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Angela Wanhalla’s *Of Love and War* uses the lives and experiences of New Zealand and Pacific War brides to examine wartime gender relations and international marriages resulting from the US military occupation of the South Pacific from 1942 to 1945. Wanhalla focuses on the understudied region of the South Pacific Command—encompassing New Zealand, the Cook Islands, Tonga, Western Samoa, and Fiji—which allows her to shed light on the diverse experiences of women and their local responses to the arrival of American forces in 1942, when the Pacific Islands were occupied as part of the southern Pacific theater. Though the occupation was brief in terms of its duration, the social impact of the relationships forged between local communities and American servicemen, Wanhalla argues, was long-lasting and deserves closer inspection. Through an analysis of over 1,655 cross-national wartime marriages and other forms of intimate relationships, Wanhalla unearths obscured stories, providing us with a rare glimpse into the political and social transformations that deeply shaped Māori, Cook Islander, Fijian, Tongan, and Samoan women’s lives on Pacific home fronts.

Scholars have long used empire and war as a key interpretive framework to understand the transnational effects of US militarism abroad. This is examined in chapters 1-2, where *Of Love and War* provides a basic overview of competing imperial powers in the southern Pacific region, starting with the arrival of the predominantly European settler population of British and Irish origins in Western Samoa and the Cook Islands and proceeding to the outbreak of the Pacific War and the ensuing warfare between Japanese and American forces over island bases. In 1942, Allied forces occupied the Pacific Islands as part of their strategic maneuver to fend off Japanese advances into the southern Pacific. Wanhalla shows how military advances sparked major changes in gendered patterns of work as women began migrating from villages to urban locations in search of alternative employment, such as work in hospitality, factories, and entertainment for American and New Zealand garrisoned troops. Wartime de-
mands also sparked new pathways of migration as women in Tonga, Samoa, and the Cook Islands found themselves traveling between islands in the Pacific. Wanhalla’s fascinating accounts of women’s wartime labor allow us to track how wartime mobilization disrupted but also extended the social and cultural order in some communities. For instance, women from Cook Island also drew on their traditional skills in plaiting and nikau-thatching to take advantage of US military presence: some produced woven goods to sell as souvenirs and handicrafts, while others used their thatching skills to construct roofs for American-occupied buildings.

Chapters 3-5 take us to the heart of Wanhalla’s argument in the book: that marriage was not simply a social and political institution that governed ways of life in US-occupied areas but also a wartime tool that served as a state mechanism of racializing and gendering bodies who sought to cross borders into the United States proper. Parsing through 1,655 cases of international marriages, Wanhalla explores the myriad intimate relationships forged between US servicemen and local women in New Zealand and the Pacific. A majority of these cases represented women of Irish, Scottish, and English birth who had been raised in New Zealand, as not all women were given equitable access to marriage with US servicemen. In addition to class background, socioeconomic standing, familial support, and emotional bonds, women’s racial background was arguably one of the most important factors for eligibility for citizenship according to US immigration and state marriage laws at the time.

As a result, blood quantum practices were central to these adjudications for determining women’s racial ancestry. Wanhalla traces how the status of Polynesians—whom she describes as racially and geographically ambiguous persons in the South Pacific—challenged the existing categories of the 1940 Nationality Act, which limited eligibility to citizenship to “white persons, persons of African nativity or descent, and descendants of the races indigenous to the Western Hemisphere” (p. 96). While Polynesians were not considered descendants of “races indigenous to the Western Hemisphere,’’ her case studies show that women were able to bend the laws to their benefit by relying on visual appearance “to enhance European ancestry” for admittance into the US (p. 101). In the end, it was partially as a result of two Polynesian brides—Monica of Fijian and Tongan heritage and Lena from Western Samoa—who were deemed ineligible for entry into the US that Congress passed legislation known as Public Law 213 in July 1947 to temporarily loosen racial criteria for war brides. According to Wanhalla, Public Law 213 later extended “admission to the US of Polynesian, Korean, and Japanese brides of American soldiers” and was a precursor to the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952, which abolished racial restrictions for relatives of US citizens (p. 104).

The final section of the book, chapters 6-8, traces the lives of the women after 1945, including those who successfully immigrated to the US, those whose relationships ended in divorce or marital breakdown, and even those who were left behind. By extending her analysis into the post-World War II period, Wanhalla illustrates how women’s lives continued to be shaped by US militarism even after the departure of the servicemen. She poignantly makes the case that excluding the women and children who remained in the South Pacific from this narrative would “misrepresent the full complexity of the social impact of the American mobilization in New Zealand and the island Pacific” (p. 7). Of Love and War’s close examination of the diverse experiences of single mothers and their children born from American servicemen across the Pacific Islands in the wake of World War II is an important contribution to the growing literature on mixed-race children and war orphans in global histories of US military abroad.
The War Brides Acts of 1945 and 1946 were landmark US immigration laws that significantly altered the political and social landscape of gendered and racialized practices governing the arrival of female immigrants to the shores of the US after World War II. Consequently, Of Love and War importantly contributes to the historical literature on US war brides and complements Ji-Yeon Yuh's Beyond the Shadow of Camptown: Korean Military Brides in America (2004) and Sonia Gomez’s Picture Bride, War Bride: The Role of Marriage in Shaping Japanese America (2024). Together, these works show how early twentieth-century immigration laws were amended to allow GI brides on the basis of their ability to embody the status of wives and mothers and, more importantly, to adhere to the ideals of American domesticity. In particular, the immigrant experiences of women of Japanese, Chinese, and Korean descent, who were some of the earliest groups to be excluded from the US on the basis of race, gender, and class since the Page Act of 1875, have been the main focus of historical scholarship on Asian exclusion laws. Wanhalla’s focus on the contested racial ancestry of “Polynesian” war brides who played a key role in loosening entry criteria for war brides is an important contribution to a field that has largely focused on the experiences of East Asian women.

Wanhalla’s spotlight on Pacific Islander women and children also deepens our understanding of how race and sexual intimacy became vessels for blood quantum practices. New historical scholarship on anti-Black racism, indigeneity, and race in the Pacific, including Maile Arvin’s recent Possessing Polynesians: The Science of Settler Colonial Whiteness in Hawai‘i and Oceania (2019), similarly interrogates racial formations and the complicated legacies of US colonial structures that compel us to ask what it means to decolonize Pacific histories. As Arvin’s examination of the racial category of Polynesians reveals, certain Native Hawaiians (Kanaka Maoli) as well as Native Americans on the North American continent retooled ideas of blood quantum—or what Arvin calls “racial colonialism”—to assert their own legitimacy as “true” indigenes in order to obtain government benefits through legislation as federally protected people. Both works point to salient parallels between various Indigenous communities around the globe employing colonial tools of membership to their advantage. Wanhalla intentionally limits her focus to the US military demarcated region of the South Pacific Command. This leaves open the possibility for other scholars to take her work and connect it to women’s experiences in other regions, including, for instance, Hawai‘i, the Philippines, and Guam, which would open up new lines of inquiry and conversations with existing scholarship. Comparing Polynesian war brides’ blood quantum law engagement with that of other Indigenous cases would complement Wanhalla’s argument that gender and sexuality are important analytical tools to widen our perspectives on racial formations in US colonial enterprises.

Wanhalla might have enhanced her analysis with a more critical perspective of US military intentions in the Pacific, including a historical investigation of racialization and its impact on the local social and cultural order. For instance, the description of US military mobilization in the Pacific Islands as a form of “defense” raises questions around source material (p. 10). In what context did local communities interpret Allied interventions on their home islands as “defense”? Were there pro-Japanese collaborators in the South Pacific who may have complicated these forms of identification with the Allied powers (as Keith L. Camacho has explored among Chamorros in the Mariana Islands)?[1] On page 42, Wanhalla describes Indigenous women as “contributing to the war effort through patriotism.” How did these women situate themselves as “patriots” within the broader gendered landscape of racial exclusion? While Wanhalla explains in detail the range of women’s motives for engaging in different kinds of relationships with Americans, a diverse understanding of Indigenous groups and their wartime
attitudes toward the “defense” and “security” of the Pacific would also have better attended to the challenge of placing women of the Pacific Islands in the global history of Indigenous politics and power.

Nevertheless, Of Love and War is a captivating book that provides a rich history of the global forces of war and militarism that shaped the local lives of women. Scholars positioned in Pacific studies, women and gender studies, and US military studies will find this book useful. Those interested in the multifaceted experiences of US-bound war brides will also appreciate Wanhalla’s careful analysis of the historical impact of war and militarism in the South Pacific on the legal parameters of immigration and the making of a multiracial America. Finally, another under-realized reality of this region of study is that the New Zealand military continued to be involved in US military operations after 1945. As Wanhalla explains, many members of the Australian and New Zealand forces who fathered children with local women later occupied Japan to “defend” the Pacific. Indeed, New Zealand and Australian forces contributed to US war efforts in Korea and Vietnam during the Cold War. Wanhalla’s examination of the wartime period from 1942 to 1945 is therefore an indispensable read for any scholar interested in understanding the expansion of US military presence in the Asia-Pacific after 1945.

Note


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