

Postcolonial Grief: The Afterlives of the Pacific Wars in the Americas, Jinah Kim, Duke University Press, 2019, ISBN 9781478002796, 185 pgs., USD\$23.95.

With her sights narrowed onto a complex target, Jinah Kim in *Postcolonial Grief: The Afterlives of the Pacific Wars in the Americas* tries to do something special. Tracing the literature, art and films of U.S. based Asian diasporic writers, Kim looks at an understated, lost-in-development, and still grieving community. Central to everything here is the feeling of a lack of resolution, a wilful or naïve failure to address the pain of recent history. The challenge, of course, is how this continued suffering (“*Melancholia*”) should be defined (“*Afterlives*”) and understood (“*transpacific subjectivities, aesthetics*”); how you designate a perpetrator from complex interactions (“*U.S. imperialism and militarism*”), and what responsibility you insist should be owed for this (“*generate transformative antiracist and decolonial politics*”). It is the kind of work that implies new moral explanations, new breakthroughs in knowledge, a new understanding of the world and our place in it.

The relationship between grieving and memory, pain and history, is not a new topic – not even close. The challenges of addressing past trauma and reconciling societies is the key reason for criminal justice in any form, but also more modern adaptations of healing and responsibility such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions used in South Africa, Rwanda, the former-Yugoslavia, Peru, and others. And the difficult question of how to deal with individual trauma is not just a macro-issue, but also the very basis for one-on-one psychological counselling done for people with conditions like Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). There is a worn and uncertain path here. Uncertain, due to the complexities of the human condition, the differences between individuals; and so with this the failures of singular, accurate, universalised approaches.

And yet this is what Kim is trying to do – it is also a return to that ‘collective’ element, to understand people, their motivations, their morality, and their suffering, through the groups they belong to. The first sentence “*This book explores moments when the present is so bloated with dead bodies demanding mourning that their claims threaten to overtake life*”, gives away the project, but also the shadowiness of it; perhaps this is why it repeats – loosely paraphrased – only five pages later, with the same happy descriptor “*bloated*”. It is not apparent in these early moments, but this begins to walk the reader closer to the issues facing the author and the limitations of her project. It doesn’t start with the events, but with the “*afterlives*” – the emotions. The intentions, and circumstances in history are less important than the feelings and the memories. And perhaps there is something in this – ontological vs epistemological truth – but there is also something clearly missing.

Postcolonial Grief is largely a literary study, and so its philosophy might understandably be second-hand. But it is still central to the whole enterprise. Kim is not instructing her audience toward a high-brow reading list, but toward the truth she sees in those authors’ works. In any event, it’s not nearly close enough to what she is hoping to achieve. One or two selected works per chapter is helpful in partitioning her work and the readers mind, but also forces the query ‘*what did she leave out?*’, ‘*what was the selection criteria?*’ Every lens here is onto an absolute – a truth that makes the reader think and doubt, but which Kim never gives proper critical analysis of. Sentences like “*The fear that prolonged and unchecked grief will lead to violence is one of the reasons grief is pathologized and surveilled by the state*”, stop the

reader dead in their tracks. It is laden with presuppositions – what is meant by “*pathologized*” and “*surveilled*”? – but the time is never given, the language moves forward, and we are left wondering if perhaps we are just not the intended audience; that there are people out there who, already initiated and having already understood the inside joke, are nodding along without hesitation or doubt.

Occasionally ideas are built from the ground-up, but the language remains tautological and gimmicky: “*the diagnosis of melancholia against the Algerians paradoxically authorizes violence as the sole provenance of the colonial state and now the post-colonial liberal nation-state’s domain.*” There is a Heideggerian element to this use of single words as catch-all phrases, repeating it into jargon, and then expecting readers to find (with clarity) the single, unclouded meaning that has since been lost. Kim is consciously trying to be ‘intersectional’ here – and as is the risk with such an approach, it comes across as scattergun. The solution? Segway to authority statements, phrases like “... *has argued*”, “... *demonstrates*” dominate the prose and hinge the book in new directions; but again it is also used as a way to introduce new ideas without spending the necessary time explaining or justifying them.

There is a motivation, an ideological sense, behind this. Kim entertains the claim, at multiple places in the book, that the problem she faces might just be knowledge itself. That knowledge is not universal, but specific to people and places (“*as endemic to U.S. knowledge production*”). Yet regardless of the victim, the perpetrator here is always capitalism and modernization; as if these are only dogmas and never synonyms for freedoms, progress and improvements. And with this, history begins to bend: the downfall of imperial Japan becomes an American aggression; a moment of ruthless opportunism where Japanese ‘militarism’ and ‘imperialism’ could be replaced, not defeated.

The proof for this underground history lesson? The “*devastating Korean War, which led to the division of the peninsula and redevelopment of South Korea under U.S. auspices*”. A number of things are being said here... all of which a false. The division of Korea happened in 1945, not in 1950 with the Korean War; the American role in the redevelopment was done at the behest of subsequent Korean Presidents; and now declassified documents show constant American reticence and unease about the authoritarianism of Syngman Rhee, Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan. America have always been a cautious and cold-footed partner on the Korean peninsula, hence the Nixon Doctrine. Yet Kim always introduces Korean identity in this way – scarred and still manipulated by the arching powers of America and Japan. And where facts don’t exist, and when the narrative cannot be supported, we are instructed to begin “*the unconscious aspects of looking*”.

For all the literature, film and art, Kim is trying to make a political statement and a claim about history; so glaring errors or wilful revisions in this field matter. The fabric stretches thinnest when America are looking at their most powerful and in control. The dropping of the bomb at Hiroshima is called a “*genocidal act*” underhandedly justified by the pretence of viewing “*American lives as threatened*”. For the reader pausing to doubt the connection here, faux-philosophy becomes the authors armour again, clouding and obfuscating the language; such as unnecessarily and inappropriately labelling this an “*ontological field*”. Just as the existentialists did to their readers in the early 20th century, ‘*Walk away*’, the author is saying, ‘*if you think that referring to something isn’t enough to make it so, then you are just not my audience*’.

Every argument turns back on America as the evil from where all other evils manifest, the pages become increasingly muddy with the authors partisanship, and the glee becomes palpable with every new call for pound-of-flesh justice. The problem slowly builds into a crescendo, on every page there is a face-value acceptance of not only grief, but of how that grief should be dealt with (always reparations), and of the ‘truth’ claims of victims and victimhood. This is a deliberately dense academic work, but there is nothing ‘academic’ about bludgeoning forward under the conviction that your argument is self-evident, and incontrovertibly true. And yet in trying to build a “*critical imaginative geography of the Pacific Arena*”, Jinah Kim is successful.

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