

Festival Neue Literatur: Monique Truong on Translations

By Guest
Contributor

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This speech by Monique Truong will be delivered this evening to mark the opening of the [Festival Neue Literatur](#) in New York City.

By Monique Truong

“[A] translation, instead of imitating the sense of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original’s way of meaning, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language.” – Walter Benjamin

“[W]riters create national literatures with their language, but world literature is written by translators.” –José Saramago

Now in its sixth year, the Festival Neue Literatur is a celebration of new German-language writings, and I am honored to serve as its inaugural Festival Chair. While we here in New York City are looking forward to welcoming this year’s crop of talented authors from Germany, Austria, and Switzerland and our two featured U.S. authors as well, I want to take a moment to say what should be obvious but, instead, is sometimes overlooked at such international literary gatherings: We—the festival, the authors, the audience members, and the readers—could not convene in this vital way without the works of literary translators and their “form.”



In Walter Benjamin’s 1921 essay, [“The Task of the Translator,”](#) he eloquently argues that literary “translation is a form” in and of its own right, and by that he means an art form. There is, however, a differing strain of thought that relegates the literary translator into the role of the faithful, abiding technician. It insists that a good translation should lull the reader into believing that the work was written in the language of the reader. It downplays that a transformative act has taken place. This denial of the translator’s art form also too conveniently supports the recent and alarming devaluation of their worth and their compensation within the increasingly narrowed economy of publishing.

As an author of two novels that have been translated into thirteen languages, I know firsthand how each of these translations and their respective translators has helped to expand my world. I mean this beyond the sense of my ability to reach new readers. For me, the benefit of being translated begins at the moment of correspondence with the translator. Their questions often require that I re-examine my word choices, my double entendres, my euphemisms, and the implied and secret meanings of my character’s vocabulary. I reveal to my translators the hidden codes of my text. In fact, I consider it less of a revelation and more of an entrustment. I have created my art form, and it is now their turn. I have been fairly compensated for my art form, and they should be as well.

This year, I am especially proud that the Festival Neue Literatur will further broaden the conversation with a panel entitled “For the Love of Translation,” which pairs notable literary translators and their editors, in order to “recount the critical decisions of their editing coordination” and to “demystify their collaboration process.”

When I think of how much smaller my world would be without literary translations, I am bereft. I would be in a literary world without Walter Benjamin, without José Saramago, and without the six remarkable writers from Germany, Austria, and Switzerland featured in this year’s Festival: Marjana Gaponenko, Navid Kermani, Jonas Lüscher, Matthias Nawrat, Monique Schwitter, and Anna Weidenholzer. I invite you to sample in the [Festival Reader](#) their insightful and enthralling contributions to German-language literature and—thanks to the art of their literary translators—contributions to world literature as well.

Monique Truong is a Vietnamese American writer based in Brooklyn, New York. Her first novel, [The Book of Salt](#) (Houghton Mifflin, 2003), was a national bestseller, New York Times Notable Fiction book, and recipient of the New York Public Library Young Lions Fiction Award, among other honors. Her second novel, [Bitter in the Mouth](#) (Random House, 2010), received the American Academy of Arts and Letters’ Rosenthal Family Foundation Award and named a best fiction book of the year by Barnes & Noble and Hudson Booksellers. Truong is a 2015 U.S.-Japan Creative Artists Fellow. She was a 2012 Visiting Writer at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, 2010 Guggenheim Fellow, and 2007 Princeton University’s Hodder Fellow. In the Fall of 2016, Truong will be the Sidney Harman Writer-in-Residence at Baruch College. Truong is a graduate of Yale University and Columbia Law School.