queens.

First you get on the R train and ride all the way out to the very last stop. Get off at Union Street. Go upstairs and take the bus, the Q44, the Q63, the Q29—or, if you’re lucky, you can take the Q66 so that you don’t have to walk down from Main Street. […] You can walk down Cedarhurst Boulevard if you want an ice-cream sandwich from the German deli, or you can walk down the side streets, where there is shade and rows and rows of single-family houses. […] When you hit Hollis Avenue, you can see how things have changed. There are new bodegas that have the same yellow-and-red awnings and men sitting outside on crates. […] Next to the Shell Gas Station is the transmission place with the pack of rabid dogs that bark and jump and throw themselves against the fence when someone walks by. […] Now you see people coming out of their cars carrying rifles in protective sheaths instead of bowling balls. In the middle of the block is Lee’s Hand Laundry, where I grew up. (16–17)

Ruby’s description of the journey suggests a spatial stratification that is ethnically and economically determined. Cedarhurst is a white, heterosexual (“grass plots […] trimmed on Saturdays by husbands in their undershirts”), middle-class space; Hollis is an ethnic, poor, violent space (16–17).

Bell’s movement outward traverses both of these spaces, the ethnic ghetto and the space of the supposed American Dream. This movement can be interpreted as Bell’s practice of freedom and care for the self—an agency that undermines patriarchal oppression and ethnic fear of persecution, both of which are aptly symbolized by her husband, Franklin. It is Franklin who has stopped Bell from going to English classes for fear of losing her. “After he had shown her everything he could, he stopped wanting to go out. He started getting carsick, train-sick, bus-sick. He sold his Chevrolet to his cousin in Chinatown” (35). Bell thus becomes trapped inside the laundry and cannot speak her mind, for Franklin’s cigar smoke is always in her throat (57). It is also Franklin who has discouraged Bell from calling her sister in Chicago, afraid that “she’d be getting on a plane and flying out there” (32). Although Ng does not describe Franklin’s experience of racial humiliation, it is suggested to the reader by his fear of
persecution. For instance, he attributes his sore feet to the fact that he has stopped wanting to go out a long time ago, a physical pain that can be read as a manifestation of psychic pain over racialization. Now Franklin travels through newspapers and shares reports of tragic events with Bell, as though they would justify his fear of the outside world. To be Chinese living in America, in his experience, is to invite trouble. Therefore, one should not broadcast one’s ethnicity. Ruby recalls her father taking out the trash. “He was calm when he used a bag from the American supermarket, but when he used a bag from Chinatown, his face would get tight and his hands quick and angry as he turned the bags inside out so that the Chinese lettering didn’t show as much” (126). When asked why he turns the Chinese bags inside out, he answers, “So people don’t know this is Chinese garbage” (126). Bell in walking the streets of Queens defies her husband’s control and braves the world that she is given, despite the risk of racial humiliation. Her newly acquired mobility finally fulfills her destiny—“Bell’s mother being the first in her family to have big feet” after the banning of foot binding (27). Bell has inherited her mother’s restlessness and “carried it with her all the way to America” (27).

Interestingly, Ruby’s wish to take her mother to Florida initiates the change, and her fantasy of rescue bears the fruit of Bell’s new mobility. Both women are saved because they are finally able to exercise their freedom independently, and this independence also frees them from each other. Bell’s break away from Franklin’s control enables Ruby to rid herself of her guilt for her mother’s unhappiness and thus enables her to live happily in Manhattan. In turn Ruby’s happy independence comforts Bell that her baby has grown into a strong woman. At the end of the novel, their love for each other finds its final expression in food. Ruby calls to ask her mother for a recipe for sea bass, and in such asking she conveys her love for her mother and her connection to her ancestry, for food is their medium of communication. Significantly, the novel ends with Bell’s voice on Ruby’s voicemail, telling her how to cook a sea bass.

“First, pick a sea bass with clear eyes, not cloudy. When you get home, wash it in cold water, inside and out. Make sure there’s no more scales left. Soak the black beans in some warm water. Put the fish in a bowl, chop garlic, scallion and ginger. Pour a little soy sauce on it, not too much. Then steam it until it’s done, maybe twenty minutes. Heat some oil in a pan. Make sure it’s hot, but not smoky. Pour it over the top. Watch out for small bones.” (252)

**Gay versus Queer**

Sexual identity has conventionally been conceptualized as a static description of one’s sexual essence. This essentialist convention demands that one be either
hetero or homo in one’s sexual desires. The discourse of “coming out,” narrating it as a process in which one becomes increasingly honest about the true nature of one’s sexuality, has been shaped more by essentialist sexology than anything else, and ironically, essentialist sexology is the very discourse that gay cultures have been trying to combat. In recent investigations by queer theories, however, there is a concerted effort to distinguish “queer” from “gay” with the intention of infusing queer theories with a fresh critical energy. In her second book, Tendencies, Eve Sedgewick defines “queer” this way:

Queer is a continuing moment, movement, motive—recurrent, eddying, troubulant. The word “queer” itself means across—it comes from the Indo-European root *twerkw*, which also yields the German *quer* (traverse), Latin *torquere* (to twist), English *athwart*. [. . .] Keenly, it is relational and strange. (xii)

In tracing the etymologies of the word “queer,” Sedgewick highlights its translinguistic convergence and invites us to conceptualize queerness as an exercise that troubles, disturbs, twists, resists, and sabotages the regimes of the normal. By this definition, “queer,” a noun, a verb, or an adjective, differs from “gay” in that “queer” does not gesture solely toward a sexual identity. First of all, queerness, strictly speaking, is not merely about sexual practices. Sue-Ellen Case puts it succinctly: “Queer theory [. . .] works not at the site of gender, but at the site of ontology” (3). Second, queerness disturbs identity, for “[t]he queer is the taboo-breaker, the monstrous, the uncanny” (Case 3). Or in Donald Hall’s words, queer practices “challenge and undercut any attempt to render ‘identity’ singular, fixed, or normal” (15).

In the domain of sexuality, being queer, therefore, entails a radically critical position toward sexual normativity, not a specific sexual desire. To truly challenge sexual normativity is to undo a monosexual identity, be it hetero or homo. Fluid sexual identities like bisexuality are fundamentally frustrating to the system of classification because they disrupt the either/or rationality. Bisexual identities are threatening to monosexual identities because they undermine the essentialist bases for monosexual identities. In speaking about the representational bifurcation between hetero and homo, Paula Rust points out, “The reconstruction of relationships to landmarks of both genders implies the destruction of the language that provides people with monosexual identities (79). The discourse of coming-out celebrates the “authentic” self by denouncing the false and dishonest heterosexual self, whereas bisexuals refuse to make up their mind and move on to their “true” selves. Joe Eadie argues that the threat resides within the monosexual identity because the bisexuality threatening to lesbians and gay men is really their own bisexuality. Eadie argues that
in denying their own bisexuality, lesbians and gays are not so clearly different from heterosexuals after all (139–170). While the regimes of the normal may reluctantly tolerate gays and lesbians because the coming-out narrative appeals to essence, authenticity, and truth, thus implying lack of choice or agency in one’s sexual orientation, bisexuality is an abomination in the general public’s eyes, for it stands for willful and insistent challenges to sexual normativity. Bisexuals, fully able yet refusing to choose either hetero or homo, are the truly monstrous and uncanny.

The distinction between gay and queer sexuality is important when reading Salt side by side with Eating. Although both novels center on the sexual identities of their protagonists, they diverge significantly in their constitution of the desiring subject. Ng’s novel, in dramatizing Ruby’s queer journey from heterosexual desire troubled by a subconscious homosexual impulse to conscious bisexual desires, may be read as a critique of the monosexual desire and relationships in Salt. Such a reading by no means critiques Truong for whatever sexual normalcy she may observe in her historical fiction. Anchored in the mores of the early 1900s when a lesbian relationship was more readily tolerated than male homosexuality, Truong deploys Bình’s gay desire as the radical terrain to mobilize a host of critical issues, including sexual normativity, colonialism, patriarchy, class, and race. Reading both texts together, however, invites us to grapple with their different approaches to sexual transgression. What was transgressive in the early 1900s may have become part of the regime of the normal in the 2000s. I wonder why Eating, eight years since its publication, has received little critical attention from Asian American scholars. Could it be that its bisexuality is deeply disturbing? It was revealing to watch how my graduate students gravitated to the interpretation that at the end of the novel Ruby is finally awakened to her lesbian self. So seduced and confined by the discourse of coming-out, we often unknowingly reduce a dynamic and large terrain of sexuality to something nameable and containable. The lack of scholarly work on Eating, I believe, is one example of our jittery uncertainty about fluid sexualities and our discomfort with Ruby’s sexual appetite.

First let me start with Salt, in which the Stein and Toklas relationship mirrors that of the historical celebrities who have been extolled as trailblazers of sexual freedom. Their same-sex relationship, even from their era’s point of view, however, hardly queers the regimes of the normal, as it largely mirrors the norm of white and propertied heterosexuality in the early twentieth century in the West. Truong, faithful to the historical Stein and Toklas, presents a vivid domestic picture of the pair in Salt. The fact that both are female is the only social anomaly in their relationship. Gertrude’s endearments for Alice include “Pussy” and “Wifie,” while “Lovey” and “Hubbie” are among Alice’s for Gertrude. Alice is the wife operating within the domestic sphere, satisfying
Gertrude’s culinary and sexual appetites, managing her social life, and serving as her private secretary. Gertrude as the husband pleases Alice by loving her food and her body, by surrendering to her all of the domestic and most of the social decisions, and by maintaining a public presence that makes Alice proud. It is telling that Gertrude almost never enters the kitchen and socializes with women. Simone de Beauvoir remarks, “When Gertrude Stein entertained friends, she conversed only with the men and left to Alice Toklas the duty of talking with the ladies” (423). As pointed out earlier, their arrangement is so agreeable to the institution of marriage that people in their circle refer to them as the Steins.

The two pairs of gay lovers in Salt, varying in gender, race, and class, have one thing in common—the irreversible roles of cooks and diners. Alice cooks to please Gertrude on Sundays, and on other days she does so by directing Bình. Spatially, Alice is primarily claimed by garden, market, and kitchen. In this respect Bình is like Alice, fixed in domesticity. With both Alice and Bình cooking for their lovers, Gertrude Stein and Marcus Lattimore are the beneficiaries of the former’s labor. Never vice versa. Such fixed roles mirror the equally fixed sexual roles between the lovers, with Alice performing the role of the traditional wife and Bình the submissive to Lattimore. Revealed in their culinary and sexual relationship is a congealed asymmetrical power relation that is no different from the hegemonic norm of heterosexuality. While one can not freely choose one’s sexuality as one pleases, one can conceivably create relationships in which power relations are reversible, permitting fluidity in identities that truly transgress boundaries.

Eating can be read as an interesting critique of the gay relationships in Salt in that sexual identities and practices are plural and fluid within one individual. Ng not only faults heterosexuality for people’s unhappiness but also removes the stigma from bisexuality by naturalizing it allegorically through metaphors of food and appetite. Ruby’s sexuality is not settled once and for all in the novel’s resolution. Her conscious desire for Hazel is not arrived at by a denunciation of her desire for men. She may have left Nick for Hazel, but there is no indication that she will not continue having male lovers. In spite of her fear of entrapment by men, Ruby enjoys the sex. “She loved him (Nick) best in bed[...].[...] And that was the scary part, that in bed it felt good” (122–123). Moreover, the modalities of sexual pleasure for Ruby range between hetero and lesbian, even before she is fully conscious of her desire for women. “What she liked best was to lie at the edge of the bed while he knelt on a pillow on the floor, his mouth between her legs. She liked to come that way” (119). On the other hand, she also finds penetration satisfying. “He pushed into her and she stopped fighting.[...] One minute she was making all kinds of noises and her hips were moving and the next minute she was coming and crying” (124).
Ruby’s search is not centered on finding the authentic self between the hetero/homo dichotomy. Rather, her journey arrives at her honesty that she is a queer, desiring subject that cannot choose one sex over the other. She is drawn to women because she desires them and because with them there is no threat of marriage. She is equally attracted to men because she desires them and enjoys them in bed. Nowhere in the novel is the language of hetero/lesbian sexuality evoked. Unlike the narrative movement that firms up Ruby’s ethnic identity at the end, the narrative motif on sexuality skirts the notion of identity formation. The novel ends without a clear indication whether Ruby will carry out her fantasy about Hazel. What we know of is her attraction and dinner invitation to Hazel.

Ruby’s shyness around women she finds attractive is the consequence of her subject formation in the culture of hegemonic heterosexuality, and her defiance of it is not limited to loving women, for doing so would deny part of herself. And such a denial plays right into the hands of the regime of the normal. To truly trouble the system of classification by which the regime of the normal operates, Ruby must allow herself to love whomever she desires regardless of their sex, resisting the social demand for coherent, singular, and fixed identities. Although Ruby’s relationship with a female lover is left to the reader’s imagination, we can make an informed conjecture (based on her relationships with Nick and Bell) that it will not be a fixed power relation.

Judith Butler is correct in reminding us that “sexuality cannot be summarily made or unmade, and it would be a mistake to associate ‘constructivism’ with ‘the freedom of a subject to form her/his sexuality as s/he pleases’” (94). Hall is equally correct in qualifying Butler that it has not been proven that “our sexuality is firmly fixed and our potentials for future identifications foreclosed from early childhood” (183). To be queer is to refuse a fixed sexuality and therefore to be shuffled between either and or. To be queer is also to permit chance to take us by surprise.