also in Venice with his new love. Oswaldo, a generation or more older than the others and the only unpaired character, created the foundation that funds Vera's stay and hosts his quasi-adoptive daughter Lucinde in Venice. Too old to believe in the permanence of love, he wants to create memorials of and for himself in a building, which he hires Anton to design, and in a portrait he hires Vera to paint.

Marriage of the Sea constructs its La Ronde of coupling and decoupling between a prologue introducing the cast of characters and a final chapter, appropriately entitled “Carnival,” in which masks slip to reveal new possibilities. Each of the many very brief chapters focuses on the actions and/or thoughts of one individual: Lach’s complacent memories, Max’s delighted exploration of New Orleans, Lucinde’s mirror-gazing self-absorption, Oswaldo’s ruminations on Venice. This includes some wonderfully satisfying passages. With the precision of a master draftsman, Alison limns Josephine’s visits to her fertility specialist—a man unerringly, almost hatefully, optimistic—and brilliantly evokes the time-warping, bitter blend of hope and fear that follows each attempt. Max creates a Futurist banquet meant to seduce Lucinde’s senses, replete with extravaganzas like Love on the Nile, “a pyramid of sticky dates in a pool of wine [surrounded by] little cubes of mozzarella stuffed with coffee beans and pistachios” and dusted with aphrodisiacal coriander. She doesn’t eat a thing.

But though Jane Alison’s prose yields much pleasure, her approach frustrates as well. Because she chooses not to flesh out her characters’ backgrounds, much remains puzzling, sometimes annoyingly so. What are we to make, for instance, of the barely mentioned drowning of Anton’s father—perhaps an accident, perhaps a suicide—and its impact on him? What about Lucinde’s terror of emotional involvement? It appears to stem from her parents’ having married her off as a child bride to her bankrupted father’s business partner. But that’s our inference, and in any event it does not adequately explain her behavior. Max-the-food-scholar and Anton-the-architect blur into each other; Vera, who is presented almost entirely via Lach’s monstrous selfishness, simply blurs. We are meant to take all of them as gifted and creative people with exceptionally, indeed enviably, interesting careers and a passion for language and beauty, but we have to accept their gifts on faith: perhaps because most of them are visual artists, Jane Alison can only describe the products of their creativity and not give us any samples.

Alison is herself a gifted person with a passion for language and for beauty, as The Marriage of the Sea amply attests. But with the partial exception of Josephine, her people are curiously bloodless, less alive than the cities they love. The novel, like some of the unnecessarily elaborate dishes at Max’s Futurist banquet, may be just a bit too self-consciously and artfully inventive, at least for my taste.

—Josephine Woll, Howard University

The Book of Salt
Monique Truong
261 pp. $24.00 (cloth)

Trac came to us through an advertisement that I had in desperation put in a newspaper. It began captivatingly for those days: “Two American ladies wish—” (p.186)

So notes Alice B. Toklas in her chapter on servants in her eponymous cookbook, The Alice B. Toklas Cookbook. Lodged amid recipes imparted to her by servants during her sojourn in Paris at 27 rue de Fleurus with her partner Gertrude Stein are tales about the various cooks who passed through her home in the 1930s. Drawing its inspiration from Toklas’s words is The Book of Salt, a first novel by Vietnamese American writer Monique Truong. Thin Binh, Truong’s protagonist, is a composite of two former cooks, Nguyen and Trac, to whom Toklas fleetingly alludes in her chapter on servants. Within and through Toklas’s slippages, Truong paints a portrait of the life of the partly historical, partly fictive Thin Binh, a gay Vietnamese cook who is employed for five years as the live-in cook for Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas.

For Toklas, Trac and Nguyen are merely part of a cast of characters that add color to her recipes. The specificities of their cultural histories, for instance, are frequently contradictory: Trac is referred to interchangeably as IndoChinese and Chinese, or Asiatic. Truong works productively within these narratival elisions and with the public’s fascination with the “Steins” to imagine what the life of the live-in cook might be like were he able to describe his intimacy with the going-ons at 27 rue de Fleurus.

The novel begins in Paris’s Gare du Nord with Binh bidding farewell to his employers as they embark on their return to the United States. Through a series of flashbacks to Binh’s days as a young cook in a Vietnam, still under the threos of French colonialism, to his time as a galley hand aboard the Niobe, a freighter that runs between Saigon and Marseilles, through the five years that he spends as the live-in cook for the “Steins,” Monique Truong poignantly evokes the vicissitudes of exilic displacement. Despite its evocative descriptions of food, The Book of Salt is not a work of gastropornography.
Truong’s depiction of colonial Vietnam conjures up the lushness of the culinary landscape of Binh’s homeland, but the narrative is more about Binh’s existence as a laborer, preparing meals for the governor-general in the colonial outposts of the French empire, as well as in the home of fellow (albeit more privileged) exiles, than it is about gratuitously describing the “exotic” appeal of Southeast Asian cuisines. Through memories of Binh’s mother in the kitchen, to his work with a chef in the kitchen at the governor-general’s residence in Saigon, to the seduction of his boss that fuels his exit to France on board the Niobe as the galley cook, and to his life in the Stein home, Truong affectively narrates how Binh’s life revolves around food, but specifically through his labor in culinary vocations.

With the appearance on bookshelves of novels such as Diana Abu-Jaber’s Crescent (2003), Bharti Kirchner’s Pastries (2003), Ruth Ozeki’s “meat and potatoes” novels, My Year of Meats and All Over Creation (2003), and David Wong Louie’s The Barbarians Are Coming (2000), there is no shortage of writing that links the materiality of racial formation for Asian Americans with the affective register of culinary practices. Whereas Asian Americans have long been associated with their foodways, those deemed “exotic” and appetizing as well as those deemed viscerally offensive and unpalatable, this newer crop of culinary-themed novels is increasingly asking what it means to root and route one’s understanding of Asianness through culinary practice. In exemplary fashion Monique Truong’s debut novel recasts the terms through which we configure the relationship between food and Asianness, so that, instead of asking for what food can tell us about the cultural lives of Asians in diaspora, readers are obliged to reflect on how the positions of Asians in the global economy tells us something about the invisible labor behind our food cultures and how it comes to pass that Vietnamese subjects—real or imagined—who were denied agency and the means to speak, found their way into the hearts, palates, and homes of one of the most renowned culinary figures of mid-twentieth-century American exile culture.

—Anita Mannur, Wesleyan University

How We Eat: Appetite, Culture, and the Psychology of Food
Leon Rappaport
Toronto: ecw Press, 2003
224 pp. $15.95 (paper)

One need go no further than Freud to find a link between the topics of food and psychology, since it was he who identified the route by which our earliest experience of nursing provides us with a template for love. But Freud is not the only psychologist to see that food and what we feel about it is a key component of any full picture we might construct of the human psyche. For some, like Abraham Maslow, eating is a basic need that must be fulfilled before the higher needs can be attended to. Now we are in an era where grand theories are few and far between. Psychologists are subspecialists who tend to focus on very specific phenomena, such as eating disorders. Among other things this means that we tend to focus on the abnormal or problematic aspects of eating and ignore its role in basic (and healthy) psychological processes.

This means that the focus of Leon Rappaport’s book, How We Eat, is welcome, as much for its implicit message as for its specific content. The book, which covers a broad range of topics regarding the habits, values, and feelings people associate with food and eating, conveys the strong message that eating (and what surrounds it) is an essential and interesting part of everyday life. If we learn how people eat, we will understand a great deal more than that—we will learn what they value, how they deal with conflict, and what might differ between individuals and cultures. However, it also must be said that the book suffers from its greatest strength. Rappaport clearly wants to reach a wide audience and speak to them about a broad range of phenomena, which in his mind are related to one another. The book ranges from differences between cultures (he describes Parkman’s first taste of puppy dog on the Oregon trail and his wife’s encounter with German disdain for corn on the cob—“pig food”) to recent research linking the consumption of sugar and to aggressive outbursts. This kind of breadth coupled with a wonderfully accessible style draws the book into superficiality.

The clues that it might have been otherwise appear early in the book when Rappaport tells us that his original interest in people’s eating customs grew out of his conviction that food was a vital bridge linking us to the natural world and that for the most part food experts (chefs, food writers, and food sociologists and psychologists) avoided the animal-like (“tooth and claw”) aspects of eating because it was simply “too bloody.” He also felt, early on in his scholarly endeavors, that food had become increasingly ambiguous as an expression of specific cultures in modern times (the globalization of cuisines and eating habits and the rapid shifts in cultures have watered down the customs and foods that might be a key to a specific community). The overall idea implicit in his original interest is that the way we eat is meaningful. However, as he began to do research for the book, he discovered that there was huge variety to the phenomena: