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# Food and Imagination: An Interview with Monique Truong

MONIQUE TRUONG IS A VIETNAMESE-AMERICAN novelist and food essayist based in Brooklyn, New York. After earning a degree in literature from Yale University, in 1995 she graduated from Columbia University School of Law and started working as an intellectual property attorney. After three years, she quit her job to devote herself to writing full-time. When in 2015 the Southern Foodways Alliance, an academic institution based at the University of Mississippi, invited her to speak at their eighteenth symposium, Truong began her talk with a revelatory biographical statement: “I was born in Saigon, South Vietnam, in 1968. I was reborn in Boiling Springs, North Carolina, in 1975. Not a rebirth in the religious sense of the word, but in the shape-shifting transformation that refugees and immigrants undergo upon our arrival here in the United States with a new language, often a new name and always a new daily bread. We necessarily become someone new” (Mason 2015).

Monique Truong’s metamorphosis began at the age of seven. In April of 1975, she was forced to leave Vietnam with her mother, but what started as a temporary precautionary measure to escape bombings soon turned into a permanent exilic condition. A few weeks later, Communist North Vietnamese forces captured Saigon and her father, a high-level executive for an oil company, left on a boat to join his family. As a consequence, Boiling Springs, NC, became for Monique Truong the initial arena to experience what would prove to be a long series of transformations, the first of which was—predictably—linguistic: “I didn’t add the English language to my Vietnamese; I traded it wholesale,” claims the writer, who included the result of this trade among the several losses that determined her negotiation between assimilation and distinctiveness. Caught between two countries, neither of which she could really call “home,” Monique Truong expressed her feeling of being trapped in “in-betweenness,” eventually stating that Vietnam is just an “S-curve stretch that I bear on my body like a tattoo . . . a secret scar to keep” (Truong 2003). The “green dragon tattoo” inscribed somewhere on her body also evokes the same permanent signs that the colonial conquest has inscribed on the body of Vietnam, eventually transforming both images into a seductive

iconic representation of exotic myths. As a result, the demystification of enduring colonial fantasies is a major concern in many of her writings.

A second transformation affected her given name: from Dung, “a name that became literally a dirty word,” to Monique, “a name on my Catholic baptismal certificate.” But proper names, what may seem mere combinations of signs to which articulation we instinctively turn to reply, are in fact a re/collection of memories, flavors, histories, and cultural traditions. What is more, Truong’s Asianness was frequently challenged by some of her American classmates, who used to call her “chink” or “jap” or “gook,” making her aware of her physical difference: her appearance started to define a person that she could not recognize.

And finally, the third transformation involved her daily bread: “hickory-smoked baked bacon, big slices of sugarcured ham, and country sausages with black pepper and generous with sage,” which offered her comfort and companionship while responding to her childhood desire to belong. Food has thus played a crucial role in her identity reformulation as a young girl moving from one geographical south to another; new food and culinary practices often became the tools to unpack and idealistically soothe grief, loss, invisibility, and denial of agency.

Truong’s fascination with food pervades most of her works. Her first novel, *The Book of Salt* (Houghton Mifflin, 2003), a national best seller and recipient of many awards, is the story of Binh, a gay Vietnamese cook who works in the Parisian kitchen of the renowned lesbian couple formed by Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas.<sup>1</sup> The novel starts in Paris’s Gare du Nord in 1934 as Binh’s employers are about to return to their home country. Chef Binh, who has worked for them for the past five years, is left with a hard decision to make: to follow them to America, to go back to Vietnam, or to stay in Paris. Before finding out his final decision, Truong’s readers are engaged with Binh’s reminiscence of those five years in France and of his previous life in Saigon. As I argue elsewhere (Fargione 2013), in *The Book of Salt* Truong confronts the different metamorphoses that immigrants are compelled to face, often



FIGURE 1: *Author Monique Truong.*  
 PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHELE PANDURI METALLI © 2013

losing cultural and linguistic distinctiveness. At the same time, however, they can often transform the new spaces they end up inhabiting, together with the stories and the languages used to narrate them.<sup>2</sup> Binh, for instance, exemplifies the condition of the silenced affective laborer, but his reaction to this imposed invisibility occurs through the creative use of a unique gastronomical language that he invents in order to translate and rewrite his own story.

*Bitter in the Mouth* (Random House, 2010), Truong's second novel, explores the concepts of displacement and estrangement in a very unconventional way. Her coming of

age novel engages Linda, an Asian girl who grows up in the '70s in Boiling Springs, NC, and whose many secrets include rape, hidden adoption, and lexical-gustatory synesthesia. The latter is one form of "otherness," which may be defined as a neurological condition that causes the involuntary mixing of the senses. The random association of words to different foods eventually allows her to understand her relationship with the many people in her life (her overweight best friend, her gay great-uncle, her first secret affair, and her oddly distant mother), while constantly disrupting the interaction of visibility and invisibility as her racial body keeps being hidden in plain

sight. What finally proves to be more an undisclosed mode of experiencing the world than a form of disability will permit Truong to reconfigure a variety of different Souths.

Author of numerous essays and contributions to journals and food magazines (*New York Times' T Magazine*, *Real Simple*, *Town & Country*, *Condé Nast Traveler*, *Allure*, *Saveur*, *Food & Wine*, *Gourmet*, etc.), Monique Truong is currently writing her third novel, tentatively titled *The Sweetest Fruits* and based on the life of Greek-born writer Lafcadio Hearn (1850–1904). This academic year she is also teaching a fiction writing workshop at Baruch College in New York City.

In the following interview, which took place in her Brooklyn apartment in August 2015, Monique Truong sheds new light on the interlacings of food, language, and identity formation.

DANIELA FARGIONE: Your fascination with food is evident in all your work and not only in your novels. Some of your essays, for instance, tell us stories of fig trees and mangosteens, of pies and parsley and much more. When and how did this passion for food begin?

MONIQUE TRUONG: Certainly, it began with my mom. She's a wonderful cook, and if she were answering this question for me, she would say that my passion for food began when I was a little baby. I was a voracious eater even then because the baby food she prepared for me was homemade and delicious, she would say. But I would say that it began when I came to the United States as a child. I was six, almost seven years old, and food became very much a part of my imagination: I felt that if only my mother knew how to make American food, I would somehow become *more* American. Just based on that statement alone, you can see that this was a double-edged idea that was dependent upon a perceived deficiency about the foods that she cooked for us, mostly Vietnamese and French dishes. I started to do things on my own; I started to read cookbooks, trying to cook for myself the things that I thought would make me more American.

DF: So, when you talk about cookbooks, you talk about *American* cookbooks, very traditional American foods and dishes, right?

MT: Yes, for example, the Betty Crocker cookbooks. I mean, this was not fine dining. I wanted to make things like meatloaf! I was fascinated by the idea of meatloaf or chocolate cakes and these things called “cookies,” pies, and mashed potatoes . . . things that my mother would never make or would make a much finer French version of them. It took me a long time, for example, before I figured out that a meatloaf was actually a very simple *pâté de campagne* or that a pie was a rus-

tic *tarte*. I think my passion for food truly began when I connected it with the idea of transformation and identity or rather identity building.

DF: For about a year you also wrote a monthly food column for the *New York Times' T Magazine* and your contribution to food journals and magazines has been consistent over the years. How does your writing change according to the different genre, publication, and reader typologies?

MT: I would hope that my sensibility, my approach, and my relationship to food are present whether I'm writing literary fiction or I'm writing for a women's magazine. Certainly, at the most fundamental level, the difference among the different formats is a question of pages and word count. If I have a whole novel to explore the ideas that I have in mind, of course, I can do so in a more complicated and complex way, but if I have seven hundred words to work with, the article or essay has to be much more economical and, perhaps, less nuanced. It's just the nature of the beast, as they say. But I do hope that the fundamentals of what truly interests me about food—may it be the political, socioeconomical, or historical—are still there no matter what genre.

DF: An interview for the *PEN Ten* reveals that your fascination with food may even be considered as a real “obsession.” However, you also explain that it is not what's on your plate that interests you the most, rather it's “the ritual of cooking and eating, the secret language of dishes and ingredients, and the thin line between labor and exploitation.” What do you mean by that?

MT: Unfortunately, when some writers think about food, they think: everyone eats, so how hard can it be? They end up writing about food in a simplistic or mundane way. It's analogous to writing about sex: everyone has sex (hopefully) but that doesn't mean that everyone can write about sex in a way that's compelling. If you're a writer who approaches the theme of sex and sexuality only from the moment of copulation, let's say, then that's the same as a writer who writes about food only from the moment that it lands on the plate. That's not really the interesting part.

DF: It is so intriguing that you came up with the analogy of sex, since I feel this has a lot to do with the idea of pleasure and identity. I also imagine this is intertwined with that “thin line between labor and exploitation” that we mentioned before. It comes up, for instance, in *The Book of Salt*...

MT: Yes, I see “this line between labor and exploitation” especially within the context of restaurants. During this past decade in the United States, there has been this rise in the fame of celebrity chefs on TV and elsewhere. What I've long

thought about is that behind each of these celebrity chefs and their restaurants are the undocumented workers, who make it possible for the restaurants to exist. People often complain about how expensive restaurant food is in London, let's say; actually, restaurant food in New York City, where I live, should be as expensive, but it's kept at a more affordable price point because of the exploitation of undocumented workers that goes on behind the scenes. I'm referring to the line cooks, the dishwashers, the busboys, etc. No one wants to talk about that. They only want to focus on the pleasure that's on the plate as opposed to the fact that the people in the kitchen do not have citizenship or health insurance. Those "illegal aliens" are the people who are physically handling your food, not the celebrity chefs! And those men and women who are handling your food cannot have access to adequate health insurance?

DF: What do you think of food pornography, the glamorized glorification of food?

MT: I think of "food pornography" in the same way that I think of pornography. It's simple pleasure and exploitation. Let me substitute "simple" with "simplistic." Most of the time when people think of food pornography, they think of something on television, all those cooking shows where they actually use shot names taken from pornographic filmmaking. The directors of the cooking shows talk about "positions," and they even talk about "money shots," which is a term directly taken from pornographic films. To me, there's another more subtle form of food pornography: a discussion about food that celebrates the chefs without once talking about the other people in the kitchen who make it possible for them to shine. I remember a story on National Public Radio about a year ago that asked: what can we learn from chefs about organizing our own lives? The conclusion was that chefs have a phenomenal organizational system called "mise en place," which basically means that all of their ingredients are already prepped, ready, and organized, which then allows them to cook in a highly efficient way. So the lesson that this radio piece wanted us to take away was: "mise en place" is how we should live our lives, in and out of the kitchen. Yet, the piece never explained what it takes to have "mise en place" in a restaurant. It takes all those men and women who work for less than minimum wage; it takes their undervalued labor to have everything in place. *Never* did that idea come up. To me, that's also a form of food pornography.

DF: One of the major challenges that your characters need to face in their complex personal stories is their status of

"doubleness." How does food participate in their multiple duplicities?

MT: For an immigrant, a refugee, or a racial or ethnic other, there's often a difference between the food that you eat in public and the food that you eat at home. That goes hand in hand with the language that you speak in public versus the language that you speak at home. There's a clear linguistic divide, and you need both languages to survive. The language spoken at home is the language of love and family. Similarly, the food eaten at home is the food of comfort and belonging. We learn to pivot back and forth, to create a "double" of ourselves who can go into the public realm to attend school or to work. That's how we survive the trauma and loneliness of displacement, immigration, or racism. Of course, the characters in my work of fiction would reflect this doubling in language and in food that I've experienced in my own life.

DF: A recurrent statement in your writings is that "the past is stored in one's mouth." What's the connection between food and memory?

MT: I think of tastes and flavors as a way of time traveling. For example, from where we're now sitting, we can see the fig tree in my backyard. I always think when I'm standing underneath that fig tree, picking a ripe fig and eating it, that this is an act, a flavor, and an experience that people have had for centuries around many parts of the world. It makes me feel connected to history. Tastes and flavors can also be transpor-tive in another way. They can act like a drug, especially for immigrants, refugees, or anyone far from home. When you taste something that you had eaten in a former life, in a former country, it takes you back there, if only for a moment. Your whole body responds, not just your tongue.

DF: Early in *The Book of Salt*, Binh states that "Every kitchen is a homecoming..., a familiar story that I can embellish with saffron, cardamom, bay laurel, and lavender." And yet, you keep warning your readers that nostalgia is treacherous . . .

MT: Well, nostalgia is a longing for the past, and that longing is often triggered by something that's lacking about the present. I believe it would be a more gratifying experience to live fully in the present, but that's one of the things that's very difficult to do for immigrants, refugees, and anyone living far from home. It's hard to be fully committed to the present, because the present is often harsh and not welcoming, and so we end up creating a fantasy of what the past was like. It's precisely the fantasy that concerns me most.

DF: Photography is another recurrent theme in your novels. Photography and food seem to be two effective but tricky

languages: they both reveal as much as they conceal. Do you agree with this statement?

MT: I do. When I incorporate photographs or photography into my work, I'm thinking about the history of photography, and I'm thinking of how it was used initially in the pursuit of "science," but here I'm of course using that word in quotes. Photography, for example, was used to capture the faces and bodies of nonwhite people, our supposed physical differences, the size of our skulls, et cetera, in order to support a theory of our racial inferiority. Photographs were seen as "objective" and served as factual "evidence." Especially in *The Book of Salt*, I use photography as a way to evoke the arrogance of the West: the idea that photography is more objective than memory. And yet, of course, the moment scholars began to "unpack" the photograph we understood that there was a subjective frame, which resulted in the image that's inside versus the one that's outside and unseen. Our understanding of photography now necessarily includes an analysis and critique of who is photographed and who is not. In *The Book of Salt*, I write about a photograph that I had read about in a biography of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas: Stein and Toklas are on the deck of a ship soon to sail for America, and their "Indochinese" cook is on his knees, bent over Toklas's feet, sewing a loose button back onto one of her shoes. Let me be clear: when I read the biographer's description of this tableau, I assumed that she was describing a photograph because the moment was so specific and yet so minor. Who would have remembered this? Who would have written it down in a diary or a journal? Who would have included the "Indochinese" man bent over Toklas's shoes? Sometimes a photograph will contain within its frame something that it did not mean to capture (the stooped back of an "Indochinese" man), and to me that's always the more interesting and intriguing component: the unofficial story, the unintended history.

DF: If we talk about food as language, we can assume that food can be "translated." Of course, when we translate we move from a codified system to another and we need to make changes and adaptations. But then: what about authenticity?

MT: Translations are always happening. You have an emotion, and you want to translate it into words: that's writing. Perhaps this is why I'm comfortable with and always welcome the idea of my work being translated into a different language. It seems to me just another part of an ongoing process, an attempt at communicating. I question the whole notion of authenticity, in all contexts. Let's begin with food. We all have our own interpretation of a dish. Often, in food as in culture, identity, and language, "authenticity" goes hand in hand with

the desire to preserve the past. I'm not interested in the static and the museum-ed; I'm more interested in the way that food, culture, identity, and language change and mutate and adapt.

DF: Your novels have been translated into thirteen languages. What was your first reaction when you read your own work in another language? Have you ever been in contact with your translators?

MT: *The Book of Salt* was first translated into French. That was a big surprise for my literary agents, because they said that the French do not like to read about themselves in works written by non-French authors. Whether that's true or not, I cannot really say, but that was what was communicated to me. So, I was of course very happy about it, and I worked closely with my French translator. I even met him in person a couple of years later in Paris. It was to me—and it continues to be—one of the most unexpected and exciting parts of being an author. This working relationship that I have with some of my translators forces me to reexamine my own writing. I'm confronted by how it can be misinterpreted, especially when a new set of cultural nuances and specificity are introduced by the language of translation.

DF: The publication of *American Grown: The Story of the White House Kitchen Garden and Gardens across America* (2012), the first book by Michelle Obama, recalls the pivotal role of food both in the cultural, political, social, economic life of America, and in the First Lady's health campaign. However, the study of the relationship between agribusiness and health issues such as diabetes, obesity, and all sorts of allergies and intolerances is quite recent. Do you think that writers can contribute to shape a collective awareness?

MT: Yes, but there are obstacles in the way, such as the major food magazines in the United States. I have written for many of them, and often what they want me to include in an article is very different from what *could* be included in an article. For instance, I've been a diabetic since the age of twenty-two, and there hasn't been a single magazine (the online "Yahoo Food" is a rare exception) that has wanted me to include that fact when I'm writing a personal essay for them. As you know, diabetes is an epidemic in the U.S. The food magazines are another form of food pomography: they only want to celebrate the delicious and the pleasurable. They don't want to talk about the other side of food. Magazines, for instance, often publish articles about the health benefits of "organic" foods but without the needed critique that to buy organic is to spend a lot more money than lower-income Americans can afford. What they can purchase is the tomato grown with pesticides versus the

tomato that costs almost six dollars a pound at the farmers market.

DF: In *Bitter in the Mouth* taste is a health condition. What prompted you to write about synesthesia?

MT: With the second novel, I wanted to continue to write about food—because, yes, it is an obsession for me—but I didn’t want to write about it from the same perspective. I think of *The Book of Salt* as a book about taste, while *Bitter in the Mouth* is a book about distaste.

When I heard about synesthesia, a neurological condition that causes the mixing of the senses, and that there was a particular form in which the person experiences flavors (“phantom” flavors is another way to think about it) when he or she speaks or hears words, it seemed like a natural subject for me. The condition ties together the two things that I’m fascinated with: language and food.

In *Bitter in the Mouth*, my narrator Linda Hammerick is growing up in a very small town in the south of the United States in the seventies. When we first meet her, she is six years old. She has a biography that is similar to my own, but I gave her something that fortunately I didn’t have, which is a mother who’s a terrible cook. If you lived in the U.S. in the mid-seventies, you’d know that food here was terrible, especially in the small towns. There was very little beyond the mass-marketed, processed foods in the supermarkets. This is the food that my character grows up with, so these are the flavors that her brain has randomly assigned to her words. I’m sure you’ve seen how often her words trigger the flavors of canned green beans and other canned vegetables, for instance.

Writing about a synesthete also allowed me to describe flavors in unusual and unexpected ways. I tried to consider and conceive flavors as an architectural space that you can enter into, for instance. I described the taste of lemon juice as a ray of sunlight that shines through a high window and the taste of dill as a room where something faintly medicinal had once been stored.

DF: Both *The Book of Salt* and *Bitter in the Mouth* are repositories of many secrets. Can we say that Binh and Linda, the two young protagonists of your novels, have this in common, i.e., many secrets?

MT: Yes, they do have a lot of secrets, and I think this is why I chose the first person voice for both of these novels. As first person narrators, Binh and Linda each tell their own stories. They share the things that they *want* to share with you, the reader, and keep for themselves what they do not want to share until it’s necessary or until they find themselves

comfortable and safe. This is certainly true with Linda, and I think that storytelling, in its purest sense, is what we are doing now: you are asking me questions, and I am responding. In that sense, we know we are always keeping something back, or we are always putting something forward first—things we are more comfortable with, or more confident about. It’s always that process of revealing and concealing, and for me this is the most fertile and fascinating aspect of being a storyteller. I actually cannot imagine writing a book about characters who do not have secrets. . . .

DF: What is the function of recipes and cookbooks in your novels?

MT: There is a line in *The Book of Salt* where I suggest that the only reason why a cook or a chef would write down their recipes is in order to prepare for that day when they are no longer here, in preparation for their death. And I believe this is not the way most people think of a cookbook: they generally think of it as a manual, a how-to, but a cookbook is also a memoir. A recipe, especially in *The Book of Salt*, functions as another instance of revealing and concealing. When Binh talks about his dishes, he never gives you the exact amount of the ingredients. He gives you a description of the dish, and sometimes he gives false recipes with false ingredients. He claims that everyone asks him about the “secret ingredient” in his omelets, and at one point he replies that it is nutmeg. Of course, it’s an absolute lie. He then says that his real secret is the fact that he has been laboring in the kitchen since he was a child. When I approach a cookbook and I see those exact amounts, I’m skeptical: cooking is not a formula; it’s about sensibility and experience; it’s about your own personal preferences.

DF: I know that you are working on a new novel. Are you going to talk about food and cookbooks again?

MT: I am working on a novel, which is based on the life of a Greek Irish writer who lived from 1850 to 1904 and his name is Lafcadio Hearn. It’s going to be told from the perspective of four women in his life. For me the book is about the other side of food, which is hunger. At its most basic meaning, hunger is the lack of food, but here I also intend to explore the hunger for a home or for a family . . .

(Brooklyn, NY – August 17, 2015)

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Monique Truong e-mailed me the following addendum, after our interview:

Toklas wrote a memoir entitled *What Is Remembered* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963). On page 139, she writes



about “our Indochinese servant” Trac and how he sews a button back onto her shoe on the “boat train.” So, THIS is the primary source material for the biographer’s description of the incident. ❸

#### NOTES

1. The awards include the New York Public Library Young Lions Fiction Award, the Bard Fiction Prize, the Stonewall Book Award – Barbara Gittings Literature Award, a PEN Oakland/Josephine Miles National Literary Award, an Association for Asian American Studies Poetry/Prose Award, and a Seventh Annual Asian American Literary Award. For more information, see Monique Truong’s personal website: [www.monique-truong.com](http://www.monique-truong.com).
2. “To migrate,” affirms Salman Rushdie, “is certainly to lose language and home, to be defined by others, to become invisible or,

even worse, a target ... But the migrant is not simply transformed by this act; he transforms his new world” (Rushdie 2010: 210).

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