The Structure of Kinship

The photographer could rehearse the efforts to picture these men in the usual ways, but there was always a remainder. The men resisted all attempts to order them, no matter the orthodoxy of conventions brought to bear in arranging and deciphering them. They had their own desires.
—ANTHONY W. LEE, Picturing Chinatown

Two American ladies wish—
—ALICE B. TOKLAS, The Alice B. Toklas Cookbook

How might we imagine otherwise? How might we visualize loss and the forgetting of race? How might we imagine a psychic landscape beyond Schreber's mental gymnastics, a social terrain beyond the limits of queer liberalism?

This—and each subsequent—chapter of The Feeling on Kinship turns to the concept of queer diasporas as a rejoinder to the political and psychic dilemmas of queer liberalism. As a methodological tool, queer diasporas directs our attention to other communities—to other humanities within modernity and its received traditions of liberal humanism. In doing so, it moves us beyond identity-based frameworks in order to emphasize the epistemological coordinates of how we are thought—in order to focus on the politics and problems of racial knowledge. As a structure of feeling, queer diasporas also indexes lost and forgotten desires, those stubborn remainders of affect that individuate through their ardent refusal of the orthodoxy of conventions, the great expectations of social agreement. Lastly, in the binding force of the what-can-be-known, queer diasporas suggests how we might think the unknowable, and indeed mourn, as William Faulkner writes, "a might-have-been which is more true than truth." Queer diasporas thus opens upon a landscape of other histories and knowledges, preserving in the process a space for social and political reinvestment.

Monique Truong’s novel, The Book of Salt (2003), and Wong Kar-wai’s film, Happy Together (1997), tell such stories of lost and forgotten desires. Truong and Wong focus on that stubborn remainder—a reservoir of insistent queer desire—that individuates their protagonists through the singularity of their longings. Truong and Wong rethink the what-can-be-known by drawing insistent attention to the epistemological as well as the ontological limits of a liberal humanist tradition that affirms particular subjects while excluding others from historical consideration. They imagine those who have yet to be visualized or articulated within these restricted paradigms of knowing and being—others who constitute and haunt, but are nevertheless foreclosed, from the domain of the properly historical. Truong and Wong thus saturate the what-can-be-known with the persistent, melancholic trace of the what-might-have-been, the what-could-have-been. This chapter focuses on queer Asian migrants in the diaspora. Unlike queer liberals today, who appear before the law demanding rights and legal protection for their intimacies, these queer Asian migrants remain subjects in waiting. Waiting structures the temporal and spatial logics of the dis-appearance of their communities of intimacies in the global system. In this manner, queer diasporas functions as a critical tool that interrupts the contemporary emergence of queer liberalism.

The Book of Salt, set in early 1930’s Paris, and Happy Together, set in late 1990’s Buenos Aires, bookend the twentieth century through their sustained attention to the figure of the Asian coolie, toiling anonymously in global streams of migrant labor. Binh, the narrator of The Book of Salt, is a Vietnamese colonial, an exiled queer and a queer exile, who is forced to leave Vietnam after an illicit love affair with the young French chef who oversees the kitchen of the governor-general of Saigon. Eventually, after various travails at sea as a galley cook, Binh ends up employed as household chef to Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas during the couple’s famous residence in Paris as American expatriates and
icons of the Lost Generation. Binh is a fictionalized composite inspired by two historical figures—two Vietnamese cooks who appear briefly in the pages of the eponymous Alice B. Toklas Cookbook (1954). Though richly imagined, Binh is ultimately an unverifiable presence, conjured forth more by American desire, by the call for hired help that Toklas places in the local newspaper: "Two American ladies wish—"73

Binh's dim presence in the archive compels Truong's fictional narrative as a historical supplement. It invokes Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's caveat that "the subaltern is necessarily the absolute limit of the place where history is narrativized into logic."74 Yet The Book of Salt is less an instance of the subaltern writing back than an exploration of the limits of such writing for the politics of history. Through the course of Truong's novel, the eloquence of Binh's queer desires comes to entangle and reconfigure the domains of both history and fiction by drawing insisted attention to who and to what must be forgotten so that the high modernism exemplified by Stein and Toklas might come to be affirmed.

Set in early-twentieth century Old World Paris, The Book of Salt rewrites the narrative of the inscrutable Asian bachelor-laborer, insisting that we consider how the colonial subtends the emergence of the modern. Set in late-twentieth century New World Argentina, Happy Together follows an underclass of queer Asian migrant workers who struggle under the shadows of globalization, demanding in turn a reflection on how the postcolonial subtends the development of the global. Two lovers, Lai Yu-fai (Tony Leung Chiu-wai) and Ho Po-wing (Leslie Cheung Kwok-wing), depart Hong Kong a few years before the colony's 1997 reversion from British to Chinese sovereignty. They travel halfway around the world, to Buenos Aires, in order to jump start their failing relationship—in the words of Ho, to "start over."

The affective intensity of the couple's queer diaspora—their impossible psychic attachments to one another—negates any generic story of the anonymous Chinese bachelor-laborer quietly toiling away in effeminized celibacy. Indeed, so compelling is the force of Lai's and Ho's inexorable desires that, ultimately, we come to witness a social and psychic reconfiguration: we witness the emergence of an alternative structure of family and kinship, a social organization and belonging not running under but alongside the normative mandates of the Oedipal. If historicism's charge is to legislate a privileged way of knowing and being in the world, The Book of Salt and Happy Together present, to borrow from

Martin Heidegger, a "worlding" of the colonial and postcolonial subject in terms other than modernity's social contract.75 Truong's novel and Wong's film thus represent two exceptional archives for a critical investigation of the dialectic of affirmation (of freedom) and forgetting (of race) that both constitutes and confounds the emergence of queer liberalism.

Naming

In chapter nine of The Book of Salt, Binh recollects a curious meeting with a fellow Vietnamese colonial he encounters one evening on a bridge over the Seine. It is 1927, over two years before Binh will find his Madame and Madame and join the Stein-Toklas household in their renowned 27 rue de Fleurus home, the illustrious literary salon of 1930s Paris. The "man on the bridge," as Binh refers to him, is an enigmatic figure. Wearing a "black suit, coarse in fabric, too large for his frame, and many years out of fashion," the stranger, whose name we never learn, tells Binh that he has also been a cook, as well as a "[k]itchen boy, sailor, dishwasher, snow shoveler, furnace stoker, gardener, pie maker, photograph retoucher, fake Chinese souvenir painter, your basic whatever-needs-to-be-done-that-day laborer, and... letter writer."76

Over the course of a shared evening and meal, Binh learns that this handsome fellow is thirty-seven years old, that he left Vietnam at age twenty-two, and that he has not been back since. Now just a visitor to la ville lumière, the unnamed man had once resided in Paris for almost four years. Their supper ends with a steaming plate of watercress, wilted by a flash of heat and seasoned perfectly with a generous sprinkling of fleur de sel, "salt flowers." Binh observes a "gradual revelation of its true self, as I was beginning to learn, is the quality that sets fleur de sel apart from the common sea salt that waits for me in most French kitchens. There is a development, a rise and fall, upon which its salinity becomes apparent, deepens, and then disappears. Think of it as a kiss in the mouth."77 Thus inspired, Binh shifts his attention once again to his attractive dinner companion, wondering if this anonymous stranger might, indeed, be the long-lost scholar-prince for whom he has been tirelessly searching.

Binh's encounter and Truong's chapter concludes with a slow after-dinner stroll in the Jardin du Luxembourg, and the hint of a mutual desire fulfilled:
A kiss in the mouth can become a kiss on the mouth. A hand on a shoulder can become a hand on the hips. A laugh on his lips can become a moan on mine. The moments in between these are often difficult to gauge, difficult to partition and subdivide. Time that refuses to be translated into a tangible thing, time without a number or an ordinal assigned to it, is often said to be “lost.” In a city that always looks better in a memory, time lost can make the night seem eternal and full of stars.⁸

Binh’s encounter with this stranger is “lost” to time, their desire and brief affair untranslatable “in between” moments of laughter and moaning, movements of shoulders, hips, and lips. Unmatched to any cardinal or ordinal assignment that would render it a “tangible thing”—unmatched, that is, to the abstract time of capitalism or to its calculated wages—their fleeting liaison confounds the domain of historical understanding if we come to recognize the biographical details Truong sparsely scatters across this ephemeral meeting: that the unnamed scholar-prince is one Nguyen That Thanh, also known as Nguyen Ai Quoc.⁹ Readers familiar with the public life of Nguyen will know that nearly fourteen years later he will finally return to his homeland, Vietnam, and under the name Ho Chi Minh (“He Who Enlightens”) will become the political leader of a successful anticolonial revolution that will humble the Western empires of France and the United States.

I begin with this episode of the man on the bridge not only to raise the specter of a scandalous, perhaps unthinkable, desire that binds Binh and Ho Chi Minh in their shared queer diasporas but also to emphasize how queer desire is not peripheral, but indeed central, to the narration of race, modernity, and the politics of history in The Book of Salt. More specifically, how does queer diasporas as a conceptual category—outside the boundaries of territorial sovereignty and in excess of sanctioned social arrangements—bring together dissonant desires with the political, thereby forcing in the process a crisis in historicism, in the idea of history as “the way it really was”?¹⁰ Queer desire in Truong’s novel enables a productive reading practice that, in Walter Benjamin’s words, would “brush history against the grain.”¹¹ Such action, mobilized through the politics of naming and misnaming in Truong’s novel, is what I call historical catachresis.

The Oxford English Dictionary (2nd ed. 1989) defines “catachresis” as the “improper use of words; [the] application of a term to a thing which it does not properly denote; [or the] abuse or perversion of a trope or metaphor.” In refusing to name the handsome stranger on the bridge, Truong insists on a consideration of how the politics of naming and misnaming works to stabilize—indeed, to justify—the historical order of things. Through the problematics of naming, historical catachresis works to dislodge a particular version of history as “the way it really was” by denying the possibility of a singular historical context in which the past has transpired and reemerges in the present as a reified object of investigation. Truong’s refusal to name the man on the bridge presents us with a dialectic of affirmation and forgetting: How is it that Stein and Toklas can appear in history as the iconic lesbian couple of literary modernism and historical modernity while Binh can never appear and Ho Chi Minh must wait to appear? How is it that Stein and Toklas are placed in history while Binh and Ho Chi Minh are displaced from it?

In her analysis of historical catachresis in the context of modern Chinese women, the historian Tani Barlow stresses the temporality of its grammar: the future perfect tense. By focusing on what Chinese women “will have been” in the “what was” of sanctioned Chinese history, Barlow seeks to destabilize the force of historicism’s documentary evidence.¹² Drawing attention to the what-will-have-been challenges the what-can-be-known by asking who must be forgotten and what must be passed over, homogenized, and discarded, in order for history to appear in the present as a stable object of contemplation. In this manner, the what-will-have-been reopens the question of the future in a settled past. It simultaneously transports that past into what Benjamin describes as a “history of the present,” which is the recognition that history is always and insistently re-presented to us, mobilized for present political purposes. In the same breath, it recognizes the fact that there are, as Michel Foucault argues, “multiple time spans, and each one of these spans is the bearer of a certain type of events. The types of events must be multiplied just as the types of time span are multiplied.”¹³

Reflection on historical catachresis in this scene from The Book of Salt highlights the imperial ambitions of modernity’s deployments of empty homogeneous time and space—the endless flow of past, present, and future—in the name of historicism. Truong’s refusal to attribute a proper name to the man on the bridge who will have been Nguyen That Thanh—and Ho Chi Minh only after returning to Vietnam—underscores the logic of waiting that structures European modernity in relation to its colonial
others: the what-will-have-been of the Vietnamese nationalist independence movement in relation to the what-was, and is, of European modernity, liberal progress, and capitalist development.

Even more, Truong’s refusal of the moniker Ho Chi Minh declines a process of nomination, dislodging the proper name from its referent; indeed, it allows the problem of historical referentiality to interrupt and reinhabit the accumulated weight of documentary evidence accrued around this famous revolutionary name. (Significantly, we also learn that Binh is a pseudonym the narrator chooses for himself when he first ships out from Saigon; the proper name is one that no one can own.) Through the irruption—indeed, the interruption—of queer desire, Truong stages the emergence of an alternative historical time and space discontinuous with the sanctioned historical development, conventional historical narratives, and authorized historical representations of this hallowed revolutionary hero.

We might also observe that historical catachresis more broadly understood implies that every naming is also a misnaming. Truong’s stranger without a name responds to the what-will-have-been of Ho Chi Minh by keeping open a permanent space of differentiation between the proper name and its intended referent. Here, the query, “Did Ho Chi Minh really sleep with men?” is lost; the impossibility of the question and a response opens up a tear in historical time, a space of disappearance and forgetting in which time never quite coincides with itself. Through this slippage in time, Truong not only draws attention to the limits of historicism’s idealization of presence and progress, but also creates a queer time and space outside teleological histories of state and family, infused with heterogeneity and intractability and lacking proper historical destination or documentary intent. In short, Truong opens up an epistemological space for a consideration of the unknowable and unthinkable—other possibilities and other possible times and spaces—that inhabit and saturate the emergence of modernity’s now.

In this regard, we might consider how Truong’s crossing of fiction into history and history into fiction is the condition of possibility for the epistemological exploration of subalternity as the absolute limit of the place where history is narrativized into logic. Since the establishment of ethnic studies in the late 1960s as a political movement as well as scholarly endeavor, the ethnic literary text in the U.S. has often been said to function as a proxy for history. This has placed particular pressure and urgency on the literary to perform what is “missing” in history and to represent otherwise unrepresentable communities. Here, the burden of authenticity and the evidence of experience inveigh against the bind and sting of injurious racial stereotypes as well as the lack of minority presence and power in the academy.

With the unnamed stranger on the bridge, however, we encounter a critical project focused less on recovery of what is a lost and irrecoverable past or on the correction of historical error through the positing of unvarnished truth—history the way it really was. We encounter less the real story of Ho Chi Minh than one in which the unknowable and unthinkable mobilized under the sign of the literary, under the sign of queer diasporas, become the conditions of possibility by which the “properly” historical, the what-can-be-known, is consolidated and affirmed. In short, by refusing to name, Truong asks us to reflect on what it means to answer forgetting and disappearance with new and ever more narratives of affirmation and presence. She encourages us to reconsider the binds of authenticity central to liberalism’s affirmation of identity and its politics of recognition. Through historical catachresis, she shifts our attention from the problem of the real to the politics of our lack of knowledge—to the dialectic of affirmation and forgetting through which historical knowledge and reality are constituted, named, and established.

Indeed, Truong’s emphasis on a scandalous queer desire binding this stranger without a proper name to Binh, the servant-cook, shifts our temporal grammar altogether. It raises the specter of the what-could-have-been in relation to the what-was of European modernity, liberal progress, and capitalist development, as well as the subsequent Vietnamese independence movement, its revolutionary discourses of postcolonial subversion and resistance, and its gendered discourses of aggrieved masculinity. The past conditional inflection of what-could-have-been indexes a space of melancholic loss and forfeiture, a privileged time of the possible, albeit unverifiable, and a privileged space of the forgotten, albeit persistent.

By enveloping the lost stranger in his desirous embrace, Binh opens up a permanent space for the ghostly in the real. He preserves room for thinking the what-could-have-been in the what-can-be-known of historicism. We might say that Binh’s queer desires, his melancholic attachments to this stranger without a name, highlight another realm of historical possibility altogether. Disturbing rather than stabilizing identity, Binh’s queer desires stage another time and space of historical becoming. They supplement the dialectic of affirmation and forgetting.
that subtends historicism’s now, its empty homogeneous time and space. "Although we strap time to our wrists, stuff it into our pockets, hang it on our walls, a perpetually moving picture for every room of the house," Binh reminds us in the closing lines of chapter nine, "it can still run away, elude and evade, and show itself again only when there are minutes remaining, and there is nothing left to do except wait till there are none." The moments in between, though desirous, are evanescent. Lost and forgotten, they saturate the what-can-be-known.

Waiting

Considering such moments in between draws attention to the temporal and spatial heterogeneity that both conditions and cuts the what-can-be-known of historicism, bringing us firmly into the folds of haunted history, one in which ghosts and spirits, as Dipesh Chakrabarty emphasizes, "are not dependent on human beliefs for their own existence." Such a critical insight demands reflection on the ways in which historicism serves, to borrow from Heidegger, as a type of violent "wording" process through which certain creatures and things are brought into the time and space of European modernity ("worlded") while others are consigned to wait, excluded and concealed ("earthed").

Chakrabarty observes that historicism enabled European domination of the world in the nineteenth century through a particular logic of time and space, embedded in the philosophical mandates of political modernity, in everyday habits of conscious as well as unconscious thought. "Historicism," he writes, "is what made modernity or capitalism look not simply global but rather as something that became global over time, by originating in one place (Europe) and then spreading outside it. This 'first in Europe, then elsewhere' structure of global historical time was historicist; different non-Western nationalisms would later produce local versions of the same narrative, replacing 'Europe' by some locally constructed center. It was historicism that allowed Marx to say that the 'country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future.'" The development of European modernity and liberal capitalism over time, as well as their globalization across space, beginning in Europe and then spreading to the New World and beyond, make the possibility of imagining alternative modernities—different knowledges, alternative political possibilities, and other social communities—exceedingly difficult. They universalize the centrality of European political, economic, and aesthetic thought in relation to its colonial others, while presuming that progress and development in the non-West must invariably take place through mimetic fidelity to European images and ideals. Rendered an obsolete remainder of a superseded past, the perpetually anachronistic non-West is forced to play catch-up with an exalted European present and presence invariably constituted as the here and now.

Chakrabarty explores how historicism employs an analytic tradition (exemplified for him by Marx) that abstracts heterogeneity and particularity by sublating them into a universalizing narrative of European historical consciousness. But he also stresses the necessity to contest and supplement the analytic tradition through consideration of a hermeneutic tradition (exemplified for him by Heidegger). The hermeneutic tradition, relentlessly dominated by the inexorable temporal march of modernity and the globalization of capitalism, operates both within and beyond historicism’s epistemological reach. It generates "a loving grasp of detail in search of an understanding of the diversity of human life-worlds. It produces what may be called 'affective histories'...[and] finds thought intimately tied to places and to particular forms of life."

These structures of feeling, to return to a concept from Raymond Williams, are those emergent social forms, ephemeral and difficult to grasp or to name, that appear precisely at a moment of emergency, when dominant cultural norms go into crisis. They evoke one important way by which hauntings are transmitted and received as an affective mood, communicating a sense of the ghostly as well as its political and aesthetic effects. The evolution of modernism in the interwar years might be characterized as such a moment of political and aesthetic upheaval in the face of total war. Nevertheless, it remains crucial to examine how this emergency not only signals a crisis internal to European thought and its history of consciousness but also marks the eruptions of race into a privileged narrative of European modernity and progress, the interruptions of a sublated and spectralized colonial world into the European universal. Here it is important to emphasize how race functions beyond the realm of the visible and the protocols of the empirical. Race, that is, is more than just an epiphenomenon of Euro-American capitalism’s differentiation, division, and management of Asian and African bodies in New World modernity. As Vilashini Cooppan points out,
race "mirrors one logic of capital (the body as commodity) while interrupting another (the stages of capitalist development)."28

In The Book of Salt, queer diasporas emerges as a conceptual wedge in the homogenizing march of the analytic tradition, while affective history marks the ghostly and the evanescent of a spectralized in-between. Binh, whose queer desires and narrative voice illuminate an alternative human life-world, reveals the return of the subject. This position is precarious, however, and hardly inured to the annihilating intents of anachronism: its discourse of citizenship and rights, its mantra of capitalism and consumption, its protocols of "Repetition and routine. Servitude and subservience. Beck and call," in Binh's words.24 The disciplining intent of historicism, its abstracting and atomizing of heterogeneity into empty, homogenous time and space, is revealed in a fascinating scene of travel in the middle of Truong's novel. Here, Binh tells us about Stein and Toklas's yearly sojourn in their country home in Bilignin, a trip he is enjoined to facilitate. "When summer comes to Paris," Binh relates,

my Madame and Madame pack their clothes and their dogs into their automobile, and they drive themselves and their cargo down to the Rhône Valley to the tiny farming village of Bilignin. I am left behind to lock up the apartment and to hand the keys over to the concierge, whom I have always suspected of being overly glad to see these two American ladies go... With my Mesdames already on the road for over a day, I pack up whatever warm-weather garments I have that year, and I go and splurge on a hat for the hot summer sun. If I find a bargain, then I also treat myself to lunch at an establishment with cloth on the table and an attentive waiter who is obliged to call me "Monsieur." I then take what is left of the money that my Mesdames gave me for a second-class train ticket, and I buy a third-class one instead. I sleep all the way down to Bilignin, where I open the house and wait several more days—as my Mesdames drive at a speed that varies somewhere between leisurely and meandering—before I hear the honking of their automobile and the barking of the two weary dogs. I wait for them on the terrace.25

Binh packs away whatever warm-weather garments he has for that year, locks up the Stein-Toklas residence, and hands the keys over to the custodianship of the French concierge. Binh's human life-world outside the beck and call of domestic servitude—his new hat, his lunch at an upscale bistro where the waiter is obliged to call him "Monsieur"—emerges only in between the time of his Mesdames' departure and arrival, their disappearance and re-appearance. Here the in-between is configured as a privileged and paradoxical key to a hermeneutic tradition, a structure of feeling that defies the temporal and spatial logic of modernity's ceaseless progress, its homogenous march from before to after. Affective history—a structure of feeling—appears both before and after: in between the time before Stein and Toklas's arrival in the rural French countryside and after their departure from the city, in between the space before Bilignin and after Paris. In the process, an alternative human life-world is given shape and form, a woriding of the colonial subaltern that Johannes Fabian might describe as the emergence of 'coevalness.'26

Focusing on modernity's persistent denial of such coevalness, its disciplining of time and space into the political logic of liberal humanism and the economic logic of liberal capitalism, Chakrabarty observes that John Stuart Mill's historicist arguments "consigned Indians, Africans, and other 'rude' nations to an imaginary waiting room of history. In doing so, it converted history itself into a version of this waiting room. We were all headed for the same destination, Mill averred, but some people were to arrive earlier than others. That was what historicist consciousness was: a recommendation to the colonized to wait. Acquiring historical consciousness, acquiring the public spirit that Mill thought absolutely necessary for the art of self-government, was also to learn this art of waiting. This waiting was the realization of the 'not yet' of historicism."27 The "not yet" of European historicism governs Binh's narrative of simultaneous migration, a process in which the servant-cook is relegated to the imaginary waiting room of history. Through the disappearance of other possible pasts as well as the forgetting of other possible futures, the colonized can only await the colonizer. Binh must learn this art of waiting. And while both must necessarily be "headed for the same destination," Chakrabarty emphasizes, it is the colonizer who must invariably arrive first, the colonized trailing behind, an anachronistic relic of the not yet of modernity's now.

In this passage from The Book of Salt, however, we are presented with a further twist of colonial logic: even when the colonized arrives early, he still must wait. That is, even though Binh is ahead of his Mesdames,
he still must work and he still must wait. The first to reach Bilignin, the servant-cook is compelled to resume his domestic duties of beck and call. He opens up and prepares the house for the arrival of Stein and Toklas, waiting “several more days” for his Mesdames to arrive at their appointed (historical and aesthetic) destination. The couple, he tells us, are motoring “somewhere between leisurely and meandering,” making their way through the French countryside, on their own schedule, according to their own sanctioned time. In between these moments and movements, the details of Binh’s life appear only to disappear.

The logic of the ghost characterizing Derrida’s analysis of capital applies equally to the racialized dialectic of affirmation and forgetting that structures Binh’s appearance and disappearance within the Euro-American modernity of Stein and Toklas. Like capital, race ultimately exceeds the logic of presence and absence, while evading the sequencing of before to after.20 I would like to describe the paradoxical effacement of Binh’s human life-world in between the visible and the invisible as a type of queer worlding. As cook and caretaker in the couple’s residence and inner sanctum, Binh exemplifies the world division of labor that both institutes and queers the very distinctions separating public and private, as well as the spheres of work and home, labor and affect, productive and reproductive labor. These are the fundamental oppositions upon which the dialectic of European modernity is constructed, but it is only in between the time and space of these oppositional terms that we also come to apprehend the contours of Binh’s other life-world, a site of affective density where history and subjectivity are remade as a ghostly structure of feeling. Here we come to recognize the in-between as distinct and separate from, indeed beyond but nevertheless within, modernity’s dictates of time and space.

“What would it mean,” asks Brian Massumi, “to give a logical consistency to the in-between? It would mean realigning with a logic of relation,” indeed ending the in-between with “an ontological status separate from the terms of relation.”29 Paying greater heed to the logic of the in-between in The Book of Salt facilitates an understanding of how it comes to accrue its own ontological status, its own ontological consistency, separate from the liberal humanist terms of relation that frame but cannot fully determine it. Brought together with the epistemological effects of historical catachresis, the in-between gives way not only to alternate ways of knowing but also, and equally important, to alternative ways of being, indeed of becoming, in the world. Through this simulta-}

neous realignment of epistemology and ontology, a queer “worlding” of lost and forgotten desires comes to exceed the dialectic of enlightenment, the dialectic of affirmation and forgetting in The Book of Salt.

**Mirroring**

Binh eventually takes up with one of Stein’s winsome acolytes, Marcus Lattimore, a gentleman from the American south but not, as Lattimore avers, a “southern gentleman.”30 In the course of the novel, we learn that Lattimore is a man of dubious racial origins. Passing through 27 rue de Fleurus, he also passes for white, his black mother having sold away his birthname; he gains financial security for her silence.31 Likewise, his on-again-off-again relationship with Binh slips in between the cracks of an Enlightenment compulsion to evaluate and interrogate, to organize and know. Hired by Lattimore to be his Sunday cook, Binh is outsourced as a borrowed servant by Stein and Toklas for only one instrumental purpose: their desire to identify, to taxonomize, and to name—that is, to turn sameness into a manageable difference, and to turn difference into a manageable sameness. “Is Lattimore a Negro?” Stein asks Binh. This, Binh tell us, “is what they [Stein and Toklas], in the end, want to know.”32 And here the question of liberal humanism’s racialized past in the colonial slave societies of the New World, and its ghostly return in the present of 1930s Old World Paris, appears as an open secret, an institutionalized regime of passing and privilege, produced but passed over by historicist disciplining.

Let me turn to one last scene from The Book of Salt—Binh’s initial encounter with Lattimore in the famous Stein Salon. Of Lattimore, Binh recalls:

I will forget that you entered 27 rue de Fleurus as a “writer” among a sea of others who opened the studio door with a letter of introduction and a face handsome with talent and promise. You stood at the front of the studio listening to a man who had his back to me. I entered the room with a tray of sugar-dusted cakes for all the young men who sit and stand, a hungry circle radiating around Gertrude Stein. After years of the imposed invisibility of servitude, I am acutely aware when I am being watched, a sensitivity born from absence, a grain of salt on the tongue of a man who has tasted only bitter. As I checked the teapots to see whether they needed to be replenished, I felt a slight pressure. It
was the weight of your eyes resting on my lips. I looked up, and I saw you standing next to a mirror reflecting the image of a wiry young man with deeply set, startled eyes. I looked up, and I was seeing myself beside you. I am at sea again, I thought. Waves are coursing through my veins. I am at sea again.33

For Binh, this mirror image does not produce a reflection of the self-same. Moreover, it does not present what, after Jacques Lacan, we are accustomed to describing as the poststructuralist advent of the "I is an other," one mocking and coherent, trapped on the other side of the looking glass.34 This disjunctive mirror image is not simply about the ways in which individuated, egocic subjectivity is given over to méconnaissance, a temporal mode of anticipation that Jane Gallop observes is oriented toward the future perfect tense, the what-will-have-been of the mirror stage, or as Lacan puts it, the "what I shall have been for what I am in the process of becoming."35

Instead, Binh's reflection brings together two disparate spaces in the salon, as well as the two disconnected lovers occupying them, aligning Binh and Lattimore beside each other in the mirror image. By displaying a curious and handsome Lattimore reflecting an astonished Binh (a "wiry young man with deeply set, startled eyes"), Truong indexes through this mirror image an alternative space and time, another human life-world within the hallowed space of the Stein salon. In Truong's reconfigured mirror stage, the temple of high modernism does not reflect on itself. Difference does not return as sameness. Historical understanding is thus transformed into a process of what Ranajit Guha describes as capturing "an image caught in a distorting mirror."36 In Binh's distorted mirror stage racial difference endures as that which remains irreducible to the dialectic of enlightenment, a human life-world other to the space and time of "the young men who sit and stand, a hungry circle radiating around Gertrude Stein."37

As Binh slips from the simple past to the past progressive and finally into the present—"I looked up... I was seeing myself beside you... I am at sea again"—he carves out through these grammatical shifts a racialized space and time that he and Lattimore share. This alternative modernity summons the epistemology of the oceanic, shifting our attention to the sea as history, from "roots" to "routes," in Paul Gilroy's famous reading of the black Atlantic—indeed, working to queer the black Atlantic.38 This is a queer diaspora in which the gentleman from the American South and the Vietnamese servant-cook can both appear, despite their very disparate class positions; it is a racialized space and time they can collectively inhabit and share within and beyond the sanctioned time and space of Binh's Mesdames. For, as Binh reminds us, the weight of Lattimore's eyes on his lips transports him to the sea, which as he later tells us, becomes the alternative space and time of belonging itself: "[A]t sea, I learn that time can also be measured in terms of water, in terms of distance traveled while drifting on it. When measured in that way, nearer and farther are the path of time's movement, not continuously forward along a fast straight line. When measured this way, time loops and curlinges, and at any given moment it can spiral me away and then bring me rushing home again."33

This space and time of non-mimetic racial identity is radically other to standard poststructuralist understandings of the mirror stage as a narcissistic self-other dialectic, which underpins the fracturing of Western subjectivity and consciousness. From a slightly different perspective, we might say that calibrated against Lacan's future perfect, the what-will-have-been of Binh's mirror stage in the what-was of Stein's modernity questions how race is managed and effaced not just in the development of Enlightenment liberal humanism, but specifically through modernism's vanguard and oppositional stance to this very tradition, one dependent on and developed during the height of European colonialism. We might say that what Truong presents us with here is a reconfigured mirror stage in which the spectality of race emerges as the repressed image of liberal humanism itself.

From a different angle, we might ask how the fracturing of Western subjectivity and consciousness, of which Stein's high modernism is a paradigmatic example, is made possible precisely through this colonial detour, through the forgetting of both Asia and Africa. As an Asian American, postcolonial, and queer text, The Book of Salt insists on a contemporary investigation of race as a comparative project across what Fernand Braudel calls the longue durée.39 In such an investigation, the U.S. is not configured as a point of arrival in a teleology about immigrant assimilation and settlement. Neither is it valorized as a melting pot or a rainbow coalition undisturbed by cleavages of race, gender, sexuality, and class. Truong does not romanticize the shared or imagined intimacies among Binh, Lattimore, Stein, and Toklas. (Indeed, Lattimore later abandons his young lover after convincing Binh to steal for him one of Stein's unpublished manuscripts, the ironically titled "The Book
of Salt.”) Instead, Truong highlights their contingent and ever-shifting intersections, facilitating in the process a more sustained consideration of the histories of exploitation and domination that unevenly bind Asian indentureship and African slavery to Euro-American modernity.

The Book of Salt thus demands a critical conversation among ethnic, postcolonial, diasporic, area, and queer studies, one bringing together the intimacies of four continents through scrupulous attention to questions of sex and sexuality. Exerting particular pressure on the processes of historicism, the problematics of queer diasporas in Truong’s novel illustrates what Carla Freccero describes as “the affective force of the past in the present, of a desire issuing from another time and placing a demand on the present in the form of an ethical imperative.” In this manner, Truong’s novel resists any simple slide—any development “continuously forward along a fast straight line”—from modernism to postmodernism as either a political or an aesthetic movement. Instead, it insists on not just a material and psychic but also a formalist investigation of the ways in which the shift from modernism to postmodernism is constituted through disavowed and sublated colonial histories of race. In short, Truong’s ghostly matters rearrange conventional understandings about the dialectic pairing of the modern and postmodern, as well as its constitutive dissociation from the colonial and postcolonial. This disappearance and forgetting is the historical foundation of our colorblind age and its racialization of intimacy.

What, we might further consider, is the relationship between the aesthetic inscription of Stein as the doyenne of literary modernism in her time and the current political inscription of Stein and Toklas as the iconic lesbian couple of historical modernism in our time? Given the temporal lag between these two historical inscriptions, how is it that the once debased status of Stein and Toklas as Jewish lesbians in early twentieth century Paris can now serve to underwrite the current folding in of normative gay and lesbian U.S. citizen-subjects into the authorized time and space of the nation-state? In other words, without discounting the radicality of Stein and Toklas in their time, we still need to ask how they are conscripted today as the poster children for queer liberalism. What possible pasts and what possible futures must be denied in order for this particular narrative of queer freedom and progress to take hold? Indeed, how does queer liberalism not only depend on but also demand the completion of the racial project, the triumph of a colorblind U.S. society as an achieved and settled past? At a moment when discourses of colorblindness evacuate all racial content in favor of a re-ascendant form of the abstract individual—the liberal human—The Book of Salt insists on a consideration of what remains unassimilable, unrecognizable, and untold in the making of the political and aesthetic realm of Euro-American modernity.

At the same time, The Book of Salt resists any simple affirmation of racial identity or any easy positivist recovery of a lost and effaced racial past. It asks how we might move beyond the dominance of the visual register itself, one overdetermining so many of our contemporary debates on race and the politics of recognition. By creating a mirror image of non-mimetic racial identity—Binh and Lattimore’s asymmetrical reflection in the mirror stage of Stein’s modernity—Truong opens up a queer terrain of racial belonging outside the authorized terms of dominant representation. She unfolds, that is, a viewing practice that obviates the unremitting demand for mimetic fidelity to universal Euro-American aesthetic and political ideals. At the same time, she refuses to substitute such demands with authenticity, with the visibility of race and racial difference. Instead, Truong conceptualizes an alternative time and space—other forms of racial knowing and being—that are more than just a negation or reversal of the dominant terms of relation. She focuses on the politics of our lack of knowledge, the more extensive forms of disappearance and forgetting that configure the aesthetic and political story of modernism in Stein’s time and colorblindness in ours.

Binh and Lattimore’s relationship—their history—is of another time and space. It is a history not of affirmation but a history of disappearance, a history of ghosts. The cook’s Mesdames come to represent the iconic modern lesbian couple of the early twentieth century, paving the way for queer liberalism today as the latest incarnation of “the rights of man.” Binh and Lattimore’s relationship cannot assume the lineaments of modern subjectivity or identity. Theirs is a private without a public; through a similar logic, the history of Ho Chi Minh will come to be a public without a private. (As one of the dominant histori-
temporary shadows of global capitalism. Binh and Lattimore index the intimacies of four continents, but their ghostly presence also signals the incompleteness of their temporal and spatial transformation under historicist disciplining of time and space.

And so they must wait.

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**Closet as Waiting Room**

*The Book of Salt* proffers a critique of historicism by exploring the time and place of the colonial in the modern. *Happy Together*, in turn, extends this line of analysis by focusing our attention on the time and place of the postcolonial in the global.

*Happy Together*, Wong Kar-wai’s sixth feature film and the only one of his productions to be shot outside of Asia, is an eloquent disquisition on the contemporary conditions of an underclass of queer Asian migrant laborers hustling in the global system. Wong’s film is a compelling investigation of the material as well as the psychic conditions that make queer diasporas inhabitable or—perhaps more accurately in the case of Lai and Ho—uninhabitable. *Happy Together*, which earned Wong the Best Director Award at the Cannes Film Festival, has garnered well-deserved critical acclaim, yet few reviewers or scholarly critics have focused on the sexual politics of its queer diaspora.

Indeed, many commentators eschew issues of sexuality altogether, describing Wong’s portrayal of homosexuality as incidental to the film’s central emphasis on emotional deadlock. They note that Wong Kar-wai avoids “cultish gay stereotyping”; that Ho and Lai are “lovers who happen to be homosexual”; that “what was widely pre-billed as a gay-themed movie is only peripherally concerned with such matters.”41 *Boston Globe* critic Jay Carr observes that the film is not “concerned so much with sexual politics as with the existential tedium attached to love’s movements from embers to ashes.”42 And writing for *Daily Variety*, Derek Elley aptly summarizes this pattern, contending that although “the universe in which the main characters move is exclusively male, the abstract feelings the movie evokes ... are transfigured to a universal, sexually neutral level.”43 I would like to suspend for a moment these summary pronouncements on the “existential” or “universal, sexually neutral” nature of Lai and Ho’s impossible relationship. Such judgments abstract homosexual particularity in the name of universal (heteronormative) love and disconnection, as well as beg the politics of sexuality and culture as they travel across different global spaces. Furthermore, they level disparities of race and coloniality that underwrite the project of liberal humanism and the contemporary emergence of queer liberalism—its racialization of intimacy and its domesticating of same-sex relations.

What might be at stake were we to think about homosexuality not as peripheral, but as central, to Wong’s film and to disparities of race and (post)coloniality that mark neoliberal governmentality in our current moment? Like Binh in *The Book of Salt*, Lai and Ho do not—indeed, cannot—appear within dominant modes of knowing or being that frame the modern (gay) subject and its history of consciousness. Under this threat of racial disappearance, *Happy Together* illuminates other epistemic and ontological coordinates. Through its queer diaspora, Wong’s film scrambles our normative cultural and narratological expectations. In *Epistemology of the Closet*, for instance, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes the closet as “the defining structure for gay oppression in [the twentieth] century.”44 In *Happy Together*, however, there is no closet from which to emerge. There is no familiar scene of “coming out,” no unveiling or shedding of a past lie in order to embrace the truth of (homo)sexual identity and belonging. Stranded in Argentina, there is no familial or social structure into which the indigent Lai and Ho can come out.

In this regard, it is useful to contrast *Happy Together* with Ang Lee’s 1993 film *The Wedding Banquet*.45 A more recognizably gay film, *The Wedding Banquet*’s entire narrative drive, conflict, and resolution is organized around Wai-tung’s (Winston Chao) coming out to his family and the reconciliation of his “modern” Western homosexual lifestyle in New York with his lover Simon (Mitchell Lichtenstein) to the “backward” traditional culture of his Chinese parents. Unlike *Happy Together*, Lee’s film configures the closet as the defining structure for gay oppression across the globe, while simultaneously revealing it to be a site for the emergence and development of minority subjectivity and racial identity—as the waiting room of history from which the gay Asian subject must struggle to emerge. In Lee’s film, the question of queer family and kinship becomes a racial metric for the not-yet of modernity’s now. In other words, Wai-tung’s sexual development, his cultivation and claiming of a homosexual identity and agency, becomes a barometer for Chinese modernity and progress itself—that is, the what-will-have-been of Wai-tung’s coming out to the what-was of gay and lesbian liberation in the West.

Mark Chiang describes *The Wedding Banquet*’s underlying parable as
tions as a private economic solution that cannot make good on large-scale structural problems including the collapse of health care, the criminalization of immigrants, and the wider dissolution of the social safety net. See Elizabeth Freeman, The Wedding Complex: Forms of Belonging in Modern American Culture; and “Still After.”

104. Lisa Duggan writes: “In a bid for equality, some gay groups are producing rhetoric that insults and marginalizes unmarried people, while promoting marriage in much the same terms as the welfare reformers use to stigmatize single-parent households, divorce, and ‘out of wedlock’ births. If pursued in this way, the drive for gay marriage equality can undermine rather than support the broader movement for social justice and democratic diversity.” See Duggan, “Holy Matrimony!”

105. Duggan and Richard Kim write: “Marital reproduction households are no longer in the majority, and most Americans spend half their adult lives outside marriage. The average age at which people marry has steadily risen as young people live together longer; the number of cohabitating couples rose 72 percent between 1990 and 2000. More people live alone, and many live in multigenerational, nonmarital households; 41 percent of these unmarried households include children. Increasing numbers of elderly, particularly women, live in companionate nonconjugal unions... Household diversity is a fact of American life rooted not just in the cultural revolutions of feminism and gay liberation but also in long-term changes in aging, housing, childcare and labor.” See Duggan and Kim, “Beyond Gay Marriage.”

106. Ibid.

107. Ibid.

TWO The Structure of Kinship


2. Monique Truong, The Book of Salt. The novel grew from a short story, “Seeds,” originally published in Watermark: An Anthology of Vietnamese Writings, and garnered several prizes, including 2003 Bard Fiction Prize, the Stonewall Book Award-Barbara Gittings Literature Award, the New York Public Library Young Lions Fiction Award, and the Association for Asian American Studies Book Award; Wong Kar-wai, director, Happy Together.

3. Alice B. Toklas, The Alice B. Toklas Cookbook, 186. Toklas writes: “When it was evident that connections in the quarter were no longer able to find a servant for us, it was necessary to go to the employment office. That was indeed a humiliating experience, from which I withdrew not certain whether it was more so for me or for the applicants. It was then that we commenced our insecure, unstable, unreliable but thoroughly enjoyable experiences with the Indo-Chinese” (186).

Toklas tells us that Stein and she employed “a succession” (187) of Vietnamese cooks, but Toklas writes mainly about two men, Trac and Nguyen, the former without his surname and the latter without his given name.

4. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography,” 207. Elda Tsou notes that The Book of Salt begins with two photographs of Binh, which appear to rectify a historical omission, to conjure forth the historically absent body, and to give voice to Binh as a missing subject. Yet the photographs are fictitious, one of many symptoms in Truong’s novel that “stages over and over the equivocation of authorship and the fiction of testimony as access to authenticity” (147). See Elda Tsou, “Figures of Identity: Rereading Asian American Literature.”


6. Truong, Salt, 86; 89.

7. Ibid., 98.

8. Ibid., 99.

9. Brent Edwards has written on the life of Nguyen Ai Quoc in France, “who may well stand as the most important and prodigious writer in radical circles in Paris during the first part of the 1920s” (33). Edwards connects Nguyen to a diasporic group of anticolonial and anticapitalist black activists, in particular, Léopold Senghor, indexing another historical incarnation of Asia and Africa in the metropole. See Edwards, “The Shadow of Shadows.”

10. By historicism, I mean the attempt, found especially among German historians around the mid-nineteenth century, to view all social and cultural phenomena, all categories, truths, and values, as relative and historically determined, and in consequence to be understood only by examining their historical context, in complete detachment from present-day attitudes. For a trenchant critique of historicism, see Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 255.

11. Ibid., 257.


15. Giorgio Agamben explains medieval conceptions of melancholia as a process of materializing the ghostly remains of an unrealized object or ideal. He highlights melancholia’s insistent compulsion to transform an object of loss into an amorous embrace, thereby magically preserving it in the realm of the phantasmagoric. For Agamben, melancholia opens up an alternative time and space of the phantasm in which lost objects appear lost precisely so that they might become real. In this regard, Agamben’s “ghostly matters” supplement what Avery Gordon describes as the haunting of the “sociological imagination” and its abiding fidelity to the empirical. These ghostly matters open onto the terrain of “complex personhood” (4), intricate ways of life and living that fall below the radar of conventional political representation and the protocols of market exchange. See Giorgio Agamben, “The Lost Object,” in Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture, 20. See also Avery Gordon, Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination.
16. Truong, Salt, 100.
17. Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe, 111.
20. Ibid., 18.
21. Ibid.
22. See Williams, Marxism and Literature.
25. Ibid., 135; my emphasis.
26. See Johannes Fabian, Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Objects, especially the first two chapters.
27. Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe, 8.
28. See Derrida, Spectres of Marx.
29. Brian Massumi, Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation, 70. Massumi further clarifies: "For the in-between, as such, is not a middling being but rather the being of the middle—the being of a relation. A positioned being, central, middling, or marginal, is a term of a relation. It may seem odd to insist that a relation has an ontological status separate from the terms of the relation.
But, as the work of Gilles Deleuze repeatedly emphasizes, it is in fact an indispensable step toward conceptualizing change as anything more or other than a negation, deviation, rupture, or subversion."
30. Truong, Salt, 111.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid., 189.
33. Ibid., 37.
38. Truong, Salt, 190.
39. See Braudel, On History.
43. Elley, "Happy Together."
44. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Epistemology of the Closet, 71.
47. The Wedding Banquet is recognizable to a Western audience as a "gay" film. Queer diaspora in The Wedding Banquet depends on the strict alignment of the Taiwanese Gao Wareng (Winston Chao) with the management of transnational capital and the Mainlander Wei-Wei (May Chin) as the source of third-world labor. The narrative resolution to The Wedding Banquet relies upon Wei-Wei's acquiescence to keep and not to abort their unborn (male) child. In Lee's film, Wei-Wei's purchase of an individuated Western gay lifestyle with his white lover Simon (Mitchell Lichtenstein), along with the placating of his heir-demanding Chinese parents (Lung Shihung and Gua Ah-ja), depends upon the subordination of women and labor, such that women become the very sign of labor. The Wedding Banquet thus illustrates the regrettable cleaving of queerness from feminist political concerns.
48. Filmmically and thematically this scene represents for Ho and Lai the original ineffable experience Kaja Silverman theorizes as the beginning point of all human desire and longing: "The experience of being within the 'here and now' is completely ineffable—it defies every kind of symbolization. Once presence evaporates, however, it assumes a status which it did not have before: it comes to signify a lost fullness. This is because we are able to constitute something as an object of desire only when we are able to make it a representative of something anterior, something no longer available to us... To desire is thus initially to incarnate, and later to reincarnate, the 'what-has-been.'" (Silverman, World Spectators, 39)
49. I borrow this term from Parreno. See Racheal Salazar Parreno, Servants of Globalization: Women, Migration, and Domestic Work.
51. See Alexander's analysis of the emergence and development of gay tourism around the globe in Pedagogies of Crossing.
52. In a Salon review, Charles Taylor notes, "It's one of the recurring jokes in Wong's movies that no matter where the characters travel, they end up in the same runny bars and apartments and fast-food joints." See Charles Taylor, "Review of Happy Together," Salon.com, www.salon.com (accessed October 8, 2009).
54. See Marta E. Savigliano, Tango and the Political Economy of Passion. Tango,
Savigliano notes, exposes the dark side of development. Tango traces its roots back to the milonga, and black men and women probably initiated the first tango steps in the Rio de le Plata in the mid-nineteenth century. She observes that the worldwide increasing popularity of the tango has been associated with the scandal of the public display of passion performed by a heterosexual couple. As the tango made its way from the countryside to the slums and brothels of Buenos Aires, and to the cabarets and ballrooms of Paris, London, New York, and Tokyo in the early decades of the twentieth century, the sins of tango’s erotic suggestiveness became entangled with its debased status, associated with its racial and class origins.

Globally exoticized, the tango underwrites what Savigliano describes as a "political economy of Passion...[which] intertwines with the economies usually described on materialist and ideological grounds" (1). Tango’s political economy of passion, Savigliano contends, is a traffic in “emotions and affects [that] paralleled the processes by which core countries of the capitalist world system have extracted material goods and labor from...the Third World (periphery)” (1–2).

But this imperial domestication and management of passion—of emotional capital—accumulated and consumed as exotic culture, cannot fully regulate its affective deviations. Savigliano writes, “Untameable interpretations...of bodies performing excessive movement, despite all efforts invested in domesticking them, are good signs for a decolonizing project” (13).

55. Massumi, Parables for the Virtual, 28.
58. Ibid., 198.
59. Numerous psychoanalytic feminist critics note that Lacan often conflates and confuses these two losses, through the privileging of the paternal metaphor and through the implicit inscription of the name of the father with meaning and the maternal body with being, i.e. that the phallus is equivalent to a penis. See the special issue of differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies 4, no. 1 (Spring 1992) on the “Lacanian Phallus.”
60. Butler, Antigone’s Claim, 41.
61. Ibid., 29–30, 70.
62. See Chris Doyle, “To the End of the World.” In his diary of the shooting of Happy Together, Chris Doyle writes, “He [Wong Kay-Wai] feels that what Zhang Zhen gives Tony (and what Tony gives Leslie) is not ‘love’ but ‘courage’—‘a will to live.’ It’s our brightest film in all senses of the word and looks like having the happiest ending of any [Wong Kar-wai] film” (17).
64. See Butler, Antigone’s Claim, 66. She continues: “From the presumption that one cannot—or ought not to—choose one’s closest family members as one’s lovers and marital partners, it does not follow that the bonds of kinship that are possible assume any particular form.”

65. There are three men and a woman working at the Chang food stand. While Wong Kar-wai suggests that two of these are Chang’s parents, we are left with an image of a non-Oedipal communal family unit. Moreover, Li’s “adoption” into Chang’s family unit demonstrates that Asian queer subjection does not necessarily occur, as some Western critics insist, outside the sphere of the traditional nuclear family but can coexist within it as a different kind of “individualism.”

THREE The Language of Kinship

1. Deann Borshay Liem, director, First Person Plural.
2. See Kirsten Lovelock, “Intercountry Adoption as a Migratory Practice.” Lovelock divides post-war transnational adoption into two historical periods: the first wave was a humanitarian response to orphans in war-torn countries; the second wave, which began in the 1970s, was a response to infertility rates in the West.
3. While there is not a lot of scholarship on the topic, in recent years there have been a number of documentaries and memoirs on the transnational adoption from Asia. For a list of documentaries, see Sunny Jo, “Korean Adoption Films.” For memoirs, see Tonya Bishop and Jo Rankin, Seeds from a Silent Tree; Susan Soon-Keum Cox, Voices from Another Place; Elizabeth Kim, Ten Thousand Sorrows; Katy Robinson, Sook Wilkinson, and Nancy Fox, After the Morning Calm: Reflections on Korean Adoptees; and Jane Jeong Trenka, The Language of Blood.
4. For recent scholarship, see Tobias Hübnette, Comforting an Orphaned Nation; Jane Jeong Trenka, Julia Chinyere Oparah, and Sun Yung Shin, Outsiders Within: Writing on Transracial Adoption; and Toby Alice Volkman, Cultures of Transnational Adoption.
6. See Volkman, Cultures of Transnational Adoption, which was originally published as a special issue of the journal Social Text. Volkman’s collection is largely about the topic of transnational parenting, from the point of view of adoptive parents. It is curated from the disciplinary angle of anthropology, using ethnographies and personal anecdotes. This chapter is, in part, a response to a necessary critical reframing of current approaches to the topic, broadening the political, economic, and cultural issues raised by the practice of transnational adoption as well as opening up new critical perspectives from the point of view of the adoptees and the (even more silent) birth mothers.
7. See Elizabeth Bartholet, “Commentary: Cultural Stereotypes Can and Do Die: It’s Time to Move on With Transracial Adoption.” Tobias Hübnette, a Korean adoptee raised in Sweden, has controversially compared the practice of transnational adoption to the Black Atlantic slave trade. See his “Orphan Trains to Babylifts: Colonial Trafficking, Empire Building, and Social Engineering.”