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The Significance of Famously Queer Writers
in *The Book of Salt* and *The Hours*

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by

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Abstract of the Thesis

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Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt* and Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* include fictional portrayals of famous writers who interact with similarly queer protagonists. These writers, Gertrude Stein, Alice B. Toklas and Virginia Woolf, are significant because of their reputations as iconic queer figures. Stein and Toklas are remembered as a progressive lesbian couple; Woolf is celebrated as an influential feminist writer. While initially it would seem that the protagonists and the writers could unite based on a shared queer identity, the novels imply that the hierarchies that are prevalent in these queer communities prevent the characters from becoming allies. Such hierarchies, which are perpetuated by a heteronormative society, suppress queer individuals based on their race, class and gender. Ultimately, the only solution the novels provide for these individuals to combat the hierarchies that restrict them is through the creation of discourse, and, in both books, the characters interact with the writing process as readers and writers. Through these efforts as readers and writers, the characters are able to shape some understanding of their own queer identities. However, the protagonists still struggle with discourse, as only those of a privileged race and class have the power to produce and spread discourse. As a result, the ability of these queer individuals to overcome the hierarchies that bind them proves largely unsuccessful, emphasizing the still prevalent struggle of contemporary queer individuals in a society that reinforces hierarchies based on normalized heterosexual practices.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
“Queer Hierarches in Monique Truong’s <i>The Book of Salt</i> ”.....	6
“Reflections of Gender in Michael Cunningham’s <i>The Hours</i> ”.....	21
Conclusion.....	36
Bibliography.....	43

Introduction:

The novels *The Book of Salt* and *The Hours* introduce queer protagonists that interact with historic figures, who, significantly, are famously queer themselves. Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt* follows the experiences of Binh, the servant of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas. Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* portrays a day in the life of Virginia Woolf and reflects on the influence of her writing on the days of Laura Brown and Clarissa Vaughn. Through these depictions, both writers demonstrate the importance of writing and reading for those individuals who struggle with their queer identities and are unable to escape the societal boundaries that confine them to their expected roles, be they the result of gender, race or class. However, despite having similar themes, the novels differ in understanding the relationships formed between the queer protagonists and the historic figures, as these individuals cannot be united based on a queer identity alone.

Both novels feature characters who do not easily fit into socially constructed categories; particularly, these characters do not conform to traditional understandings of race, gender and sexuality. As such, the characters resist heteronormativity, a term coined by Michael Warner to describe societal expressions of normalized heterosexuality. The word "queer" is a useful term for examining these characters. Eve Sedgwick provides a definition for the term as it has been applied to the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) movement. Noting the origins of the word, Sedgwick describes that "the word 'queer' itself means across" (xii). Queer identifies that which applies across categories, including the categories of race, gender and sexuality. Sedgwick elaborates on this term, stating that queer defines that which "can't be

subsumed under gender and sexuality at all: the ways race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality criss-cross with these *and other* identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourses” (9). In other words, queer refers to that which does not fit clearly into a single socially constructed and normative category. Thus, the queer identities of the characters in these novels transgress social identifications. They resist classifications of race as they migrate from one place to another. Their sexualities defy heterosexual norms as they identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual or present fluid sexualities. Through non-traditional expressions of gender, these characters resist binary definitions of male and female. The characters continue to challenge established societal categories in various ways throughout the novels.

Because of their queer identities, the characters in the novels of Truong and Cunningham are excluded from the communities in which they live and are pushed to the margins where they are rendered invisible. These mainly heteronormative communities include family units as well as larger communal structures, as both groups exclude queer individuals as a result of established patriarchal structures. As Brian Loftus explains, those who are queer do not “fit neatly into the narrow alignment of gender, sex, and sexuality that produces heterosexuality and that naturalizes such cultural arrangements as family structure and patriarchy” (33-34). The ostracizing of queer individuals reflects the exclusionary forces of patriarchy, and as a result, those who do defy these constructions are shunned. Accordingly, those who demonstrate a queer identity are negatively viewed and are forced to struggle for existence and visibility in a heteronormative society.

The resistance of women to their societally obligated roles is a significant aspect of both Truong’s and Cunningham’s novels, especially when considering the prevalent patriarchal societies that surround them. Judith Butler analyzes social regulations of gender, particularly with relation to women and constructions of gender identities. When considering the identities

of women that are traditionally depicted, Butler asks, “is there some commonality among ‘women’ that preexists their oppression, or do ‘women’ have a bond by virtue of their oppression alone?” (7). Despite any communal bond that may naturally exist between women, Butler understands that female communities are strengthened by a shared struggle against a patriarchal society. Particularly in *The Hours*, the women establish a common bond among each other that is formed around their shared battle against patriarchal oppression. However, Butler does recognize this understanding of a commonality among women solely based on gender to be problematic, as she finds that the term ignores race, class, ethnic and sexual identities. Moreover, Butler analyzes the idea of a gender identity, finding that societal constructions impact the development of a gender identity, as “whatever social context the person is ‘in’ remains somehow externally related to the definitional structure of personhood” (22). Social pressures influence and constrict the formation of a gender identity, and therefore encourage certain manifestations of gender performance that align with the appearance society has determined for each gender. As such, “if gender attributes...are not expressive but performative, then these attributes effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal” (Butler 180). Individuals adopt gender performances to become normalized by society, not expressing the identities they truly embody, but rather performing in the way society would expect for their gender. Gender performativity even extends to queer couples, who exhibit a heteronormative performance in order to become more normalized by society instead of becoming marginalized by their sexual preference, a social pressure present in both novels.

In Truong’s and Cunningham’s novels, the authors suggest that communication is the best tool for resisting the marginalization created by heteronormative societies. Addressing the importance of discourse, Michel Foucault analyzes power relations that are shaped through

language that addresses sexuality. Importantly, as Foucault states, “discourse transmits and produces power” (101). Language has become increasingly employed as a mode to express identities, particularly sexual and gender identities, a mode of identity construction that is prevalent in both novels. The ability to produce discourse on sexuality influences power and places the speaker in a position of power over those who struggle to generate communication on the subject. Examining the role of power in a larger society, Foucault states, “relations of power are not in a position of exteriority with respect to other types of relationships (economic processes, knowledge relationships, sexual relations), but are immanent in the latter; they are the immediate effects of the divisions, inequalities, and disequilibriums which occur in the latter” (94). Individuals gain power over one another because of hierarchies or divisions that are present and certain individuals are able to access influence over discourse when others cannot. In the novels, social power enables individuals to communicate and understand their own queer sexualities; those who have the ability to shape discourse achieve the power both to understand and discuss sexuality, which others cannot obtain.

In *The Book of Salt* and *The Hours*, understandings of the heteronormative and the ways in which the characters defy social expectations are significant, as the characters struggle against social boundaries and cannot easily embrace their queer identities. To combat societal exclusions, the characters attempt to form communities, but a common queer identity is not sufficient in uniting these characters, as their commonalities are dependent on shared class and race identities in addition to a common sexual identity. Interestingly, strict societal boundaries influence heteronormative gender performances and threaten the characters’ sexual identities. What proves most important for understanding and developing queer identities is the ability of

the characters to produce discourse as readers and writers, and, in doing so, share in the profession of the historic writers they encounter.

Queer Hierarchies in Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt*

Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt* follows the narrative of a young Vietnamese cook, Binh, who is employed by the famous lesbian couple, Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, or as the couple instructs Binh to address them, GertrudeStein (pronounced as one name) and Miss Toklas. Binh is himself a queer character, as he is a migrant who is expelled from his home by his tyrannical father following the discovery of his homosexuality. However, though he finds himself in the home of a progressive lesbian couple, he does not encounter a welcoming queer community. In fact, the shared queerness of Binh and his employers is overshadowed by the hierarchy created by differences in race and class, rendering Binh an invisible figure that is unable to survive history in the manner of Stein and Toklas. Though he longs to share his story, one that details his journey from Vietnam to Paris and his struggle to gain acceptance as a queer individual, he is unable to communicate because of the persistent language barrier and his position as a poor migrant. Consequently, Binh suffers from feelings of impermanence and exploitation, as his story is stolen by Stein as a result of the helplessness created by his situation.

Binh inhabits the space of the kitchen in the home of Stein and Toklas, as well as in the homes of others that have employed him. This space becomes Binh's own as he crafts meals for his Mesdames (the name with which Binh refers to Stein and Toklas). Nevertheless, Binh is aware of his removed position as he is concealed from the rest of the community that enters the household, acknowledging that "I hide my body in the back rooms of every house I have ever lived in" (Truong 151). As a servant, Binh hides in the kitchen and servants' quarters, away from the sight of those who consume the food he prepares with his own hands. As stated by Y-

Dang Troeung, “the surface inscription of race on Binh’s body relegates him to the margins of society” (118). He must remain invisible because of his race and class, even in the home of the progressive Stein and Toklas.

Because of Stein and Toklas’ notorious lesbian relationship, it would seem that the couple would be able to relate to Binh’s queer identification. However, as interactions between Binh and his Mesdames demonstrate, “queer identity does not necessarily produce liberal politics...the effects of empire cannot be separated from categories of desire and identity...and the lesbian couple at the novel’s center may not wind up being its heroes” (Cohler 27). Stein and Toklas are never able to see Binh as anything other than a Vietnamese servant, as they persistently require his service, but never care to understand the cook that resides in their home with them. Instead, Stein analyzes his struggle to speak and uses his childlike repetition to feed her creativity, mimicking his speech in her writing. Ultimately, Binh becomes merely a footnote to the otherwise iconic tale of Stein and Toklas. Though he is surrounded by a queer society in the home of Stein and Toklas, consisting as it does of various artists and other American expatriates who themselves are migrants in Parisian society, he is unable to enter this community. Stein even famously ascribes the name the “Lost Generation” to the gathering of artists that she orchestrates, furthering a queer understanding of this small group as they are displaced in the city and no more native to Paris than Binh. As Wenying Xu rightly acknowledges, “the ability to practice sexual transgression heavily depends on one’s race and class” (127). Binh is unable to associate with the queer couple or the community that enters the home of Stein and Toklas because of his race and class. Even though Binh serves as an important aspect of the household, particularly with regard to these social gatherings, he remains invisible and is marginalized.

Binh recognizes his position of invisibility in the home of Stein and Toklas and considers how their guests must perceive him—“Always discreet, almost invisible, I imagine that when the guests look my way they see, well, they see a floor lamp or a footstool. I have become just that”—and he admits that “even the furniture attracts more attention than I do” (Truong 149, 150). The fact that the Stein household is a constant attraction for writers and artists who seek the counsel of Gertrude Stein only emphasizes the invisibility of Binh, particularly because he is a culinary artist with his own story to tell. During these gatherings, Binh is no more noticed than a piece of furniture that is placed in the home solely to be of service to Binh’s Mesdames and their guests. Moreover, Binh is successful in his culinary act, and he finds his employers inquiring “what is your secret?” (Truong 153). Binh will not reveal his secret and in fact believes that his accomplishments are due to his inferior position. Addressing his culinary success, Binh states, “if there is a ‘secret,’ Madame, it is this: Repetition and routine. Servitude and subservience. Beck and call” (Truong 154). Despite his success in the kitchen and the acknowledgment of his culinary prowess by his Madames, Binh is still ignored by Stein and Toklas’ visitors. The contrast does not go unnoticed by Binh, as he imagines guests asking, “The Steins have a cook?” (Truong 150). David L. Eng poses the question, “How is it that Stein and Toklas can appear in history as the iconic lesbian couple of both literary modernism and historical modernity while Binh, the queer Vietnamese colonial, can never appear in history?” (19). Stein and Toklas, as wealthy Americans, are able to be remembered because they have an influential status in society, while Binh, though an artist in his own right, constantly blends into the background as an Asian migrant of the lower class. The shared identities of homosexual migrants that are exhibited by both Binh and his Mesdames are not enough to unite them, as the distinctions created between servants and employers prove stronger.

As Binh struggles with his position as a queer migrant, he finds comfort in memories of home. Binh attempts to reconstruct these memories and even resorts to harmful behaviors, particularly self-injury, in an effort to recreate the images from his past. However, despite the harm he suffers at his own hands, he cherishes any connection he is able to forge with his past. When considering the image of his home in Vietnam, Binh says, “I stand there still...Tiny orange marigolds, their petals bunched together, twisted inside themselves, crowd around the dirt path on which I stand. Out of the corner of my eye, I see the fraying chin strap of my mother’s hat moving listlessly in the sun. I stand there still” (Truong 164). Binh so desperately longs for memories of home that he can still imagine his home as it was when he left it. Mainly, Binh yearns to strengthen his connection with his mother as she shares his struggle against his oppressive father who is a “fanatical Catholic, an alcoholic, and a brute to his hapless sons” (Clausen 23). This man, who is a tyrant to both Binh and his mother, indirectly encourages the relationship formed between mother and son as the two work to protect one another. As a result, Binh and his mother are able to create a sphere away from the despised man. Through these actions, Binh and his mother experience a queered invisibility; just as Binh is forced to hide in the kitchens and back rooms of the houses in which he works, his mother is similarly confined to the realm of the kitchen by her husband so as not to disturb her husband or interfere with his business. Both Binh and his mother are able to queer the space in which they are forced to hide by resisting their expected roles in these homes.

Binh relates the story of his mother’s exclusion from the center of the home, remembering that his father “built for her a kitchen at the back of his house. He wanted a room where she and the baby, who would not stop crying, could go when there was business to be done in the main part of the house” (Truong 168). Though she is only provided with a paltry

room that has a dirt floor and must work with simple clay pots and ladles constructed from coconut shells, Binh's mother relishes in having a space to call her own. As a result of this small amount of freedom, Binh's mother uses this space to defy her husband, and in doing so, queers the space she inhabits. She forms her own version of religion in this room, as she "set[s] up a small shrine at the back of the kitchen in honor of Buddha" despite the Catholic religion preached by her husband (Truong 168). Creating her own religion from the remnants of the religions passed down to her by her mother and father and later by her husband, Binh's mother effectively queers her faith. However, despite this attempted defiance, she still remains affiliated with her husband's Catholicism. Although she keeps the Buddha shrine in the kitchen, she begins attending a Catholic ceremony, making sure to walk to a separate church from the one in which her husband worships. Binh's mother cannot completely separate herself from her husband and ultimately converts to his religion, though she does this on her own terms. This defiance is limited, still containing Binh's mother within the strict boundaries of her role as a wife, though providing a queered understanding of her identity.

Binh becomes a part of his mother's kitchen, being the only son permitted to work by his mother's side to learn the art of cooking from her. This connection is fitting, as it is through Binh's conception and birth that his mother is further queered by unconventionally asserting her own rights. Binh is conceived through an affair his mother has with a school teacher, who, as Binh relates, "wore wire spectacles...they marked him as educated and of another class" (Truong 179). Ingrida Zindziuviene correctly states, "this issue complicates the understanding of identity" (151). Not only does Binh's mother participate in an affair, making Binh an illegitimate son, but she conceives Binh with a man of another class. Binh's mother crosses societal barriers through this courtship. As a result, Binh himself is further queered, being the

illegitimately conceived son of an upper-class man. Furthermore, following Binh's birth, his mother asks the midwife to make her incapable of conceiving any more children. In doing this, she "dared to exert sovereignty over her own body when she had been explicitly told she had no rights" (Truong 197). A wife is expected to bear her husband many sons and she is forbidden from exercising control over her own body. However, Binh's mother actively gains control over her own destiny and rebels against her husband.

As Binh's mother shapes aspects of her identity around the birth of her youngest son, contributing to the creation of his non-normative identity, it seems that the only place Binh truly belongs is in his mother's kitchen. Though later the kitchen symbolizes his servitude, Binh fondly remembers the kitchen in his childhood home, where he learned important lessons from his mother. In the kitchens of his employers, Binh persists in finding a way to keep the memory of his mother alive and begins acting in defiance of his employers to sustain his memories. Binh forms a habit, purposefully cutting his hand when cooking in an effort to reinforce a memory he has of chopping scallions in his mother's kitchen. He describes the knife his mother has used when cooking, an important instrument in any kitchen: "Hers was the kind of knife that would have rusted except that it was continually in use. It was made from an indifferent material that became duller and duller with every cut" (Truong 69). The knife serves to indicate the persistent, though humble cook his mother becomes, fulfilling her obligations as a wife while teaching her youngest son to cook. Binh takes up this tool to mimic the actions of his mother when helping her cook. However, as he is slicing scallions, the knife slips and he feels that the "silver is threading my skin" (Truong 72). Noticing what has occurred, Binh's mother quickly comes to his side and removes her own shirt to create a makeshift tourniquet for the wound. Binh acknowledges, "Blood, she knows, changes everything. I see there on my fingertips a

landscape that would become as familiar to me as the way home” (Truong 73). This injury becomes a reminder of home and a connection between Binh and his mother. They are connected by familial blood as well as by the protection provided by Binh’s mother following his loss of blood. Binh’s mother attends to the wound by wrapping herself around him, enfolding him, and creating a womb for Binh to return to. Binh remembers her repeating this action on other occasions and admits, “I know, Ma, I know. I have never left your womb, is how you want me to feel. I will always be protected, safe inside of you, is what you want me always to remember” (Truong 174). This moment remains significant for Binh because, by remembering this moment, he remembers his mother and her protection as well as the blood that connects them and makes them family.

Recalling the sacrifice his mother made for him also leaves Binh feeling guilty. Binh is aware of his habit and what he is risking by continuing to practice it in the kitchens in which he works. He begins to cut himself, just as he had in his mother’s kitchen, letting the blood fall into the meals of his employers. Thinking about his habit, Binh considers that “I said that it gives me proof that I am alive, but I have shared nothing but the details of the many small deaths I have inflicted, of how many of them are required for a truly good meal” (Truong 70). Though Binh struggles with his position as a migrant who is pushed to the margins of society and not acknowledged by his employers or their guests, he does not form this habit to remind employers of his existence. Instead, he repeats this action to remind himself of all the sacrifices that had to be made in order for him to leave home, which in turn, resulted in leaving his mother behind in the kitchen that they have shared, where she now suffers alone. As Binh describes, “sometimes when it 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’” (Truong 74). When

Binh is feeling lonely, he remembers his mother. The cutting serves as both a reminder of the close relationship the mother and son have shared and a punishment for leaving her behind.

Significantly, Binh's habit replaces the words he cannot utter as a migrant in Paris. Binh is unable to converse fully in the language, as he can only speak a few words in French and, as a result, struggles to communicate his story. Gertrude Stein, on the other hand, is able to inscribe her memories in her books, keeping alive moments of her past and of the people who have influenced her. In writing her book *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein records the life of her partner and immortalizes the moments the couple shares together. For Binh, being unable to communicate in a similar fashion is frustrating and makes his fight to preserve memories of home and his mother more difficult. As Jan Clausen argues, the novel "explores notions of home and exile through Binh's reflections on language" (23). Binh's native language connects him with home, but as a migrant, he must learn to converse in French instead. As a result of his incapability to communicate in French, Binh is forced to find alternate methods for preserving his memories. The habit Binh develops helps him to formulate an alternative to words and helps ensure that his memories will survive. Instead of inscribing his memories on paper like Stein, Binh communicates by etching his emotions in his flesh.

Furthermore, letting this small amount of himself enter the dishes he serves gives Binh a sense of power. He proudly admits that "there is rarely anyone to notice what I have concealed or what I have left in plain sight" (Truong 70). Though Binh is able to continue his habit unnoticed in other households, Toklas discovers him and advises, "Next time, Bin, you need to bandage [your hands]. Do you understand?" (Truong 71). Toklas' statement appears to be advice. However, Binh is correct in believing that "Miss Toklas's words may have sounded like a suggestion, but they were a line of instruction, a warning even" (Truong 71). Ultimately,

through this interaction, Toklas asserts her authority over Binh. Because of this discovery, Binh is no longer able to practice his habit, distancing him from his memories of his mother. As Xu states, “Truong is accurate in describing Stein’s and Toklas’ arrogance, ignorance of the culture from which Binh comes, and condescension toward him” (128). Neither Toklas nor Stein attempts to understand Binh’s culture or the displacement he may feel as a Vietnamese immigrant living in Paris. Following the loss of his ability to practice his habit, Binh experiences a further severance of his connection with his home.

Binh yearns to share his unique story and feels that his tale is a gift. When being interviewed by potential employers, Binh relates the experience of having to divulge his story, only to receive a “thank you, but no thank you” reply. Following this response, Binh retorts, “Thank you? Thank you? Madame, you should applaud! A standing ovation would not be inappropriate, I think each time. I have just given you a story filled with exotic locales, travel on the open seas, family secrets, un-Christian vices. *Thank you* will not suffice” (Truong 17). Binh identifies Gertrude Stein as a member of this undeserving audience, as she also listens to his stories without caring to understand Binh’s struggles. He describes that she, “like the collectors who have preceded her, wants to see the stretch marks on my tongue” (Truong 36). Because of her social class, Stein is easily able to assume the role of a collector, yet she is unable to comprehend truly the hardships found in Binh’s tales because of her privileged position. With regards to their Vietnamese cook, Stein and Toklas are found to be uninterested in “Binh’s present life circumstances” and instead are only curious to learn “the stories born out of his experienced oppression and his melancholic imagination” (Troeng 126). The American couple sees Binh only as a servant, beneath them in all regards. If they require a story of him to satisfy their own desire for knowledge of the exotic, Binh is expected to tell it.

Binh recognizes that stories are gifts to be shared and he believes that “a gift or theft depends on who is holding the pen” (Truong 215). With this understanding, Binh expresses a belief that a writer is in fact a thief, stealing the stories of others for inspiration. Stein, as a writer of others’ stories, is herself a thief. After removing one of Stein’s manuscripts from her cupboard, Binh discovers the theft of his own story. Scanning over the foreign words, Binh notices the spelling of his name that Stein has attributed to him, as she is unable to pronounce his Vietnamese name. The Americanized name “Bin” is scattered through the pages of the book. In response to this intrusion, Binh becomes upset and reacts strongly to this violation:

I did not give you my permission, Madame, to treat me in this way. I am here to feed you, not to serve as your fodder. I demand more money for such services, Madame. You pay me only for my time. My story, Madame, is mine. I alone am qualified to tell it, to embellish, or to withhold. (Truong 215).

As a result of Stein’s theft, Binh’s life is available to be viewed by all readers, no longer a gift for those few eligible listeners Binh chooses to hear his tale. Because the story is told through Stein’s perspective, Binh’s tale is untrue to his own experience and understanding of his memories. This translation becomes further problematized as Stein and Toklas are even unable to recognize the spelling of Binh’s name. Following the reception of a letter addressed to Binh, Stein asks, “Thin Bin, we assume *this* is you?” (Truong 228). This inability to identify Binh’s name complicates the accuracy with which Stein has been able to portray Binh through her writing. Moreover, because the story is written in a language that is foreign to him, Binh will never be able to read his own story or understand the “Bin” that Stein has created through her writing. As he sifts through the words of the manuscript, he comments that he is “surrounded on all sides by strangers, strung together along a continuously unraveling line that keeps them above

the water's surface. It is a line that I cannot possibly hold onto. GertrudeStein knows it, and she has cast me in there anyway" (Truong 214-215). The words on the page mimic his reality, as his name is a foreigner surrounded by a crowd of English words. Furthermore, despite being used as the subject for Stein's work, Binh has not been compensated for his additional function as "fodder." Binh has been exploited; his memories have been stolen from him and this theft has only been successful because of Binh's position as a lowly cook who cannot understand Stein's language or contest her actions.

Binh's story is not the first tale that Stein has stolen; she has authored the autobiographical story of Toklas as well, ironically naming the text *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. Binh even learns of *The Autobiography* and reflects, "My Madame wrote a book about my other Madame. How convenient, I think. GertrudeStein would never have to travel far for her stories" (Truong 145). Without reading the book, Binh forms an understanding of the effort necessary for writing *The Autobiography*. Writing a book about her partner is a matter of convenience for Stein. Stein has not had to leave the comfort of her home to gain writing material, as both Binh and Toklas provide her with convenient tales, again demonstrating a reliance on the experiences of others to satisfy her craving for a story. Similar to Binh's experience, Toklas' story is taken from her, as "both chronology and the voice of Alice B. Toklas are manipulated in this autobiographical novel" (Zindziuviene 149). Through her writings, Gertrude Stein is able to queer the notion of autobiographies; the novel discusses Toklas' experiences and memories, but it is told through the words and perceptions of Stein. As Anna Linzie states, "In relation to an autobiographical tradition that presupposes heterosexuality, the Toklas autobiographies simultaneously conform to and undermine generic conventions and expectations on the level of content" (51). While Stein's autobiography adheres to the traditional

understandings of the autobiographical genre in that it tells the life story of an individual, it defies expectations through Stein's authoring of the work. As a result of Toklas' cooperation in creating her own stolen autobiography, the subjugated role of Toklas is even more apparent than that of Binh.

While Stein and Toklas both contribute to the creation of Stein's work, Stein clearly has a dominant role as the writer. Toklas participates in this partnership by laboring over the writing of Stein and typing and proofreading her work. Though Toklas does eventually author some books of her own, it is not until after Stein's death that she is free to become more dominant. Toklas furthers this understanding of her subservience by entering the kitchen, a place where Stein never treads, and cooking for her partner on Sundays. Toklas serves Stein and mimics Binh's actions during the remainder of the week. Toklas works side by side with Binh, teaching him aspects of the cooking process, and serving as an intermediary between Binh and the great Gertrude Stein. Significantly, Binh and Toklas both prepare the food that Gertrude Stein consumes, and, furthering this role, provide her with the fuel needed for her writings.

Interestingly, as a result of their roles in the partnership, Stein and Toklas create a queered heteronormativity, which further strengthens the hierarchy present in the household and again places Toklas in a subordinate position in relation to Stein. Though a lesbian couple, Stein and Toklas assume the roles of husband and wife, an idea that is perpetuated by the functions they perform in the household, the nicknames with which they refer to one another and the understanding of those outside the household who know them. Linzie, in fact, finds the hierarchical relationship present in the writing of Stein to be a product of the heteronormative performance the couple seems to demonstrate: "Stein and Toklas's enactment and display of a hierarchical relation in various texts is a thoroughly gendered enterprise, the public reflection of

their private butch/femme performance” (39). In the relationship, Stein assumes a more masculine role and therefore becomes the writer and the breadwinner, while Toklas, performing a more submissive feminine role, becomes the aesthetic subject of her partner. This adherence to heteronormativity allows the lesbian couple to become normalized and complicates understandings of their identity.

The normative sexuality of Stein and Toklas is an idea they themselves propagate through their interactions with one another. Toklas, performing the role of the wife, cleans up Stein’s manuscripts after she has been writing, makes them more presentable, and enters the domain of the kitchen, which, as demonstrated by Binh’s mother, is the territory of the wife. When receiving company, Toklas, as wife, amuses the other wives in the kitchen while Stein, as husband, entertains the men and conducts business. During these social gatherings, Stein even displays a sexist view of the women that are present, as she “considers these women all merely ‘wives.’ Their actual marital status does not interest her...Wives are never geniuses. Geniuses are never wives. GertrudeStein, therefore, has no use for them, especially at her Saturday tea” (Truong 184). Ironically, though Stein considers herself to be a genius regardless of her gender, she does not believe other women possess that capability. With this understanding, it becomes easier for Stein to become an intelligent and influential figure if she presents herself in a more masculine way. Those around her, including herself, are more likely to accept her genius if she presents herself as filling the role of a man.

Furthermore, the names the couple assigns to one another reflect their performance of the traditional gender roles of a married couple. Stein refers to Toklas as “her ‘Sweetie,’ her ‘Queenie,’ her ‘Cake,’ her ‘Cherubim,’ her ‘Baby,’ her ‘Wifie,’ her ‘Pussy’” (Truong 155). Toklas, on the other hand, addresses Stein as “her ‘King,’ her ‘Fattuski,’ her ‘Mount Fattie,’ her

‘Hubbie,’ her ‘Lovey’” (Truong 157). The guests in the home of Stein and Toklas even view the pair as a heteronormative married couple. Binh learns that “all the boys who gather at their Saturday teas call them ‘the Steins’” (Truong 176). The couple is provided with a married status as a result of the application of Stein’s surname to the pair, which provides Stein with the masculine identification. Examining this marriage, Xu states, “the Steins are complacent, conforming, and socially accepted in their same-sex arrangement” (135). By conforming to heteronormativity, the couple is more easily accepted by those around them, despite their lesbian relationship. As a result, Binh’s Madames become normalized through their heteronormative performance.

The heteronormative performance of Stein and Toklas contrasts strongly with Binh’s homosexuality as it further complicates the identities of the characters and reinforces the hierarchy present in the household. If Binh’s Madames are presented as normalized, particularly as a result of the acceptance of the society that surrounds them, then Binh becomes further marginalized because of his invisibility. As a servant, Binh is not given such lenience towards a normalized performance. He cannot transgress the boundaries in which he has been placed. This further deepens the divide that separates Binh from Stein and Toklas, preventing them from becoming queer allies.

As a result of the subjugation experienced by Binh at the hands of his Madames, he must discover his own method of overcoming the hierarchies present in the household to preserve his identity and the memories that shape it. Though Binh has been prevented from reenacting memories of home and his mother, he still yearns to define his identity and to resist his position as an invisible Vietnamese cook. Binh is able to reclaim the story and his memories by removing the manuscript from his Madames’ cupboard. By literally removing the words of his

story from their place on Stein's shelf, Binh figuratively regains ownership of his memories. Though he is worried about what, at first, he considers an unwarranted theft, he later relishes in the action. In defense of his act, Binh insists, "this notebook may belong to my Madame, but the story, it belongs to me" (Truong 215). Though Stein may oppress Binh by writing his story and enforcing hierarchies as a result, Binh exerts a subtle act of defiance by taking the manuscript back. Binh's theft allows him to resist the hierarchies that repress him and preserve his memories, as these are all he has to assert his identity. Through his defiant actions, Binh is able to achieve a small amount of power and resist the racial, sexual and class-based boundaries that define him in the home of Stein and Toklas.

Importantly, even this reclamation of his story cannot ensure the permanence of Binh, as his Madames survive history to become iconic queer figures while Binh remains invisible, like a piece of furniture in the home of Stein and Toklas that is seen but not heard. In the end, it becomes apparent that even in the home of queer icons, hierarchies exist and queer individuals are exploited, living as merely shadows beneath the weight of these idols. Stein and Toklas have become immortalized through their own words and those of others; their cooks, conversely, are only remembered by slight mentions of their existence in Toklas' own publication, *The Alice B. Toklas Cookbook*. This mainly results from the privileged positions of Stein and Toklas, as they can afford to publish their works and create their own fame. They speak in a privileged language that others are more willing to read. When they hire Binh, he becomes their property, particularly as he cannot verbalize a protestation against their exploitation of him. Without the aid of being a member of a dominant class speaking the language of the privileged, Binh, quite literally, cannot afford to be remembered.

Restrictions of Gender in Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*

Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* imitates Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, reinventing the beloved characters and their identities. The novel follows the lives of three women who, like Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway, struggle with their roles as wives and mothers and feel constricted by societal expectations. Extrapolating from the memory of a queer kiss recalled by Clarissa Dalloway in Woolf's novel, Cunningham's characters express fluid sexualities as they participate in a meaningful, though deviant, kiss of their own. Furthermore, the women engage with the writing process as writers, readers and characters, attempting to understand their identities through these roles. Though each of these women—Mrs. Woolf, Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Dalloway—is urged to act as an idealized wife by the heteronormative society that surrounds her, they all demonstrate a desire to resist their societally constructed identities, favoring a queered identity.

Connections between *The Hours* and Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* extend throughout the three narratives of Cunningham's novel. However, rather than simply reconfiguring a story that has already been told, Cunningham answers questions raised by the text, particularly questions pertaining to sexuality and marriage. Elaborating on the same-sex kiss in *Mrs. Dalloway* as well as the protagonist's experience within a marriage, Cunningham introduces three characters who express similar frustrations with their societal obligations as Woolf's Clarissa Dalloway. Patricia Laurence acknowledges Woolf's intentional societal critique and reflects that Woolf once recorded in her diary, "I want to criticize the social system, & to show it at work" (372). An elaboration of this social criticism is also found in Cunningham's novel as he examines the

ability of his characters to transgress societal boundaries as time passes, analyzing the societal changes that occur. Each character represents a very different time period, as Virginia Woolf is writing her novel in the 1920s, Laura Brown is caring for her family in the 1950s, and Clarissa Vaughn, known by her nickname Mrs. Dalloway, walks the streets of New York City in the 1990s. The Mrs. Dalloway character proves to be the most compelling of the three as she offers the most contemporary depiction of a heteronormative society and demonstrates the modern pressures that urge an adherence to traditional gender identities.

Each of the women in *The Hours* is queered through her restlessness and dissatisfaction with the socially constructed roles she is pressured to fill. Maria Lindgren Leavenworth observes that “issues connected to constructions of identity are central in all three texts as the women question assigned and sometimes uncomfortable and painful roles” (511). Though expressing displeasure with their heteronormative responsibilities, each participates, to some extent, in the duties of a typical housewife. Leavenworth describes the characters as having what she names “hostess-identities,” as they have obligations of “nurturing, of preparing food, of hosting parties” (512). All three women are portrayed through the course of one day performing the responsibilities of their gender, which are mainly demonstrated as each arranges a party—be it a visit from family, a small party for a spouse, or a reception to congratulate the achievements of a friend—and becomes consumed with organizing and readying the different aspects of the gatherings. Moreover, naming becomes a device that further confines the women to their expected societal roles, as each woman is identified by her married name, even Mrs. Dalloway, who is forced to adopt the name of her fictional counterpart even though she is not in a heterosexual relationship. As Leavenworth notes, “the titles of Mrs. suggest heterosexual marriages, a suggestion which is made problematic” (511). The women become discouraged by

their married identities, but are nevertheless forced to carry these identities with them by accepting their husbands' surnames and adopting a "Mrs." prefix. Significantly, while participating in these heterosexual roles, the women express feelings of inadequacy, believing they are unable to embody the character of the perfect wife and hostess, though they are pressured to adopt this identity.

Declining to participate in some of the social obligations of a wife or mother, Mrs. Woolf, Mrs. Brown, and Mrs. Dalloway act defiantly and reject their expected duties. When reflecting on her social obligations and her true desires, Mrs. Woolf demonstrates that she is conflicted. She admits that she feels as though "she straddles an invisible line, one foot on this side, the other on that. On this side is stern, worried Leonard...On the other side is London, and all London implies about freedom, about kisses, about the possibilities of art and the sly dark glitter of madness" (Cunningham 172). Considering her social obligations, Mrs. Woolf feels guilty relying on her husband Leonard to care for her, reversing their gender roles and casting Leonard as a wife figure. However, even though their gender roles are reversed, Mrs. Woolf is still trapped within a heteronormative marriage. The only way Mrs. Woolf is ultimately able to choose an appropriate lifestyle is to escape her obligations and societal pressures, and thereby deny them through a deviant act as she walks into the River Ouse to end her life.

Laura Brown is similarly conflicted regarding her expected gender roles. As a wife and mother, she is obligated to perform certain familial duties and longs to escape these responsibilities. When first meeting Mrs. Brown, the reader is informed that "Laura Brown is trying to lose herself. No, that's not it exactly—she is trying to keep herself by gaining entry into a parallel world" (Cunningham 37). Rather than facing her trying responsibilities as a wife and mother, Mrs. Brown absorbs herself in a novel, which, on this day, is Virginia Woolf's *Mrs.*

Dalloway. Mrs. Brown even physically leaves her home and her young son behind and rents a hotel room simply to have a space where she can read, demonstrating through this action a need to have a room of her own. Ultimately, Mrs. Brown rejects her expected position entirely, as, years later, Mrs. Dalloway observes Mrs. Brown, mother of her friend Richard, stating, “Here is the lost mother, the thwarted suicide; here is the woman who walked away” (Cunningham 221). Mrs. Brown attempts to escape like Mrs. Woolf, and, when this fails, abandons her family, being unable to participate in the forced performance any longer.

Even Mrs. Dalloway, who appears to be the most successful woman in the novel in that she lives with her partner Sally and embraces her queer sexuality, is unable to separate herself entirely from heteronormative gender performances. Interestingly, Mrs. Dalloway enters the most normalized “marriage” with her partner as a result of her gender performance. As Brooke Allen explains, “in the particular world she inhabits, Clarissa, like Clarissa Dalloway, is in effect a conventional society wife, not so very different, really, from her heterosexual, married counterparts on Park Avenue” (81). Mrs. Dalloway’s longtime friend, Richard Brown, finds fault in this life, believing that “Clarissa’s decision to live with Sally represents, if not some workaday manifestation of deep corruption, at least a weakness on her part that indicts (though Richard would never admit this) women in general” (Cunningham 19). Living with her partner and performing as husband and wife marks Mrs. Dalloway’s failure to deny a hostess-identity completely. Those that surround Mrs. Dalloway even find that “Clarissa has, at heart become a society wife” and believe the couple to be “dressed to pass, bourgeois to the bone, living like husband and wife” (Cunningham 20, 160). Mrs. Dalloway feels pressured to perform as a wife despite being in a queer relationship and is able to become a wife figure more successfully than the other women as a result of her heteronormative performance.

Despite their attempts to fit a binary societal structure, none of the three women can adequately be identified as gay, straight or even bisexual and instead they demonstrate fluid sexualities, defying the constructed binary sexuality embraced by society. The novel interestingly introduces characters that “desire touch and contact with one another and that desire often transcends or contradicts the narrow identity labels, via sexual orientation, that society has constructed” (Schiff 368). The identities of these women become fluid, as their desire is not influenced by an attraction to a specific gender, but instead by a particular moment in which they react based on a desire. Significantly, Woolf’s novel is ideal for developing this unconventional understanding of gender and sexuality as “her handling of gender and sexual identity and her depiction of the fluidity of the character remain highly relevant to contemporary readers” (Schiff 365). In fact, the kiss that serves as a significant moment in each of the three narratives is derived from Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*. In Woolf’s novel, Clarissa kisses Sally Seton and fondly remembers this event upon recalling it years later. The reading of this moment has been interpreted by many as being “evidence of a repressed lesbian identity,” though Cunningham examines it as a moment that allows the protagonists to transcend societal boundaries and act in accordance with their desires (Haffey 137). Elaborating on the understanding of the kiss as representing a queered and deviant desire, Cunningham portrays all of his characters experiencing a similar moment, rejecting their normative performances and willingly participating in a secretive kiss.

Like her character Clarissa Dalloway, Mrs. Woolf herself partakes in a kiss that is easily examined as deviating from heteronormative constructions of sexual expression. Mrs. Woolf’s kiss occurs in her home with her sister Vanessa when her servant, Nelly, turns her back on the two women:

Nelly turns away and, although it is not at all their custom, Virginia leans forward and kisses Vanessa on the mouth. It is an innocent kiss, innocent enough, but just now, in this kitchen, behind Nelly's back, it feels like the most delicious and forbidden of pleasures. Vanessa returns the kiss. (Cunningham 154)

The kiss that takes place between Mrs. Woolf and Vanessa is queered in multiple ways. Firstly, it is a kiss that occurs between two women and defies the heterosexual marriages in which both women are bound. Additionally, the kiss is between two sisters and is therefore incestuous in nature, though Mrs. Woolf seems to be more invested in the forbidden aspect of the act than in any sexual attraction to her sister, delighting in its secretiveness and constantly returning to the fact that it has occurred in the presence of her unknowing servant. Mrs. Woolf recalls what she felt during the kiss, describing it as "that potent satisfaction, that blessedness" (Cunningham 163). Most importantly, however, the kiss is the inspiration for Clarissa's deviant action in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Kate Haffey discusses this kiss at length, stating that "the moment ultimately becomes an inspiration for Virginia who translates the feeling she had when kissing Vanessa into Clarissa's feeling at her kiss with Sally" (157). After worrying about adequately fulfilling the roles society designates for her, Mrs. Woolf finds relief in the ability to defy those expectations momentarily.

Following the example that Mrs. Woolf records in her novel, Mrs. Brown experiences a queer kiss of her own. While she is completing the duties of a housewife, baking a cake for her husband's birthday and soothing her child, Mrs. Brown receives a visit from her neighbor Kitty. The two women experience a tender moment and begin to hold one another, during which "Laura is flooded with feeling" (Cunningham 109). Kitty's company is enjoyable, as she similarly feels pressured and overwhelmed by her feminine obligations. Mrs. Brown finds that

“they are each impersonating someone. They are weary and beleaguered; they have taken on such enormous work” (Cunningham 110). The two women find comfort in the fact that they are both struggling to become the perfect housewife. Embracing the moment, the two find themselves kissing: “Kitty lifts her face, and their lips touch. They both know what they are doing. They rest their mouths, each on the other. They touch their lips together, but do not quite kiss. It is Kitty who pulls away” (Cunningham 110). At this moment, Mrs. Brown and Kitty participate in a partial kiss that is able to succeed because they momentarily reject the acts they have adopted.

The kiss that takes place between Mrs. Brown and Kitty is the most uncomfortable kiss in the narrative. Where Mrs. Woolf relishes in the excitement of participating in the deviant action, Mrs. Brown feels guilty and both women agree that their actions need an explanation. Mrs. Brown realizes “she has gone too far, they’ve both gone too far, but it is Kitty who’s pulled away first. It is Kitty whose terrors have briefly propelled her, caused her to act strangely and desperately. Laura is the dark-eyed predator. Laura is the odd one, the foreigner, the one who can’t be trusted” (Cunningham 110). Immediately, the participants of the kiss begin to assign roles to excuse their actions, as both fear the consequences. As such, “the kiss must be placed into a familiar narrative and explained away” (Haffey 150). The most understandable reason for the kiss requires the women to assume the roles of victim and predator, and Mrs. Brown, having the most foreign appearance of the two, is the one who receives the blame. Still, through the moment of the kiss, both have acknowledged that their identities are merely constructed and that a non-normative desire to rebel against societal barriers lies in both women if they are brave enough to defy them.

Unlike the other two women, the kiss that Mrs. Dalloway reflects on is a heterosexual kiss from her past. Mrs. Dalloway reminisces about a summer that she spent with her close friend Richard, the name of her counterpart's husband in Woolf's novel. Considering the original kiss that she experiences with Richard, Mrs. Dalloway remembers, "Richard had called her Mrs. Dalloway, and they had kissed. His mouth had opened into hers; his tongue (exciting and utterly unfamiliar, she'd never forget it) had worked its way shyly inside until she met it with her own...that was the moment, right then. There has been no other" (Cunningham 98). The kiss is an aspect of her past she is unable to forget and she continually wonders what would have happened had the two remained together. Similar to the kisses experienced by Mrs. Woolf and Mrs. Brown, Mrs. Dalloway is kissing someone she is not supposed to kiss, as Richard is already sexually involved with his partner, Louis, when this moment occurs. Reflecting on this act, Mrs. Dalloway questions, "Why not have sex with everybody, as long as you wanted them and they wanted you?" (Cunningham 96). Mrs. Dalloway's questioning of this sexual practice demonstrates her uncertainty of the act; though she willingly participates in this sexual freedom, she questions social acceptance of fluid sexualities. Despite any uncertainties, the three defy a social pressure for a monogamous relationship as they act upon momentary desires, mutually participating in sexual acts with one another.

Being the only character able to reflect on the kiss, Mrs. Dalloway recognizes that moment as influencing her future identity, as the kiss transcends the sexual identities that the couple have attributed to themselves, informing them of other possibilities. The kiss, then, serves as the "moment with the power to change lives" (Leavenworth 508). Had she accepted the kiss with Richard, Mrs. Dalloway would not be living with Sally and instead would have entered a queered heterosexual relationship. As Haffey states, "For Clarissa, it is this kiss that is

transgressive and not her relationship with Sally. By switching the gender of these characters, Cunningham is able to more clearly delineate the significance of the kiss” (152). When kissing Richard, Mrs. Dalloway is deviating from her lesbian identity, and Richard from his gay identity, demonstrating the fluid sexualities of both partners. However, it is at this moment that Mrs. Dalloway and Richard decide between embracing a heterosexual and a homosexual life, as this moment presents the possibility of Mrs. Dalloway following in the path of her heterosexual married counterpart.

Examining Mrs. Dalloway’s constructed identity through her adopted married name proves significant as her marriage is symbolic, not literal. It is Mrs. Dalloway’s friend Richard that provides her with this identity and encourages her to follow in the footsteps of Woolf’s original character. Reflecting on the origin of her nickname, Mrs. Dalloway recalls that “the name Mrs. Dalloway had been Richard’s idea—a conceit tossed off one drunken dormitory night as he assured her that Vaughn was not the proper name for her” (Cunningham 10). Richard Brown, much like the Richard Dalloway of Woolf’s text, gives Clarissa this new surname and provides her with a new identity as a result. Richard and Clarissa symbolically become wedded through this action as they repeat the action of their counterparts in the earlier novel. Furthermore, Richard elaborates on the choice of Mrs. Dalloway, stating, “her existing first name [was] a sign too obvious to ignore” and adds that “she was destined to charm, to prosper” (Cunningham 9-10). The renaming of Clarissa Vaughn, which Richard argues to be fated, encourages her to become the perfect hostess and wife and thereby addresses the prevalent societal pressure that surrounds Mrs. Dalloway when she is younger. Even though Richard is queer himself, he expects her to fulfill her feminine obligations and reminds her that she is destined to become a housewife.

When experiencing her queered kiss with Richard, Mrs. Dalloway remembers Richard calling her by her nickname prior to that moment: “Richard called her Mrs. Dalloway and they had kissed” (Cunningham 98). Addressing her by her heterosexual name is a prerequisite for this moment, as Richard wants to remind her of their queered marriage before they share an intimate experience. Beyond this moment, Richard insists on referring to her by her nickname, ultimately frustrating and angering Mrs. Dalloway. When visiting her friend she thinks, “isn’t it time...to dispense with the old nickname?” (Cunningham 55). Though they did not pursue a heterosexual relationship together, Richard still considers her to be a wife figure and reminds her of the identity she is expected to assume. Moreover, he expresses disapproval with the life she has chosen and mocks her decision, believing her choice to be the product of her frailty. Richard instills doubt in Mrs. Dalloway and she regrets not pursuing this heterosexual relationship, believing “they might have been husband and wife, soul mates” (Cunningham 67-68). Mrs. Dalloway constantly questions her chosen identity and wonders if she should have adopted the identity Richard created for her. Ultimately, Mrs. Dalloway is able to reject the heterosexual married title Richard has given her, but it is not until he has passed away and taken with him any prospect of fulfilling this identity. She realizes, “here she is, herself, Clarissa, not Mrs. Dalloway anymore; there is no one now to call her that” (Cunningham 226). Upon recognizing this newfound freedom, Mrs. Dalloway expresses simultaneous regret and relief. She has lost her friend and heterosexual partner, but without him, she is free to embody a lesbian identity. Interestingly, even without her “husband,” Mrs. Dalloway is never able to break completely from her societally constructed hostess-identity, as she continues acting as the hostess even after Richard’s death.

Mrs. Dalloway's character introduces a lesbian identity that is able to survive in the 1990s, though society forces a heteronormative performance on the couple. However, an alternative lesbian identity is also depicted in the text through the character of Mary Krull, a friend of Mrs. Dalloway's daughter. Mrs. Dalloway finds fault in Mary's own performance, as she considers her to be "Mary the stern and rigorous, Mary the righteous, shaved head beginning to show dark stubble, wearing rat-colored slacks, breasts dangling (she must be past forty) under a ragged white tank top" (Cunningham 158). Mrs. Dalloway distrusts Mary, believing her to be presenting herself as hard and unrelenting, and as such, trying desperately to gain attention. She believes that Mary is "just as bad as most men, just that aggressive, just that self-aggrandizing" (Cunningham 161). Through this identity, Mary Krull gains attention and avoids adopting a hostess-identity. However, Mary is ultimately unable to enter a relationship. Mary Krull, in love with Mrs. Dalloway's daughter, will never have her love returned. Watching the woman she loves, Mary thinks, "*If you could love me...I'd do anything. Do you understand? Anything*" (Cunningham 162). Though Mary Krull has escaped a life in which she is forced to act as wife figure by rejecting a feminine performance, she is unable to enter a relationship because of her severe identity and agonizes over this loss. The alternative that Mary Krull provides for lesbian identities is just as frustrating as the one Mrs. Dalloway exemplifies, leaving little hope for the possibilities of future queer identities.

Ultimately, it is the writing process that enables the women of *The Hours* to comprehend their identities: Mrs. Woolf serves as the writer of the text, Mrs. Brown the reader and Mrs. Dalloway the character. As Leavenworth acknowledges, "ideas of reading and writing, of readers and writers, of the impact of literature on our lives are central to Cunningham's novel. All the principal characters are in some way controlled by narratives" (516). Even beyond the

three women, other characters are affected by and affect the writing process and the idea of reading and writing saturates many aspects of the novel. Through her writing, Mrs. Woolf is expressing her own frustrations of her identity as a woman who has loved another woman, who has come to her senses and married a man, and who has contemplated suicide, as the character of Clarissa Dalloway has in her notes for the novel. Similarly, when reading *Mrs. Dalloway* and thinking of Virginia Woolf, Mrs. Brown is able to comprehend her own existence and her frustration with it. Mrs. Dalloway's existence is most influenced by the writing process, as it is formed around the character she is emulating. Like Clarissa Dalloway, Mrs. Dalloway experiences a queer kiss. However, because the kiss is placed in a more contemporary time period, Mrs. Dalloway is given the opportunity to enter a same-sex relationship that is not available to Clarissa Dalloway. Analyzing this retelling, James Schiff states, "because of the cultural climate, Woolf was compelled to live a relatively secret and encoded sexual existence, and her character Clarissa Dalloway, whose sexual orientation would appear to be largely toward women, ends up in a rather chaste, heterosexual marriage" (367). Where neither Mrs. Woolf nor her character is able to live a life in which her queer identity is revealed, Mrs. Dalloway is given the capability to enter a same-sex relationship and demonstrate a queer identity.

The other significant writing that occurs in this section of the novel is Richard's writing, as two of the women are cast as characters in his novel and in his poetry; the identities of Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Dalloway are influenced by Richard's perception of them. As another published writer, Richard "will carry on the legacy of Virginia Woolf" (Hughes 355). He, like Mrs. Woolf, yearns to write about his struggle to obtain a queer identity and write about those who have shared in his struggle. Revealing his intentions to Mrs. Dalloway, Richard claims, "I wanted to write about you, about us, really. Do you know what I mean? I wanted to write about

everything, the life we're having and the lives we might have had. I wanted to write about all the ways we might die" (Cunningham 67). Though Richard has already written a novel (which was largely unsuccessful) about Mrs. Dalloway and their experiences together, he feels that the story is incomplete. In a sense, he hopes to recreate *The Hours* the way that Cunningham recreated *Mrs. Dalloway* by writing about the different choices Mrs. Dalloway may have made if given the chance to live again. Mrs. Dalloway is recast in the same role in Richard's novel as she is in Woolf's and Cunningham's and is ultimately unable to escape her identity as a character. Richard's mother, Mrs. Brown, on the other hand, is immortalized in his poetry as sorrowful and defeated, in much the same way that Mrs. Brown remembers Virginia Woolf. Mrs. Dalloway reflects upon the character Richard created when meeting Mrs. Brown and thinks, "Here she is, then...here is the woman from Richard's poetry. Here is the lost mother, the thwarted suicide; here is the woman who walked away. It is both shocking and comforting that such a figure could, in fact, prove to be an ordinary-looking old woman" (Cunningham 221). As a character, Mrs. Brown's inability to perform the role of a housewife is what is recorded and emphasized, when in reality, she presents as a normal woman.

When considering the legacy of Richard's works, Mrs. Dalloway realizes that, though his writing may provide immortality for those characters he has created, it is most likely that "some of them, a handful, are good, and of that handful, only a few survive...Clarissa, the figure in the novel, will vanish, as will Laura Brown, the lost mother, the martyr and fiend" (Cunningham 225). The promise of permanence afforded by the writing process is slim and the survival of the novels cannot be assumed. Still, at the end of the novel, Richard seems to echo Mrs. Woolf herself through his writing of deviant women, particularly because of his exploration of the different choices available to women. The writers are further connected as a result of the suicide

that claims Richard's life at the end of the book. Like Mrs. Woolf, and the other women, Richard feels that he has failed at his task, as he is unable to create a novel like *Mrs. Dalloway*. He admits, "I've failed...I have. I'm not looking for sympathy. Not really. I just feel so sad. What I wanted to do seemed simple. I wanted to create something alive and shocking enough that it could stand beside a morning in somebody's life. The most ordinary morning" (Cunningham 199). Like Mrs. Woolf, Richard looks back and believes he was not successful at his work, at writing something that could survive and prove meaningful to readers. In the end, the novel comes full circle, as Richard becomes the Virginia Woolf of the 1990s, leaving the characters in his works either to be forgotten or celebrated after his death.

An understanding of Woolf as a feminist icon influences interpretations of the women in the novel and the experiences they encounter. As Laurence asks, "Is Virginia Woolf a gendered novelist? Do only women read and like her?" (371). Traditionally, Woolf has attracted a mostly feminine readership, an idea portrayed in *The Hours*. The women in Cunningham's novel, like Woolf, suppress same-sex sexual urges and struggle to break the routine of day-to-day life. Because of Woolf's reputation, the characters are able to form a feminine community, linked by their struggle against heteronormativity. Yet these women are only able to unite and form a queer community because their shared gender is combined with their common race and class, as all three women are white and are either middle-class or upper-class. These shared characteristics contribute to the similar social pressures urging them to be able to control a household, to serve others, and to host parties. The novel, by contrast, reveals the distrust these women have of others of different races and social classes, suggesting that a mutual race and class is necessary to form a feminine community. Mrs. Woolf distrusts her servant Nelly; Kitty assigns blame to Mrs. Brown for instigating their kiss because she is the more foreign in

appearance of the two and therefore more likely to be the predator. Overall, their gender, race and class provide them with the chance to figuratively unite and express their queer identities whereas others may not have that opportunity.

Though bound by the societally constructed roles of heteronormative society, Mrs. Woolf, Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Dalloway recognize their own dissatisfaction with their identities and attempt to test the societal boundaries that restrain them. However, the power to express a deviant identity is limited and is controlled by constructions of race, class and gender. Ultimately, none of the women is able to dismiss her hostess-identity and they all adhere instead to their roles as wives and mothers. In this regard, Mrs. Dalloway's narrative proves to be the most significant, as she is able to enter a queer relationship, unlike the other women. Despite her same-sex relationship, even she cannot assume an ideal queer identity, as she remains by Richard's side, allowing him to call her by a nickname that attempts to force her to conform to a heteronormative role. Because the women are unable to embody fully the queer identities they long to possess, they become tragic figures. *The Hours* becomes not only an imitation of *Mrs. Dalloway*, but a commentary on the bleak future for queer individuals, as the heteronormative society that restricts them has yet to allow for much needed change. The women in the novel comment on the inability of society to adapt to expressions of queer sexualities, as the fear of queer identities has not changed despite encompassing a seventy-year time period. As such, the problematized feminine roles presented in *Mrs. Dalloway* continue to be relevant in contemporary society and, as a result, the novel urges for societal change for the future Mrs. Dalloways.

Conclusion:

The understanding of queer individuals that is promoted in the novels *The Book of Salt* and *The Hours* is problematic, because in both novels no individuals can entirely reject the heteronormative boundaries that surround them and express their queer sexualities. Instead, these characters are restricted by society and forced either to repress their sexualities or participate in gender performances to find social acceptance. As such, queer identities are complicated in the novels, even for the historic figures that are represented. Still, both novels acknowledge discourse as an important factor in changing the fate of queer individuals; this idea is especially accentuated through the authors' choice of incorporating famously queer writers into their novels. Through examining the novels themselves as an extension of this discourse, an understanding of the struggle of queer individuals is encouraged by the texts.

As Truong and Cunningham demonstrate through their novels, queer communities are problematized through the persistent exclusions practiced by queer individuals. As Foucault acknowledges, communities are formed based on common identities that not only rely on a shared sexuality, but also a shared race, class and ethnicity. The women in *The Hours* are able to figuratively unite because of their common struggle against patriarchal oppression, but also because they belong to the same racial and class group. A brief glimpse at the fear of foreignness is seen in the kitchen with Mrs. Brown as she is assumed to be the more deviant woman because, when comparing Mrs. Brown and Kitty, Mrs. Brown is the most foreign in appearance and is therefore more easily assumed to be a fiend. Mrs. Woolf furthers this exclusionary practice as she distrusts and dislikes her servant Nelly and can only delight in

expressing her freedoms in the presence of Nelly, all the while knowing Nelly could never exhibit sexual freedoms in the same way. *The Book of Salt* examines this issue at length, as Binh can never enter the queer society in Paris simply because he is of another race and class. Though Binh is a culinary artist, a queer individual, and an expatriate, he cannot share these identities with the community that enters the Stein and Toklas household because hierarchies of race and class prevent Binh from entering that community. Both novels depict the problems of exclusion that are prevalent and problematic in queer communities, as queer individuals are not only repressed by the society that surrounds them, but by the queer communities they attempt to join.

Another problematic aspect of queer communities that continues to exist in contemporary depictions of queer individuals is the pressure to conform to heteronormative ideals, which ultimately demonstrates Butler's concept of gender performativity. *The Hours* clearly presents the problem of gender performativity through the narratives of each of the women, as Mrs. Woolf, Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Dalloway struggle to act as a wife and mother should. They are frustrated with these roles and feel that they are not naturally inclined to perform them. As such, the women are eager to shed these obligations and reveal their queer identities. Further problematizing the concept of gender performance, the lesbian couple of each novel is pressured to perform as a heterosexual married couple. In *The Book of Salt*, Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas act as husband and wife. Gertrude Stein easily accepts the role of the husband, adopting more masculine obligations around the household while Toklas performs as the wife, taking up the feminized responsibilities. Similarly, in *The Hours* Clarissa Vaughn and her partner, Sally, are also revealed to present as husband and wife, performing heteronormative gender roles, as is most evident as Clarissa Vaughn acts as a typical housewife while she is preparing for a party. This persistence of the exhibition of gender performativity for the contemporary queer woman is

foreboding, as even in the 1990s, lesbian couples are expected to present as straight couples and assume performances of “normalcy.” The only other option that is presented is exhibited by Mary Krull, who persists in gaining attention, though she herself is performing as a hostile individual. As a result of this other possible performative role, Mary Krull cannot enter a relationship, as her performance suggests an opposition to this normative practice. Ultimately, gender performativity constricts the possibilities for queer individuals, particularly queer women, preventing them from exhibiting their true identities.

The only hopeful suggestion that is supplied by the novels for combating the difficulties surrounding queer identities is the propagation of a discourse on sexuality, an idea popularized by Foucault that still remains relevant. In the novels, discourse takes the form of reading and writing and is helpful in allowing the characters to understand their sexual identities by relating with others as readers and also by writing about their struggles and true identities. In *The Hours*, each of the characters is able to examine his or her own queerness through the writing process. The characters interact with the writing process in various ways, becoming readers, writers and even characters. Each of these roles allows the characters to form understandings of their own identities as they express their true identities in their writing or read about shared frustrations in the writing of others. The novels even facilitate discourse themselves, promoting understandings of sexual identities to readers through their presentations of queer characters.

However, even the concept of discourse becomes problematized as some individuals are excluded from the writing process because of their race and class. This exclusion is most apparent in *The Book of Salt*, as Binh is unable to contribute his own story to the literary world because he is not of a privileged position in society. Stein and Toklas, on the other hand, are able to write about their own lives and the lives of others because of the power they obtain as

upper-class Americans. In fact, their authority enables them to control Binh's own story, knowing he does not have the power to rebel. As a result, the novel does recognize problems with the seeming solution of discourse, as power to control discourse is directly related to a person's race and class and is therefore not available to all queer individuals.

Still, the novels leave readers to wonder if the words created by the characters could even survive in the manner of the writings of the historic figures that grace the pages of the novels. Though writing innately contributes to a feeling of permanence, the discourse ceases to become significant without obtaining readership. The historic writers portrayed in the novels have paved the way for other writers who intend to express queer sexualities in the pages of their writing. However, many of the other portrayed writers still struggle to create meaningful and permanent works. For Binh, this inability to write resides in his being a member of the lower class and being Vietnamese. Without speaking the language of a privileged class, Binh cannot write a story that will survive. For Richard Brown, who is a privileged white male and therefore has the power to create works that will be read and can survive, the inability stems from the fact that his novel, which is the most important personal work he creates, is condemned by a society that is reluctant to accept obvious and emotional portrayals of seemingly abnormal sexual identities. Even when considering the works of Stein and Woolf, a sense of removal is present that protects the reader from too closely encountering the deviant identities presented in the novels. Stein's *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* demonstrates this sense of removal as the novel is introduced as an ironic autobiography that is filtered through the words of another. Woolf's protagonist Clarissa Dalloway similarly distances herself from her queer identity as she does not accept her same-sex kiss as a manifestation of her latent queer desire and instead dismisses the kiss as a

childish fancy. As a result of this understanding, the reader finds that discourse is problematic and needs a more progressive audience for encouraging understandings of queer identities.

When analyzing the success of the novels, a significant commonality connects the two; both novels include portrayals of celebrated queer writers. The writers, Gertrude Stein, Alice Toklas and Virginia Woolf are remembered as iconic figures: Stein and Toklas are heralded as a progressive lesbian couple and Woolf is regarded as an influential feminist writer. However, their fictional counterparts, as presented in the novels, do not correspond with these positive reputations. In fact, through the depictions in these novels, the writers are found to be less progressive, as they are unable to shed the constraints of heteronormativity and they instead reinforce societal hierarchies. Mrs. Woolf looks down upon her servant, Nelly, despite a shared feminine gender, contradicting her feminist ideologies. Stein and Toklas exploit their cook Binh and ignore his queer identification, excluding him from the queer community that gathers in their household. These understandings of the famous writers problematize connotations of progress, particularly when examining similar sexual and gender identities.

Truong and Cunningham approach problematic social receptions of queer individuals differently in their novels. Truong actively attempts to address the hierarchies present in queer communities while Cunningham concentrates on the evolution of queer identities for women expressing fluid sexualities. Both issues are significant and the authors skillfully attract attention to social exclusions. As such, both novels are progressive in their own right, though Cunningham's novel has gained more popularity. However, Truong's novel significantly analyzes the hierarchies perpetuated within queer communities as queer individuals exclude others who share similar struggles, making her novel importantly critique the repression that prevents all queer individuals from uniting based on a common identity. Both novels are able to

convey the effects of persistent social barriers, emphasizing the extent that heteronormative societies affect the construction of identities, and the novels are heralded for their success. However, Truong's novel should be acknowledged for not only criticizing the heteronormative society that only encourages expressions of heterosexuality, but also analyzing the significant repression that occurs within queer communities and needs to be combated in order to achieve larger social change.

The novels *The Book of Salt* and *The Hours* are not the only works to present famous queer figures and examine queer identities through the lens created by the fictionalized historic figures. Similar works include Colm Tóibín's *The Master*, in which the writer Henry James is presented as struggling with his own homosexuality at a time when the society vastly disapproved of homosexual acts. Tony Kushner's well-known two part play *Angels in America* introduces the historic figure of Roy Cohn, who battles with his real-life counterpart's fatal contraction of AIDS and becomes obsessed with denying the truth of the disease to retain the political power he has garnered during his career. Noël Alunit's *Letters to Montgomery Clift* portrays a young boy who turns to the famous actor Montgomery Clift for an understanding of his sexuality, as Clift himself was bisexual and struggled to accept his identity. The examination of queer identities in these works through the inclusion of fictionalized queer historic figures seems to introduce an emerging genre of literature. These similar works are centered on the curiosity that surrounds historic figures and their queer identities, as the authors take these curiosities and entrap them in novels that question portrayals of sexuality. The novels interestingly generate discourse surrounding fictional queer characters as a result of the depiction of historic queer figures.

The Book of Salt and *The Hours* both introduce problematized depictions of queer individuals. The frustrations that are embodied by the protagonists of the novels extend to a contemporary time, and as such, present struggles that are still relevant. As the novels express, problems still exist with regards to exclusion and forced performativity. The discourse created by the novels can only begin to expose these problems and attempt to dismantle heteronormative societal boundaries. As a result, the characters portrayed in the novels will be remembered as the historic figures are; they are individuals who struggle to escape a patriarchal and heteronormative society but ultimately are unable to realize fully their queer identities.

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