

In/visible Sight: The Mixed Descent Families of Southern New Zealand

By Angela Wanhalla.

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Reviewed by Arini Loader

Angela Wanhalla has produced a fascinating, carefully written study on the mixed-descent families of southern New Zealand centered on the community who lived at Maitapapa on the Taieri river. Based on her PhD thesis, Wanhalla introduces her study with her own family experiences and explicitly connects her work and her interest in this area to her father. Wanhalla tells the reader that as the thesis took shape her father ‘found the confidence to claim a Ngāi Tahu identity’ (p. 2). This personal connection to the work underscores the potential for historical research to be truly, as Wanhalla herself says, ‘transformative’ (p. 1) and furthermore aligns with senior Māori historian Aroha Harris’s assertion that, ‘the histories Māori historians narrate are rarely – if ever – those of an impersonalised other, or even of an amorphous, generic us. At the base of our histories, are ourselves, however we understand ourselves to be, and whether in familial, tribal or Māori terms’.¹ Wanhalla plots a storied journey through her own past as she takes the reader on an intellectual journey amongst the people and places of Maitapapa.

By its own admission *In/visible Sight* contributes to a growing literature which seeks to expand colonial histories. As Wanhalla states in her first chapter, ‘This book sets out to explore the less visible side of colonialism by tracing the history of interracial marriage in a part of the country where such relationships are most intensive’ (p. 12). However, my one major concern with this book centers on whether or not interracial marriage is best thought of as being part of colonialism. Wanhalla states, for example, that, ‘For the purposes of this book, ‘intermarriage’ refers to a process sanctioned by the tribe and the family, carried out in accordance with certain cultural and social protocols, and designed to integrate newcomers into the tribal group’ (p. 4). The process that Wanhalla here describes here which saw newcomers absorbed into tribal structures exists at clear odds with the colonial project as it was ultimately visited upon Māori. Wanhalla may well have hesitated to take the larger step that her very meaningful history that she relates in the pages of this work suggests. That nineteenth-century instances of interracial marriage between Māori and non-Māori were events that brought with them a myriad of implications for those involved is undoubtedly so, what is not so clear, however, is that interracial marriage between Ngāi Tahu women and non-Ngāi Tahu men in nineteenth-century Aotearoa New Zealand was so overtly or directly connected to colonialism. Wanhalla herself notes that, ‘Interracial relationships were mutually beneficial: the whaling industry fostered new trading relationships for Ngāi Tahu, bringing wealth to communities as well as to chiefly families, and marriage drew whalers into a network of economic, political and social obligations’ (p. 13). While it would be extremely problematic to in any way propose colonialism as ‘mutually beneficial’ experience for indigenous peoples and colonial powers and settlers, interracial relationships evidently were often precisely this. As Wanhalla herself reminds us consistently in this work, amongst the historiography and behind the images, the stories and the archives are people and their beliefs, ironies, complexities and contradictions. If not colonialism, Wanhalla’s sensitive treatment certainly does explore one of many less visible sides of Māori and New Zealand history and challenges the reader to look closely at more intimate stories of our past. Moreover, this focus on intimate histories invites the reader to take a closer look at themselves and their own family history and thus demonstrates that in addition to the potential for historical research to be transformative for the researcher and their family and friends, historical research can also be transformative for readers.

There is, however, a tri-lateral tension concerning identity politics that runs the length of *In/visible Sight* centered around 'Ngāi Tahu' on the one hand, 'white' on the other and 'mixed-race' or 'mixed-descent' somewhere in between which is never quite resolved. This is an observation as opposed to a criticism as it is precisely this tension that provides the underlying impetus for and drive in the work. Throughout the book Wanhalla grapples with the same complex issues which enabled her own father to, as she says, 'recast his identity at will in response to people's puzzled reactions' (p.1). The ground that lies immediately beneath 'identity' has the dynamic potential to move and shift to meet and accommodate new circumstances. What does it mean then, to assign the label 'mixed-descent' to families who descend from parents or ancestors from different cultural backgrounds? Is this how these families described or describe themselves? In her third chapter entitled 'Interracial Families and Communities' Wanhalla contends that, 'The new stock [children born to parents of Ngāi Tahu and non-Māori parents] that arose in the 1840s did not become...an important class in settler society, but affiliated instead with Ngāi Tahu' (p. 68). Wanhalla suggests here that these descendants of mixed Ngāi Tahu and non-Māori ancestry at this time identified as Ngāi Tahu rather than being of 'mixed-descent' as Wanhalla frames them within the context of the book chapter. This slippery, illusive nature of identity hints at broader issues of control and power. Who uses these kinds of labels to classify and define people and for what purposes? *In/visible Sight* grapples with this question in a range of direct and more indirect ways and clears a great deal of intellectual and scholarly space for more questions to be asked, debated and discussed.

The internal structure of the book works well from the introductory material in chapter one to the fragmented and heavily mediated yet deeply compelling story of Pātahi's relationship with Edwin Palmer and further through close and in-depth examinations of the specific people and families involved, the socio-political forces that swirled around them and the ideologies, Government policies and practices that were forced upon them. Accompanying this intricate history are numerous striking photographs sourced from Government archives and libraries as well as family photo albums. Some of these images have even crossed these lines and are members of both types of collections (see p.148). These arresting images attest to the remarkable resilience and continuity of the Taieri community and more broadly Ngāi Tahu people. Wanhalla's commentary which accompanies the portrait of Robert Brown on the back cover of the book reinforces the metaphor of the 'visible-ness' and 'invisible-ness' which underpins the book (see also pp. 154-155). The implications of this powerful metaphor centered around sight, what is seen and not seen and the visible and invisible are manifold and are especially pertinent to discourses of Indigenous assimilation and erasure which, as Indigenous peoples the world over continue to prove, are inherently flawed. As Wanhalla points out, 'Assimilation is only one possible reading of the family photograph. Other less formal images point to a different history' (p. 158). Wanhalla's use of these images comes full circle in her comprehensive and illuminating discussion of the 'Visual Record' at the end of chapter 7: Migration Stories. Wanhalla contextualises the use of the images in her work and the particular challenges, the 'dualities and ambivalences' (Leonard Bell 2002: 96) of the colonial experience that they so aptly invoke. These multifaceted issues of identity politics where exactly whom was absorbed into whom and whom was assimilated by whom is very difficult to make out with any clarity as is emphasized by the photographs which grace the pages of this work and Wanhalla's accompanying captions and commentary.

In summary, *In/visible Sight* is a thought-provoking response to narratives of invisibility and erasure which have been specifically affixed to the people of Ngāi Tahu and which dually share much in common with other Māori and Indigenous communities around the world. Angela Wanhalla's work furthermore makes an invaluable contribution to histories of Aotearoa New Zealand and draws attention to the value of seeking out new and divergent intellectual approaches. This work provides a robust and generative scholarly template

through which others following in the path of Wanhalla and her father might find ways to connect or re-connect with their own heritage and people.

¹ Aroha Harris, 2009. 'Theorize This: We Are What We Write', *Te Pouhere Kōrero 3: Māori History, Māori People*. Wellington: Te Pouhere Kōrero.