

Possessing Polynesians: The Science of Settler Colonial Whiteness in Hawai'i and Oceania

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Possessing Polynesians: The Science of Settler Colonial Whiteness in Hawai'i and Oceania, by Maile Arvin. Duke University Press, 2019; Paperback, 328 pages; \$27.95.

In *Possessing Polynesians: The Science of Settler Colonial Whiteness in Hawai'i and Oceania*, the Kānaka Maoli scholar Maile Arvin captivantly articulates a settler colonial possession of Polynesians as a method of examining how whiteness, as a type of mechanism or tool, is employed through both a literal possession of physical entities, such as bodies, land, or ideologies, and a more spectrally metaphorical understanding of the term. This is concretely contextualized within the scope of Hawai'i and among its Indigenous people through anti-blackness and gendered heteronormativity.

Arvin's approach to possession draws from what Patrick Wolfe has famously described as the "logic of elimination" (389), an active removal of the native that is central to the settler colonial project; and from Avery Gordon's theorization of haunting as a "reality that analyzes the lingering impact" (63) of the horrors and histories of settler colonial possession of Polynesian bodies and land.

Arvin introduces the text by stating, "Polynesia is a project, not a place" (1). In this regard, her first two chapters excavate the processes by which settler colonial logics use whiteness to legitimize possession, notably through the vectors of anthropology and race. The fundamental logic of possession was to establish that whiteness was indigenous to Oceania, specifically in the region of Polynesia. Arvin details this process in relation to the historical "Polynesian Problem," the early 19th century scientific framework used by white scholars to connect the racial origins of Pacific Islanders to that of the Aryan race. In doing this, white settlers legitimized "claims of belonging to Polynesia while [relieving] colonizers' racial anxieties about those they dispossessed" (4). According to Arvin, it follows that this exact racial reasoning was used to distance Polynesians from whiteness and identify them as degenerative, never truly actualized white bodies. These chapters portray the extensive, and arguably outrageous, lengths and venues that white settlers took to claim a biological connection to Polynesian indigeneity in order to justify territorialization of land while further absolving accountability of any ongoing violence caused by whiteness.

The third chapter explores the dispossession of the native in approximation to whiteness as evidenced in the fetishization of the "Hawaiian girl." Working with the idea of Hawai'i as a United States racial laboratory, Arvin addresses the inherently biological underpinnings of racial mixture, such as the ideologies of hybridity and hyperdescent, in the actualization of a multicultural state, whereby Kānaka Maoli

women were objectified by white men and still expected to reproduce the ideal, mixed-race Hawaiian. The author engages with historian Tavia Nyong'o's argument that antiblackness is evident in the "fear of phenotypic blackness" (118) in Polynesian bodies, which is remedied by a racial hybridization of the Native Hawaiian. The construction of the "Hawaiian girl," then, is further evidence of the heteropatriarchal, gendered, and misogynistic structures situated within an embodiment of settler colonial whiteness.

In chapter four, Arvin historicizes the topic of blood quantum with regards to the federal recognition of Native Hawaiians by looking at the infamous case of *Day vs. Apoliona*. This is a moment where Kānaka Maoli "called the law on [themselves]" (154) and sought exclusive membership from the settler state through the same logics of possession that were used originally against them. By retracing the details of this landmark case, Arvin succeeds in conveying the contentious nature of Indigenous peoples engaging in settler colonial whiteness. Yet, in a more significant manner, Arvin questions blood quantum as a "technology 'not of our own making' but nonetheless one that has become an undeniable part of many Native nations" (145) and confronts the politics of recognition by including Kānaka Maoli 'a'ole as a form of regenerative refusal evinced in the community commentary at the Department of Interior hearings for the Akaka Bill.

Following 'a'ole, the fifth and sixth chapter similarly challenge whiteness and the ideological possession of it through various mediums of regenerative refusals. In direct contestation of the settler colonial technologies intended to possess them, Arvin details the moves beyond race in which Native Hawaiian, Samoan, and Māori defy racial purity logics grounded within the Hawaiian Genome Project along with artistic modes of resistance to white commodification and aesthetics that are "painfully overlaid onto Indigenous Pacific bodies daily" (222). Arvin further invites the reader to pay close attention to the regenerative refusals of genome science and the ways in which Indigeneity is defined within Polynesian worldviews and futurisms.

Although Arvin diversifies her work to include figures and histories throughout Pasifika, such as Te Rangi Hīroa of Aotearoa, and Samoan artist Yuki Kihara, whose photograph "A Study of a Samoan Savage" dresses the cover of the book, there is still so much left untouched with regards to exploring whiteness outside of Hawai'i. Subsequent work by scholars of Oceania can utilize Arvin's book alongside stories focused on other Polynesian nations such as Samoa, Tonga, Tahiti, as well as stories of other nations within Micronesia and Melanesia, in order to fully represent the logic of possession throughout the entirety of Pasifika. For instance, analyzing the logic of possession as it pertains to both past and present Chamoru experience within both Islas Mariānas and the diaspora, would add nuance to the conversation of settler colonial whiteness. In doing this, one can take on Arvin's concluding call to challenge racial hierarchies throughout Pasifika and instead, as famed Epeli Hau'ofa writes, reestablish our sea of islands (152) and foster deeper connections and solidarity beyond the cartographic divisions of Polynesia, Micronesia, and Melanesia.

Ultimately, *Possessing Polynesians* is a fascinating text that deepens our understanding of the biopolitical histories of possession and the lasting impact of

settler colonial whiteness as Indigenous Pasifika communities know and experience it today – but more importantly how they continue to refuse and contest it.

Works Cited

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