

***Possessing Polynesians: The Science of Settler Colonial Whiteness in Hawai'i and Oceania*  
By Maile Arvin. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).**

Beginning with late-nineteenth century American intervention in the Kingdom of Hawai'i as a settler state and moving through the persistent coloniality of Hawaiian statehood, social scientists, anthropologists, and the US state developed a keen interest in the origins of Polynesian, Micronesian, and Melanesian peoples. In *Possessing Polynesians: The Science of Settler Colonial Whiteness in Hawai'i and Oceania*, historian Maile Arvin grapples with this ongoing fascination by white Americans and Europeans with the question: *what is a Polynesian?* in an attempt to interrogate how representations of Polynesian culture are omnipresent in American life while the Polynesian individual is decidedly absent.<sup>1</sup> Using an interdisciplinary approach, she argues that through the knowledge produced by social science about Polynesians as a race, whites have defined an origin for the Polynesian people that both links them to and limits them from whiteness, allowing whites to claim and possess Polynesian indigeneity. By claiming Polynesian identity as 'almost' white in this way, social scientists and the American state both undergird settler colonial claims on Polynesian land and answer overarching questions about Man to ameliorate anxieties about the security of whiteness.<sup>2</sup>

In Part I, "The Polynesian Problem: Scientific Production of the 'Almost White' Polynesian Race," Arvin examines the Western social scientific studies produced about the Polynesian race from the nineteenth through the mid-twentieth centuries to demonstrate how settler colonial ideology framed a supposed connection to Polynesian-Aryan heritage, allowing white settlers to map themselves onto Polynesian time/space.<sup>3</sup> Chapter 1 uses Western studies of

<sup>1</sup> Maile Arvin, *Possessing Polynesians: The Science of Settler Colonial Whiteness in Hawai'i and Oceania* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

Polynesian origins from the 1830s to the 1930s to argue that European discourses connecting Polynesia to classical Western “civilizations” positioned Polynesian identity in a dialectical relationship with Melanesians that perpetuated antiblackness.<sup>4</sup> In Chapter 2, Arvin employs twentieth-century anthropology and eugenics problem literature concerning Polynesian origins, both by white and Polynesian social scientists, to argue that these works calcified a logic of racial purity that positioned Polynesian identity as both ‘almost white’ and ‘dying native,’ furthering the settler colonial ideology of possession through whiteness. In addition, she points to these works as the beginnings of arbitrary logics of blood quantum, dividing Polynesian indigeneity into Pure and Part Hawaiian.<sup>5</sup> Chapter 3 examines the generation of the hybrid “Hawaiian” girl of the mid-twentieth century, arguing that the hula girl image stems not from the tourist industry, but from social scientific discourses of Hawai’i as a racial melting pot.<sup>6</sup>

Part II, “Regenerative Refusals: Confronting Contemporary Legacies of the Polynesian Problems in Hawai’i and Oceania,” shifts to an indigenous feminist framework to argue that Native Hawaiians and Polynesians still grapple with the discourses of racial purity and mixture in their challenges with and against the American settler state.<sup>7</sup> As a call to action, she posits the concept of regenerative refusals, where Indigenous communities dynamically challenge settler colonialism through restoring pre-colonial connections to people and land and constantly questioning “state-recognized forms of authenticity.”<sup>8</sup> Chapter 4 turns to two public debates of Native Hawaiian membership, arguing that Polynesian individuals have used regenerative refusals in different ways, some working through and by the settler state, while others protesting

4 Arvin, *Possessing Polynesians*, 41.

5 *Ibid.*, 93.

6 *Ibid.*, 114.

7 *Ibid.*, 126.

8 *Ibid.*, 130.

through and by Indigenous voices, solidarity, and dissent.<sup>9</sup> In Chapter 5, Arvin examines contemporary attempts to catalogue Polynesian DNA and the revived interest in Polynesian origins, arguing the importance of understanding the logic of possession through whiteness as it still operates through Western science's attempts to move toward the post-racial.<sup>10</sup> Chapter 6 uses Indigenous Pacific art to argue that subverting notions of indigenous authenticity through representation reveals important strategies for imagining Indigenous futures and regeneration away from the settler state.<sup>11</sup>

Arvin's work presents new opportunities for interrogating whiteness and the settler state in ways that disrupt, rather than sustain, the power of empire and white supremacy. Oftentimes, works seeking to deconstruct the shifting boundaries of whiteness unintentionally center the discussion around white supremacy as a forgone conclusion. Arvin resists this fallacy through her integration of Indigenous voices, who echo the haunting logic of possession through whiteness, particularly in questions of federal recognition. In a nuanced and gentle reminder that power can work through the oppressed, Arvin challenges historians of settler colonialism and race to move beyond a linear narrative of discourse to empire. Instead, she demonstrates how to move towards a narrative with dynamism and scope, allowing space for our own refusal of looming inevitability and the regenerative potential lying in overlooked voices.

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<sup>9</sup> Arvin, *Possessing Polynesians*, 167.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 198–99.

<sup>12</sup> As an editor, the author recused themselves from the editing process regarding this article. It received no special treatment and was required to conform to all standard requirements.