

Reading Food as Fiction: Reflections on *Writing Hunger* by Monique Truong

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Let me start these reflections on *Writing Hunger* by telling a story about food. In 2010, I visited Chengdu, in the Sichuan province of western China. I was walking on Chunxi Street with a Japanese friend. We had been walking around the hot city all day, and our bodies craved something cold and sweet. We bought cups of bubble tea from a vendor and when we soon grew tired of the sweetness, we threw the cups away in the trash with some of the drink left remaining. Then, a few children rushed up to retrieve our discarded cups. Their action was so quick and sudden that I could not recognize what had happened at first. Leaving our tourists' hands, those two cups of leftover tea became gifts to the boys. The sweet taste of the tea became perhaps a rare treat for them. Chunxi Street is a symbol of Chinese wealth spreading out to the western part of the country. There was even a Japanese supermarket, Ito-Yokado in the city, which represents the wealth brought by global capital. But the children I encountered have clearly been left out of the wealth in the center of the city. The moment I witnessed seemed to expose the poverty behind the wealth of economic growth, and the gaze of many travelers has found similar scenery for hundreds of years. Bubble tea has emerged from the youth culture of Taiwan. At street corners in many global cities, you can find young people drinking cups of bubble tea in a display of their cultural citizenship. For Asian American youth in California, bubble tea could be simply a mark of their cultural heritage in a dominant western culture. On the other hand, the children I saw on the street in Chengdu may pick up cups of bubble tea as part of their struggle to survive.

Monique Truong's literary imagination seems to explore the voices of the vagrants, exiles, refugees and immigrants who have been left out of or behind the opportunism of global civil society, which is similar to the figure of Chinese children looking for leftovers of global wealth at the center of their city. They occupy nearly every corner of the city. The hunger behind global wealth is omnipresent. It is also in Monique Truong's novel, *The Book of Salt*. There are three boys at a marketplace in Saigon who make a precarious living off of sharing the last slurp of broth from a vendor's lunchtime bowl of pho, gained as payment for their services to the vendor. For the French cook Blériot, sharing the same bowl of soup implies an intimate family relationship, and so he wrongly assumes that the boys are biologically related. For Binh, a Vietnamese garde-manger, this poverty-induced intimacy is in fact a mark of degradation. Here I quote Binh's remark on Blériot's assumption about three boys' relationship:

How could he *not* assume a familial relationship after witnessing the boys eating from the

same bowl? Blériot had not lived in Saigon long enough to understand that poverty can turn an act of intimacy into one of degradation. That in this marketplace, eating from the same bowl was the equivalent of pissing in the same pot. It was fine, especially if you were the first to go. (*The Book of Salt* 122)

As Ms. Truong claimed in her lecture, food and eating could be “performance, ritual, replacement, reward, punishment, pleasure, resistance, and as means of creativity and communication.” Eating at the same table is a performative act to form a family, community or any other group and at the same time too much intimacy can be a possible result of hunger and poverty, especially under the gaze of colonizer who degrades and humiliates the colonized subjects.

Ms. Truong said, “we cannot understand the power and the meaning of food, until we understand hunger.” In this context, hunger and food are not necessarily physical or material but can also be spiritual or figurative. Hunger in literature can represent many things. Food to fill your stomach, words to enrich your heart, warmth to protect you from cold, and love to save you from loneliness. Binh, who feels hunger, cold, and loneliness in Paris, represents other Asian American voices like the Filipino worker Carlos who struggled hard during the Great Depression in Bulosan’s *America Is in the Heart*. Carlos wrote, “my insatiable hunger for knowledge and human affection were the two vital forces that made my days of great loneliness and starvation a frantic determination to live” (Bulosan 236). Carlos trained his heart through consuming books to fight his illness and writing stories to change the desperate situation of his fellow workers in America. Binh improved his cooking skill to fulfill his spiritual hunger for respective acknowledgement from others. As Wenying Xu put it, cooking for Binh seems to be a way of constructing his subjectivity through the process of assimilation while retaining his foodways means humiliation and degradation under the colonizer’s gaze (Xu 140). It is noteworthy that both Binh and Carlos are addicted to alcohol and as they lose their appetite for food, their cravings for personal expression increase. What they have in common is the absence of their own story and therefore they long for their own homes, where they can feel safe and comfortable in articulating their own words and sharing multiple stories and experiences.

In Truong’s second book, *Bitter in the Mouth*, a southern girl named Linda Hammerick who grew up in a small town in North Carolina, has a secret that is difficult to share even with her family, friends, and lover. Her synesthesia makes her feel like a stranger in her own family, hometown, and community. Even though the backgrounds of these two novels are very different, both Binh and Linda taste the bitterness of their lives and try to fulfill the hunger of their spirits through sharing their stories at the same table. Their spiritual hunger is represented by the image of the tongue, with its double meaning of eating and articulating. The foods that content the hunger of their spirits are the stories and aesthetic creations born of their literary imaginations. Through sharing the fruits and bitter juices of their stories, they look for their own places to call home.

During her lecture, Ms. Truong shared the first few lines of her third novel, revealing impressive writing that seems to promise that the new novel will be as excellent as her previous efforts. *The Book of Salt* challenges us to retell the modernist narrative from an Asian immigrant point of view. In *Bitter in the Mouth*, Linda's secrets attach a new dimension to the regional novel in the American South. The third novel starts with a ghost story of Lafcadio Hearn, created by the perspectives of four different women, in which Ms. Truong may continue to explore new cultural locations and temporalities for writing hunger.

I would like to conclude my thoughts by proposing three questions for Ms. Truong as a starting point for further discussion.

Q1: Food and literature

Recently, there are more and more works related to food. Most of this writing seems to focus on the social and cultural meanings of food and identity. However, there are relatively few studies of food in the field of literature. What kind of role does food play in literature and other writings?

Q2: Hunger and creativity

In 2014, I attended a symposium related to food and American literature and had a discussion about how writers tend to have less appetite as they drink more alcohol and more concentration on their writings as they feel great hunger. What is the relationship between hunger and creativity? When you write, do you prefer to be full or hungry?

Q3: About the third novel

Your first two novels were written in the first-person narrative. Your third novel, currently in progress, seems to be told from the points of view of four different women. How will you narrate four different voices? Is there any difference, in terms of the narrative method, compared to the two previous works?

Bibliography

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