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# Literary Recycling in Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt*

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## Abstract

In *The Book of Salt*, Monique Truong repurposes details from the biographies of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas in order to tell the story of Binh, a fictional Vietnamese chef whose experiences testify to the circulation of race and sex in French-colonial Vietnam and in France of the early 20th century. In addition, I argue, Truong's unscrupulous character Lattimore, who becomes Binh's lover, is a revision of Stein's character Melanctha from *Three Lives*. Finally, Melanctha herself is Stein's fictional re-presentation, in blackface, of her college love, May Bookstaver. This paper establishes the lineage of literary borrowing behind *The Book of Salt*, and also places Truong's novel in the context of other literary borrowings, such as Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in order to understand literary borrowing as a trope for circulations of race and sex as powerful and continuously recirculating metaphors. This paper also asks what, if anything, can be gained by using the term "recycling" to discuss not only literary borrowing, but also the ways in which the metaphors of race and sex recirculate through literature and culture.

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