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Peer reviewed

***America Is Not the Heart*. Elaine Castillo. Philadelphia: Penguin Group Viking, 2018. i + 408 pp. \$27.00 paper. ISBN 9780735222410.**

Elaine Castillo's impactful novel, *America Is Not the Heart*, overflows with imagery and emotion honoring the experiences of 1990s Filipinos in California's South Bay; it centers on Filipino experiences of intergenerational loss, trauma, healing, and community building. Castillo sets the novel's strong tone through the rise of one Filipina's life, Paz's, through the U.S. diaspora, highlighting her struggles with class and family tensions in route to working as a nurse in Milpitas, California. Her story, captured through snapshots in the prologue, offers an effective set up for our central character, her niece, Hero, a Philippine medical student drop-out who served 10 years with the rebel communist New People's Army. *America Is Not the Heart* provides an endearing, immersive experience of how a Filipino family navigates the ghosts of martial law, death, queerness, and building spaces of belonging in the South Bay. Castillo weaves a complex matrix of overlapping narratives, jumping gracefully between the current timeframe in Milpitas, and Hero's past in the Philippines as a medical student or with the New People's Army. Her ability to move between moments in Hero's history with such ease and without demarcations or breaks reveals Castillo's poetic, fluid writing. There are no borders between memory and timeline; there aren't even quotation marks to separate dialogue from narrator. It is through Hero that we immerse ourselves in her process of navigating both an unknown country and multiple layers of trauma and healing. Trauma, not just from the physical torture she endured as a captured New People's Army rebel, but also the emotional trauma of being erased by society, and more poignantly, in her parents' minds.

Castillo's novel is anchored in honoring healing, not as a process, but a space and an ongoing relationship of love. We see this in Adela's weekly healing sessions for Roni's eczema, leading to Hero developing many life-changing relationships that assist her with her own healing journey. Castillo does well in showcasing the complexity of these relationships: from platonic friendships turned secret romance to the mirroring between Hero and her niece, Roni. Castillo also features relationships with places of memory: the feelings a character holds for a country, uptown San Francisco, or a barbecue restaurant. These relationships foster not just spaces of healing, but also the highlights for both Hero and Paz's narratives, providing moments of tenderness and hope. Castillo masterfully draws multiple characters into moments of trust and vulnerability. Healing is a relationship and space; relationships offer spaces to heal.

Another strength is the use of sensory details. Many of the relationships that deeply impact Hero are marked by unique memories featuring sound, smell, taste, and touch. You feel the despair and distance in the first phone call between Hero and her aunt Soly since arriving in the United States—how it tapped into the forgotten visual of Soly's kitchen furniture. Food, smell, and taste take center stage in

Hero's journey of finding community and comfort, leading to an end point where late-night pancit serves as a climactic reunion for many characters on an emotional level. Naturally, language plays a huge role in how sensory details demarcate Hero's relationships and even class status. Ilocano signifies the estranged relationship between Hero and her parents; Tito Pol's pedigree as a sought-after bachelor doctor—with the famous surname to boot—comes through in his mixture of English and “proper Tagalog”; and we witness Hero's comfortability around her friends grow through the use of Bay Area slang and sayings. Language becomes a symbol of class and social mobility.

Readers may at times find themselves rereading passages to realize the switches between memory and current timeline, a valid critique by those who may not be as comfortable with more unstructured, freeform writing styles. The constant jumping from 1990s Milpitas in a restaurant kitchen, to flashbacks of Hero blindfolded and captive in the Philippines, to phone calls with her parents, may discombobulate some. For those who feel this way, I highly recommend truly leaning into the fluidity of the text, feeling how the unannounced switch in scenery and tone can represent a person's rushing thoughts and intrusion of memories of trauma and loss.

If you allow yourself to sit with these meshing images and scenes, *America Is Not the Heart* fantastically unpacks a queer Filipina's journey through community and healing in the 90's South Bay. It is restaurant owner Adela who best encapsulates the novel's lesson of healing as a space and a relationship rather than a process: “According to you, healing is a relationship between doctor and patient. ‘Di ba? Pero you're wrong. Alam mo, healing? It's a world. So what you think about it matters. You're involved.”¹ Castillo's narratives not only tell an amazing story that has helped define a generation of Filipino Americans' shared experience of the 90s, but they also effortlessly involve the mixing in of critical theory and unpacking of racial capitalism within the Bay Area: settler colonialism in Milpitas; gentrification and the forcing out of black workers; class divisions within the Philippines and the U.S.; and the struggles queer Filipinos experience when facing their community's underlying homophobia. This book provides a brave avenue to explore their own complex multiplicity, the tensions from one's past clashing with the present, while opening up critical conversations around Filipino placemaking in the Bay Area during the 1990s. The novel serves as a refreshing addition for English Literature, Asian American Studies, and Ethnic Studies courses at both the high school and collegiate levels. Through an underlying lesson on intersectionality, Castillo demonstrates with her characters and merging storylines that we may try to separate our fractured selves; but these segments, like lost families and forgotten pictures, always find a way to reunite under the same home. “She knew about separating parts of her life

1. Castillo, Elaine. 2018. *America Is Not the Heart: a Novel*. Penguin Publishing Group. 364.

out, too; about being one person in one place, and another person in another place. Hero wondered if Jaime knew yet...that those people usually ended up meeting, in the end."²

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2. Ibid, 209.