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Literary Repair in *My Year of Meats* vs. *The Book of Salt*

At first glance, despite the central role that food plays in both novels, Ruth L. Ozeki's *My Year of Meats* and Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt* seem to be marked by distinct differences: they are set more than half a century apart (bookending the 20th century), they happen in different parts of the globe (the former in America and Japan, the latter in Vietnam and France), and most significantly, they appear to overtly pursue disparate agendas — the sexual politics of meat in the former, and a queer, postcolonial project of reconstruction in the latter. Yet, both *My Year of Meats* and *The Book of Salt* are ultimately concerned with notions of authorship and the possibility of self-repair through literary creation. In particular, the characters, Akiko Ueno and Binh, utilize imagination and fictional strategies as catharsis and self-representation — their creative production also a claiming of agency over their own bodies against the epistemic violence marginalizing them. However, both novels ultimately question the extent of fictional repair, in a metafictional turn, with *My Year of Meats* arguing that truth is fiction and *The Book of Salt* questioning that possibility.

In *My Year of Meats*, the technologies of meat production and the transnational structures of consumption are reflected in the paratextual technologies of storytelling from television to documentary film to fiction to recipes to Shōnagon's diary-lists. While this pastiche of mediums is constructed in Jane's narration of the making of *My American Wife!* (MAW!), Akiko's literary trajectory from one medium to another is a searing critique and act of resistance against the

hegemonic structures governing her voice. We first meet Akiko in a moment of receptivity and consumption, as she watches MAW! and attempts to imitate the happy-go-lucky persona of Suzie Flowers. This passivity and stiff mimicry is connoted by the recipe of rump roast that begins her chapter. The use of paratexts in self-expression continues. Her barrenness — both literary (no longer allowed to work as a manga writer) and literal (infertility) — and bulimic nausea find an outlet through Shōnagon's lists that Akiko quotes but finds “hard to improve on” (39), choosing instead to identify “her own sad self” wholly in the words of Shōnagon (41). We then encounter Akiko's own “pickled lists” in her pillow book diary — for example, “Things That Make One's Heart Beat Faster” — which illustrate in a cautious, subdued manner the violence imbuing her life. However, Akiko almost immediately negates the possibility of her lists being creatively valid as “poetry,” choosing instead to rip them out. In Chapter 5, we find out about John's domestic violence in a roundabout way, as Akiko recounts the accident intermittently between the cheery, clinical passages she writes for maternity magazines. It is only when she acknowledges her own poetry — “not good poetry, perhaps, but... words she'd never dare write down before” (172) — that she rejects the stifling banality of the maternity magazines. Her tremulous literary coming-of-age is paralleled with the end of her purging — while she has had to eject the meat (a symbol of John's domination over her diet) she consumed in the past through vomiting, in what is arguably a weak, stagnant form of retaining control over her body, Akiko now transforms the meat into an animal exuding its “fecundity” for creative production and “fueling her imagination” (172). This momentum of agency leads to new forms of communication, from sending the confessional, curious fax to Jane to one of the most powerful scenes in the novel — Akiko's moment of conception and literary creation. In a scene that borders on magical realism, we witness the entirety of Akiko's conception of a baby alongside

her, through her creation of a poem. This witnessing is not one of seeing, as with our eyes, but of conceiving in our minds. With this moment of creative production, Akiko conceives literally and figuratively, claiming full agency over her mind as well as her body. Here, the imagination transcends invention to become actualized truth, and self-representation is fulfilled both epistemically and ontologically. Distanced as she has been from her own body, in curating the violent words of sex (“penetrated,” “ruptures,” “engorgement,” “hemorrhage,” and “secretion”), Akiko reclaims the violence done to her body as her own: a moment of her coming into her body (306). Ultimately, this moment is also performative: as Akiko’s poem reiterates the violence, reinscribing it in her body, it casts off the original codification of the female body under the male gaze. It is *Akiko*’s gaze that becomes paramount in this scene, a triumph against the epistemic violence of the patriarchal, masculine structures that have sought to control both her corporeal and creative self.

A different epistemic violence is also at work in *The Book of Salt*, a fictional work of postcolonial autobiography. The Indochinese cooks marginalized as a footnote in *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book* and in literary history coalesce into the narrator Binh in *The Book of Salt*. From the onset, Binh is aware of the act of storytelling and the ethics of narration. He describes his exploitation at the hands of his employers, pointing out a category he calls “the collectors” (18), who are ravenous for what lies inside his “scars” — “the fruits of exile, the bitter juices, the heavy hearts” which signify “no true interest in where [he has] been or what [he has] seen” (19). “GetrudeStein, like the collectors who have preceded her,” is only interested in seeing “the stretch marks on [his] tongue” (36), the stories born out of his experienced oppression and his traumatic melancholia. Here, Binh articulates the almost cannibalistic, voyeuristic pleasure of the colonizers in appropriating and relating to the Other. By using the diction of food to describe his

scars (“fruits,” “juices,” and “hearts”), Binh shows us that it is not simply the food he prepares or his labor that is being devoured, but also his stories that are used to nourish the colonial Self in the metropole. All the same, Binh sees how his body is perceived, “[offering] an exacting, predetermined life story,” “generalized” and “indiscriminate” (152). The collectors do not distinguish between him and other laborers, choosing instead to objectify and exoticize them in their suffering, essentializing them in their identities and their histories. Binh seeks to cast off that colonial gaze first with language, by slipping “[his] own meanings into their words” (155). Using a “house with a host of doors” as a metaphor for language, Binh acknowledges his own incapacitation: he is “uninvited” and “without the keys” (155). But, other than an inability to speak French fluently, a more subtle metaphor for Binh’s marginalization of voice is at work throughout the entire novel, of salt and cooking. As a cook, Binh has to adopt his employer’s tongue, to make room for it, which “can only mean the removal of his own” (211). The salt of his experience — “kitchen, sweat, tears, or the sea” that Binh has tasted on his tongue (261) — are abnegated in the kitchen space; as Madame tells him, “in [her] kitchen, [she] will tell [him] “when salt is necessary” (212). It is only when Binh discovers that Gertrude Stein has written about him that he deliberately asserts the authority of his voice, addressing Stein: “My story, Madame, is mine.” (215) He stakes his claim of ownership over the narrative Stein has created, and also the narrative that we are currently reading: he alone is qualified to “tell,” “embellish,” or “withhold” the story (215). In *The Book of Salt* that we are reading, it is Binh, in an act of self-declaration and assertion of authorship, who “holds the pen” (215).

The question then is: Where does the fiction leave off and the truth begin? Binh destabilizes his own narrative with the presence of Gertrude Stein’s *The Book of Salt* within *The Book of Salt* of his own. Even as he privileges his story, he highlights the inherent subjectivity of

narration and his literary positionality. As Binh aptly remarks, “A gift or a theft depends on who is holding the pen” (215). By making it clear that he is the one holding the pen in the book we are reading, he lays bare the discursive power relations that allow him to achieve presence and visibility. As Binh so clearly states, a story is a memory is a gift; that is, a story can be construed as history, which in this novel, becomes his gift to us. By challenging the epistemic distinctions between fiction and history, *The Book of Salt* resists the impulse to be dismissed as imaginary or to be verified, instead turning our attention to the possibility of historical representation for a figure like Binh who is so starkly absent from historiography. Yet, the novel ultimately also hedges its claims. By choosing the medium of English, this work becomes a fiction of impossibility. As historically plausible Binh’s narrative is, we are constantly reminded of its inherent fictionality — the real Binh, if he existed, can never write in English.

My Year of Meats echoes this question. The idea of “gift” and “theft” in storytelling comes out in hints. Shōnagon is described as “the master thief,” who slips in and out of darkened rooms and “steal from people’s lives” (33). Inverting this notion of theft in creation, Akiko describes herself feeling “like a thief,” as she “[sneaks] through the desolate corners of her own life, stealing back moments and pieces of herself” (37). Just as *The Book of Salt* is concerned with recovering the personal epic in the footnote of history, *My Year of Meats* too concerns itself with the big things and little things that “threaten to slip through the cracks, untold, out of history” (360). However, *My Year of Meats* goes a step further. It posits that in making things up, sometimes such fictions become truths that can alter outcomes. Jane, the narrator and the diegetic author, is attributed the footnotes and bibliography, collapsing the distinctions between fiction and fact, and transgressing genres. The fictionality of the work is openly acknowledged, yet, Jane suggests that this is indeed truth.

Both novels gesture towards the constructed and translated nature of their own narrative.

While central characters in their texts, particularly Akiko and Binh, make use of literary strategies and imagination for articulating and creating the self, both novels ultimately push us to consider the extent to which we take such fictions as truth. An in-between, liminal field between fiction and history, fiction and documentary is created in these two works, where the absence of a voice is made present through fiction all the while the novels strive to recover presence from realism.