

There is No Single Voice of America

L lithub.com/there-is-no-single-voice-of-america

January 17, 2018

Elaine Castillo on Empire, Untranslated Words and American Fiction

By [Elaine Castillo](#)

January 17, 2018

Recently I got a heads-up from not one, but two separate writers of color who were kind enough to read the novel I'm publishing in April. The heads-up was about a subject that features in all of our respective works: untranslated words, specifically in fiction. "People are gonna go off on you," they said, more or less. "It really riles people up when they can't understand every word in a book. Just get ready."

Why are untranslated words in American fiction important? I mean, there are a couple answers to this question. One of them is just a basic craft answer, a fundamental writing tenet that's important for both writers and readers to remember: there is a difference between what's legible and what's understandable. Anyone who's ever crammed for a test knows this. You can be able to read every single word in a text, and not understand it. Conversely, you can be profoundly moved by a song in a language you don't know, and that reaction isn't just about the melody, but the confluence of aspects that goes into making that particular song: words, melody, pacing, rhythm, how it particularly speaks to you at that particular time. I didn't understand a single fucking word of Radiohead's "Pyramid Song" when I first heard it in high school, and that didn't stop it from becoming one of my Ur-songs, the kind of song that reads your whole damn life to you, in all your languages, and in all the secret speeches only your dumb heart knows.

That's how art functions. There are lacunae in every art work, gaps that we fill or don't fill, and it's not by understanding everything perfectly that we are enriched—not in art, not in life. It's not by going into a book armed with the confidence of all-encompassing knowledge that we can be assured of a "successful" reading experience, because that's not what creates true connection. The only thing that gets you to that wild, terror-sown heaven of knowing and being known is vulnerability—when it comes to books, that means both the capacity of a reader to be vulnerable to the work she finds herself reading, and the willingness of the work to make itself vulnerable enough to make the kinds of aesthetic and ethical decisions that mean we're not engaging with an ethnography or a dictionary, but a work of art.

Sometimes I leave a word untranslated because it's simply the weight and vibration of that word, in that sentence, that I want there, and no other. Sometimes I leave a word untranslated because I know exactly how that character would deliver a line, and it's not an English word at the end of that sentence. Sometimes we forget that the sole function of words isn't just to deliver meaning; they have a material, historical and emotional life all their own. They sing to us as much as they speak to us. It's a writer's job to remember this, because unlike songwriters who have melodies, or film directors who have actors and images—words are all we've got.

But the thing is, these types of questions aren't asked of all writers. These types of specific questions about untranslated languages are typically asked about use of non-Western words in a largely English language book (I don't see people getting stressed about all the ancient Greek or French in George Eliot's novels), and in my experience, they're asked much more of writers of color, immigrant writers, first-generation writers. Tellingly, it's in the work of these specific types of writers that untranslated, foreign-sounding words come to represent specific lacunae that we somehow continue to find difficult, if not outright hostile, to engage with in American fiction.

And that's unacceptable. It was always unacceptable, but it's egregiously unacceptable in 2018. Look. I was born in the Bay Area, and my parents spoke four languages between them; my mother's language (Pangasinan), my father's language (Ilocano), the common language of the Philippines which they spoke to each other (Tagalog), and English. They spoke to me in a mixture of those languages, without much border between one or another. English was not my first language; all childhood videos of me show me speaking English with a very heavy accent. My first language was Pangasinan, a language I no longer really speak and can now only understand with difficulty. Pangasinan is spoken by roughly 1.5 million people in the world and about half of those people seem to be in my mother's Facebook feed, talking about how dark I look in some photo. Pangasinan dictionaries were impossible to find growing up, and there were no Pangasinan classes in college I could take; the closest I've come is a fairly wonky app, created by the University of Pangasinan College of IT Education, "to help reinvigorate this language." Speaking a language proficiently also means having access to the kinds of tools that would develop vocabulary, correct grammatical errors, provide live examples of native speakers: not all of us have those tools at our disposal, and that goes especially for those of us who live in that old country, diaspora.

All of that means that those four languages—Pangasinan, Tagalog, English and to a lesser extent Ilocano—were floating around in my head my entire life, flawed and fragmented. To top it off, my partner isn't a native English speaker either, and was raised bilingual French and German, the former of which I now speak better than Tagalog and the latter of which I understand enough to get hyped in all the right places during *Deutschland 83*. I've actually never lived with a native English speaker, unless you count my younger brother, who's with

me in that whole first generation language soup thing. That has meant a life full of sentences in which I understand some things, not all; or maybe I understood the meaning of a sentence without quite understanding the specific word. Sometimes I *do* translate Tagalog or Pangasinan words in my work, but the reason I do so isn't for "mainstream" "American" readers (all dogwhistle words for white), but for Filipinx kids like myself, who don't understand every word their mother says, who get the grammar wrong when they're texting someone in WhatsApp, who have to use Google Translate to make sure the insult they're sending is conjugated right. Readers like me know that gaps of understanding aren't the anomaly; they're the stuff of daily life. Daily American life.

Tagalog is the fourth most widely spoken language in the United States, after American English, Spanish and Mandarin. The town I grew up in has pretty much always been majority Asian, predominantly Filipinx and Vietnamese, along with a significant Latinx minority and more recently, a growing South Asian population. The last statistic I checked said that 66 percent of its residents spoke English along with another language. All but one of the mayors of my town since 1996 have been Filipinx or Vietnamese.

That's an American city. Those are American realities. To suggest that the depiction of a life like mine, a city like mine, a linguistic context like that one, is somehow incompatible with the demands of American literature is to gravely underestimate and impoverish American literature. And that would be a shame. Because it also means we'll never know who we are.

And who are we, really? The United States currently maintains almost 800 army bases in over 70 countries around the world. The so-called Philippine-American War took place between 1899 and 1902—as with any war of colonial occupation and local resistance, the date of the conflict's end is disputable. The Proclamation of the US Commission Towards Conciliation and the Establishment of Peace, issued to Manila in 1899 and also known as the Schurman Commission, makes no bones about the true costs of American empire-building; it informs the Philippine people of "certain regulative principles by which the United States will be guided in its relation with them... deemed of cardinal importance."

The first principle: "The supremacy of the United States must and will be enforced throughout every part of the archipelago, and those who resist it can accomplish no end other than their own ruin."

There is no definitive historical record of the number of Filipinos killed as America became America. Some of the more conservative estimates by historians place the number at around 600,000 deaths in Luzon and Batangas towards the beginning of the conflict alone. More comprehensive anecdotal reports of the total loss suggest a number close to 1.4 million. The water cure—now more commonly known as waterboarding—was first used by US soldiers in the Philippines as a form of torture during this period.

That war, and the occupation that followed, remain crucial to the imperial project of early

20th-century American statecraft. Its global, economic and human consequences are legion. One of those consequences means that when you look up any tourism information about going to the Philippines today, one of the major positives advertised to would-be holidaymakers always goes something like: *And the locals speak great English!!!*

If American fiction is going to be at all deserving of the epithet, then it has to also encompass the America that exist beyond its borders, the Americas all around the world that makes America what it is today: the America that flowered in an archipelago almost ten thousand miles away, wiping over a million souls from the earth and sprinkling English dictionaries over their corpses. Voice of America, the federally funded government radio station founded in 1942, is still broadcast throughout the globe—including, of course, the Philippines. What did Filipinos from the beginning of the 20th-century to now think about all the untranslated words being transmitted to them—through American school teachers, American medical systems, American torturers? What does my mother think, having left a life of crushing rural poverty to immigrate to Nashville, then California, eventually bearing a child who can now switch into the kind of English that she only ever heard in real life at Camp John Hay, the military base in Baguio that she and her nursing school friends used to visit for a hot-dog-flavored taste of hegemonic glamour? The reason I write in English, and the reason I use untranslated words, are one and the same, the punchline to that rambling, viciously grim joke also known as history: because I'm fucking American.

*

Let's say I invite you to my house. And I dress up in my best and least offensive outfit, and I have everybody dress up in their own best and least offensive outfits. And there's food laid out on the table, and all the dishes have been prepared to your taste. And we're all talking to you, politely and clearly, so that you can understand every word we say, and all of our conversations are directed towards you, for your comfort and pleasure. When you've left the house—have you met us? Have you met any people, at all?

On the other hand: I invite you to my home. I wear what I normally wear when I'm trying to a look a little cute, and so does everybody else. There's food laid out on the table, some of which you might eat, some of which you might not like the look of that much, and you're free to take and leave what you will. The conversation flows among all of us; sometimes we talk to you, but sometimes you'll overhear us talking to each other, and you might not understand what we're saying. You're also not the only guest—maybe a guest next to you does understand what we're saying and can chime in, and maybe you get a little jealous, maybe you think she's having a better time because of that.

But then again: you're not there to compete about who's having the best time. You're busy, maybe, connecting with someone at the table that you're having a really good conversation with, maybe you guys like the same music or have the same sense of humor, maybe it's just the slow-burning mystery of human chemistry, who knows, maybe you're even flirting a

little, fuck it. Connecting's all right, food's pretty good, and when you leave, you may not have understood every single word that was said, but I guarantee you: you will have met people.

And in the end, it's because of people that untranslated words are important in fiction. Because as long as we continue to uphold the belief that non-English words are somehow alien to American fiction, we will never have an American readership that is commensurate to its American reality, or the people it produced. People like me. Hi.

*

Elaine Castillo will be appearing with Athena Farrokhzad, Johan Harstad, Ishion Hutchinson and Elena Marcu at the Freeman's Berlin launch at Silent Green Kulturquartier at 8PM. Gerichstrase 35, 13347

The preceding is from the new *Freeman's* channel at Literary Hub, which will feature excerpts from the print editions of *Freeman's*, along with supplementary writing from contributors past, present and future. The new issue of *Freeman's*, a special edition featuring 29 of the best emerging writers from around the world, is available now.

© LitHub

Back to top