

MICHELLE PEÑALOZA

# FORMER POSSESSIONS OF THE SPANISH EMPIRE

[www.michellepenaloza.com](http://www.michellepenaloza.com)

“Of this I am certain: I’ll be celebrating this poet for many years to come.” - Aimee Nezhukumatathil, author of *Lucky Fish and Oceanic*

PRESS RELEASE

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## Advanced Praise for *Former Possessions of the Spanish Empire*



- Garrett Hongo, author of *Coral Road*

“As an heraldic preface to her wondrous new volume, Michelle Peñaloza asks of her poetry a profound question—*How do children born of empire // once removed // possess the history // of their naming?* So the poet sings in splendid particulars—of a mother almost mystic in affection, a father who works with uncommon pride in his work on an assembly line, of her sensuous own body burgeoning with erotic impulse and tenderness, of the romance of an island archipelago luminous with magical beasts but also riven by colonial decrees. Even her own, indigenous family name has been lost to time and conquest. **Yet each song is a kind of phenomenal puzzle**—until you step back from the reading and recognize these are glowing tiles and shining panels assembled to make a larger composition—a faceted portrait of a life derived from the lonely scatterings of history, from a dispossessed people who would be orphaned without the love and poetic homage rendered here. **The book is a colorful and complex mosaic of re-possession, a repairing of an uprooted history, and Penaloza’s own passionate monody of praise for all that was lost.**”

“Michelle Peñaloza’s ambitious and remarkable debut searches for a place to anchor in spite of a rancorous world where we might have “began as crumbs ferried in the beak of waxwings.” These poems read mythic yet contemporary in their burst of bloom-song and bright blood stroke. The result is electric—giving us a kind of poetry more alive, more filled with lava and lyric. **Of this I am certain: I’ll be celebrating this poet for many years to come.**”



- Aimee Nezhukumatathil, author of *Lucky Fish* and *Oceanic*



“Michelle Peñaloza’s first collection of poems, *Former Possessions of the Spanish Empire*, is filled with so much care and *kapwa*, a deep understanding of shared humanity, between generations of Filipina women and girls -- the granddaughter plucking her lola’s gray hairs, witnessing the aging, failing body with so much warmth and compassion, the daughter who knows her mother’s voice so well, that she inhabits it. Peñaloza’s poems are grounded in details, textures, and aromas, rose petals, coffee, garlic, smoothed rosary beads, old prayer books, the tangle of mangrove roots. **This is an emotionally complex work, in which grief, and immigrant, diasporic confusion and rage are handled with so much wisdom. I love this book.**”

- Barbara Jane Reyes,  
author of *Poeta en San Francisco* and *Invocation to Daughters*

**Two poems from *Former Possessions of the Spanish Empire*:**

Former Possessions of the Spanish Empire

People name us  
with the separation of their teeth,  
the long *z* of our naming.

It used to be  
we were named for our proximity:  
kato tabing dagat, the parentage of the sea;  
the forest's lineage, kato ginubatan.

Or we were named for our parents—  
anak ni Lina, bunso ni Boyet.  
The song of our names  
led to the discovery of garlic  
growing from our palms,  
the scapes forming a second green hand.

But it was in the name of good King Philip  
that songs changed to names  
and the naming of names became law.

A governor general made a name for himself  
with the *Catalogo de Apellidos*—  
a dissemination of empire, a naming of parts  
to trace and tax everyone:  
whole provinces renamed with efficient alphabetical phenomena:  
Padilla, Pacheco, Palma, Paz, Perez, Portillo, Puente, Peñaloza.

Still, there were names we kept to ourselves,  
a shorthand between us:

windows lined with votives  
jars of holy water

the papaya's  
lush coral and beaded seeds  
shining fish roe.

Can legacy exist in short hand?

Papal papa  
papel papaya  
paalam permission  
please

What are the root words  
for what we simply know?

How do children born of empire  
once removed

possess the history  
of their naming?

## Variations on Prayer and the Color Brown

My mother sends emails  
telling me to be happy and grateful,  
reminding me of the day's saint, instructing me  
to pray the rosary and how to.  
There are differing views  
on origin and history—  
did the Virgin Mary give Saint Dominic  
a strand of beads in a vision?  
Or did people simply make a way  
to count their prayers?

~

My lola had visions  
of Saint Anthony of Padua—  
patron saint of lost items and souls;  
of native peoples, amputees, animals,  
of barrenness, of Brazil and Cebu;  
patron saint of counter-  
revolutionaries and the elderly,  
of fishermen, of harvests and horses,  
of poor and oppressed peoples; of Portugal  
and pregnancy; patron saint of shipwrecks,  
starvation, swineherds, travelers, and runts—  
he, appeared to my lola in the midst of her prayers.  
His arrival shook the nipa roof. In his benevolent  
presence, my lola pled for Saint Anthony to save  
my Tito Ubing from the illness which the doctor  
(they could not afford) could neither name nor cure.  
She placed cold towels on her son's head  
while she praised Saint Anthony for his sermon  
to the fish in Rimini—a multitude in peaceful, perfect order  
rose up, smallest to largest, lifting their heads out of the water  
to gaze upon his face. Lola praised Saint Anthony  
for converting the heretics of Rimini with the miracle  
of penitent fish and called on him—Doctor of the Church,  
fish-whisperer, heretic-hammer, bearer of brown habit

and three-knotted cord, Anthony of Padua—to save her son.  
And he did. And my lola, my beautiful lola, whose skin  
sang against fabrics of coral and pink and cerulean and  
ruby and jade and chartreuse and indigo and gold  
pledged to renounce all color for the rest of her life,  
to demonstrate her devotion. This was always  
my mother’s answer when I asked her:  
*Ma, why does Lola only ever wear brown?*

~

Variants of Brown, according to Wikipedia:  
AMBER, BEAVER, BEIGE, BRONZE, BUFF,  
BURGUNDY, BURNT SIENNA, CAMEL, CHESTNUT,  
CHOCOLATE, COFFEE, COCOA BROWN, COPPER,  
COYOTE, DESERT SAND, ECRU, FALLOW, FAWN,  
FIELD DRAB, KHAKI, LION, LIVER, MAHOGANY,  
RAW UMBER, RUSSET, RUST, SAND, SEAL BROWN,  
SEPIA, SIENNA, SMOKEY TOPAZ, TAN, TAUPE,  
TAWNY, UMBER, WENGE, WHEAT.

~

When I was born, my lola could not believe  
how dark I was, how dark brown—*parang*  
*itim!*—almost black, she supposedly said.  
Even in her love, what she spoke was her fear,  
that darkness would mar me, that likeness  
to blackness was a matter of concern, enough for  
exclamation and, later, prayer. She gave me  
an ironic (or hopeful?) nickname:  
Mochiko, after the sweet white rice flour  
she used to make palitau, housed in a thin, white box,  
marked by a single blue star and red writing.

~

If I look at my hands, my arms, my face in the mirror—  
I might name my hue SAND in the fall,  
CAMEL or LION in the winter,  
COPPER and SEPIA in spring,  
SEAL BROWN in summer.

~

Lola long dead, I still enter her old room  
and find her rosary made from pressed rose petals.  
I cradle it in my palms, perfuming  
my hands with her prayers.  
I don't pray. I just wonder  
at the fragrance a brown bead can hold,  
how many petals, how many roses,  
to make just one bead.

*An interview with Michelle Peñaloza, author of Former Possessions of the Spanish Empire:*

**1. In reading the title of your book, *Former Possessions of the Spanish Empire*, I think about the Philippines in which you primarily write about, but also its shared colonial history with Puerto Rico, Cuba, and much of Latin America. Can you talk about your thought process for this collection's title and the Philippines' relationship to other "former possessions of the Spanish Empire?"**

The title as a phrase itself came from a conversation with Mario Alejandro Ariza. We were bonding over our last names both having the letter Z and both being a result of Spanish colonization despite my being Filipino-American and him being Dominican-American. I can't remember who actually said the phrase first, but I do remember us having one of those, "I'm Going to Write This First!" Poet Moments. After that conversation I wrote the title poem, "Former Possessions of the Spanish Empire" for the collection. The phrase became this refrain in my mind, a kind of shorthand for some of the shared reverberations of colonization: lost family names, lost languages, lost spirits and gods—and the need I felt to reclaim and remake those for myself. "Former Possessions" also speaks to the ways relationships to nationhood and identity can reflect or manifest in the violence and complexities of individual interactions—in families, in intimate relationships—and the complications of desire.

**2. These lines from the title poem in your book are so powerful: "How do children born of empire / once removed // possess the history/ of their naming?" Is your writing process connected to this history of naming? How does this connect to the way you wrestle with language in the book?**

Yes, all these aspects are connected. To be a child of empire is to never be wholly of the site of conquest nor of the conquering force and yet to also be of both. To be "once removed," is to constantly negotiate between spaces and identities without a defined guide for those negotiations. In my writing process, I'm engaging with those contradictions and reimagining what histories, what ways of being and naming, were/are possible. I'm working with what isn't necessarily recoverable, with what I am unable to access, even as I try to do just that: recover, access, and, ultimately, possess, if you will, my own naming, my own history.

**3. Which writers/books were influential to you as you were writing *Former Possessions of the Spanish Empire*?**

*Rose* by Li-Young Lee, *Native Guard* and *Domestic Work* by Natasha Trethewey, *Want* by Rick Barot, *White Elephants* by Ritika Vazirani, *The New Black* by Evie Shockley, *Juan Luna's Revolver* by Luisa Igloria, *Seam* by Tarfia Faizullah. The poems of Larry Levis, Wislawa Szymborska, Jack Gilbert, Gjertrud Schnackenberg. The prose of Joan Didion and Gina Apostol. Garrett Hongo, my mentor, was a strong influence in my thinking about what arc the collection could create.

**4. How did you choose the art for the cover of the book?**

I knew I wanted the artwork of a Filipinx-American artist. I kept coming back to the paintings of my friend, [Roberto Jamora](#). I love his use of color, the effects and execution of what is layered, what is taken away, and what is left. Also, Roberto's artwork is also featured on the cover of my chapbook with Organic Weapon Arts, *Last Night I Dreamt of Volcanos*. So, it felt right to seek out his work again. At first, I called him and we talked about a concept and he created a piece; it wasn't really what I had envisioned. But, I really wanted to use one of his paintings. With the help of the book's designer, Kenji Liu, I was able to find right one: (I love the title, too! Roberto has the best titles!) it's called "Ride or Die Chick." Also, Kenji was able to incorporate a bit of gold on the cover. I think because of the book's title and of my own relationship to the color, it was important to me to have that gold piece be a part of the cover. I like how it looks like a label you could scratch off or a plaque that's waiting to be engraved. I like that it could be something being un/recovered, or a boat, or a log.

**5. If the book had a playlist or soundtrack, what would be on it?**

This book *does* have a playlist! You can check it out [here via Spotify](#). We got Whitney, Solange, Mariah, Roy Orbison, Xscape (!!), Feist, Sade, a number of Prince songs (of COURSE), and a few Neko Case songs. I also sprinkled in some of my favorite Filipino songs from the '70s that make me think of my family—songs by Pilita, Celeste Legaspi, Sharon Cuneta.

**6. An even better music-related question, which karaoke song would this book sing? Why?**

This book would sing Bjork's "It's Oh So Quiet" because of its many textures and registers: whisper soft and shouting at the top of its lungs.

Also: DRAMA.

Also: I love this question.

Also: Wanna go to karaoke?

**7. Who do you hope to reach with this book?**

The children of empire. The lonely ones. The ones who never see their faces appear at the front of the classroom. The ones who know that they have to, but don't know how they can leave. The ones that don't yet know one day they will find a way to leave. The path-pavers, the trouble-makers. The ones who did and who didn't become the nurses their parents wanted them to be. The ones who if I won the lottery I'd start an endowment for (so that they could get paid to write poems in beautiful places, undisturbed, with actual reprieve from white supremacy and misogyny and homophobia). The long dead. The not yet born. My family. My elders. My ancestors.

**8. If this book attended a Filipino family potluck, what would it bring?**

It would bring a giant, still-hot pot of kare-kare and extra bagoong (two jars, spicy and not). It would also bring a bottle of nice-ish whiskey to pass among the cousins.

Michelle Peñaloza created a Spotify playlist inspired by *Former Possessions of the Spanish Empire*. Enjoy!

Link:

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/3uAR57qg44gKhG3uDQTtG?si=Y5vAGHaNTxGbLswX4wPBeg>



PLAYLIST

## Former Possessions of the Spanish Empire MIXTAPE

I wrote a book, y'all! FORMER POSSESSIONS OF THE SPANISH EMPIRE (we'll try on FPOSE as an acronym) drops August 2019. Put on this playlist as you wait in anticipatory delight. Put it on when you buy the book. Put it on whilst you hold the book in your hands and read it!

PLAY

FOLLOWING

...

FOLLOWER  
1

Q Filter

Download

TITLE

ARTIST

ALBUM



+ Heartbeats	The Knife	Deep Cuts	15 days ago	3:52
+ Blue Bayou	Roy Orbison	The Monument Singles ...	11 days ago	2:29
+ In the Aeroplane Over the Sea	Neutral Milk Hotel	In the Aeroplane Over t...	15 days ago	3:22
+ Kapantay Ay Langit	Pilita Corrales	Special Collector's Edit...	9 days ago	2:54
+ Starfish and Coffee	Prince	Sign 'O' The Times	9 days ago	2:51
+ Cranes in the Sky	Solange	A Seat at the Table	11 days ago	4:11

From *Poetry Northwest*:

## **Interview // How a Phrase Will Find You: A Conversation with Michelle Peñaloza**

by Jake Uitti | Contributing Writer

*Michelle Peñaloza, who was born in the suburbs of Detroit, grew up in Nashville, lived in Seattle, and now resides in rural California, offers rich, lush poetry packed to the margins with stories of her father and mother, tear-inducing fights with lovers and bouts grappling with self-doubt. Maneuvering through rivers of anger with an ability to turn a masterful phrase, Peñaloza has written a new collection of poetry, *Former Possessions of the Spanish Empire*, which won the 2018 Hillary Gravendyke National Prize, and will be published by Inlandia Institute in August 2019. To celebrate the publication, I caught up with Peñaloza to ask about her family, her relationship to anger, and how she fell in love with the written word.*

### **What about poetry called you in, and what about it kept you?**

I think what pulled me in was story and, like, what's the word—it's sort of a pretentious idea, but verisimilitude. The idea of bringing you into the truth of a place or an experience. Reading all kinds of literature does this for me. I get to experience and learn something new—a new kind of empathy or a new kind of knowledge of a situation or person. The very practical expansion of one's capacity for empathy and connection to the world outside the self—that's what pulled me in. And what kept me was being able to feel like I could enter that conversation as well.

### **You did a lot to shed light on your family's culture in the forthcoming book. Did it feel difficult translating it, so to speak, to a potentially unfamiliar audience?**

When I was writing the poems I was less concerned about that. My feeling about "translation" for an unfamiliar audience is similar or analogous to the convention of italicizing words that aren't in English. I don't do it anymore. I did when I first started writing poetry. Any words in Spanish or Tagalog, I would italicize so as to mark them and convey, "I understand this is not English and you should look it up." Now, I feel like language that is not English need not be othered in my writing. In that same way, I didn't think about how to write to or for someone who wasn't familiar with the Philippines or Filipino-American culture. I wrote these poems to process and learn things for myself, to pay homage to my family. Of course on some level you think about your audience, but I didn't write these poems as a means to shed light or educate people about culture.

### **In your life, do you think often about the idea of tradition?**

Oh yeah, I'm a recovering Catholic. Growing up, tradition was my whole life. I think that tradition is interesting because once you've figured out what it means to you, it's like a buffet. I get to pick and choose what I continue to believe and what I want to carry forward, what I've processed or what I've decided to cleave away. I don't think tradition is inherently

bad. I think tradition can be valuable. It's important to me to know where things come from, even if I don't believe in them anymore.

**How did you find your relationship to the idea of anger evolve as you wrote?**

I think it was less the idea of anger and more actual anger. I think that anger, like trauma or grief, is something that comes in waves. You can't feel grief all the time or sustain processing trauma all the time—you can't be joyful all the time. It comes in waves. I feel like it was like that with these poems. Because there is joy in the book, too. But I think that anger is what drives a lot of things. There's a lot to be angry about in general and especially now. It's a very motivating emotion, but there's a fine balance there because it can swallow you up. I feel like the poems in this book helped me process those things. Each poem is like a layer on top of another thing. It's like a palimpsest—the things that were there are never really gone. It's not like anger is ever really gone, but there are other lenses with which to view it or hold it.

**Did these poems create any type of distance that you didn't expect?**

There's a previous relationship, which is not the same as my current— and happy!— marriage, that I definitely processed through a number of these poems, and I think that allowed me some distance. I think you always carry the consequences and effects of what you've experienced—that's what makes us who we are—but I think you can find a healthy distance from those effects. Many of the poems in the book created a lot of space from traumatic things.

**I love the sonic quality of your last name. And you call on it in the book at least a few times. Did you always appreciate the sound of your name?**

No, not always. But I do love it now. It's my father's surname and I don't have my father in the world with me anymore. I think as I got older my name became more important to me. I didn't take my husband's name. I'm married, but I'm still Michelle Peñaloza.

Growing up, though, it wasn't a typical last name in Nashville, Tennessee in the mid-90s. One of my teachers, Mr. Langdon, would try to be cute and call me Michelle Pepsi Cola. There were always other iterations—Pepsi Cola, Panty Hosa, Pennzoil. People really freak out when you have a Z in your last name. They're like, "Oh no! The letter Z! It's at the end of the alphabet, I don't know what to do with this!"

I agree it is a very sonically pleasing last name. And I love my family, and my family name accordingly—it's a part of who I am and I've grown to really like that person.

**There is a lot about romantic relationships in the book and the particularly jarring moments come when you describe a situation with someone in power and someone without. Was it difficult to mine these spaces?**

Yeah, it was painful, at times. But I think to your prior question about distance, I think it was also really healthy and good and artistically rich for me to do that. It was cathartic. But yeah,

it could be hard. But all writing that's hard is better than writing that's easy, I've found. Whenever stuff comes easy, I go back to it and I'm like, "Ugh, this is terrible!" That's just my process. When it comes easily, it's usually not getting to what I need to figure out.

**How many poems did you throw away while writing the book?**

Oh, many. I have a whole sequence that I just can't fucking write. It's this really interesting story, a whole 20-page sequence that's based on family lore on my dad's side about how my Lolo, my grandfather, went into the jungle to look for gold and never came back and his body was never found. Maybe that will be in the next book. Maybe not. There were also a number of sweet love poems that didn't make it in.

**There are so many amazing lines in the book. For example, "He pressed like pressing was what his life was for"; "facts are marbles in my mouth"; "Landscape climaxes against the crash of water." Do these come to you during the writing process or do they pop in your head while you're, say, doing the dishes?**

I think it's a mix. I keep a notebook—well, I've been bad about it lately, but while writing the book I kept a notebook. It's like how music will get in your head, how a phrase will find you.

The "marbles in my mouth" came in the writing of that poem, just meditating on language and thinking about how it physically feels when you know how to say something but you can't say it. It feels heavy and you can't swallow or you'll choke. The "pressing" line, that one came in the writing, too. From meditating on trauma and abuse and what that experience is like. And the "climax" line, that came from writing the poem, too. So I guess I'm a liar with those three. But there are plenty of other lines in the book that happened to pop in my head at any given moment.

**What's one writing trick you've learned?**

Garrett Hongo, when I was at the University of Oregon for my M.F.A., did this thing where, in the workshop, he'd read someone's poem and it was like jazz. He wouldn't put in any new words, he'd cut maybe one or two words. But he'd just move stuff around. He'd take lines from the middle and put them at the beginning. He'd make small moves like that, but what he was always doing was finding the heart of the poem, which isn't a trick. He'd always talk about the latent meanings and narratives the poem had in it, that it hadn't—haha, that *you* hadn't—let the poem reveal, that you'd hidden from yourself. You've already written the poem, he'd say. When I revise or return to a poem, I often think of that.

**You live in rural Northern California after spending time in Detroit, Nashville, and Seattle. How does your home affect your writing?**

There's always been lots of nature and plants in my writing and I feel like that is – it's just changed the landscape. I feel like a lot of poems in the book that were written while I was living in the northwest reflect that. There's a lot of nature named in it: ferns, specific places,

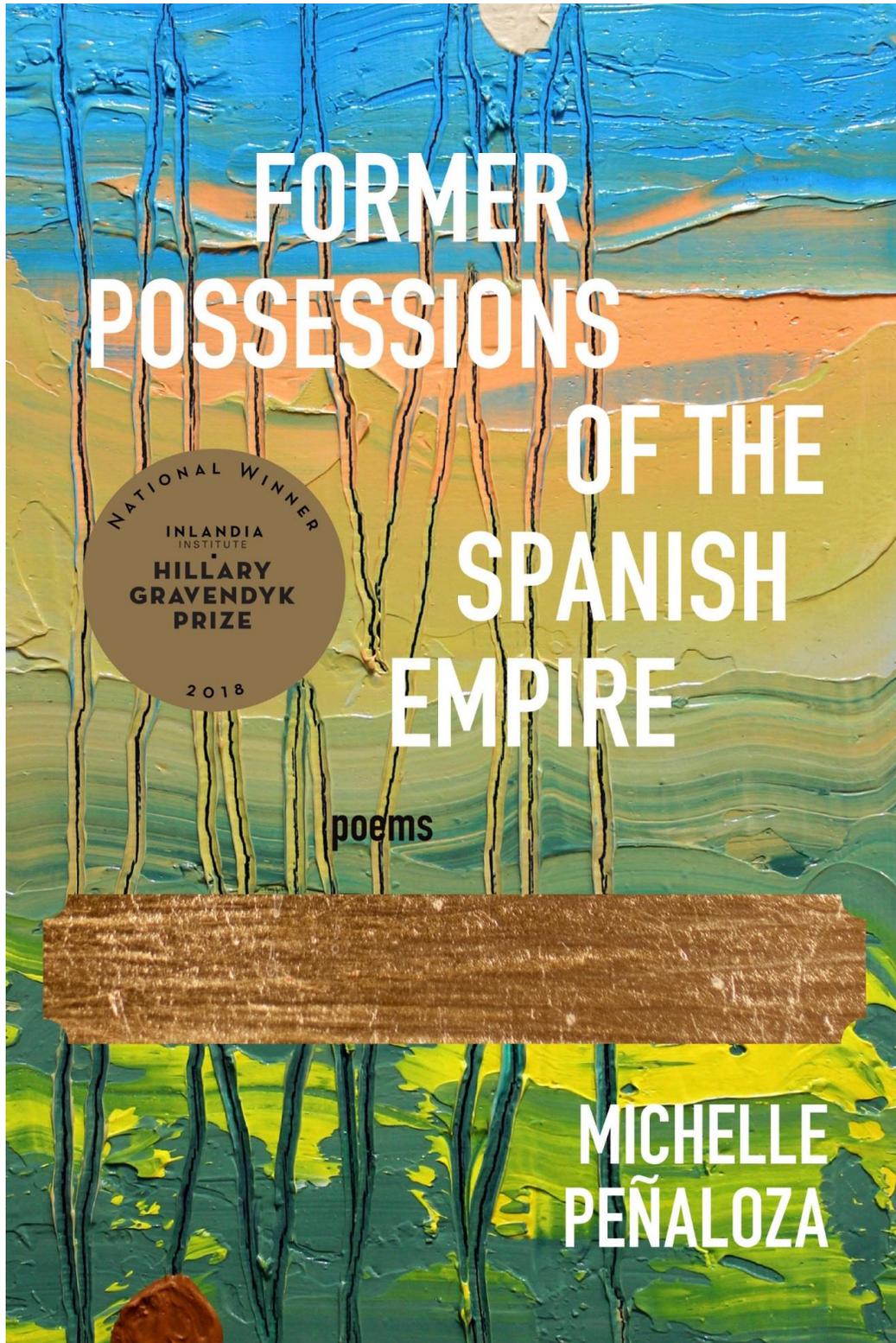
moss, things like that. And now there's specific things that pop up in my writing. I live in a very rural place where there aren't very many people compared to basically everywhere else I've lived. It's also the first place I've lived with a large Native population. The history of white settler colonialism and what was done to Native people in the town where I live is still very apparent and present in the landscape, and also in the way people socialize and interact. So, while that history and those narratives are not explicitly named in my writing, I think my witnessing of that has entered my writing.

Also, for the two years I've lived here, various parts of California have been on fire for half the time. And those two things are in line with how I feel about the rest of the world, right now, too. It feels heavy, which makes it slow, but also I have more space living in a rural place—physical, emotional, and mental. And being a farmer, I'm using my body. I'm dirty. And that is very different than my life in Seattle. I don't know exactly how that's going to manifest because in this transition, I haven't been writing a ton of stuff either. It will be interesting to see how those things intersect.

Currently, I don't have a specific question in mind or something I'm processing personally at the moment, but I feel like there's a lot collectively. There is a lot happening outside of my own life that still feels personal. I'm not sure how it will manifest, but in the poems I've written things like this definitely bubble up.

**In the book you write about grief. How did the writing process help exercise or exorcise your own grief?**

So many of the poems are about my dad and my mother in the wake of the loss of him and also about other beloved family members who have died. I feel like writing those poems and reading them, sharing them with people, is a way of both honoring my dead and keeping them close, which is good. It's like we're giving each other a gift.



High Resolution File of Author Photo

