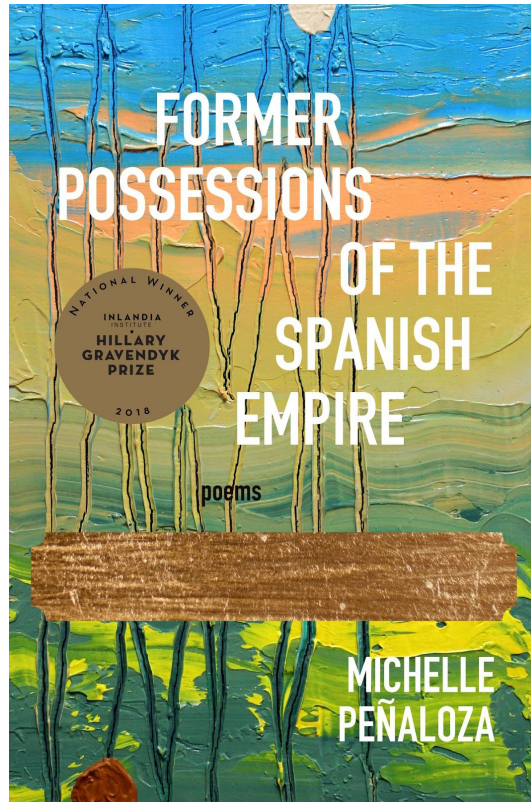


Teaching Guide for *Former Possessions of the Spanish Empire*



Description:

Ambitious and emotionally complex, Michelle Peñaloza's debut poetry collection, *Former Possessions of the Spanish Empire*, explores grief and violence, the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality, and the complications of desire. *Former Possessions of the Spanish Empire* won the 2018 Hillary Gravendyk National Prize. Aimee Nezhukumatathil, author of *Oceanic*, calls Peñaloza's book "remarkable" and says "Of this I am certain: I'll be celebrating this poet for many years to come."

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Author's Bio:

The proud daughter of Filipino immigrants, **Michelle Peñaloza** is author of *Former Possessions of the Spanish Empire*, winner of the 2018 Hillary Gravendyk National Poetry Prize. She is also the author

of two chapbooks, *landscape/heartbreak* (Two Sylvias, 2015), and *Last Night I Dreamt of Volcanoes* (Organic Weapon Arts, 2015).

Keywords:

- Poetry
- Creative Writing
- Postcolonial Studies
- Asian American Studies
- Filipino American Studies
- Women/Gender Studies
- Identity
- Poetic Forms
- Feminist Literature

Recommended Classes:

- Poetry
- Creative Writing
- Asian American Studies
- Filipino American Studies
- Women/Gender Studies
- American and Contemporary Literature

Discussion Questions:

1. *Former Possessions of the Spanish Empire* refers to both physical lands colonized by the Spanish Empire and to the people of these lands. How does the poet grapple with this history of colonialism in the title poem, “Former Possessions of the Spanish Empire”?
2. In the title poem, “Former Possessions of the Spanish Empire,” how does the act of naming assert power? How does naming play a role in identity formation?
3. In “Letter from My Mother,” the poet uses the persona form, which in Greek means “mask,” taking on the first-person point-of-view and voice of the poet’s mother. How does the persona form give unique insight to the mother’s perspective that the reader wouldn’t have typically experienced without this form?
4. In “Butiki,” how does Peñaloza use metaphor? How does this poem reflect the speaker’s relationship to language?
5. In “Thread Rite,” why does Peñaloza use the act of plucking white hairs to reveal her relationships to her grandmother and mother? Why does she choose this specific act?
6. Peñaloza uses the form of the “Q&A” or “question and answer” throughout the collection. Who is asking the questions, and who is answering them? Why are these particular questions asked? How do these answers reflect the speaker’s sense of self, voice and agency?

7. In “Vestige,” “Late Afternoon with Chagall,” and “Variations on Prayer and the Color Brown,” how does Peñaloza wrestle with the idea of faith and tradition? How does this shape or connect with her relationships to her family?
8. In “Variations on Prayer and the Color Brown,” how does Peñaloza unpack varying ideas on prayer and the color brown in relation to her grandmother? What are these variations?
9. How does Peñaloza approach themes of immigration, longing, and (dis)connection in “To the Older Couple Also Eating Dunkin’ Donuts at O’Hare,” and “Nostalgia is a Dangerous Thing”?
10. In “Transgression” and “Pioneer,” how does Peñaloza use the concept of desire to unpack power and privilege?
11. “In Magsaysay Drive Olongapo City, Na Wala Sa Pagasalin,” Peñaloza confronts the history of forced prostitution and poverty in Olongapo City, Philippines as a result of U.S. imperialism and the legacies of war. How does Peñaloza use named, physical spaces (“neon buzzes/ streets alive”) and white space on the page? What do these formal decisions communicate to the reader? How does Peñaloza use characterization to distill experiences of prostitution?
12. In “When My Mother Was Eartha Kitt,” the poet views her mother through the lens of the African American singer and actress, Eartha Kitt. What insight about the mother does the reader gain through this lens? Why does the poet specifically choose Eartha Kitt as an icon to describe her mother?
13. In “Partial,” Peñaloza repeats the lines “not exactly that / I didn’t want it” to talk about rape and consent. What is the effect of this repetition?
14. In “Upon Reading *Understanding the Filipino*” and “Proverbial,” how does Peñaloza relate the history of colonialism to intimate forms of sexual violence? Sexual discretion?
15. In “Upon Reading *The Confessions of St. Augustine*,” the poet writes: “Our life then --was it not / a series of little murders?” How does Peñaloza use the form of the confession to reveal truth and emotion in this poem?
16. In “A Strange Constellation of Desires,” Peñaloza repeats the word “because” as a way to propel the speaker’s list of reasons. What is the effect of this repetition? How does cataloging, or listing, work in this poem?
17. In “When Will We Ache Less,” Peñaloza connects historical facts, to headlines from newspapers in an increasingly tenuous political time, to her observations of nature and her garden, and finally, to the speaker’s ties to an individual and collective beloved “you.” Describe the surprising, or unexpected connective tissue between these worlds. What are the relationships between these facts, headlines, observations, and moments?
18. In “Daguerrotype,” how does storytelling and myth-making play a role in understanding history?
19. In “Payatas,” describe how Penaloza uses place (in this case, a dumpsite and a living neighborhood in Metro Manila) to characterize the legacies of colonialism.
20. In “Heceta Beach,” how does landscape give shape to experiences of grief? And, how does grief shape the poet’s perspective on the landscape around her?
21. In “In Dreams, The Dead Sing” and “Constellation,” how does the poet grapple with the divine?
22. In “Tabi, Tabi Po,” how does the speaker use sensory detail to illustrate her sense of wonder? What is her relationship to mythology? To the unknown?
23. In “Here,” how does Peñaloza transform and use the concept of “seeds” as a way to forge her own understanding of history and family?

24. In “Post Diaspora,” describe the speaker’s relationship to diaspora via her relationship to her mother. Define the term, “post diaspora.” How does this connect with the rest of the poem?

Possible Writing Assignments:

1. Inspired by Peñaloza’s “Upon Reading…” series, write a poem rooted in the landscape of your favorite book. Or, a variation: write a poem riffing on or disagreeing with the main argument that the writer poses in your selected text.
2. Inspired by “Self-Portrait at Thirty-three,” write a self-portrait poem at that age you are now. Make a list of observations of your physical self, and a list of epiphanies you’ve had from the past year.
3. Write a poem about migration (your history or your family’s) inspired by these lines in “On Migration, Upon Finding an Old Map,” “I can believe almost anything—/that we began/as thoughts an ocean away carried as seeds or smog or trash/ across the water//by capital by will by God/or/we began/as crumbs ferried in the beaks of/waxwings birds of paradise/we began/as birds ourselves—/migration/instinct.”
4. Inspired by “Letter From Mother,” write an epistle poem in the voice of a loved one, a letter from them to you. Try to establish the tone and intimacy of your relationship by including with details to them and the way they speak.
5. Write your own Q&A poem. Begin by creating lists of questions: questions you’re often asked, questions you’ve always wanted to ask, questions you ask yourself, questions that annoy you, questions you have no answers to. Then, answer them.
6. Write a piece inspired by “Variations on Prayer and the Color Brown).” Fixate on a color. Research it. Write down you associations, denotations, connotations, memories, dreams and feelings about and around this color.
7. Inspired by “Desire” and “Constellation” (write an anagram poem. The end words of each of the poem’s lines must be derived from letters in the poem’s title.