

Mothers' Darlings of the South Pacific: The Children of Indigenous Women and US Servicemen, World War II

Edited by Judith A. Bennett and Angela Wanhalla

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The title of this book, *Mothers' Darlings of the South Pacific: The Children of Indigenous Women and US Servicemen, World War II*, charts a very specific set of concerns. First, the book's primary focus is the offspring of American military servicemen and Islander women during World War II, including the close relations that surround those children and their families. The choice of an endearing phrase such as *Mothers' Darlings* to reference them further signals the authors' emphasis on the descendants' own personal narratives and those of their family members. While not shying away from the sentimentality that pervades their subject, these studies also manage to present a critical perspective on the social institutions that governed race, marriage and immigration in mid twentieth-century America and the Pacific. The result is a highly original set of studies that deserve the attention not only of scholars of the Pacific and the United States but anyone with an interest in problems of familial loss, longing, and intergenerational memory.

The book manages to combine both geocultural breadth (case studies in eleven different societies) and in-depth oral historical research that yields compelling stories about the experience of wartime offspring across generations. The book's broad scope was made possible by a collaborative project of the same name, the Mothers' Darlings Project, organized at the University of Otago in 2010. While the volume is very much the work of the first editor, Judith Bennett, who authored or co-authored eight of the book's thirteen chapters, it also succeeds in bringing a wide range of cases into conversation with one another without pushing premature generalizations or thematic closure.

Geographically, the book is true to its focus on the 'South Pacific.' Although excluding Papua New Guinea, the volume's case studies span the southern region of Oceania, focusing on places where American bases were constructed after the outbreak of war: Bora Bora, Samoa, New Caledonia, Vanuatu, Wallis (Uvea), Tonga, Fiji, New Zealand, Solomon Islands, Cook Islands and Kiribati. The concern with U.S. bases and American servicemen reflects the dominance of the United States in Allied military operations and allows the authors to examine the specifically American institutions that regulated the interplay of race, marriage and immigration in the twentieth-century Pacific.

Acknowledging that no accurate count is possible, the editors estimate that the number of children fathered by servicemen in the South Pacific during the war years (1942 – 1945) exceeded 4000 (307). In the Samoan islands where American marines vastly outnumbered the local population, between 1600 and 2000 children were born to American fathers (p.54). It is telling that despite these numbers, only about 40 marriages with indigenous women occurred across this region, mostly with 'part-indigenous' women, the majority from New Zealand and 'only about 14 from the island Pacific' (xiv). Given these numbers, one might assume that the low marriage rate reflects the racism and sexism that typically surround military bases and colonial institutions. While racism and sexism were certainly widespread, the picture that emerges is of a more complex, nuanced range of sentiments and experiences—a picture that is as often poignantly touching as it is critical of the oppressive policies of the time.

Given that marriage was probably not on the mind of most of the young men who fathered children in the Pacific, these meticulously researched chapters leave the reader amazed that anyone at all succeeded in marrying, much less bringing an island wife to the US. The efforts of most of those who tried were blocked at every turn: military commanders had to give their approval; anyone under 21 (a majority of unmarried combatants) required the permission of parents back home; 29 states had banned interracial marriage; and eligibility for citizenship required that spouses or potential spouses be at least half white. Thus, the editors conclude, the disruption and loss of marriage partners was in many cases less a failure of interest from the father as it was a 'result of a US immigration framework steeped in racial discrimination' (29).

Added to these institutional forces blocking the formation of wartime marriages are a host of local factors in indigenous societies that also did their part in discouraging marriage or the emigration of young mothers. These range from refusals to recognize a child's wartime paternity to the embrace of families seeing high value in the offspring of powerful foreigners. Overall, normative Oceanic views of sexuality, procreation, marriage and adoption made for a much easier integration of wartime babies into Pacific Island societies than was generally the case in Asia or Europe. And yet, in most of the cases taken up here researchers found that wartime mothers were left with feelings of disappointment, abandonment and morally compromised identities.

In so far as most of these chapters are built around just a few case studies, the authors do not engage in much typologizing to explain the moral response to wartime children from one society to the next. Indeed, the cases presented show that outcomes could vary widely within the same society. In one of the most ethnographically rich chapters, Saui'a Louise Mataia-Milo's essay on American and Western Samoa describes marriages that succeeded while at the same time concluding 'most Samoan war children could not escape the stigma of illegitimacy' (66). Similarly Angela Wanhalla and Kate Stevens' chapter on Māori-American relations in New Zealand ('I Don't Like Maori Girls Going Out with Yanks') describes consistent tensions between the fun and excitement generated by the presence of American troops and the concern of elders to maintain customary boundaries—tensions that reflected emerging urban/rural conflicts.

If there is a broad generalization to be made about differences that emerge across the diverse cultural regions represented here, it is that racial ideologies were a constant force in shaping and regulating wartime interactions. Despite the absence of Papua New Guinea from these studies, the chapters on Solomon Islands and New Hebrides (Vanuatu) suggest that cross-color relationships were rarer in these Melanesian islands. Along the same lines, anecdotal accounts of relations between indigenous women and African American servicemen appear to have been more common in these areas. The one detailed case in Bennett's Solomon Islands chapter is that of a Solomon Islander woman and her daughter born from relations with a Hawai'i-based serviceman from Guam—a Pacific Islander American with Filipino ancestry. This case illustrates well the kind of complexities that the war introduced into colonial colour codes and explodes any idea that 'native women'/servicemen' relations were always governed by neat alignments of race and nation.

The use of oral histories was not only a way to explore individual experiences; it was also a practical necessity. As is so often the case for histories in the margins, written accounts of children of military unions are scarce. And even oral histories, seventy years after the war, are now for the most part only available from the 'children' who are themselves aging parents and grandparents. Shifting the focus from wartime to the lives of descendants has the effect of widening the lens of these histories, leading authors to consider not only romantic and marital

attachments but relations between parents and children, between siblings, aunts and uncles, grandparents and grandchildren and so on. (Not to be overlooked in these pages, however, are the comments from descendants and their relatives that recall, even dimly, the sort of youthful desire evoked in encounters with soldiers in the prime of their youth, described as strong, confident well-built young men capable of flattery and romance.)

The fact that even the children of wartime unions are themselves now aged is a constant reminder of the urgency of oral historical research on World War II's human legacies. As the book makes clear, this is also an urgency felt by many of those who became the subjects of this project. The project's early efforts to reach out and identify descendants and relatives willing to talk about their family histories evoked so many replies asking for help to recover lost connections that the researchers developed a website to facilitate reunions. The collaborative aspect of the project is illustrated well by the many photos of individuals and families who participated, as well as the inclusion of an appendix that gives advice to anyone looking to find a wartime father. Whether or not it started out that way, the research for this volume became an activist intervention, with both scholars and family members connected through their mutual interest in the stories uncovered in the course of research.

The emotionality of these histories rises to the surface in nearly all the essays. The word 'love' is a constant throughout. Noting that, 'Love is something historians rarely speak of' the editors observe that it is only by engaging with people's lives that it has been possible to read the social conditions and consequences of the war for those who remained in their Pacific homes. The alternative, of reading the war's sexual encounters from a distance, have most often led writers to portray them 'as simply sexual, status seeking, disreputable, and/or part of a commercial transaction' (23). The expanded focus on multiple generations and larger familial milieu makes it possible for these essays to examine the social contexts where, ultimately, the social and moral meaning of wartime encounters for young women were shaped.

For the most part the histories recounted in *Mothers' Darlings* emanate from Oceania rather than the North American locations of the fathers and their families. Kathy Creely's chapter on New Caledonia is a notable exception for its focus on the family history of a single 'war bride', Isabelle Melina, who was one of 37 'French war brides and children' who arrived on a single ship in 1946 (83). Isabelle Melina's story, however, turns out to be a tragic one as her husband died young and she descended into alcoholism, losing her two children to foster families. Although surrounded by ambiguity and mystery, Creely's treatment of this story, based largely on oral histories derived from Isabel Melina's children (with attendant gaps and ambiguities), is one of many narratives that demonstrate the potential for individual case studies to illuminate the larger politics of race and gender at the intersection of American and Pacific lives.

In the New Caledonia case and others accounts elicited from American families we learn that life was not easy for women who managed to emigrate with their American husbands. At the same time we also learn that at least some of these men, and ultimately their American descendants, also harbored sentiments of longing to recover connections with their Pacific child/relative. In their epilogue, the editors with Rosemary Anderson summarize the predicament of most Pacific war children as people who searched for their American fathers for decades, usually without success. Despite the difficulties, a number of people made use of this project to search even more intently and in some instances make connections. When the American-born daughters of GI Nicholas Marconi learned of their Pacific half-sibling in Aitutaki, for example, one of them wrote in an email to Anderson,

Although I was surprised to find a sister halfway around the world, I was not shocked. . . . My first thought was of this child, woman, our half-sister, growing up not knowing about her father. . . . I knew there was only one right thing to do and that would be to open our hearts and give this girl the information she needs. . . . Maria is our father's daughter and we have accepted her as family. It's exciting to have a new sister (302-303).

This narrative, and many others in the volume, give fitting testimony to the intimate politics of race, nation and gender in wartime encounters between Oceanic women and American soldiers—structures that continue to exert force in Pacific and American lives.