Since arriving at the Getty in early June, I have become deeply attuned to its smells. There’s the crisp scent of the gallery air conditioning, with notes of cleaning products and old pages. The fragrance of lavender greets me just outside the South Building, and in the Cafe, the rich aroma of carne asada tacos makes my stomach grumble. Elsewhere, I smell the wafting breezes of passing visitors’ perfumes and colognes—mixing sandalwood, vanilla, rose, and bergamot.

For me, however, the most powerful fragrance at the Getty is that of the star jasmine. This white flower lines many walkways of the museum and blooms beautifully in the Garden. One Getty blog post described it as such: “This sweet-smelling flowering plant is native to eastern and southeastern Asia and can be found all over the Getty Center, not just in the Central Garden. A valuable perfume oil can be extracted from the flowers and a diluted form is often used in Chinese, Vietnamese, and Thai incenses. Flowering usually begins in May and continues through June.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Jasmine is one of my favorite fragrances. I love its musky, sweet scent, which unfolds in layers and soaks the air like a silky nectar. But jasmine’s meaning to me reaches further back. Back to the jasmine fields in Vietnam, maybe in Hue or Da Lat, where my grandmother and grandfather are from, respectively. Like my family, the jasmine I smell every day comes from southeast Asia. The plant was transported, likely by plane or by boat, making multiple stops, until it arrived here, at the Getty, for me to smell. Jasmine reminds me of a home that has been lost with blood and tears, and its scent takes me back there, to a place that has never been mine.

The smell of jasmine at the Getty also takes me back in time, to my mother’s memory. When my brother was just a baby and I was not yet born, my parents visited my dad’s family in Fountain Valley. My mom had been reading about the new Getty Center atop a hill in Los Angeles, and she suggested that our family spend the day there. My grandparents objected. That is not for us, my grandfather said. “We want to do something that celebrates Vietnamese culture.”

This project, “Rescentment,” seeks to give a voice, and a nose, to the many Asian diaspora writers, artists, and activists who have reclaimed smell as a tool to resist marginalization and empower their own communities. This publication is the continuation of the work I did last summer with Professor Belinda Kong researching the olfactory sense in literature and drafting the first chapter of my thesis. I hope that this project helps you recognize the power of scent—both its ability to hurt and to heal. And as my grandparents intended many years ago, this project aims to celebrate Vietnamese culture, for my family and for my ancestors who are no longer with me but linger in the air like traces of a scent long gone. Because to smell is to remember.

# Salt: The Smelly Logic of Empire

“I sniffed the envelope before opening it. It smelled of a faraway city, pungent with anticipation for rain. If my Mesdames had not been in the room, I would have tasted it with my tongue. I was certain to find the familiar sting of salt.”

— *The Book of Salt* by Monique Truong

## Introduction

Perhaps the most powerful and destructive nose in history is that of Empire. Under colonialism, empires have defined their own hierarchy of smells, delineating the foul and the fragrant to uplift their dominance and justify their subjugation. By othering the so-called “smelly” bodies of the subaltern, colonizers have appropriated the olfactory sense as a tool of Empire, using it to “sniff out” those on the margins. This method of othering falls under the discourse of Orientalism, or the construction of the Orient by the Occident, as outlined by scholar Edward Said. In Said’s words, “Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident’” (2). Specifically, Orientalism is based on an asymmetrical relationship between the Orient and the Occident, “a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony” (5).

I am interested in how Orientalism and scent intersect, assembling together a kind of olfactory Orientalism that naturalizes smells to either the “East” or “West” in a hegemonic manner. In particular, olfactory Orientalism conjures a stereotyped smellscape of the Orient, which perpetuates its simultaneous exotification and degradation. As such, my analysis focuses on the physical influences and imaginations of colonial power, demonstrating colonialism not only as a political and economic force, but also as a multisensory, embodied practice that elevates both the scents and senses of the powerful while alienating those of the subaltern figure and landscape.

A quintessential mode of Orientalism is that the Orient does not speak for itself, but is instead represented by the Occident. To reframe this in terms of olfaction, in Orientalist thought, the Orient does not smell for itself, but is instead smelled by the Occident. A case in point: according to historian Alain Corbin, travel accounts of the Orient by Flaubert and the likes “imposed a stereotyped image on oriental actuality.” For the Goncourt brothers of the 19th century, simply the name Constantinople “awoke in him dreams of poetry and perfumery where... all his ideas of Eau des Sultanes, pastilles of the seraglio, and the sun on Turkish backs mingled” (Corbin 199). Dan McKenzie, one of Britain's most well-known otolaryngologists, simplified further. “The East is just a smell!” he claimed. “It begins at Port Said and continued until one reached San Francisco. Few forgot the bazaar smells of India, the atmosphere of China. The first whiff of a Tibetan monastery, like that of an Eskimo hut, grips the throat, they say, like the air over a brewing vat” (qtd. in Reinartz 88). Such descriptions highlight that strong scents enveloped the Orientalist illusion, so that the Orient and fragrance became enmeshed in the minds of Orientalists. For them, to think of the Orient was to smell it too.

The relationship between smell and Orientalism may derive from a peculiar connection: scent’s reliance on orifices of the body. Namely, such openings become pertinent when considering xenophobic fears of a “boundary crisis” related to immigration. According to anthropologist Mary Douglas, “when external boundaries of the social system are perceived to be threatened, attention is paid to the orifices of the body and the bodily functions of ingestion, digestion, and excretion as symbols of entry and exit into and out of the social system” (qtd. in Lee 36). The bodily function of scent echoes such circulation, as smells are ingested via the orifices of the nostrils and also excreted from the body. Robert G. Lee puts forth language, food, and hair as so-called “tropes of boundary crisis” that fit this focus on the body’s own boundaries; I argue that scent can also function as such a trope, especially as a means of Eastern “excretion” into the “social system” of the West. Especially within the context of Asian immigration to America, and California in particular, during the 19th century, white paranoia of a boundary crisis grew. With it, attention to smell sharpened. Yet, perceptions of these “Eastern” scents varied widely. Lee argues that the arrival of Chinese settlers in California marked a turning point, as the “construction of racial difference as distant and exotic was displaced (but not completely replaced) by a construction of racial difference as present and threatening” (Lee 28). Thus, the romanticized “exotic” scents of the East could easily transform into the polluting smells of immigration, displaying the precarity of smell as a subjective sense connected to proximity.

Characterizing certain scents as threatening also worked to support settler colonialism. In fact, the colonizer strategically implemented deodorization tactics and eradicated indigenous olfactory traditions to reinforce his authority, as Hsuan L. Hsu argues in their book, *The Smell of Risk: Atmospheric Disparities and the Olfactory Arts* (154). For example, reports of India by British imperial officers disparaged the sensory landscape, especially the open sewer, and described Indians as “dirty children” (Reinartz 90). Consequently, colonies implemented toilet-training programs to cleanse and deodorize what they considered repulsive. Paradoxically, while denouncing indigenous smellscapes and olfactory rituals, colonizers simultaneously perpetuated the myth that the air and land were “empty” (Hsu 155). This belief attempted to justify the colonizers’ invasion of occupied space. Again these dual claims highlight the plasticity of olfaction, as colonizers ambivalently described the air as pungent and empty to align with their self-interest.

Such ambivalence is indicative of the irony of Empire. Namely, when it comes to olfaction, Empire projected its own infiltration of Asia onto the East by casting subaltern smells/smellscapes as the real “infiltrators.” In particular, the pervading quality of smells allowed the colonizer to abstract danger from subaltern scents, cautioning against their spread. Every denunciation of subaltern smells, every erasure of indigenous olfactory rituals, evaded the fact that the colonizer was the true invader—excreting his odors, enforcing his olfactory practices, on those he colonized. Perhaps the colonizer’s hyperfixation on policing subaltern cleanliness was also a manifestation of his affective guilt. As evident in idioms such as “cleanse your conscience,” “wash the guilt away,” or “come clean,” cleanliness has long been associated with morality and peace of mind. Thus, the deodorization tactics of settler colonialism may divulge the deeper stench of cruelty and the larger liability of Empire.

In this project, I focus primarily on Empire, paying attention to the harm that settler colonialism has inflicted via olfactory representations, but also the healing that Asian diaspora writers have gained from decolonizing and reclaiming scent in literature. At first, I argue that texts such as Sax Rohmer’s *The Insidious Dr. Fu-Manchu* (1913) manipulate olfactory language to perpetuate a “yellow peril” ideology and an Orientalist othering. Like many other crime fiction texts, *Fu-Manchu* encapsulates Empire’s obsession with surveillance and containment, using scent as a metaphor for social transgression. Yet, I pair Rohmer’s text with a turn to the cultural politics and environmental conditions in Hawai’i, drawing on Haunani-Kay Trask’s *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai’i*. This work approaches smell through the perspective of a Native Hawaiian activist, inverting the Orientalist lens of *Fu-Manchu* and mobilizing scent as a device to protest against colonialism. Similarly, I will highlight the olfactory art of Anicka Yi, who uses scent to call out social injustices and cultivate empathy. I next discuss Monique Truong’s *The Book of Salt* (2003), which shares the postcolonial, reparative threads of Yi and Trask’s work. The text’s protagonist, Bình, is a Vietnamese cook who works for Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas in Paris. While Bình is othered by scent to match his subaltern status as a queer, lower-class, Vietnamese person in France, I argue that Bình also offers a rewriting of *Fu-Manchu*’s characters and Orientalist perspective. In essence, *The Book of Salt* positions smell as healing and vital in order to disrupt Empire’s olfactory narrative.

It is Truong’s text that provides the titular inspiration for this chapter. Salt, which plays many roles in *The Book of Salt*, is a good starting point for discussing Empire. Salt has functioned as a catalyst throughout history, contributing both to Empire’s creation and collapse via salt mining, salt taxes, and salt protests, variously. In one famous example, Mahatma’s Gandhi's Salt March of 1930 employed salt to inspire mass disobedience and disempower the British Empire. Displaying a handful of salty mud in his hand, made by breaking British salt laws, Gandhi said: “With this, I am shaking the foundations of the British Empire” (qtd. in “Gandhi's Salt March, the tax protest that changed Indian history”). Salt, therefore, holds significant weight in postcolonial studies. And salt, like smell, leaves traces. By tracking the salty and smelly stories of colonialism, this chapter confronts Empire’s shaky veneer of power.

## *The Insidious Dr. Fu-Manchu*: The Orientalist dream and nightmare

Sax Rohmer’s *The Insidious Dr. Fu-Manchu* serializes the story of police officer Nalyand Smith and Dr. Petrie as they target Dr. Fu-Manchu, a Chinese antagonist and blend of various tropes, such as the Yellow Peril, the mad scientist, and the emasculated Asian man. Karamaneh, the main female character and a captive of Fu-Manchu, works at first for the Chinese doctor, but she eventually and stereotypically falls in love with Petrie. Notably, Karamaneh exudes a flowery, intoxicating scent of the “East.” Repeatedly throughout the text, Smith is drawn to her smell, typecasting her as the cliché of the exotic and mysterious Asian woman. Unlike Karamaneh’s scent, however, the smells of Fu-Manchu indicate danger, marked by a pungency, and predicated on evil. Petrie and Smith act as policemen of this stench, attempting to surveil and contain its threat. It is this shift from exotic to perilous that interests me, as it reflects how the “boundary crisis” discussed earlier might be represented in literature through smell. Thus, the ambivalent olfactory representations in *Fu-Manchu* conjure both an Orientalist fantasy and terror. In particular, the closeness of “threatening” scents displays Rohmer’s own paranoia of olfactory infiltration and suggests the error in producing the Orient as an unreal, exotic place. The imagination of the East as a distant invention then crumbles with a sniff.

Karamaneh introduces readers to scent as integral to the Asian woman and her mysterious irresistibility. Rohmer’s invention of Karamaneh is “wildly picturesque,” “dangerously lovely,” “submissive” and in need of saving by the “good” white man (Rohmer 79). As Karamaneh falls for Petrie, her love for him draws upon floral imagery and is compared to “the conjurer’s mango-tree; it is born, grows and flowers at the touch of a hand” (18). This flower symbolism derives from a Western invention of the Asian female body and its embodiment of the “lotus blossom” stereotype. Following this stereotype, Asian women are objectified as beautiful and submissive flowers, awaiting their domination by a Western man. As an extension of these “lotus blossoms,” Asian women exude an imagined flowery Oriental scent. For example, Karamaneh has a distinct scent that identifies her, which Petrie describes when he narrates: “A faint but most peculiar perfume stole to my nostrils, a perfume which seemed to contain the very soul of Eastern mystery” (91). In this way, Karamaneh’s beauty couples with her lovely perfume, making the scent a signal of the sexualized and exoticized Asian female body. Such a perfume, however, is always notably “faint.” For example, instead of describing the notes of the perfume, Karamaneh’s signature scent is only identified by its subdued quality, which is always “faintly perceptible” (106). Such faintness may be aptly viewed as a trope of distance, in which the “desired/ideal” Oriental woman must remain in the far away East in order to be exoticized and enjoyed by the Occidental male gaze (or in this case, olfaction). Thus, Petrie’s dialogue on Karamaneh’s perfume, “which seemed to be a part of her—which always I associated with her,” transforms when the “which” transitively refers to the East rather than her perfume, binding Karamaneh to the East inextricably and permanently.

The perceived danger, then, occurs when this Eastern scent is removed from its remoteness and infiltrates the West. Unlike Karamaneh’s non-threatening “faint perfume,” the scents of danger in *Fu-Manchu* are strikingly strong. For example, the first signs of danger are the envelopes “scented with some pungent perfume” that attracts the killer beasts (6). Smith later hypothesizes about this scent:

In the swampy forests of the district I have referred to a rare species of orchid, almost green, and with a peculiar scent… I recognized the heavy perfume at once. I take it that the thing which kills the traveler is attracted by this orchid. You will notice that the perfume clings to whatever it touches. I doubt if it can be washed off in the ordinary way. (12)

Here, the strong orchid smell represents peril, rather than seduction, as Fu-Manchu applies it to draw in the killer. In particular, Rohmer makes use of the smell’s lasting quality as a fear tactic, drawing from Empire’s obsession with deodorization and hygiene. Similarly, Fu-Manchu’s opium den is polluted by a “heavy voluptuous perfume” (121). Even Redmoat, a fortress created with barbed wire to protect against “trespassers of any kind,” is not safe from Fu-Manchu’s odor: “The very atmosphere of Redmoat was impregnated with Eastern devilry; it loaded the air like some evil perfume” (32, 35). As evident here, scent’s ability to traverse the barriers of Redmoat makes it particularly alarming to the narrator. By constantly hybridizing and blurring boundaries, smell poses a unique threat to spatial and social segregation. Moreover, the role of smell itself becomes unclear, negotiating a position between the “exotic” scent of Karamaneh and the “pollutant” scent of Fu Manchu. This dichotomy ultimately reflects the larger push and pull of Western interest in and fear of the East; while Westerners may be close enough to appreciate Oriental exoticism, they stay far enough away to evade its peril.

Here, the roles of Petrie and Smith materialize: they are enforcers who “contain” the racialized Asian body from spreading its simultaneously dangerous/lovely scent (43). In this way, *Fu-Manchu* builds on the larger genre of detective/crime fiction and its construction of scent. In crime fiction, smell often acts as the most perceptible quality of an invisible, imminent danger. Canonical texts of the genre, such as Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, employ dogs and their hyperosmic sensitivity to track down criminals. As Hsu notes in *The Smell of Risk*, such sniffer dogs recall the bloodhounds used to track enslaved peoples attempting to escape (32). With this in mind, Hsu argues that detectives in literature often work towards a “project of racial deodorization,” highlighting scent as a marker that may be tracked in order to target racial minorities (129). This view of detective fiction expands policing to the olfactory realm, acknowledging that the surveillance state, typically thought of in terms of the ocular and aural, engages in multisensory control. More than simply a “private eye,” detectives also mobilize the nose as a method of detection, sniffing out racial/cultural difference in the case of *Fu-Manchu*.

Overall, Rohmer outlines several olfactory tropes to uphold Orientalism, including stereotypes of the seductive smell of Asian women and the threatening scent of the Yellow Peril. Told from Petrie’s perspective, *Fu-Manchu* also imagines the East/West relationship in a typically Orientalist way, as the “Eastern” characters of Karamaneh and Fu-Manchu are always smelled by others—we do not know what they smell, or what they think about those smells. Thus, not only are the text’s Asian characters othered by scent, but they are also denied olfactory subjectivity. Herein lies the importance of learning about scent from the perspective of those on the margins.

## “The stench of colonialism”: Dysplacement and environmental risk from an indigenous perspective

Fragrance often holds great importance to indigenous populations. In many indigenous cultures, there are no “good” or “bad” smells, as every scent is generative and essential in its own way (Hsu 171). In Hawai’i, sandalwood is sacred, not only as a source of food or tools, but also for its sweet fragrance. Sandalwood trees were once abundant throughout Hawaiian coastal regions and mountain slopes, and indigenous communities extracted their oil to create scents for perfume and medicinal purposes. Smell is also narratively significant, and Hawaiian literature associates chiefs with their scents, as smell conveys the notion that a legacy might linger (155).

This lingering quality highlights another feature of smell: it is deeply linked to memories and a sense of place. Among many indigenous populations, olfaction presents a useful means of understanding space and finding a sense of belonging. In Oceania, for example, indigenous groups use smell as a navigation tool, employing the notes of their environmental landscape to know where they are (155). Although maps are typically imagined in terms of the visual, such practices show that the olfactory sense also informs representations of space. This introduces Douglas Porteous’s concept of the “smellscape,” which, related to a “soundscape,” defines the olfactory environment perceived/understood by a person in a specific place. Porteous argues that “the concept of smellscape suggests that, like visual impressions, smells may be spatially ordered or place-related.” In this way, scent proves essential to indigenous livelihood, not only for its use in cultural practices, but also for its ability to create an affective sense of home.

Such belonging may therefore be disrupted by a changing smellscape, especially one brought on by Empire’s infiltration. As an example, the aforementioned aromatic sandalwood trees have been decimated by the deforestation and invasive species that came with settler colonialism and trade in Hawai’i. This destruction has impacted the smellscape of Hawai’i, encouraging displacement of spirit and identity for the indigenous community (156). In her article, “Scents of place: the dysplacement of a First Nations community in Canada,” Deborah Davis Jackson studies a similar phenomenon on the First Nations reserve in Ontario, which has been disturbed by the extreme pollution of chemical plants and oil refineries. She argues, “the local smellscape, while having reinforced a sense of positive emplacement on the reserve in the past, is now, because of the constant presence of toxic fumes, instilling in residents a profound sense of alienation from the ancestral landscape—a condition I call ‘dysplacement.’” Such dysplacement adds another layer to the harm of settler colonialism and capitalism. While scents act as warning signs of physical danger, indicating the proximity of toxic fumes, for example, they themselves can also inflict harm, estranging indigenous populations from their land and history. Accordingly, though certain smells conjure memories, others might also encourage forgetting. This erasure serves the colonial goal fundamentally.

Haunani-Kay Trask, a Native Hawaiian scholar-activist, is intent on remembering her ancestral history and attacking imperialism. Her book, *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai’i*, pushes against abuses of Native Hawaiian rights and advocates for the sovereignty of indigenous peoples*.* Trask demonstrates the practice I label “rescentment,” “rescenting” smell to call out the cruelty and consequences of colonialism in Hawai’i. Primarily, she focuses on the pollution, filth, and contamination of Empire, reappropriating the label of “smelly” and attaching it to the colonizer in a litany of imperial exploitation (worth quoting at length):

In colony Hawai’i, not only the cruelty but the stench of colonialism is everywhere: at Pearl Harbor, so thoroughly polluted by the American military that it now ranks among the top priorities on the Environmental Protection Agency's superfund list; at Waikiki, one of the most famous beaches in the world, where human excrement from the overloaded Honolulu sewer system floats just off shore; at Honolulu International Airport, where jet fuel from commercial, military, and private planes creates an eternal pall in the still hot air; in the magnificent valleys and plains of all major islands where heavy pesticide/herbicide use on sugar plantations and mammoth golf courses results in contaminated wetlands, rivers, estuaries, bays, and, of course, groundwater sources; on the gridlocked freeways, which swallow up more and more land as the American way of life carves its path toward destruction; in the schools and businesses and hotels and shops and government buildings and on the radio and television, where white Christian American values of capitalism, racism, and violent conflict are upheld, supported, and deployed against the Native people. (19)

In so doing, Trask inverts the logic of *Fu-Manchu* and other Orientalist texts: it is the Occident, rather than not, that stinks and spreads its “stench.” Trask also takes an environmentalist perspective, noting the toll of imperialism beyond the human, on the air, land, and oceans of Hawai’i. This differs from symbolic representations of scent in literature, as Trask instead scathingly points to a literal, physical “stench” that violently disrupts indigenous communities and their landscapes.

More recently, Maui fires devastated Hawai’i. One way to assess the damage done is through the olfactory sense. In addition to the initial burning smell, the fires left a lingering scent due to the debris and toxic chemicals that remained. “It just smells like absolute poison. It’s not just like a campfire smell. It’s just in the air. And it feels dirty to breathe,” a Kula resident said (Partlow et al.). One *Washington Post* article comments that Lahaina residents Samantha and David Dizon knew that there was a fire because “burning homes have a specific kind of plastic smell,” one they recognized from fires in 2018 (McDaniel and Sacks). The presence of such recurring and lasting toxicity speaks to a climate emergency. Not only ravaged by the fires, Native Hawaiians are plagued by the aftermath and the terrifying but likely possibility that Hawai’i will burn again.

To make matters worse, imperialism most likely lit the flame that burned Maui, as the consequences of colonialism and tourism made the environment ripe for fire. To follow one thread specifically, European ranchers introduced non native brushes such as guinea grass to Hawaii in the 18th century. These brushes have since spread rapidly, disrupting the natural ecosystem and endangering Hawai’i due to their high flammability. Building on global climate change, such imperialist disturbances stack up, implicating Empire as an arsonist. Former state legislator Kaniela Ing makes this point in “The Climate Crisis and Colonialism Destroyed My Maui Home. Where We Must Go From Here.” This essay laments the damage to Ing’s home and places blame on imperialism and how it has exploited Hawaiian land: “The disturbing silence left by the missing and the mourned souls tells of a disaster that's unnatural, shaped by the human hand—a byproduct of the dangerous dance between climate change and centuries of colonial greed.” Yet, Ing argues that native resilience is a “silver lining” despite tragedy:

The wildfires of Maui, while devastating, have also ignited a spark in us. They’ve awakened a renewed commitment to not just rebuild, but to redefine what Hawaii stands for. This is our home, our history, our legacy. And it's our collective responsibility to ensure that Hawaii’s future is carved out of respect, understanding, and love for its past.

Ing’s staunch rebuke of “colonial greed” builds on writers like Trask, and together, their voices urge action and remind us what is at stake. Ing also draws attention to the future, noting the changes—including environmental action and Hawaiian sovereignty—that might remove the “stench of colonialism” and inspire hope.

## Scents of empathy: The olfactory art of Anicka Yi

“Vinyl, steel pipes, metal bowls, beeswax, dried shrimp, glycerin soap, hair gel, metal pins, seaweed, foam, plasticine, pigment powder, worklight.”[[2]](#footnote-2) This is the museum wall label for artist Anicka Yi’s work, *Your Hand Feels Like a Pillow That's Been Microwaved* (2015). This label, with its bizarre combination of items, is characteristic of Yi’s wall texts, which read more like “alien shopping lists” than descriptions of her works.[[3]](#footnote-3) This strange, list-style of labeling, however, fits with a key interest of Yi: the world of smells. In particular, Yi’s labels function like notes of a perfume, emphasizing the many parts, seen or unseen, working together in her art pieces. I will focus on these olfactory aspects of Yi’s art, selecting key works that deal with smell and air. Namely, I am interested in how Yi’s olfactory art centers intersections of gender, race, and species to criticize a hegemonic obsession with vision, cleanliness, and odorlessness, ultimately building empathy for the marginalized and invisible. Like Trask, Yi “rescents” the traditional olfactory narrative, as she reclaims the physical medium of smell to upend derogatory stereotypes, especially towards Asian women.

While there are examples of olfactory art from the 20th century, smell has been an especially potent medium for contemporary artists to discuss themes of environmental risk, feminism, immigration, memory, disease, and the non-human. Interestingly, one of the main works that initiated questions of transcorporeal, olfactory art did not intend to do so. This was Ai Weiwei’s *Sunflower Seeds* (2010), a pile of almost 100 million hand-painted ceramic sunflower seeds, which the Tate Modern deemed too toxic to interact with because of the risk of dust inhalation.[[4]](#footnote-4) This instance demonstrates a key point of olfactory art, which is that no matter how hard museums and the art world insist on an exclusively visual relation between visitors and art, the invisible, transcorporeal world still seeps through. Smell has also permeated the art world despite its academic critics. Immanuel Kant, for example, classified smell as the sense with the least aesthetic potential because of its intimacy to the body, subjectivity, and ephemerality.[[5]](#footnote-5) In fact, it is these very characteristics that have made the olfactory sense a fascinating subject for contemporary artists.

There are many possible explanations for this recent turn to smell. One, as argued by Hsuan Hsu in “Olfactory Art, Transcorporeality, and the Museum Environment,” is that olfactory art “activates museum air as an aesthetic medium and highlights the manifold ways in which our bodies literally incorporate that air,” making it a powerful avenue to resist the separation of nature from the human and and showcase environmental risk.[[6]](#footnote-6) In this vein, Hsu also argues that the conservationist approaches to art and nature work hand in hand, both framing the environment as needing preservation from humans.[[7]](#footnote-7) Olfactory art, however, defies this framing, using its transcorporeal nature to showcase how humans intermingle with, and ultimately are, their environments. Another reason experimental artists have utilized smell is due to its ability to encapsulate a particular time and space. For example, Marcel Duchamp’s *50 cc of Paris Air* (1919) displayed a glass ampoule containing nothing but Parisian air. By putting forward air as his primary visual subject, Duchamp’s work questions the idea that air is empty and links the air—and its smell—to the environment and notions of place.[[8]](#footnote-8) Olfactory art, in this way, possesses great potential as a medium to explore themes of migration, geography, and cultural identity. Additionally, olfactory art often brings to the forefront elements that society would like to repress, including disease and contagion. This is especially relevant considering that miasma theory, which viewed “bad,” smelly air as the agent of disease, was the norm in Europe until the late nineteenth century.[[9]](#footnote-9) Related to this weaponization of smell, groups such as women, people of color, immigrants, workers, and non-humans have been systematically discriminated against on the basis of scent. Such discrimination underscores the fact that scents are subjective, so any hierarchy of “good” or “bad” smells simply reiterates the beliefs of institutional power structures. However, contemporary artists like Anicka Yi have queered this hierarchy, reclaiming and redefining smell in their own way to support intersectional feminist discourses and recognize the reparative potential of scent.

In a *New Yorker* article on her interest in smells, Yi wrote, “The smell of fermenting kimchi and *doenjang* seemed to sink into our furniture, clothing, and hair. As a child, I often felt ashamed of my family’s olfactory world. I wanted to smell American, which I imagined would involve becoming perfectly odorless.”[[10]](#footnote-10) In this sense, Yi’s olfactory art has roots in her personal background and identity as a Korean American woman. Yi, who was born in Seoul but later migrated to Alabama and then California, often discusses feeling invisible as a Korean American in America.[[11]](#footnote-11) It is interesting, in this way, that Yi has turned to scent, which is also a trope of invisibility. Although Yi only began making art in her mid-30s, she quickly appropriated her fascination with smell into her art. Consequently, “Yi has made air her primary material and subject."[[12]](#footnote-12) In particular, Yi uses smell’s somatic and tangible qualities to foreground a critique of structures in the art world and broader society, which connect the gaze and odorlessness to masculinity, whiteness, and power. Yi has explored the repercussions of these power dynamics, asking “How do we imagine that immigrants, or foreigners, smell? Do we think of the interiors of taxicabs, or Chinese takeout, or feet? As a child, these questions horrified me, but as an artist I have learned that there is power in finding the fascination that lurks in that feeling.”[[13]](#footnote-13) By dissecting this feeling, Yi recovers smell as a way to repair people’s relationships with one another and the world: “I believe we’ve lost our empathic core because we’ve neglected these other senses, like smell and touch and taste,” Yi said.[[14]](#footnote-14) Especially, smell can facilitate empathy because it necessarily collapses the distance between the smeller and smelled, drawing the audience closer and requiring interaction. For Yi, this potential manifests in her focus on cultivating empathy for (not exclusively) Asian and Asian diaspora women, who have been systematically marginalized, objectified, and dehumanized.

In order to demonstrate this practice, I would like to begin by analyzing *Tempura Fried Flowers*, a collection from Yi’s 2022 exhibition in Seoul, *Begin Where You Are*. Tempura fried flowers have been a repeating motif in Yi’s work from her earliest exhibitions. One reason this pairing is interesting derives from its clashing of scents, as Yi “upends the usual odor sensations associated with fresh flowers: the nosegay’s rosy fragrance is replaced by the unctuousness of the wok.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Interestingly, both scents are tied to Asian women, who are stereotypically associated with the feminine, “exotic” fragrances of lotus/cherry blossoms and the greasy odors of culinary labor. Thus, the hybridization of the tempura fried flowers showcases the multifaceted and paradoxical imagination of the Asian woman. The tempura flowers also symbolize a liminal state between life and death, as if the flowers—often representations of vitality—have been frozen in time by the frying process, “suspended permanently in a process of decay.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Some of the tempura flowers have also been placed in cardboard boxes resembling tombs. According to English and gender studies scholar Rachel Lee, this echoes the practice of adorning burial sites with flowers to represent that “the route taken by the metabolites of these blooms as they volatilize mimics the airborne mode that a soul must travel in going from the earthly to the spiritual realm.”[[17]](#footnote-17) In this sense, Yi’s work deals fundamentally with the invisible and transcorporeal, as symbolized through fragrance, hybridity, and transformation.

Yi’s 2021 exhibition at the Tate Modern, *In Love With the World*, builds on these themes with an emphasis on human’s coexistence with machines. In this exhibition, Yi has created what she calls an “aquarium of machines” in the Turbine Hall, which float as jellyfish-like, amoeba forms, programmed on artificial intelligence software.[[18]](#footnote-18) Inside the hall, Yi has included multiple scentscapes that transition weekly. These smells are associated with specific historical periods in Bankside, including marine scents of the Precambrian period, plant smells from the Cretaceous period, or spice fragrances used to treat the Black Death.[[19]](#footnote-19) These scentscapes reinforce the fact that we share, and have always shared, our environments with many living and non-living things, from dinosaurs to viruses. Specifically, Yi is interested in a “politics of air,” and she conceives of air as a “sculpture we inhabit” to highlight how “the space is not empty but filled with the air we all share, and on which we depend.”[[20]](#footnote-20) In this way, *In Love With the World* decenters the human, imagining a world of harmonious exchange with nature and machines. Her use of olfactory and machine art also challenges notions of what art is, and it is particularly relevant that Yi has used scent in this space—the Tate Modern in London—which is connected to power. “I talk a lot about how power has no odor,” Yi said. “This is why you should not be smelling any odors when you walk into a gallery in Chelsea, or when you walk into a bank. These are places of power and sterility, oftentimes associated with the masculine.”[[21]](#footnote-21) By introducing smell to the Tate Modern, then, Yi acts as a feminist intervention to the smell policing of patriarchal institutions, exposing the idea that smell can be powerful in its own right.

Perhaps the most crucial display of Yi’s exploration of smell is her 2017 exhibition at The Guggenheim Museum, *Life is Cheap*, which won the Hugo Boss Prize. This exhibition followed the 2016 election of President Donald Trump and explores themes related to this political climate. *Immigrant Caucus*, for instance, conjures up migration and borders. This work signals the entrance to the exhibition, and it involves three pesticide canisters placed before an iron gate, emitting a scent derived from the combination of Asian American women and carpenter ants. According to Lee, “While the canisters allude to late 19th and early 20th century sanitary techniques of delousing the presumed ‘dirty’ immigrant at the Mexican border, Yi repurposes them in her exhibit to diffuse a mist that rather than killing insects might prime the viewer to the advantages of cross-border contacts.”[[22]](#footnote-22) These canisters and their fragrance thus encourage a hybridized perspective that values cultural diversity and exchange. The other two works in this exhibition, *Lifestyle Wars* and *Force Majeure*, display the scent’s elements on opposite sides. Specifically, *Lifestyle Wars* depicts a circuit board of real carpenter ants as they travel through the tunnels, following the same perfume from *Immigrant Caucus*. Reflecting on why she chose to use ants, Yi said, “Ants fascinate me, with their matriarchy, industry, and powerful sense of smell, which they use to recognize the caste of other colony members,” noting that ants are also the only species other than humans that practice slavery.[[23]](#footnote-23) Yi was also interested in ants because of their possible association with Asian American women, as both are stereotyped as hardworking and lacking individuality.[[24]](#footnote-24) By drawing these women and ants together, and having the audience literally stand between them, Yi encourages an ecofeminist, multispecies empathy. Across from *Lifestyle Wars* is *Force Majeur*, a powder room of growing bacteria cultivated from women sampled in Manhattan’s Chinatown and Koreatown neighborhoods (swabbed from their cheeks and vaginas). Yi spotlights the formal aspects of this bacteria, which grow in dynamic shapes and colors on the plexiglass tiles. Lee argues that this artistic quality reparatively embraces the notion of Asians as “invaders”: it is as if Yi is saying, “yes, Asians are like invading microbes and haven’t you noticed what great artists they are?”[[25]](#footnote-25)

These works from *Life is Cheap* are the clear descendants of Yi’s exhibition, *You Can Call Me F* (2015), which harnesses the potency of bacteria and femininity to criticize institutional sexism. In *Grabbing at Newer Vegetables*, Yi sampled cheek swabs from 100 women in her social network, including many female gallery owners in New York City, to spread and mutate on agar with the titular words “You Can Call Me F.” This title suggests femininity, as “F” may be a stand-in for “Female” or “Feminine,” though the shortening also gives the work a techno-futuristic feel. Over time, this title has been obscured by the bacteria, and the smell of the samples, which one visitor described as like “parmesan cheese or rancid butter with sour floral accord up top,” grew stronger.[[26]](#footnote-26) For Yi, the desire to bring together women and create art from their collective bacteria came from her personal experiences with gender in the art world. In her words, “Women getting together is seen as threatening, so it’s diminished into something frivolous. I was frustrated that I wasn’t seeing more females helping each other in this very aggressive, competitive place in the art world.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Building on this, Yi’s *Fontenelle* juxtaposes the scent of the female collective with the imperceptible odor of the Gagosian Gallery, one of the most prestigious contemporary art galleries in the world. This friction between the female bacterial network and the patriarchal gallery space becomes manifested in motorcycle helmets, which diffuse the combination of these scents into the gallery. In the art world and beyond, Yi thus “aligns society’s growing paranoia around contagion and hygiene (both public and private) with the enduring patriarchal fear of feminism and potency of female networks.”[[28]](#footnote-28)

Yi’s work, then, underscores the prevailing strength of femininity and female networks, as symbolized through hybridized scents, carpenter ants, or multiplying bacteria, to name a few. Despite society’s attempts to contain and control smells and women, Yi’s art demonstrates how things always seep in eventually, creating a beautiful, smelly, interwoven world. Yi puts this simply: “There is nothing but ceaseless porousness.”[[29]](#footnote-29) Smell, as a medium, wonderfully demonstrates this permeable quality, and Yi masterfully uses it to cultivate empathy through art. In doing so, Yi crafts a better future, one she imagines will further redefine scent: “I’ve always thought of my work as being on the precipice of a lot of discoveries that happen with smell. The day when we can smell a jpeg is probably just around the corner.”

## *The Book of Salt*: Love, diaspora, and a new *Fu-Manchu*

In *The Book of Salt*, Monique Truong weaves together stories of diaspora to spotlight the trauma and abuse that Empire has imposed on the subaltern. Primarily, *Salt* tells the stories of three diasporic characters who have traveled across oceans to live in Paris during the 1920s and 30s. These figures are Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, based on their historical counterparts, and Bình, their Vietnamese cook. Bình represents the countless “nameless” Asians whose stories have long been ignored by the Western literary canon. Far from nameless, however, *Salt* deeply probes Bình’s character, exploring his position at the nexus of race, sexuality, and class identities. Told from Bình’s point of view in a reparative manner, *Salt* invokes smell with abundant olfactory and culinary language, as one might expect from a chef. In this way, I argue that *Salt* effectively rewrites *Fu-Manchu*’s olfactory logic by reclaiming the perspective of the subaltern character from the “East” and centering their sensory experience. Utilizing smell as a trope of love and diasporic memory, Truong rejects the imperialist notion that olfactory representations might only be used to other. Instead, *Salt* makes space for a fragrant healing.

In the context of a new *Fu-Manchu*, Bình represents an interesting hybridization of characters. As a queer Asian man, Bình exists in the margins, setting him apart from a white masculinity that figures like Dr. Petrie or Nayland Smith embody. This makes him similar to Fu-Manchu, who author and playwright Frank Chin interprets as a “sexual joke, glorifying white power”:

Dr. Fu, a man wearing a long dress, batting his eyelashes, surrounded by muscular black servants in loin-cloths, and with his bad habit of caressingly touching white men on the leg, wrist, and face with his long fingernails, is not so much a threat as he is a frivolous offense to white manhood. (95-96)

Dr. Fu’s emasculated and queered identity therefore antagonizes him in *Fu-Manchu*, but in *Salt*, Bình’s queerness is central to a story of desire and longing. Additionally, Bình’s occupation as a cook is reminiscent of Fu-Manchu’s expertise as a chemist. Again, then, Truong reclaims what was weaponized in *Fu-Manchu*, recognizing cooking/potion making as sites for diasporic creation and sustenance.

Alternatively, Bình might also be read as a revision of Karamaneh’s character. For example, both are oriental servants who move between various “employers.” The texts focus on two employment trinities, with Karamaneh serving Petrie and Smith while Bình serves Stein and Toklas. Though Karamaneh and Bình may enter the home space, such access is selective, demonstrating their lower status. This is a reminder of Homi Bhaba’s concept of “colonial mimicry,” as Karamaneh and Bình reflect the Other “as a *subject of difference who is almost the same, but not quite*” (126). However, Bình is “not quite” Karamaneh either. Unlike Karamaneh, who personifies the Orientalist fantasy of absolute Oriental servitude, Bình serves whiteness with rebellion, as his narration often renders Stein and Toklas as ignorant rather than all-powerful. As a result, *Salt* imagines a rewriting of *Fu-Manchu* in which Karamaneh subversively criticizes those she serves.

Most pertinent to this project, Bình also resembles Fu-Manchu and Karamaneh due to his “other” scent. As he attempts to find a job, Bình laments, “I am accompanied by the stench of the unemployable” (Truong 15). Here, the use of “stench” conveys the strength and permanence of Bình’s joblessness, which elicits social disdain and further prevents him from finding work. Even when employed, though, smell still haunts Bình. Especially, the Messieurs and Mesdames Bình works for “prefer to believe that their cooks have no bodily needs, secretions, not to mention excrement” though Bình counters, “we all do” (64). By ignoring the bodily grotesque, these French employers seek the impossible, unfairly punishing their laborers for natural excretion. Thus, olfactory abuse is two-pronged in *Salt*, as the French elite both discriminate against marginalized figures for their scents and penalize them when an expectation of odorlessness is unmet.

As part of such policing, the symbol of the sniffer dog reappears in *Salt*, as in *Fu-Manchu*. This time it is Stein and Toklas’s dogs, Basket and Pépé, who surveil Bình by his scent. When he gets drunk and throws up in the Bilignin home, Bình believes the dogs’ “noses must have been offended by the strong smell of alcohol that my vomit released into the kitchen. I can imagine that their barking then reached a particularly persuasive pitch” (141). In alerting Stein and Toklas of Bình’s impropriety, the dogs use scent as a means of control, affirming their status as “supervisors” to the dehumanized cook. Like Basket and Pépé, the chauffeur also attempts to control Bình. Notably, he prescribes a “decreased intake of garlic, ginger, and other ‘hot’ spices” as a “cure” for Bình’s “condition” of queerness (128). The chauffeur’s idea that sexuality could be medicalized as a symptom of sensory overload charts how the senses (especially of smell and taste) can be degraded to instill homophobia, racism, etc. Like Empire’s desire for subaltern deodorization, the chauffeur calls for a repressed diet in order to repress Bình’s homosexuality. This dual “repression” backfires, however, as the spices actually become symbols of queer desire, objects that, according to Bình, the body “naturally craves” (128).

This theme of craving is an important element of *Salt*; beyond the sexual, characters also crave greater social status and the smells that come with it. Bình’s maritime friend Bão, for instance, compares ships and explains that he prefers the *Latouche Tréville* to the *Niobe*. Though Bão never says why, Bình postulates that it was the luxurious fragrances that drew Bão in:

Bão, I imagined, liked being so close to luxury, so intimate with its smells, the rumpled linens loaded in his arms, lavender-scented still by the fresh-bathed bodies of women whom he would never meet, the perfume and cigar smoke still dancing in the air as he mopped the decks clean at three in the morning…like all servants he *had* to take solace from wealth and pleasure, even if they were not his own. (108)

For subaltern characters like Bão, then, smell allows a momentary social transgression, an imagination of what it would be like to live in the upper echelon of society and be surrounded by its scents. By the same token, characters avoid the smell of the impoverished: “No one wants to stand so close to desperation. It is too thick in the air. It is naturally invasive, has the dank odor of musty rooms and vacant houses, a distinct taste, tangy and burning on the tongue” (220). The determination of class, thus, relies on a multisensory playbook, distinguishing the “dank odor” of poverty from “lavender-scented” luxury. With odors acting as class indicators, these two instances reflect how smells instigate a push and pull—attracting people towards the scent of wealth and propelling them from that of scarcity. Bình in particular is attracted to a white-passing Black man named Marcus Lattimore. Unlike Bình’s, Lattimore’s fragrance helps him to blend in, as “Miss Toklas approved of the scent of bay and lime on [his] skin. Like a Frenchman, she thought, announcing himself even before he enters the room, making an impression even after he is gone” (38). Perhaps what Bình desires most is for smell to help him achieve such “passing.” Then, his smell might fool others into believing he belongs, even if he does not think so himself.

However, characters like Bình and Bão never realize the status they desire, as Truong forgoes the goal of cultural assimilation for one of imperialist undoing; by taking the subaltern perspective and centering smells/foods, *Salt* ultimately challenges the hegemony of Empire by discrediting its sensory order. As the abundant olfactory language above suggests, the text disrupts a dominant hierarchy of senses by prioritizing subaltern olfaction. In fact, it is scent that inspires Bình’s realization that his lover Lattimore (Sweet Sunday Man) has left him: “I know by the smells. Fresh paint and fresh air can mean only one thing” (236). For Bình, smells denote truth and understanding, conveying olfaction’s value. Moreover, in *Salt*’s hierarchy of the senses, smell seems to overcome sight. At one point, Lattimore tells Bình that “of the five senses, the one that he most distrusts is our ability to see. It is the one most easily fooled” (236). Lattimore’s profession as an iridologist, one who uses the eyes to assess a patient’s health, further supports the shortcomings of vision. Though this practice does elevate the eyes as “windows” to a person’s health, it also points to them as signs of disease and bodily fragility. By corrupting the eyes, Truong protests Empire’s historic privileging of sight as the superior sense.

The trope of food in *Salt* builds on this attack of imperialist sensory hegemony to critique colonialism. Because the text tracks the stories of various cooks, it is no surprise that food, its taste and smell, holds power. Bình’s brother, Anh Minh or “Minh the Sous Chef,” recounts one particular story of a chef’s rebellion:

After all, the *chef de cuisine* at the Continental Palace Hotel in Saigon—a man who claimed to be from Provence but was rumored to be the illegitimate son of a high-ranking French official and his Vietnamese seamstress—had to be dismissed because he was serving dishes obscured by lemongrass and straw mushrooms. He also slipped pieces of rambutan and jackfruit into the sorbets. “The clientele demanded that the natives in the kitchen be immediately dismissed if not jailed, shocked that the culprit was a harmless-looking ‘Provencal’ incensed enough to threaten closure of the most fashionable hotel in all of Indochina.” (42-43)

In this case, the *chef de cuisine* reclaims his labor by breaking boundaries and sneaking traditionally Vietnamese foods/herbs into the Continental Palace Hotel, a glaring monument to French colonialism and tourism. This anecdote engages with Truong’s larger point that the subversion of Empire employs foods and scents. Especially, smell’s ability to “threaten closure” of the hotel signifies olfaction as an engine of subaltern might—capable of “closing” Empire.

Food also functions more figuratively in *Salt*. For Bình, learning the language of the colonizer feels like he had been “born with [French words] in my mouth, as if they were the seeds of a sour fruit someone else ate and then ungraciously stuffed its remains into my mouth” (11-12). Truong thus calls upon food metaphors to critique linguistic imperialism and emphasize Empire as a bully. Wenying Xu quotes Truong’s metaphor in “Sexuality, Colonialism, and Ethnicity in Monique Truong’s *The Book of Salt* and Mei Ng’s *Eating Chinese Food Naked*” and details its symbolic nuance:

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. (140)

Xu draws attention to how the “seed” metaphor works to convey the prolonged consequences of colonial rule, noting that imperialism brings grief and melancholia past Empire’s departure. The metaphor also functions reparatively, though. While Bình mourns the struggle of knowing little French, as his vocabulary is mostly limited to that of culinary labor, he resourcefully uses this culinary focus to inspire food metaphors that attack the colonizer. Pigeon-holed in a French-ruled society, Bình embraces the pigeons.

Most importantly, it is Bình’s sense of smell that allows him to survive, love, and remember what he has left behind. By reclaiming olfactory language to support Bình’s diasporic journey, Truong asserts smell as a vital sense on a personal scale—it is inextricable from the subaltern individual’s story of healing. Starting on a basic level, smell supports Bình’s livelihood. As a cook, a strong sense of smell is essential, so Bình’s olfaction likely finances his career and promotes his survival as an immigrant. Gertrude Stein agrees that one needs a sense of smell to cook, and even more, she blames her own olfaction for preventing her from becoming a doctor. Stein, who would “would rather drink a glass of spoiled milk than bother to smell it beforehand,” claims that “one must possess a keen sense of smell in order to identify and, more importantly, to distinguish among the odors emitted from the body during its varying stages of decay” (181, 180). In medical school, these smells haunt Stein, “combining all her patient’s beastly odors into a solid wall of filth and stink, a wall that she was absolutely unwilling to breach” (180). Stein’s refusal to deal with such odors reflects an imperialist need for deodorization, but in this case, this desire emerges as a weakness. Therefore, Bình’s superior olfaction, and his willingness to smell, proves Bình eclipses Stein on some level. Scent, then, protects Bình and his attempt to survive despite marginalization. Smell aids other characters, too, like the blind vendor who sells pungent vegetables. Bình shares that it is “no coincidence that this man sells what he does. With onions and garlic, he can protect himself from thieves, because he can always smell them walking away” (62). It is also “no coincidence” that Bình cooks—this work gratifies Bình’s smell to nourish his professional status and ultimately empower him.

Beyond such survival, smell permits love, adorning the romantic and sensual moments in *Salt* with fragrance. According to Bình, “the truffle is a gift for the nose. Pleasure refined into a singular scent, almost animal, addictive, a lover’s body coming towards yours on a moonless night” (210). In Truong’s world, smell and pleasure are entangled, and the scent of the truffle symbolizes this intersection. Particularly, the setting of a “moonless night” evokes a landscape of darkness, allowing scent to come to the forefront as the sense of love and lovemaking. Truong especially details the smells of queer desire from the narration of Bình. As mentioned earlier, Bình identifies his lover by the smell of lime and bay. As Bình and Lattimore have sex, Bình appreciates his smell: “Your body comes close, and the scent of lime and bay is all around us” (146). Smell, in this way, denotes the sensual, as the mingling scents symbolize the couple’s sexual uniting and queer love. Interestingly, queerness pairs well with olfactory symbolism, perhaps due to smell’s marginalized status and transgressive qualities—scent breaks “rules,” just as queer lovers do.

Lattimore’s epithet, “Sweet Sunday Man,” builds on the association between love and smell, as “sweet” is a gustatory and olfactory adjective. Such sweetness repeats when Bình recounts the story of how his mother and likely biological father met. In this encounter, foods and smells are prominent. Candied lotus seeds, for example, “sweetened their first sighs of love” (170). Additionally, when Bình’s mother becomes pregnant, “her hair grew thick, shiny with oil, and smelled of the fresh orange peels that she used to mist her comb” (170). In these instances, Truong connects romantic and maternal love to a sweet scent. Furthermore, Truong uses seed imagery of flowers and fruits to describe this smell, adapting her earlier metaphor of the seeds of colonialism to proclaim the seeds of love in a reparative manner. Love therefore burgeons, fruiting like a seed to incorporate multiple senses. This agrees with Bình’s answer, when Stein asks him to define love. Love is *not* something, he says, “seen but untouched”—it is smelled too (40).

In this manner, Bình’s appreciation of scent distinguishes him from the Old Man, his abusive, alcoholic father. The Old Man often devalues smell, especially despising the smell of women. In reference to “women with bulging money belts and a willingness to embrace whatever gods necessary,” Bình recounts that the Old Man “could not stand the sight of them, the smell of them” (201). The Old Man thus highlights how scent and gender intersect, as scent may be applied to reinforce misogyny. Additionally, when the Old Man and Bình’s mother sleep together, the Old Man attempts to dissolve his sense of smell, removing the “sense” from the “sensual.” In particular, the Old Man “had to touch this girl who smelled like the only woman he had ever loved. It sickened him each time. He committed the act quickly and without ever closing his eyes” (201). In this instance, the Old Man upholds a hegemonic hierarchy of the senses, making sure to keep his vision while degrading olfaction as “sickening.” For the Old Man, vision protects and sustains his power. At the same time, however, Bình’s mother “kept her eyes close” and she thinks to herself, “He can make me open my legs, but never my eyes” (201). In this way, it is the *absence* of sight that empowers Bình’s mother, as this allows her to dissociate from the pain and reaffirm her bodily autonomy in a moment of vulnerability. The senses, then, in *Salt* hold vastly different purposes for each character, sometimes spurring love and other times protecting from love’s lack.

Beyond love, Truong emphasizes the powerful connection between scent and memory. For Bình, aromas create a thread to his “origins” despite diaspora, tying him to Vietnam by triggering memories of it while in Paris. For example, when Bình receives an envelope from his brother, he first sniffs it, noting that “It smelled of a faraway city, pungent with anticipation for rain” (5). The faraway city here is Saigon, and it is scent that is primary, before vision, in this moment of diasporic memory. The smell of food, in particular, draws Bình to memories of his homeland. When Bình shares a meal with the enigmatic “man on the bridge” in Paris, smells of Vietnam abound: “When we opened our mouths to speak, the night air became scented with cinnamon,” and again, “the aroma of cinnamon, unmistakable and insistent, especially when coupled with sugar and heat, surrounded us” (99). In this instance, the fragrance of cinnamon becomes all-pervasive, taking over the French air. Cinnamon here may symbolize Vietnam, as it is an essential spice in Vietnamese cuisine, flavoring the broth of phở, for example. It is interesting that the dish here is apple pie, often considered a quintessential American dessert. But the cinnamon in this dessert comes from South and Southeast Asia, a product of colonialism. Truong, therefore, complicates the origins of apple pie, connecting it to Bình’s own origins in Vietnam. During this meal, the diners also encounter the scents of morel mushrooms, “hidden below the haricots verts until their aromas gave them away,” and watercress, “unmistakable, bitter in the mouth, cooling in the body, greens that any Vietnamese could identify with his eyes closed” (97). Xu proposes that this watercress represents the struggles of Vietnamese people:

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. (Xu 146)

Xu further extends this metaphor, describing how watercress rebels when overwhelmed by heat, turning into ropes that are impossible to swallow. Truong, then, suggests that the Vietnamese refuse to be ruled by colonists, displaying fervent anti-imperialist sentiment via culinary metaphor. In such a way, foods, and their scents, anchor Bình to Vietnam and Vietnamese affect. As Xu delineates, “Memories of exile are often evoked by kitchen activities, the partition between past and present rendered porous by food, smells, and tastes” (136). Thus, smells in *Salt* blur boundaries of time and place through recollection and remembering.

Finally, the olfactory sense inspires memory of Bình’s mother, bringing them together across the physical distance of oceans and the metaphorical distances of time and death. Scent engulfs Bình’s relationship with his mother, even from its conception: Bình remembers, “Before my mother could take me into her arms, I smelled her. Before I could take in my mother’s milk, I tasted the salt on her nipple” (217). This maternal scent and taste dominates Bình’s first memories, underscoring its significance. Specifically, Bình’s mother smells like oranges, the scent of the “fresh orange peels that she used to mist her comb” when pregnant with Bình. As Bình says goodbye to his mother when departing Vietnam, he “kissed her cheeks, taking the time to smell the oranges in her hair” (175). The citrusy fragrance holds multifaceted memories for Bình, then, reminding him of his mother, but also their separation. More than just fruit, though, all smells of cooking remind Bình of his mother, as he grew up cooking with her in the kitchen. One particular memory, when Bình was nine years old, is of cutting vegetables with his mother, his “fingers, face, hair, stinking of raw scallions” (72). As such, memories of Bình’s mother evoke not only past imagery, but fragrance. This memory is also of the first time that Bình cut himself with a kitchen knife, bleeding into his food, which becomes a habit over time. Doing so reminds Bình of his mother. He feels, when the cut 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). The pain of the cut, for Bình, cannot be separated from the memory of his mother. As Xu notes, “Bình 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” (142). Such bleeding also initiates a boundary crisis, excreting subaltern bodily fluids into the social system, just as white imperialists worried about. Yet this time, Truong reclaims the blurred lines from the subaltern perspective: this permeability is a tool for subaltern remembrance, enabling Bình to cross the sea and return to his lost mother. As a result, I believe that *Salt*, in a way, functions as Bình’s memorial for his mother, who is revealed to be deceased later on in the text. Smells feature fundamentally in this memorial, scenting the bond between mother and child indelibly.

Therefore, *The Book of Salt* rewrites *Fu-Manchu*, developing scent as a medium for marginalized characters to live, love, and hold on to diasporic memories. This last section, on memory, introduces scent as a bridge between past and present, one crossed by those in the Asian diaspora to remember that on the other side. I am reminded of Ocean Vuong’s *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* when discussing Bình’s relationship with his mother. Writing in the form of a letter from son to mother, Vuong shares:

In Vietnamese, the word for missing someone and remembering them is the same: nhớ. Sometimes, when you ask me over the phone, *Có nhớ mẹ không?* I flinch, thinking you meant, *Do you remember me?*

I miss you more than I remember you. (186)

Vuong’s questions confront the separation of the verbs “to miss” and “to remember” in the English language. Where does missing end and remembering begin? Since Vietnamese is also Bình’s native language, perhaps Bình’s grief expresses the word *nhớ* as a hybridization of longing and remembrance as well. Memory, thus, is muddled: hybrid, subjective, and smelly. And memory, it is important to note, is necessary to overthrowing Empire—how can one cast away what has been forgotten? In the fall, I will write the next chapter of my honors thesis, “Fish,” which will explore memory in greater detail, examining recollection from an ecological perspective with consideration of the nonhuman world and its odors.

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