

The Authority of Fiction: An Interview with Monique Truong / Audrey Farley

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Detail from cover of U.K. edition of *Bitter in the Mouth*, published by Chatto & Windus, 2010.

*Monique Truong was born in Saigon, South Vietnam. At the age of six, she came to the United States as a refugee. She grew up in the South, the Midwest, and Texas before earning a B.A. in Literature from Yale University and a J.D. from Columbia University School of Law. After practicing for several years as an intellectual property attorney, she left law to write fiction. Truong has published two award-winning novels: *The Book of Salt* (2003) and *Bitter in the Mouth* (2010). Set in 1934, *The Book of Salt* tells the story of a fictional Vietnamese cook working in the Paris household of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas. *Bitter in the Mouth* takes readers to Boiling Springs, North Carolina, in the 1970s and 1980s. It is a coming-of-age tale about a young Vietnamese American woman who tastes words (she has auditory-gustatory synesthesia). Truong is currently working on her third novel, *The Sweetest Fruits*, a fictional portrait of Greek-born writer Lafcadio Hearn (1850–1904). Hearn is best known for popularizing traditional Japanese ghost stories and folktales.*

*Critical discussion of Truong’s fiction has focused on the importance of food in her narratives. For instance, critics have explored how the sensory experience of taste becomes implicated in questions of history and heritage. Critics have also focused on Truong’s representations of family and belonging. This is because both of her novels ask: What does it mean to belong? What does it mean to be an outsider? Less accounted for is Truong’s engagement with scientific discourse—in particular, the brain sciences. This interview explores the author’s scientific influences with regard to *Bitter in the Mouth*, which centrally features neurological disorder. The interview illuminates Truong’s*

contributions to current debates about the brain, as well as to the genre of the “neuronovel.” Here, the author discusses the need for fiction to challenge the authority of science and for stories with enough imaginative force to enact social change. Truong concludes by reflecting on the impact of Trump’s election on literature.



Photo credit: Michele Panduri Metalli

Audrey Farley/ What are the most pressing concerns for you as a writer? In other words, what compels you to write?

Monique Truong/ I write to try to understand my world. Perhaps, this is why my novels have taken a long time to complete. *The Book of Salt* was a five-year-long process and *Bitter in the Mouth* was written over a seven-year span of time. We exist in a world that expects everything quickly and immediately. I don’t believe that the best way to understand and learn about your surrounding is by Googling it. Yes, you’ll arrive upon an immediate set of facts, but those facts are not necessarily the truth of the matter. Novels are better equipped to suggest not an absolute truth but one of many possible truths.

AF/ Your first two novels are very literary. *The Book of Salt* is set in the fictional home of Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas, and *Bitter in the Mouth* invokes Harper Lee. Your upcoming novel is also based on a literary figure. Do you think of yourself as a writer’s writer?

MT/ I write the kind of books that I enjoy reading the most: told in the first-person voice, unabashedly character driven as opposed to plot driven, in which language itself is a character, with a time line that loops, a puzzle that takes time and concentration, and all these elements are hemmed in by history.

AF/ *Bitter in the Mouth* is about a woman with a neurological disorder (synesthesia). The protagonist has a “dictatorial brain” that compels her to taste words. Since it focuses on the brain (rather than the mind), the novel

might be described as a “neuronovel.” However, in contrast to neuronovels like Richard Powers’ *The Echo Maker* or Ian McEwan’s *Saturday*, you avoid delving too deeply into scientific explanations. To what extent is this book influenced by the developments in neuroscience?

MT/ I’m not familiar with the term “dictatorial brain.” Perhaps, this is a scientific term that is used now in the current discussion of synesthesia? Or is it your coinage?

I relied primarily on the 2002 edition of Dr. Richard Cytowic’s *The Man Who Tasted Shapes* (MIT Press, 1998) because *Bitter*’s timeframe ends in 1998. Cytowic is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and a neurologist. His book documented a decade-long study that began in April of 1980 of two individuals with synesthesia: a man who tasted shapes (felt the shapes rubbing against his face or sitting in his hands) and a woman who experienced “colored hearing,” a.k.a. auditory-visual synesthesia (when she heard sounds or certain words, she saw colors). According to the foreword written by Dr. Jonathan Cole, even in ’98, when the book was first published, there were already newer, better techniques for measuring/documenting blood flow in the brain. Cytowic’s theory that the limbic system alone causes synesthesia, Cole wrote, was therefore most likely “pre-mature” given these scientific developments. Cole, nonetheless, commends Cytowic’s book for educating the public about synesthesia, especially those who are synesthetes and who did not realize that their condition had a name and thought that they were mentally ill.

Cytowic’s findings served as the foundation for my depiction of Linda’s condition. For instance, a basic tenet of synesthesia is that, like all sensation, it is a product of the brain, as opposed to the imagination. Others include: most synesthetes can’t recall a time when they didn’t have synesthesia; the condition cannot be turned on and off at will; overall, synesthetes have high intelligence; and there’s a strong link between synesthesia and photographic or heightened memory with many synesthetes using their synesthesia as a mnemonic aid or device. I also read *Synesthesia: The Strangest Thing* by Dr. John Harrison (Oxford University Press, 2001).

Instrumental in my understanding of memory and the ways that it can malfunction or function too well (one of the sins is persistence) was *The Seven Sins of Memory* (Harvard University Press, 2001) by Daniel L. Schacter and *The Mind of a Mnemonist* (Harvard University Press, 1968) by A.R. Luria, a Russian psychologist who studied a patient for 30 years in order to understand his photographic memory and its relationship to synesthesia.

AF/ I was thinking of your book when I used the phrase “dictatorial brain.” *Bitter*’s narrator calls her brain a “willful, dictatorial processor” that prevails over “lesser, subservient organs.” This passage intrigues me because it articulates a contemporary attitude about human behavior (e.g. “my brain made me do it”). But of course, the story suggests that Linda’s experiences are much more complex.

In fact, you dramatize this in one scene. The protagonist views a PBS program in which several synesthetes from around the world are interviewed. She is appalled when the interviewer undermines the synesthetes’ testimony and when the voiceover tries to translate their complex sensory experiences into scientific terminology. This scene illuminates how individuals today are pressured to think about themselves in neurobiological terms—and also how scientific discourse tends to flatten race and individual difference by focusing on the neurological coordinates of experience. Are you concerned about neuroscience’s increasing cultural authority?

MT/ Science is the poster child for “objectivity.” Scientists, however, are human beings with inherent biases and their funding sources can bring with them special interests. For example, when I was a litigator, I read many of the studies produced by the scientists and labs supported by the tobacco manufacturers. Their findings were cited in the courts and at Congressional hearings to establish that there was no connection between tobacco and cancer and other serious illnesses. To me, there’s no clearer example that science is like any other human endeavor: flawed.

When Linda watched the television program, what she noted first was the interviewer’s assumption of abnormality, that to be a synesthete was disruptive. The interviewer, a non-synesthete, uses her own experience with the world as the baseline for normality.

Linda also objected to the impulse to reduce a synesthete's complex, nuanced, unique experiences into a set of MRI scans and a mouthful of scientific jargon. The irony here, of course, is that without the MRIs and "science" the synesthete would have no "proof" of their condition and would be regarded as delusional.

The interviewer, a stand-in for society as a whole, needs objective science in order to believe the synesthete's subjective experiences.

The more interesting question to me is whether the synesthetes themselves need the validation or proof provided by science. The answer, at least for Linda, is no. She eschews the scientific body of knowledge and does not pursue it further. What interests her more is the existence of these other synesthetes. She does not need proof of their experiences. She believes them because she's one of them.

So though I read Dr. Cytowic and Dr. Harrison's books, I didn't feel the need to quote from them within the pages of *Bitter*. Linda did not need their authority to validate her synesthesia. She only needed to see and hear from other synesthetes.

Linda's synesthesia and her racial identity—her two sites of difference—are intended to comment upon each other. The former is non-visible and the latter visible. The former defines her and the latter others define her by. The former is a scientifically documented condition and the latter a construction, with a history of specious science.

So, yes, the question of who has "authority" is one that is at the heart of the novel.

AF/ I think you're on to something curious when you describe the irony of scientific evidence. It can legitimate experience (the MRI validates the synesthetes' testimony), even while it fails to fully capture experience. You seem to be distinguishing between explanation and understanding. Science can *explain* certain phenomena in the world, but we need more than facts to truly *understand* those phenomena. Is this the purpose of fiction, in your opinion? To help us *understand* ourselves and our worlds?

MT/ I think fiction's greatest strength is its ability to create the conditions necessary for empathy. By conditions, I mean the emotional and intellectual state that a reader enters into when she's reading an immersive, compelling, thought-provoking narrative: she is quiet (in listening mode, as it were, instead of speaking mode), contemplative, letting go of the self and voluntarily entering into that of another's (or an other's), curious, attuned, engaged, solitary, and slowed.

So, yes, fiction, at its best, is a primer for understanding. Each piece of fiction is one individual's subjective viewpoint of the world. Each piece of fiction is one tile in a mosaic. Clearly, I do not believe in the idea of the universal in fiction. I see it more as a Venn diagram, with the works overlapping one another. The areas of overlap are revealing, but even more so are the areas that do not.

AF/ You mention Cytowic and Luria. I find these figures very interesting because they violate the generic conventions of clinical writing. They combine empirical description with the elements of narrative. (In fact, Cytowic has an MFA!) The late Oliver Sacks also writes in this tradition of "Romantic Science," as do neuro-novelists like Powers and McEwan. They want to reconcile the authority of science and the authority of subjective experience. In contrast, you prioritize the authority of experience. As you've emphasized here, Linda eventually learns to trust her experience and disregard what the experts say. And you, the author, don't feel the need to quote the scientific authorities in the novel. So, do you think fiction loses something by directly incorporating scientific evidence? Do "facts" diminish the novel?

MT/ Whether scientific evidence is incorporated into a novel depends on the narrator. If Linda, as the first person narrator, were a scientist for example, then it would have been absurd for me to construct a novel where no or few facts were directly cited and discussed. Linda, however, watches the television program about synesthesia and sees it as a kind of "creation myth" of a "family." Like the story of Virginia Dare, George Moses Horton, the Wright Brothers of North Carolina, the Greek myths, and fairy tales, synesthesia is for Linda "a story of where [she] came from and

how [she] got here.”

As a historical novelist, I wouldn't characterize “facts” as a diminishment of a novel. Rather, it's the opposite. If my novels are buildings, then facts are like their steel framework. I would never dismantle the facts. It's more interesting to me to write around them, between them.

AF/ You've said that when you are writing fiction, you can rarely read fiction. So, what other *nonfiction* were you reading when you wrote this book?

MT/ While writing *Bitter*, I read nonfiction books that bordered upon the various subjects that I was attempting to explore within the novel. This peripheral research—that's my term for it—keeps me within the substantive and thematic world of the novel but is different and distinct from the primary research stage.

I read *Beyond the Best Interests of the Child* by Joseph Goldstein, Anna Freud, and Albert J. Solnit. This supplemented the more targeted research that I had already done on transracial adoption: the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare booklet, published in 1975, entitled *Tips on the Care and Adjustment of Vietnamese and other Asian Children in the United States*.

I wanted to understand the Vietnam War from the point of view of an attorney, so I read *Military Justice in Vietnam: The Rule of Law in an American War* by William Thomas Allison.

As *Bitter* is replete with food items and dishes from the American South, I wanted to immerse myself in the aspirational cooking that preceded the mid-70s convenience cooking that DeAnne, the main character's mother, prepared, so I read *American Gourmet: Classic Recipes, Deluxe Delights, Flamboyant Favorites, and Swank “Company” Food from the '50s and '60s* by Jane and Michael Stern.

For a gorgeous exploration of memory, I re-read Vladimir Nabokov's memoir *Speak, Memory*, which took on an additional layer of meaning as I learned from Cytowic's book that Nabokov and his mother were synesthetes.

AF/ You mention the importance of legal scholarship in your research for *Bitter*. Prior to writing fiction, you practiced law. How exactly has the law shaped this story? And how has your legal experience shaped you as a writer?

MT/ The “reasonable man” is a legal construction straight from my Criminal Law and Tort classes. He's an imagined, projected, fictional character that courts have used to assess the actions of others by. The line between the law, which in my mind prior to going to law school was more of a science, and fiction was no longer so clear to me. The law isn't a science. It's written by humans, implemented by humans, and therefore doomed to be as flawed as humans. That was what I learned in law school. Also, that what is legal is not the same as what is ethical, moral, or just. This latter point is reflected in the many definitions of family in *Bitter*. There are the biological, the legally constructed (marriage, adoption), the scientific, and then there are the chosen families. To claim that one takes precedent over the other—as the legal system tries to do—is to me obscene.

As for how my legal training and years of practice have shaped me as a writer, I strive above all for precision in my word choices. Poets do that as well.

AF/ Speaking of precise language, I am curious about the importance of metaphor in the book, particularly since the concept becomes implicated in discussions of synesthesia. Many scientists claim that synesthesia illuminates how metaphors are represented in the brain. V.S. Ramachandran, for instance, explains that synesthesia is neural cross-wiring; the brain makes arbitrary links between perceptual entities (colors, sounds, numbers) that seem unrelated. By learning more about synesthesia, Ramachandran claims, we can better understand some of the high-level thought processes of which only human beings are capable. Your novel adapts this line of thought—the protagonist's synesthesia reveals the *failure* of metaphor and of language, more broadly, since it reveals the lack of correspondence between meaning and representation, as well as between subjective experiences and the racial constructions that designate her. How do you understand metaphor? In what ways is this literary concept important

to the novel?

MT/ In *The Man Who Tasted Shapes*, Cytowic wrote that it was often very difficult for synesthetes to explain their experiences because there was “the lack of a shared referent.” He also wrote that “telling, of course, does not guarantee understanding,” and that the “indescribable nature of subjective experience is not unique to synesthesia.” His observations confirmed for me that synesthesia was the ideal, central metaphor for a novel about the fragility of communication and how often language fails us.

There’s another metaphor central to *Bitter* that is often overlooked and that is how adoption and in particular transracial adoption functions as a model and construct for the larger concept of nation building. In *Bitter*, the Powell family is synonymous with the nation. The orphan Linda and how she’s received, rejected, or kept at an emotional distance by individual members of the family is the refugee and immigrant, a figure that triggers within the nation a questioning and crisis of what it means to be a full-fledged member and citizen.

AF/ Many of *Bitter*’s primary concerns—about citizenship, about nation-building, about the difference between the visible and the invisible—seem to have taken on a new urgency since November. I am curious about how Trump’s election may influence your literary concerns. I ask this because many critics are frantically speculating about Trump’s impact on the novel. (Not surprisingly, many predict an uptake in satire and apocalyptic tales.) Is Trump’s election a game-changer for you? How might a Trump presidency influence the stories that you write?

MT/ Our current administration is proof that unfortunately a significant percentage of Americans crave the simplest, easiest to understand story. The Trump campaign and now his administration are shoddy pieces of fiction. Trump himself is composed of no facts, no experiences, and no abilities. The current administration is also proof that racism and its theology, White Supremacy, are enduring narratives within our country. The United States has many creation myths: the Mayflower, the Pilgrims, the Settlers, the striving Immigrants, the American Dream, American Exceptionalism, Leader of the Free World, etc. They all cover up a list of damning facts: our country began as a massive land grab, grew in size via the genocide of Native peoples, grew in economic strength via the enslavement of Africans, and continues to hum along via the ongoing exploitation of “illegal” laborers.

The Trump administration is what happens to fiction when its writers become unhinged from facts, from reason, and from history. It’s the worse kind of fiction: propaganda.

So, a “game changer” doesn’t even begin to describe my feelings toward this regime. I’m insulted by Trump on so many different levels. As a former refugee, as a writer, as a woman, as a human being, as a person with a pre-existing condition (diabetes), as an ally to Black Lives Matter, the LGBTQ, and the transgender communities, and as a pacifist. I can go on and on. Here’s the thing though: out of this outrage, I want to still craft another novel, a libretto, a song cycle, anything.

Will my stories change? Yes, because I’m changing.

I look back at the generations of African Americans and their allies who fought for Civil Rights in our country. I’m thankful for their political struggle but also for the art, music, and the lasting works of the imagination and beauty that they created while fomenting social and political change. That’s the model, that’s the example that I’ll be following.

[Audrey Farley](#)

Audrey Farley recently earned her PhD in English from University of Maryland, College Park. Her research interests include contemporary American fiction, cognitive science, and popular culture.

