

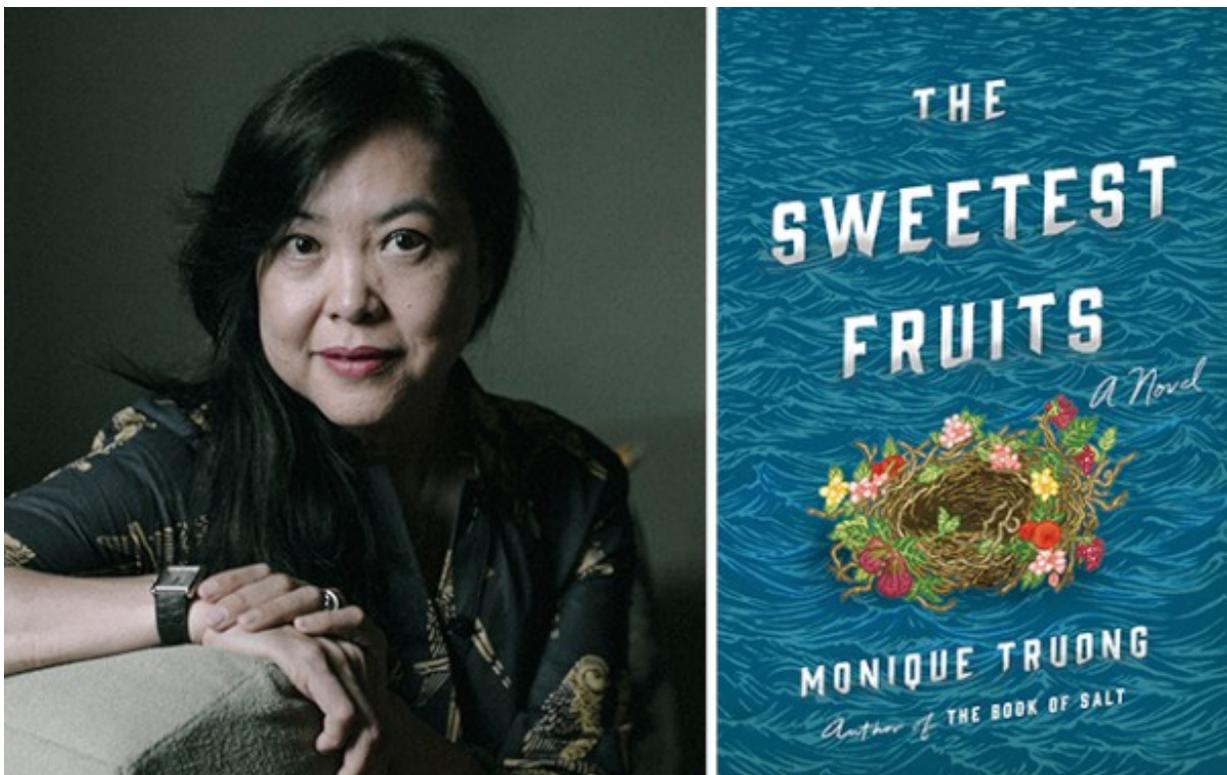
Monique Truong's New Novel Shows the Unreliability of History

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Monique Truong's novel *The Sweetest Fruits* tells the story of Lafcadio Hearn through the voices of three women in his life

By Gabrielle Bellot |

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Monique Truong

This novel speaks to my distrust of history," Monique Truong says of her latest book, *The Sweetest Fruits* (Viking, Sept.). It tells the story of the writer Lafcadio Hearn from the perspectives of three important women whose voices have largely been ignored: Rosa, Hearn's Greek mother; Alethea, Hearn's African-American ex-wife in Ohio; and Koizumi Setsu, Hearn's Japanese partner during the final stage of his life. Born Patricio Lafcadio Hearn in 1850 in Lefkada—the Ionian island and British colony he was named for—Hearn quickly became a traveler, both by choice and by coercion. At his British father's request, as the novel details, he was sent as a child to live in Ireland without his mother, instead being raised by his prudish, elitist paternal grandmother; she refused to call him Patricio,

Anglicizing his name into Patrick. Later, after traveling to America as an adult, he attempted to reclaim the name Lafcadio but decided upon introducing himself to others as Pat, which seemed easier for his American acquaintances to pronounce.

A journalist, as well as a writer and translator of fantastical tales from around the world, Hearn found himself drawn to the marginalized, Truong notes, often spending time trying to understand the people around him wherever he was in the world, even as some of his work fell within 19th-century tropes of exoticism. He found New Orleans and Martinique particularly compelling, but Hearn—a kind of cultural chameleon, with his softly swarthy multiracial complexion and malleable Irish accent, which he molded at will to sound more like whomever he was speaking with—perhaps felt most at home while in transit during his journeys. “To migrate is human,” Truong says, reflecting on the charged notion of migration in 2019, though she notes that Hearn’s lightness of skin allowed him to cross borders more easily.

Truong smiles as she describes Hearn’s complexities. He was “a man drawn to the margins of society,” she says, perhaps because he never truly had a family to understand, fully, as his own. He was pulled inexorably to the allure of the new, the different, she adds. To that end, during his travels, he recorded a compendium of Creole grammar, becoming one of the first scholars to give serious attention to Creole, and, in one of Truong’s favorite books by Hearn, he recorded Cajun recipes from black households and cooks. Later, Truong says, Hearn set sail for Japan, where he changed his name—a requirement by the Japanese government at the time for a foreigner to gain citizenship—to Koizumi Yakumo.

From the beginning, Truong’s fiction has sought to question which stories get told—and whether or not any history is wholly reliable. It can be uncomfortable for people who casually trust the veracity of well-known narratives to imagine that nonfiction accounts can have unreliable narrators or be edited or skewed to become partly, or even predominantly, fictive; Truong relishes re-creating this sense of discomfort around official histories. Ultimately, all narratives are made up of many stories, and her work seeks to restore this sense of narrative multiplicity, particularly when certain voices—such as those of women, people of color, and queer immigrants—have been downsized, demeaned, or outright deleted from official accounts.

In her first novel, *The Book of Salt* (2003), Truong reenvisioned the lives of Alice B. Toklas and Gertrude Stein by telling their tale through the eyes of a queer Vietnamese cook they hired, whose own life story is sprawling. Through it, we get both a new look at Toklas and Stein from the perspective of someone all too often invisible—a poor immigrant worker—and a reflection on why it is unwise to naively trust any single historical account, as the chef’s story is not entirely reliable.

Truong is a Vietnamese immigrant herself. Born in Saigon, she came to the United States at the age of six with her mother, who was fleeing the devastation of the Vietnam War. Truong has long been drawn to the tales of the invisible and unheard, and this focus is only more deeply embedded in her new novel, which examines the life of Hearn with new eyes, while also, and most importantly, restoring the perspectives of three significant women in his life.

“When I first read about Rosa and Alethea, the thing that struck me was that the first two were written about in a very dismissive way, in particular because they were illiterate,” Truong says, her already-soft voice lowering almost to a frustrated whisper. “So, they could not leave behind their own story. Everything that is known about them is mediated.” In *The Sweetest Fruits*, both Rosa and Alethea are dictating their stories to other women—another layer of mediation, Truong says.

Setsu left behind a memoir titled *Reminiscences*, “but,” Truong observes, “it was translated—another example of mediation”—and the translation “was most likely heavily edited, if not by herself, by the translator.”

Because these women’s stories were already “so compromised,” Truong says, she “wanted to create a narrative that strips away as much of that mediation as possible” and that “shows the choices they made.” She reflects, “When I read about them in biographies, these women were presented as passive.” Indeed, Hearn’s first biographer went so far as to simply leave Alethea out entirely.

Truong notes that Hearn’s biographers assumed that, because he was a well-known white explorer, he must have been able, for instance, to speak fluent Japanese—though it is unclear how fluent he was. “There seems to be a huge investment,” she says, frowning, “in his authority and his expertness.” She is dismayed by the ongoing scholarly assumption of the “expertise” of white male figures—another reason to mistrust certain sources.

The way that language, colonialism, and violence intersect is important in *The Sweetest Fruits*. The novel seeks to explore how European colonialism, by forcing new tongues onto its colonies and demonizing those who spoke in precolonial languages, left scars on its victims that they may not even have realized they had. This is apparent when Rosa learns that her child must be renamed; when she hears “Patrick,” a sound that, as Truong says, is “ugly to her ears,” it hurts her, yet she is forced to accept it. Her Venetian and Romaic speech is brushed together under a rug as “foreign” in Ireland, and her traditions, too, such as piercing her boys’ ears, are verboten. This echoes the colonial rebranding of the islands that Rosa grew up on, which Truong powerfully describes as another instance of “naming and controlling.”

Truong says that she found herself deeply “interested in the white women who wrote Hearn’s biographies, because they were particularly harsh about his attraction to women of color”—such as Alethea and Setsu. “It was explained away,” Truong adds with a roll of her

eyes, “by the fact that his mother was considered ‘Oriental,’” which supposedly accounted for “his attraction to ‘swarthy’ women.”

To be sure, Hearn was naive about his privileges, and Truong evokes this naivety in her novel: he does not understand the difficulties that Alethea, as a black woman, endures and does not understand why he can walk into a rich white neighborhood without a thought but she cannot. He fails to understand the power that he holds as a man who can pass as fully white, until he is fired from his job at a Cincinnati paper due, in part, to Ohio’s antimiscegenation laws. Hearn is both wise and ignorant, an explorer with much left to explore. And we see him, perhaps better than he saw himself, through the women in his life.

Women’s stories, historically, have been dismissed as “gossip—a very gendered term,” Truong notes. Men’s stories, by contrast, were often “travelogues,” more important, somehow, simply because men were telling them. She says that she wanted to deconstruct “this very gendered idea of storytelling,” because “Hearn has already had his say, and I wanted to hear what other people around him think.” Truong’s novel is a testament to the power of reclaiming voices so long unheard, and to how each story, ultimately, is composed of choruses of voices that we need to listen for if we wish to understand it.

Gabrielle Bellot is a staff writer at Literary Hub. Her work has appeared in the Atlantic, the Guardian, the New Yorker, the New York Review of Books, the New York Times, and elsewhere.

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