



Kathryn Cai // Apocalypse and speculative fiction have been central to modern imaginings of biomedical and scientific developments in the U.S. While these narratives have speculated on a hypothetical global apocalypse to come, literary and nonfiction narratives from other parts of the world continue to grapple with apocalypses that have already come to pass. Rather than universalized destruction, these narratives are concerned with particular iterations of destruction that are nevertheless world-shattering on a large scale. For instance, the anthropologist Christina Schwenkel points to the U.S. Cold War agenda to “bomb [Vietnam] back to the Stone Age” in her study of affect in postsocialist Vietnam,[1] while nuclear annihilation was a constantly evoked threat throughout the Cold War Years.[2] As apocalyptic scenarios associated with environmental destruction and nuclear annihilation have altered U.S. conceptions of health,[3] post-apocalyptic imaginings beyond U.S.-centric contexts are also transforming how people think about health and the body in relation to raced, gendered, and imperialistic histories. Contemporary narratives that imagine the body in relation to these histories suggest how the medical/health humanities and disability studies can interrogate emerging transnational conditions beyond U.S.-centric lenses.

Elaine Castillo’s recent novel *America is Not the Heart* (2018) presents an example of a narrative whose engagement with world-ending is not recognizably apocalyptic through frames that foreground twentieth-century disasters of war, genocide, and environmental destruction.^[4] The novel explores the traumas of political violence and immigrant alienation in the context of multigenerational, diasporic Filipinx American families and communities in the 1990s Bay Area. Castillo’s descriptions of the novel, however, assert a connection between the aftermath of trauma and a post-apocalyptic frame. In interviews, she describes the novel’s engagement with “post-apocalyptic daily life”: “how do you make a life, from day to day, what are the things that make up a life—feeding each other, maybe being kind to each other, falling in love with each other, taking care of each other.”^[5] Elsewhere she cites anthropologist Veena Das’s work on the sexual violence perpetrated on women during India and Pakistan’s Partition,^[6] its subsequent familial and national disavowal, and how individuals must find ways to remake their worlds in the wake of this violence.^[7] In terms of Castillo’s own trauma, she has also articulated that after the death of her

father and her own long period of sickness, her first foray back into writing was through *X-Men* fan fiction because “post-traumatic mutant life” felt most appropriate for her psychic and emotional state.[8] Her reflections suggest an interest in apocalypse as a lived condition and the contingent negotiations and unexpected, “mutant” transformations that enable the ongoingness of apocalypse’s aftermath on a daily basis.

As in Castillo’s reflections, the embodied nature of healthcare and disability are central to the novel’s engagement with U.S. and Filipino national histories, migration, and politics and hence to the novel’s elaboration on the everyday negotiations of “post-apocalyptic daily life.” The novel focuses on a family of healthcare workers: the family matriarch, Paz, works as a nurse, while her husband was a successful doctor in the Philippines who now works as a security guard. The novel’s protagonist, Hero, which is short of Géronima, began her medical studies in the Philippines but left school to work as a doctor in the communist New People’s Army, which opposed Ferdinand Marcos’s authoritarian rule. She was eventually captured by the Philippine Army and tortured, and her two broken thumbs from her imprisonment continue to pain her and affect her daily life well after she has left the Philippines for her uncle’s home in Milpitas, California. Already, then, the novel presents rich connections that depart from the still predominantly white, U.S.-centric narratives of disability studies and the medical humanities. In Castillo’s novel, disability is a product of political engagement within Filipino national politics and the legacy of U.S. imperialism and must be negotiated outside the biomedical sphere in the context of immigration. Meanwhile, Paz is one of many women of color who perform domestic caretaking labor in the U.S. healthcare industry, often in precarious, unprotected roles.[9]

While the novel presents other forays into questions of health, including traditional healing, I would like to focus on its relatively undeveloped engagement with the communist New People’s Army and Castillo’s interest in the mundane, everyday routines and negotiations through which livable aftermaths of trauma are constructed. Within the novel’s intertwined contexts of Filipino and U.S. national politics, migration, romance, and intergenerational family drama, the apocalypse that Castillo imagines does not emerge from a clear source or crisis event. Indeed, Castillo asserts that in writing *America is Not the Heart*, she was explicitly not interested in writing a heroic, revolutionary “thriller.” She imagines that the thriller version of the novel would center on another character who is a high-ranking member of the NPA but peripheral to Castillo’s narrative, while “Hero’s just this grim doctor on the side that you don’t really take a second look at.”[10] Castillo frames the novel as it is as “fan fiction” that elaborates on this side character and states that she is “interested in what happens after what we would call the ‘legibly political event.’”[11] Her interest in the mundane thus aligns with other writers who refuse what literary critic Frederic Jameson famously deemed “Third World allegories” that necessarily recapitulate their national political histories.[12]

I would further suggest that this focus on the mundane is aligned with a broader shift in contemporary imaginations of political affinities and possibilities for the future. Hero’s personal trauma is thoroughly intertwined with the foreclosure of her own revolutionary political participation in relation to her family’s class privilege as close associates of Marcos. She is released

from the prison camp when her captors discover her identity, and the majority of the novel is devoted to everyday life in the 1990s U.S., rather than to rejoining her comrades or revolutionary politics. The living of this everyday life, however, entails its own engagements with class and politics, though in different, more diffuse, and less immediately apparent registers. Paz is from a working-class family in the Philippines, and the family are themselves working class in the U.S. in a similarly working-class community with its own tensions of race, gender, and sexuality. The focus on the everyday is not then a reprieve from politics, but an altered orientation to it. Castillo's characters do not pursue revolution but contingently search for and cobble together shifts in degrees that enable heretofore impossible orientations to one another and the world. They thus forge emerging worlds among and for one another that unfold into an uncertain future, without clear ends, as a way of making lives that feel livable. In this imagination, Castillo's novel converges with what I am considering a "postsocialist" orientation that is concerned with lived aftermaths when the possibility of revolution has already passed,[13] central to which are considerations of health and the body.

[1] Christina Schwenkel, "Post/Socialist Affect: Ruination and Reconstruction of the Nation in Urban Vietnam." *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2013, p. 259.

[2] Joseph Masco, *The Theater of Operations: National Security Affect from the Cold War to the War on Terror*. Duke University Press, 2014.

[3] Joseph Masco, "Atomic Health, or How The Bomb Altered American Notions of Death," in *Against Health: How Health Became the New Morality*, edited by Jonathan Metzl and Anna Rutherford Kirkland, NYU Press, 2010, pp. 133-53.

[4] See Claire P. Curtis, *Postapocalyptic Fiction and the Social Contract*. Lexington Books, 2010 and Teresa Heffernan, *Post-Apocalyptic Culture: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Twentieth-Century Novel*. University of Toronto Press, 2008.

[5] Don Tagala, "Elaine Castillo debuts *America is Not the Heart*." *Balitang America*, 6 May 2018, <https://balitangamerica.tv/elaine-castillo-debuts-america-is-not-the-heart/>.

[6] Yasmin Adele Majeed, "A Little Bit Like Worship: An Interview with Elaine Castillo." *The Margins*, 25 April 2018, <https://aaww.org/america-is-not-the-heart-an-interview-with-elaine-castillo/>

[7] Veena Das, "Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain." *Daedalus*, vol. 125, no. 1, 1996, pp. 67-91; Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*. University of California Press, 2007.

[8] Megan O'Grady, "In Elaine Castillo's *America is Not the Heart*, Searching for a Place to Call Home." *Vogue*, 3 April 2018, <https://www.vogue.com/article/elaine-castillo-america-is-not-the-heart>

[9] *Intimate Labors: Cultures, Technologies, and the Politics of Care*. Edited by Eileen Boris and Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, Stanford UP, 2010.

[10] Majeed, "A Little Bit Like Worship."

[11] Ibid.

[12] Frederic Jameson, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capital." *Social Text*, vol. 15, 1986, pp. 65-88.

[13] My dissertation builds a framework of contemporary global postsocialist narratives that are concerned with constructing modes of continuing to live in the wake of global communism's foreclosure while also reflecting on, engaging with, and refusing emerging structures of nation and capital. These modes are imagined through the body and flattened affects to suggest emerging, non-revolutionary possibilities for affinity. I build on Jason McGrath's consideration of "global postsocialism" as a condition affecting not just China but the entire world with the end of global communism as a viable alternative to capitalist modernity (Jason McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity: Chinese Cinema, Literature, and Criticism in the Market Age*. Stanford UP, 2008, p. 14).