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Citation: Nyerges, A. 2019. Postcolonial Grief: The Afterlives of the Pacific Wars in the Americas by Jinah Kim. Durham: Duke University Press. *Cultural Studies Review*, 25:1, 197-199. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5130/csr.v24i1.6674>

ISSN 1837-8692 | Published by UTS ePRESS | <https://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/csrj>

REVIEW

Postcolonial Grief: The Afterlives of the Pacific Wars in the Americas by Jinah Kim. Durham: Duke University Press

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5130/csr.v24i1.6674>

Article history: Received 23/03/2019; Revised 04/02/2019; Accepted 04/08/2019; **Published 25/09/2019**

'We belong to the Pacific with its rich variety of philosophies and different ways of viewing reality, nature, the atua and the cosmos', proclaimed the writer Albert Wendt, before continuing, 'We belong to the Pacific, with its multiplicity of social/economic and political systems all undergoing different stages of decolonisation'.¹ These two intertwined pronouncements on Pacific belonging were made by Wendt in 1988, in his inaugural lecture as a Professor of English at the University of Auckland. Wendt's lecture maps a personal journey, through life and fiction, which includes many migrations—from his birthplace of Samoa to his second home of New Zealand, from literary obscurity to public prominence—but it also underlines a fundamental shift in academic thinking about the Pacific. In the 1970s and 1980s, Wendt and other writers, such as Epeli Hau'ofa and Haunani-Kay Trask, gave the lie to the language of decolonization and independence through which the post-war Pacific was often articulated. Hau'ofa and Wendt, in particular, became associated with 'new Oceania studies', an inter-related academic and creative effort to use writing to push back against the themes of remoteness, distance and poverty that the new world order had inscribed into Pacific islands. In these writings Oceania became the name of a region that was reimagined in terms of richness, interior complexity, vastness, and global interconnection. While Cold War geopolitics emphasized a 'Pacific Rim' of economically productive and strategically important states (making the archipelagic cultures of the Pacific its hollow centre), the naming and theorizing of Oceania underscored that the work of decolonising had just begun.

Writing, for Wendt, gave indigenous peoples of the Pacific a way of coping with the obliterating loss attendant on colonisation, an experience that is also captured in American Indian, Maori, and Aboriginal Australian literatures. The act of writing, he suggests, is done

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTEREST The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. **FUNDING** The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

‘to discover what has happened, to shape the feel, depths, dimensions and tastes of that loss, and its causes’ (37). This relationship between loss and literature is also central to Jinah Kim’s new book *Postcolonial Grief: The Afterlives of the Pacific Wars in the Americas*. Kim’s concern is for a contemporary political and cultural imaginary that is bloated with death, an imaginary in which bodies constantly surface as reminders of violence that is ignored, crimes that have gone without redress, loss that is unmourned, and stories that are untold. Kim’s particular geographic focus is a place she calls ‘the Pacific arena’, an area effected by US militarization, neoliberal biopolitics and the extension of racial colonialism across the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. Though she does not cite Wendt and new Oceania studies directly, her map of the Pacific extends its critical aims by considering the living on of colonialism in the transpacific movement of Japanese and Korean diasporas. In ways that Wendt and his peers would recognize, she also argues that confronting the violence of US and Japanese militarism is an essential stage of decolonising the Pacific. Moving beyond that resistant framework, however, she also argues that this stage of decolonisation might be defined by a recalcitrant and resistant grief, an affective situation that refuses to exchange melancholia for the reparative work of mourning, but rather asserts that ‘some losses cannot ever be replaced, but rather are erased or lived as loss’ (9).

Evocatively written and imaginatively structured, *Postcolonial Grief* is organized into four chapters, which almost read as stand-alone essays that are connected most strongly by their interest in ‘the productive nature of unresolved or unresolvable grief’ (19). Intriguingly, Kim spends half of her relatively short book focused on Los Angeles. She begins by adducing a theory of melancholy violence from Franz Fanon’s ‘Colonial Wars and Mental Disorders’ and relating it to ‘A Fire in Fontana’, Hisaye Yanamoto’s short-story about a woman returning to LA after being imprisoned at the Poston Internment Camp in Arizona. In Chapter 2 she thinks through the aftermath of the 1992 LA Riots as a terrain for racial cognitive mapping. This approach leads her to characterise the city in terms of an abiding postcolonial melancholy that challenges the popular view of the riots as a moment of racial rupture. Continuing its transit of the Pacific Arena, the book’s third chapter pays long-overdue attention to the transpacific orientation of the noir genre. This chapter puts forward the notion that postcolonial grief is strategically opposed to liberal rites of reconciliation, or state-sanctioned rituals for overcoming trauma. It makes this argument through noir texts that are haunted by the devastation of the Korean War and refuse to let that slaughter be redeemed. The final chapter considers the staging of Sophocles’ *Antigone* in Peru as postcolonial allegory. Kim highlights how Antigone’s defiance of the Creon’s order that she bury her dead brother allows the restiveness and resilience of grief to make visible forms of violence that have been refused visibility. As these examples indicate, the book’s archive is eclectic and exciting, extending from Dai Sil Kim-Gibson’s *Sai-I-Gu* to include Héctor Tobar’s *The Tattooed Soldier*, Sam Fuller’s *The Crimson Kimono*, Naomi Hirahara’s *Summer of Big Bachi*, Teresa Ralli and José Watanabe’s *Antígona*, Jennifer Egan’s ‘The Liberation of Lori Berenson’, and Ann Patchett’s *Bel Canto*. Scholars and teachers of these works will find something of value in Kim’s approach to them, even if books of this kind are rarely designed to further reputational discussions around individual writers.

Kim’s book also reveals the logic of selection that goes into such an idiosyncratic mapping of the Pacific Arena. While her careful attention to the resonance of irredeemable grief marks an important contribution to our understanding of the militarised histories of the Pacific, her privileged points of inquiry—Los Angeles, the Japanese and Korean diasporas, Peru—repeat in ways that may undermine her ultimate goal of challenging the logic of a Pacific

Rim that swivels around Los Angeles, a global pivot defined by economic capital and new forms of ethnic collectivity and merger. This raises the question of the book's relationship to the geography of neoliberalism, a term that periodically surfaces within its covers only to be displaced by the affective weight of Kim's theorizing of postcolonial grief. While Kim makes explicit that reconceptualizing the Pacific as an 'arena' implies notions of gladiatorial combat, she risks underplaying the complexity of weaponizing affect in the contemporary political context. Scholars like Vincanne Adams and Lauren Berlant have raised cautions about the way in which the retreat of organized opposition to capitalist exploitation has been accompanied by a new economy of affects. It would have been interesting to see Kim negotiating more candidly the possibility that postcolonial grief has a vexed relationship with its own moment, a moment in wherein the publicising of personal mood increasingly passes for a politics of opposition. Seeing Kim take up these conversations might have been more satisfying than watching neoliberalism presented via the imperial 'anti-conquest' narratives of Egan and Patchett. To this reader these writers came off as so much neoliberal straw from which Kim spun the countervailing insurgency of postcolonial grief.

On the whole, Kim's book sharply fulfils the promise of decolonising the Pacific begun in the critical and scholarly insurgency of the 1970s. The communication between writing and loss remains central here, as it was for Albert Wendt. *Postcolonial Grief* makes an important theoretical contribution to these conversations and I recommend it to readers interested in critical ethnic studies, Asian American Studies, and decolonizing methods of reading.

Endnotes

1. Albert Wendt, 'Pacific Maps and Fiction(s): A Personal Journey' in Suvendrini Perera (Ed.), *Asian and Pacific Inscriptions: Identities, Ethnicities, Nationalities* (Bundoora, Victoria: Meridian, 1995) pg. 16.