

I've always been interested in the social histories few people know about - the history of New Zealand's Gujarati community, for example. How many Kiwis would know about their rich culture, their sizable contribution to New Zealand or the ongoing discrimination many face today?

I call these stories our 'invisible histories'. We tend to know about and value the histories of powerful people - privileged white men, mostly. And that's important. But to really understand ourselves and our heritage as a country, I believe it's important to explore these lesser known histories too.

I first started down this track in the 1970s, as an undergraduate student at the University of Otago. I'd grown up in a working-class family that valued education but had very few material possessions - for years we had no car, or even a refrigerator. I understood a bit of what it felt like to be an outsider.

One of my lecturers, Hew McLeod, was a specialist in Sikh history. He encouraged me to research New Zealand's Gujarati community, which I did for my PhD. I was obviously inspired by him. But I've always felt drawn to give neglected communities a voice and speak out against racism. That's what I wanted to do in my thesis and have done in the books I've published since.

To me, it's important to break down stereotypes and help people see the nuances in human history. Yes, some of it is mundane - like the reality that many Gujarati immigrants who came to New Zealand chose to live in rural areas and didn't become shopkeepers.

Some of it is simply important to have on record,

such as how, in the 1920s, New Zealand's Indian and Chinese communities had to bear the brunt of white supremacist groups who wanted to 'keep New Zealand white' and put a stop to Asian migration.

When it comes to preserving our social history, I do have a few thoughts. I think it's important for gatekeepers of information to better balance the need to protect personal privacy with the need to release information for public scrutiny. Too often our gatekeepers favour the former, which prevents important stories from being told.

It's a challenge for me right now, looking into the history of depression in New Zealand. I think we need to understand the impact of electroshock treatment on patients, for example. What was it like for our mothers, fathers, uncles and aunties? How can we learn from their experiences today? ■

In August, Jacqueline Leckie published Invisible: New Zealand's History of Excluding Kiwi-Indians (Massey University Press), adding to her PhD thesis on the history of India's Gujarati immigrants in New Zealand and a book on the history of Indian settlement in New Zealand. She taught for 27 years in the University of Otago's Department of Anthropology and Archaeology, which she headed for five years. Jacqueline has also lectured in Fiji and Kenya and made many trips to India. She is currently an Adjunct Research Fellow with the Stout Research Centre for New Zealand Studies and a Conjoint Associate Professor at the University of Newcastle.

Noticing the NUANCES

Seeing our 'invisible histories' gives us a better understanding of ourselves and our heritage, says Jacqueline Leckie

INTERVIEW: JACQUI GIBSON



IMAGE SUPPLIED