From One Former Possession of the Spanish Empire to Another: A Review of Michelle Peñaloza's *Former Possessions of the Spanish Empire*

Mario Ariza

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$13.21

A review about a book of poetry that thematizes diaspora, written by a reviewer who is himself a member of a diaspora, should probably begin with a quote by some sort of diasporic intellectual. Perhaps Glissant would do, or Bhaba, or Spivak. But I've never read Bhaba, have barely read Spivak, and though I've read Glissant, I can hardly pretend to have understood him, even if that was sort of his point.

But Michelle Peñaloza's third collection of poetry, *Former Possesions of the Spanish Empire*, is—unlike Glissant—written to be understood. And it is with an arresting clarity rare in contemporary poetry that Peñaloza explores themes of diaspora, displacement, immigration, and loss.

I remember the day Peñaloza came across the title of this third book of poetry of hers. I should remember it, for I spoke it to her. We were sitting on wicker chairs in a Vermont barn, exhausted. It was the 5th or the 7th or the 300th day of the Bread Loaf Writer's Conference. We were waiters. There were still waiters then, though there are none now (thank god!) Maybe it was exhaustion, or all of the heavy drinking, or the fact that we—immigrant writers—were serving people meals in exchange for room and board, but the subject of discussion turned to imperialism. And I remember—at some point—noting that both of our motherlands (The Phillipines, Haiti/Quisqueya,) had been Spanish colonies.

And now Peñaloza has gone and written a book, and in it are lines that compare papaya seeds to fish roe, and say that gecko's feet make a "colloquy," and describe a group sex experience as "hostile and chock full of imperialist overtones," and it is lovely. But more than just lovely, the poems in the book, divided into three sections, broadly explore the experience of a speaker trying to make sense of the dislocation and confusion that follows in the wake of imperial dislocation.

The first section explores the legacy of diasporic displacement through the lens of the family unit. "How do children born of empire/once removed/ possess the history/of their naming?" one early poem asks, and the succeeding pieces—which mix Filipino and English—explore that question, often in addresses to or in the voices of family members.

The second section does a masterful job of intertwining the sexual objectification and loss of agency that comes from historical imperial subjection with the personal romantic foibles of the speaker. A series of seven poems set in and around a famous Philippine red-light district frequented by American servicemen serves as a foil to poems that narrate the speaker's experience of first love as a brown girl in a white country. And poems that chronicle the failure of a doomed relation are twinned against ones that explore sexual encounters of dubious consent.

The third section is a bit more inchoate, but centers around grief and family history, deftly exploring the semantic and symbolic dislocation of diaspora. One poem, titled "In Dreams the Dead Sing", is—frankly—beautiful.

"The dead sing / within the salt dissolved on living tongues," it muses, a few stanzas in, somehow embodying the weight of history itself and transmuting into language.

Empires—one after the other—raped and pillaged and warped the Phillipines. They did the same with Caribbean, and with sundry sections of the earth. The people who were shifted about as a result have to make sense of the carnage, somehow. Peñaloza has written a book that does so, in a dazzling fashion.