Reimagining Queer History: The Legacy of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas Reframed

Through Monique Truong’s *The Book of S.A.L.T.*, Chapter 1

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So much of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas’ lives were about public display and perception, and their participation in high culture and intentional cultivation of their public selfhood and coupledom embodies a sense of queer decadence. As a lesbian couple in the art and literary world who publicly emphasized the nature and importance of their relationship to their circles, Stein and Toklas carefully cultivated the gendered aesthetics and sensibilities they exhibited. Understanding Stein and Toklas’ role in queer history requires an examination of their legacies beyond the glitz and glamor of these women’s lifestyles as they themselves presented it. Particularly as high profile Americans living in Paris, reconstructing their image in the public imagination from unconventional perspectives reveals the commodification, exploitation, and privilege at the foundation of their coupledom. Queer imaginaries illuminating the underbelly of the Stein and Toklas power couple inform contemporary understandings of the very important, but far less well documented, elements of their lesbian lives. Or rather, the not so glamorous things that allowed for and sustained their lives of glamor and leisure.

What Stein and Toklas wanted to be known and remembered for, as articulated through their entwined legacies, become both reified and countered through alternative narratives of their histories. *The Book of S.A.L.T.* by Monique Truong, though published many decades after Stein and Toklas’ deaths, takes on the iconic lesbian power couple of the early 20th century art and literary world from the unconventional perspective of their Vietnamese chef, Binh, who Truong imagines as a queer figure within this queer household. The reader sees Binh’s position as a gay person of color during French colonial rule, working and living in the American Stein and Toklas household in Paris where their relationship to the couple is heavily informed by the deep divide along race and class. The queer history of the period between and during World War I and World
War II exemplifies the contrast to contemporary ideas of “queer community” where positions of gender and sexual non-normativity do not necessarily predicate solidarity.

Within the opening page of the novel, Binh, the narrator of *The Book of S.A.L.T.* addresses the public and performative nature of the Stein and Toklas couple: “Photographers, my Mesdames believed, transformed an occasion into an event.” (1) Truong, as a historical fiction author drawing on existing historical knowledge surrounding how this couple presented themselves to the world, refers to Stein and Toklas as “my Mesdames” repeatedly throughout the entirety of the first chapters. The possession Binh portrays himself as having over Stein and Toklas, his employers, in his narration as a character speaks to the autonomy Truong attempts to grant him as an imagined construction of a historical figure she brings to life. Often, like many historical accounts and representations of wealthier individuals, the historical portrayals of the Stein-Toklas household lacks information on the staff employed by them. And yet, the household staff’s presence deeply shaped, defined, and informed the day to day livelihoods of their employers. Truong’s imagination imbues Stein and Toklas’ chef with the assumed queerness and individuality granted to the two white women who employed him, providing a space to examine the very real existences of queer Vietnamese working people of Paris during this same time period. When preparing to accompany the couple on their overseas travels, which they are very anxious for, Binh notes that “the ocean for them was only a memory… for me it was alive and belligerent…” (3) due to the nature of his diasporic identity. This contrast of “them” and “me” in the dialogue speaks to the ocean of vast difference between Binh and the Stein-Toklas couple even under one roof, and their shared queer identity.

Binh’s perspective on the Stein-Toklas household as a non-white employee and yet fellow gay person offers both a sympathetic and critical view of complicated historical figures who,
unlike their household staff, had some access to power and record keeping of their own legacies. Even for other queer women who lived intimately together in a similar fashion to Stein and Toklas, historians acknowledge the difficulty of constructing those histories; “Little documentation of working-class women who lived as couples exists, because there are fewer records of the lives of less-affluent people.” Yet, Truong’s account stays true to Stein and Toklas’ self representation in the way Binh almost exclusively refers to them as “my Mesdames,” reinforcing their identities as inseparable from one another.

The intimacy of their relationship was offset by the fact that they were photographed and written about in the media quite often, as Binh says: “Every visit by a photographer would be inevitably followed by a letter enclosing a newspaper or magazine clipping with my Mesdames’ names circled in a halo of red ink.” (2) Particularly with regards to photographers, and Binh himself being a gay man, the perspective he has regarding the inseparability of Stein and Toklas matches the historically documented gay male photographer Cecil Beaton’s portraits, who “always photographed Gertrude and Alice as a couple”2 when photographing the more famous Stein. Essential to each of their identities was their relationship to each other, and those who knew them recognized that; “Beaton never ceased to be charmed by the ways the two women complemented each other, inseparable but with agreed upon differences.”3 In a similar vein Binh notes, “My Mesdames communicated with each other in cryptic ways, but after all my years in their company I was privy to their keys.” (2) Of course as the cook for many years, Binh would be “privy” to some of the “cryptic ways” the two women communicated with each other, not that traditional historiography or Stein and Toklas’ peers and admirers would have considered that at

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3 Ibid.
the time. Truong’s presentation of Stein and Toklas from Binh’s unconventional standpoint provides an even more intimate perspective on an intimate relationship, while problematizing the class and race dynamics underlying an employer/servant relationship.

The transactional arrangement of Binh’s relationship to Stein and Toklas plays a key role in the erasure of his identity and personhood from history. Beaton, the gay fashion photographer who took many portraits of Gertrude Stein and the Stein-Toklas couple towards the end of their life wrote in 1939 of the couple’s household that “the food is the best food, for Alice... watches her cook with a rapier eye.” The language usage of “watches” implies a passivity imposed on the anonymous unnamed cook, and a sense of aggression and autonomy exerted by Toklas. Truong, in her narrative portraying the Stein-Toklas household, reverses the roles of the couple, the photographer, and the cook. Binh cheekily remarks, “My Mesdames had to pay me to stay around.” (2) While photographers such as Beaton were individuals who existed in the social circles of Stein and Toklas, they were not regularly paid for their services while in the company of the couple, unlike the hired staff. Beaton’s own writing historically documents his point of view on the relationship between the cook and Toklas, whereas Truong’s fictionalized account empowers Binh through imbuing his perspective with humor, bringing employer-employee relationship into vivid contrast.

Truong also takes the historical role of Binh’s job as the cook in the Stein-Toklas household to reveal the level of dehumanization he faces working in a service position: “There was certainly no love lost between me and those dogs, the poodle Basket especially. My Mesdames bought him in Paris at a dog show in the spring of 1929. Later that same year, I too joined the rue de Fleurus household. I have always suspected that it was the closeness of our

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arrivals that made this animal behave so badly toward me. Jealousy is instinctual, after all.” (3) Binh implicitly compares himself to a pet the couples have bought in remarking that “jealousy is instinctual,” which speaks to the way he understands himself to be perceived or related to the Stein-Toklas household. Truong’s awareness of the evident racism in comparing colonial subjects to dogs and animals shows itself in the antagonism Binh feels towards Basket, as well. Both proud of the fact that Stein and Toklas “had to pay me to stay around” (2) and well aware of the patronizing, racist, and demeaning logic Parisians have towards the Indochinese, Binh as a character has made the best of what he has been offered.

In many ways, the humor and cheekiness of Binh’s character result as coping mechanisms to survive in an environment hostile to his existence. The decision Binh makes to work as the cook for Stein and Toklas offers itself up less as a choice and more of a necessity, a last chance and only option. When presented with the offer of going back home to Vietnam in a letter from his brother, Binh says: “I am a man unused to choices, so the months leading up to that day at the Gare du Nord had subjected me to agony, sharp and new, self-inflicted and self-prolonged. I had forgotten that discretion can feel this way.” (9) Truong allows for an exploration of an imagined queer history, one that is often forgotten in its discretion— even more so than all of queer history, which tends to exist at the margins in the first place— by igniting the life of Stein and Toklas’ cook with his own queer narrative, a narrative deeply intertwined and informed by his Vietnamese identity. The public facing queer icons of the past exist in tandem with the working class racialized people who were in their midst. The Book of S.A.L.T. by Monique Truong examines this truth through fiction and imagination, painting a fuller picture of Stein and Toklas’ lives in their relationships to class and race privilege through its stark contrast to Binh’s lack.
Bibliography

