When I embarked on my postgraduate studies, with an enthusiasm for finding out more about the history of white and Aboriginal women's relationships, the issue of white women and complicity became very personally pointed. I was enthusiastically attending all sorts of Aboriginal protest rallies and meetings, getting active in an Aboriginal neighbourhood centre, and talking politics with Kooris at the pub. Meanwhile, in my studies I was digesting a tremendous amount of literature about the position and role of white women in colonization – all with a growing sense of confusion. My own position as a privileged white woman seemed to invalidate any attempt by me to write this history. Writing from such a perspective, it seemed, constituted little more than an exercise in redemptive apologia at best and, at worst, it was a reiteration of colonial domination. As my sense of disconnection intensified, I went back to the town where I had lived as a child in the East Kimberley,
accompanied by my childhood friend, an Aboriginal woman, who had also moved away as an adult. But my return visit in her company did not achieve my hoped-for sense of purpose. I became only more uneasy – 'unsettled' if you like – as I realised this was her place and her history, so much more than mine. I decided then to defer my studies, and headed up the Far North Coast of New South Wales to live with my aunt and grandmother. While I was there, reluctantly promising to 'do' some family history for my Gran, I uncovered the remarkable story of my great-grandmother Joan Kingsley-Strack, and it changed my outlook on Australian history, on women's history, and on history in general.

**Ming: A study in complicity and resistance**

My great-grandmother, "Ming" as she was known by my family, had employed Aboriginal 'apprentices' (young women taken from their families to slave in the households of their oppressors), and yet she was also an activist for Aboriginal citizenship rights and equality. Through her secretaryship of the Committee for Aboriginal Citizenship, she worked with the rather heroic Koori activist Pearl Gibbs to raise white feminist support for the Aboriginal campaign for political and civil rights in the late 1930s. But it was a story Ming had not shared with her family in my lifetime. She had literally boxed it up, putting away her voluminous correspondences and diaries documenting this struggle from the time of my father's birth, when her fourth and final domestic worker, 'Jane King', was committed to a mental asylum. Such a drastic action had the effect of shutting Ming up altogether, as she saw her own personal failure compounded by the disaster her actions had created for Jane. It was a powerful story of a woman both complicit with, and raging against, her history and then becoming silent, and it was a story that now demanded to
A privileged woman, Ming was indeed both complicit and resistant; I could not even place her on a simple trajectory of moving from complicity to resistance, as she was often both simultaneously. But through her individual story, I could undertake a broader analysis of white women's involvement in colonial conquest as 'mistresses' to Indigenous servants, and of white women's problematic histories of speaking out on a range of issues around Indigenous people and experiences. I was confident that her story was at least in some sense my own to tell, but writing about my own great-grandmother induced an intense self-consciousness in the way I approached her. Her profuse sentimentality and overweening maternalism towards Aboriginal women (which arose out of the way she liked to imagine her domestic relationship with those who worked for her) profoundly embarrassed me; as her great-granddaughter I felt the constraints as well as the release of an intimate personal connection to the history of colonialism, and to a complex history of complicity and resistance.

A certain degree of rage

Having seen how Ming and Jane were brutally forced into silence, Gayatri Spivak's question (1986) addressed to 'subaltern' women – "Why not develop a certain degree of rage against the history that has written such an abject script for you that you are silenced?" - struck a chord with me, as it has with other white women working in the field of Aboriginal history.¹ As we approach the history of white women's role in histories of colonization and other forms of racial oppression, it would seem that, for
all our raging, our urge *as historians*, as well as historical actors, to speak out forcefully against colonization's history has been stymied. An almost irresistible pressure to judge white women in history both collectively and individually, in terms of their complicity with or resistance to colonialist and racist oppressions and discriminations, has brought us to a stalemate. Though the subject of white women's roles continues to fascinate, and indeed to fascinate widening circles of writers and readers, at the same time, many of us studying the history feel the need for a new direction. 

One can recognise the frustration expressed by Spivak, even if, for a privileged woman, it comes/came from a different place; but if it is relatively easy to make such a disturbing slippage between subaltern and privileged women, it is even easier to blur the boundaries between white women *in* history, and white women *writing* history. "Whiteness" is of course an entirely artificial construct, born out of the history of European expansion, slavery, and empire. Settlers and their descendants became "white Australians" through the process of appropriating and colonizing this country, and it is not coincidental that the "Great Australian Silence" of Australian history has been inextricable from the experience of imagining Australia as being "white". As black American writer James Baldwin put it, people who have constructed their identity as white find it virtually impossible to look upon the 'ravages and lie' of this history – "they are as speechless as Lot's wife – looking backward, changed into a pillar of salt!" (1984: 177-180). The issue seems to be, not simply how to acknowledge the fact of violently constructed racial privilege, but to move on from this acknowledgement in order to speak against it. Taking into account the privileges of race – and frequently class as well – and the liabilities of gender, what did white women do, and what could they do?
And how do we – as white women ourselves – recognise how and when white women in the past might have managed to confront the ravages of colonialism? The challenge for us now is to find that voice; and in giving voice to white women against colonization, we should not have to silence or imprison the voices of other women and other histories.

A fraught historiography

It's interesting to note that the pressure to bring moral judgements to bear on white women in the past does not seem to be brought to bear on the histories of any other groups. This distinction seems to reflect a fraught historiography: the writing of histories of white women in colonization took place, in the first instance, against a backdrop of histories that either ignored white women, or blamed them for the hardening of racism and segregation which took place in colonization; in reaction, some women historians swung hard in the other direction, to suggest that the course of colonization might have run smoother had women been in charge (see Haskins 2003, Martin 1992). But by the end of the 1970s the initial optimism of that decade's second-wave feminist search for a hidden history of sisterhood and solidarity across race and class differences had already given way to more sober contemplation. As American historian Elinor Burkett put it in 1977:

Perhaps it is time to admit the possibility that those participants [in history] who never evidenced a modicum of sisterly solidarity reflected a deeper truth than we, the observer objectifiers, and that, beneath the clouds of obscurity and prejudice, loom the massive overshadowing peaks of race and class. (qf Stone, 1982: 20-21)
Australian feminist historical scholarship turned to reassessments of popular historical mythologies about white women and race, especially in the frontier zones, such as the "goodfella missus legend", dissected by Madeline McGuire. Such work found white women were often agents of colonialism in their own right, and alternative possibilities were constrained by structures of colonialist power; the traditions of sympathetic writings by white women on Aboriginal people were similarly critically interrogated (see West 1977, Godden 1979, Riddett 1983, Tonkinson 1988, McGuire 1990, Sheridan 1995, Grimshaw 1996). As white women academics appeared to be engaged in a redemptive critique of their forebears, the retort of a number of Aboriginal women academics to the white feminist anthropologist Diane Bell's attempt to intervene in intra-racial rape occurred at a crucial time. The Aboriginal critique of Bell's claim that she could speak for Aboriginal women (and indeed against her assertion she was speaking with Aboriginal women on the subject) abruptly brought the discussion back to the private and personal issues of complicity:

just because you are women doesn't mean you are necessarily innocent. You were, and still are, part of that colonising force. … In many cases our women considered white women to be worse than men in their treatment of Aboriginal women, particularly in the domestic service field. (Huggins et al, 1991: 506)

There was, however, a waning of interest in such intimate relationships on the frontier in the 1990s. Instead, there emerged a more complex engagement with and consideration of the role of the earlier feminist
movements in setting an Aboriginal reform agenda (Lake 1994, 1996, 1998, 1999; Paisley 1997, 2000; Holland 2001a, 2001b), while international work attempted to unravel the way the western feminist and women's movements have been shaped by the colonial/racialist context (Ware 1992, Frankenberg 1993). This fruitful and interesting work nevertheless has not gone much beyond the insights into the ambiguities of white women's position in imperialism made in the early 1990s. I think Anne McClintock's conclusion in 1993 best sums up the position we reached, and where we remain:

… the rationed privileges of race all too often put white women in positions of decided – if borrowed – power, not only over colonised women but over colonised men. As such, women were not hapless onlookers of empire but were ambiguously complicit both as colonisers and colonised, privileged and restricted, acting upon and acting.
(6)

As many of us "white women" are ourselves grappling with how we operate in this world, as historians and as human beings (hopefully not incompatibly), it's a position that, while self-evident, doesn't give much guidance. As Ann Curthoys pointed out the same year, all white women "were always already in situations of power in relation to Aboriginal people. … [and they] inherit 'agency' and 'empowerment' as part of the triumphant colonial process of historic dispossession" (174). And even to approach colonialism's histories from a 'woman-centred' perspective had become contentious (Haggis 1990).

'Whiteness studies' rather than 'women's studies' have more recently
provided a starting point by which the racial privilege of colonizer women can be named, and the politics of difference worked through – and it is not coincidental that many who utilize and wrestle with the concept of 'whiteness' also focus on gender (see Moreton-Robinson 2004, McKay 1999, Haggis 1990, 2003). While practitioners warn against "recuperative" histories of white women in colonialism (Haggis, 2003: 161-164), the "personal turn" in whiteness studies nevertheless has a worrying potential to operate as a way of enacting "a complete divesture of the privileges and entitlements of whiteness", or in other words, as redemption (Brewster 2005).

New approaches

In the past two decades, as Antoinette Burton has noted recently, scholarly attention to memory has given women's historical experience "a foothold in history" (2003: 21). Indeed, a deep and long-running aversion to "amateurish" family history, and all the subjectivity that it connotes, is symptomatic of the gendered practice of historical writing (Smith 1998). The dismissal of such concerns as trivial and biased, even hysterical, helps to explain why my great-grandmother Ming's story was forgotten even within my own family history, let alone why the histories of women's relationships in the domestic sphere are forgotten in broader histories of colonialism. Aboriginal people, however, have overwhelmingly preferred the personal and family history approach in writing their histories, but it was not until I had to work through the issues that writing Ming's stories raised for me that I was able to appreciate the significance of that. It has become apparent to me that our existing theoretical tools are limited in their analytical effectiveness, taking us
only so far – to a description of the ambiguity of the white woman's position – and no further. The following thoughts I offer for readers' consideration; these are some ideas I have tentatively used in my own work and that I believe may be usefully developed to assist our understanding of both this history and our own roles as historians.

**White women as performers**

A focus on the lived and bodily experience of people illuminates the complex realities of historical acts and agencies. An age-old philosophical notion of identity through action, subtly and intelligently reworked by queer theorist Judith Butler to address the construction of gender, might provide a useful first step in approaching white women's histories of colonialism. Gender for Butler is "performative", constituted of repetitive acts that function as "a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer" and hence as authoritative statements of gender subjectivity (Butler, 1993: 234). Drawing on this we might argue, to paraphrase de Beauvoir's classic statement, "white women" of the past were not born such, but became "white women" through their acts. We might then consider those acts performed by women that enabled them to identify as white women and regulate their behaviour, as "white women".

In the context of domestic service relationships between women across class and racial identities, "maternalism" provides an apt description of the nature of reiterative acts of benevolence and control that generate and prescribe such identities of both servant and, perhaps even more powerfully, of mistress (Rollins 1985, Arnado 2003). The term has also been used to designate those political ideologies that exalt supposedly woman-specific virtues, to extol "the private virtues of domesticity while
simultaneously legitimating women's public relationships" (Koven & Michel 1990: 1079); and has been used in such a way to consider white women's struggle for political power in Australia (Lake 1999), as well as to understand white women's engagement with racial/colonial politics in other contexts (Ramusack 1992; Janiewski 1993; Jolly 1993; Ladd-Taylor 1994). Following this, connections between appropriative white feminist practice and the discursive construction of Indigenous domestic service relations can then be drawn (Moore 2000: 100).

"Maternalistic" acts can be understood not just as specifically female but also connected, in a complementary way, with the acts of men; and concerned also with constructing a classed identity. Such acts affirming Aboriginal subordination and deference, benevolent or otherwise, were and are clearly performed by white women as part of their process of becoming white (and privileged), and focusing on such acts illuminates the link between arenas of the personal and the intimate (the household, family, domestic lives) and arenas of public policy and political campaigns, where white women spoke on behalf of and over Aboriginal women (see Haskins 1998). A transnational approach enables us to further link such acts to the broader imperial constructions and self-constructions of white femininity (Woollacott 2003, Boisseau 2004).

**Subversion**

To the concept of performativity we might add the related tool of "subversion"; the idea of someone pushing the boundaries from within established norms, making subtle changes to the way we think and look out upon the world. Within maternalistic acts, for instance, reside the potential for subversive and unexpected effects, which might destabilise
hierarchies of colonial rule, as well as contest prescriptions for maintaining racial dominance and obscuring the violence inherent in the colonial relationship. The larger women's culture of 'maternalism' that operated in the early twentieth century was part of the whole process of increased state control, yet the discourse was contested and unstable, rather than being hegemonic (Matthews 1984: 88; Summers 1994: 387). Hence it was open to subversion, and subversive acts, and indeed in Ming's case she took maternalism in a somewhat unexpected and indeed subversive direction by arriving at an about-face position that advocated the end of state control for Aboriginal people. This clashed with the direction of the feminism of the time, which was primarily directed at enhancing the power of white women of privilege, by securing their own foothold in the structures of state power. It was a direction so threatening to the state that it culminated in the committal of Ming's fourth and final Aboriginal worker, Jane King, to an institution, and the silencing of Ming altogether (Haskins 2001). However, it did foreground a movement of collaboration between white feminist women and the Aboriginal movement several decades later. For instance, in the 1930s, when Ming was active, Jessie Street, as leader of the United Associations of Women, was resistant to Aboriginal calls for equal rights and representation, as she engaged with such potent maternalistic campaigns as the anthropologist Olive Pink's campaign for secular Aboriginal reserves (Haskins 2005:184-5, 197-198). Yet in the 1960s, Street's collaborative campaigns with Black activist and South Sea Islander Faith Bandler for Aboriginal citizenship and the abolition of the state Aboriginal administrative Boards would become legendary (Sekuless 1978; Lake 1999: 204-209). If identity is a process of "becoming" ever in flux, the power dynamic between women can be hairline-fractured by such destabilising
subversions and bring forth different modes of relationships.

**Collaboration**

Ming subverted maternalism by initially allying herself as a protector to young Aboriginal girls. This brought her into contact with older Aboriginal women - mothers and aunts - with whom she began to act as an equal, in a collaborative fashion. Her subversion hinted at the limits of maternalism. Acts enhancing the power of one group of women over another can't effect change to the relations of dominance under colonialism - and white women writing "Aboriginal history" from a position of dominance can't effect change either.

As my own unexpected personal connection to this history invigorated and transformed my approach, I realised that my understandings of issues of historical ownership and accountability had been too simplistic. Working on Ming's story, I realised that it could not be disentangled from the stories of the Aboriginal women who worked for her, who drew her into their lives even as they had been drawn into hers. I had to attempt a reconstruction of their own actions and experiences to make sense of this shared history, and the only way I could do that with any integrity was to work with their descendants in doing so. I realised, also, that the subversiveness of Ming's maternalism was inseparable from her presumption of accountability for what was being imposed upon Aboriginal people by the colonising state and by individuals like herself.

In the book I have recently co-edited with Fiona Paisley and Anna Cole, *Uncommon Ground: White Women in Aboriginal History*, the preparation of which helped me articulate many of these issues, we unapologetically,
though not unreflexively, edited it as three white women historians. But our intention was to go beyond acknowledging the importance of Aboriginal people writing their "own", Aboriginal histories. We wanted to open up white histories to Aboriginal interrogation. Aboriginal writers contribute a new direction to analysis of white women's role, and not always in predictable ways. The story of one "non-white" woman, Pearl Gibbs, appeared in this collection of focus essays on individual white women in Aboriginal history, at the insistence of contributor Stephanie Gilbert, a Koori historian. Pearl Gibbs was an Aboriginal activist who directed her unflagging energies over the years to working with white women - including Ming - to bring them beyond a position of complicity. Stephanie saw an essential place for Pearl Gibbs in a book about the history of white women. In fact Pearl Gibbs is a subversive presence in the book, interrupting our easy assumptions of "whiteness", at the same time as her presence acknowledges the long-standing collaborations and historical entanglement of women's lives "across the racial divide".

But collaboration as a theme of the history of colonization is under-analysed in the existing literature. It is, I feel, worthy of more analytical exploration. Two Aboriginal academics, Jackie Huggins and Isabel Tarrago, discussed the general concept in 1990, and then followed it up with a profound historical study of women's lives, joined by white academic Kay Saunders, ten years later, but sustained discussion has not followed this ground-breaking work. Collaboration encompasses all sorts of actions. For both white and Indigenous historical actors, the term implies complicity in another sense and therefore complicates it. Collaboration necessitates a shifting and a sharing of power. In the process of defining boundaries of identity, it collapses them. It is both an
act and a process. If we can focus upon the issue of collaboration, and
focus upon historical collaborations, we can begin moving away from the
pull of the moralising compass, that trap of weighing up good versus bad,
as well as refusing the representation of colonial power as monolithic or
all-encompassing. Collaboration is deeply problematic and resists easy
explanation, a point highlighted by a return to the Bell-Huggins debate
from that perspective. We are able to see those living under colonization -
historically and in the present - as engaged in diverse negotiations, and
complex sets of relationships.

In inverse proportion to the tendency to judge white women is a
reluctance by historians to admit any "complicity" on the part of
Aboriginal women altogether (which is not the case for Aboriginal men). 3
While it would certainly be retrograde to set about casting similarly
moralising judgements on Aboriginal women, paying attention to
*collaboration* – as the inclusion of Pearl Gibbs shows – makes it
impossible to perpetuate the binary depiction of Aboriginal women as
passive in the colonial encounter and white women as active rescuers or
persecutors. Focusing on the stories of collaboration not only disengages
our fixation on the continuum from complicity to resistance on the part of
white women, but disrupts the idea that colonization involves a simple
dichotomy between either exclusion or incorporation of passive natives
by active colonizers, with colonized people responding from one of two
alternatives, resistance or accommodation. This is a deeply problematic
dichotomy, and Australian historians have been quick to use
"accommodation" as a "default setting" when no physical resistance is to
be found. Yet, to quote Homi Bhabha:

[r]esistance is not necessarily an oppositional act of
political intention, nor is it the simple negation or exclusion of the "content" of another culture, as a difference once perceived. It is the effect of an ambivalence produced within the rules of recognition of dominating discourses as they articulate the signs of cultural difference.

With such postcolonial theories, "it emerges that the colonial self is constructed discursively through its encounter with the native other. … The native other is not to be viewed as a passive 'effect' of the colonial self, but plays an essential role in the negotiation of the identity of both the colonial self and the native other" (Wolski 2001: 219, qu Bhabha 1994). Which brings us back to Judith Butler. Butler argues that the state of "being a woman" (or a man) is "internally unstable"; that such identity is "always best by ambivalence precisely because there is lost in every identification, the loss of some other set of identification, the forcible approximation of a norm that one never chooses…" (Butler 1993: 126) Such inherent ambivalence, expressed most powerfully in the performance of gender as "drag", reveals the falseness of claims to naturalness and originality of hegemonic norms. For Butler, this is the "subversive" aspect of "drag" that contests hegemonic heterosexuality (Butler 1993: 125); but her approach might be extended also to the hegemonies of racialized, oppositional gender that exist under colonialism's conditions (that is, our assumptions of the "naturalness" of "being a white woman" - or indeed, "of being an Aboriginal woman" - in Australia.) So, in terms of considering white women's histories in colonization, we might consider how "resistance" of white women to colonialism might arise subversively out of their discursive and performative engagements with Aboriginal people, and especially out of
collaborative exchanges with Aboriginal women, through which the
ambivalences of their "white woman" identity become evident.

I offer these thoughts in the interest of provoking new directions in the
gendered writing of colonization's histories. The focus on the personal
and private interactions of individual white women with Aboriginal
people, and their engagement with Aboriginal issues, must be more than
just a convenient way of negotiating our own positions as white women in
Aboriginal history. By thinking about white women's historical roles in
terms of performativity, subversion and collaboration, we can instead, as
'white women' today, think about the roles we play today in oppression,
neo-colonialism, racism. Coming through the academy in the late
twentieth century, we have been schooled in the understanding that we
cannot address race relations history without taking our privilege and
power as white women into account. Now tentatively reaching beyond
this, to go beyond complicity, is to find a voice – and an energy – to
confront the ravages and lie of colonialism's histories. All our own
smaller stories are but tiny parts of a larger shared whole, and all are
fragments that together make up the vaster canvases of our shared past.

FOOTNOTES

1. See Anna Cole, Victoria Haskins, and Fiona Paisley, 'Preface', quoting from Gayatri
137 (Cole et al, 2005: xiii).

2. Claudia Knapman (1986) went against this critical grain by insisting on the positive
role of white women in colonial Fiji.
3. An exception to the rule of course are those studies of Tasmanian woman Truganinni, beginning from Vivienne Rae-Ellis (1981). For Aboriginal men there has been much more propensity to consider 'complicity', best known being the controversial work of Marie Fels (1988).

4. This position has been reworked and expanded by Lynette Russell in Casella and Fowler (eds) (2005).

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