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Whiteness, maternal feminism and the working mother, 1900–1960

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In the decades immediately following the granting of the suffrage, middle- and working-class women, campaigning through separate organisations to claim citizenship rights, were able to construct a maternalist politics, drawing on their shared identities as actual or potential mothers.¹ Broadly defined, feminist scholars have used the notion of maternalism to characterise policies that associated women with the interests of home and family, built on the assumption that women’s nurturing work could be equated with male labour, their contribution to the nation being to raise its future citizens.² Drawing on their knowledge of existing earning capacities, and the difficulties facing women who attempted to combine motherhood with waged work, most argued that women with children would be far better served by the payment of an allowance to mothers that recognised their contribution as

¹ Marilyn Lake, Getting equal: the history of Australian feminism (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1999), 56.
Although the goal of a mother’s wage was never realised, such maternalist feminist campaigns re-shaped the notion of ideal motherhood and were influential in the introduction of payments and services which made it easier for women to devote themselves fully to the maternal role.

It was a campaign grounded in a mostly disguised racial discourse. Whiteness, Cheryl Harris has argued, needs to be understood as ‘an active property’ that has been ‘used and enjoyed’. And as Ruth Frankenberg has pointed out, a focus on whiteness draws attention to the fact that all systems of differentiation shape the privileged as well as the oppressed. Our investigations into the historical debates on women’s right to work, or not to work, stand to benefit from a firmer emphasis on the privileges whiteness affords those who are designated white. This is so even where the main players are protagonists for others in need, and indeed for progressive state intervention that led to the welfare state. This chapter focuses on maternalist feminist campaigns in the first half of the 20th century about married women’s work and the privileging of the status of the citizen mother, arguing that their focus on disabilities of gender disguised untested assumptions about the privileges of race. Feminists who sustained a watching brief on women’s labour issues could exclude quite unthinkingly Indigenous women and migrant women of colour from their conceptual frame. These activists could ignore, also, working women of southern and eastern European origin whom they regarded as ‘not quite white’ or ‘probationary white’, in the terms of

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critical race theorists. This was so because such migrants differed in appearance, language, religion and expectations of family from mainstream Australians. The women who were prominent in liberal and labour groups of the women’s movement from the turn of the century were shaped as much by their race as by their gender and class affiliations. They therefore situated their arguments for women in the new nation within an uninterrogated assumption of its white destiny. In this the category woman was implicitly designated as white.

**Activists’ opposition to colonial practices**

Activists of the 20th-century women’s movement set their faces against practices of the colonial era, when government assistance to families was minimal, and the charities that administered emergency relief recognised no right to support. In good times and bad, families were expected to make the decisions about workforce participation that would ensure their economic independence. Given the lower wages available to females, and the labour required to maintain a home and care for the children, the mother was the least profitable family member to put into the workforce, but women with absent or inadequate breadwinners, and without children of working age, had little choice. In a society that abhorred dependence, such poor women were seen primarily as workers rather than mothers. While, occasionally, there were voices regretting the strain such labour placed on mothers, the necessity itself was seldom questioned.

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8 Moreton-Robinson, 346.

9 The centrality of married women’s wages and the structural constraints on their ability to work are discussed in Desley Deacon, *Managing gender: the state, the new middle class and women workers 1830–1930* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1989), 144–50; Anne O’Brien, *Poverty’s prison: the poor in New South Wales 1880–1918* (Melbourne: Melbourne
‘Is the mother in a position to support the child you referred to?’ NSW child rescuer, George Ardill, was asked as he discussed the case of a child of eight, begging ‘under the pretext of selling newspapers’, before the NSW Select Committee on the Children’s Protection Bill in 1891. His response, that ‘Yes, she is able to get sufficient work … Laundry work and needle work’, served only to condemn her further, not because she was neglecting her child through working but because she was not working hard enough to keep him safely at home. If such mothers struggled with their dual role, charity workers and policy makers believed that they should sacrifice their children rather than their employment. Fairer wages, and better conditions, particularly in areas where work could be done at home, were advanced as solutions to the poor working mother’s plight, but if all else failed the children should be removed. ‘They will not part with their children; they would sooner die,’ J.P. Grant, the Chief Inspector for the Benevolent Society of NSW, lamented. Yet removal


was the only solution that charity could offer. As the superintendent of a Victorian orphanage commented:

a poor woman who has perhaps to go out washing or into service, cannot do both; she cannot keep the children in the home and go to service, and it is a great charity to take the children from the mother, and get her to give some of her earnings towards the maintenance of the institution.14

The policies developed by the various Aborigines’ Protection Boards were based on a similar premise. In many states, whether on reserves or attempting to survive as free people, women were sent to work in order to be able to support themselves.15 If that meant that they were unable to provide for their children then the children would be removed, or kept on reserves or missions.

In the early-20th-century concern for the declining white birth rate led to a re-evaluation of white women’s role, resulting in changes in social policy designed to free some poor white mothers from the necessity to earn a living. The system of arbitration, introduced by the new Commonwealth, had institutionalised a male breadwinner model, paying all men a family wage, while limiting women, irrespective of their family circumstances, to between 50 and 60 per cent of the male wage.16 While feminists continued to argue for fair wages for women they increasingly paired this with a claim much more amenable to male labour activists: the duty of the state to support the citizen mother to stay in the home.17

Labour women, who held few illusions about the often desperate lives of mothers working in order to provide support for their children, joined with middle-class feminists in the hope that by privileging the mother’s

14 Royal Commission on Charitable Institutions, 746.
15 New South Wales Aborigines Protection Board, Report for the Year 1900 (Sydney: Government Printer, 1901), 5.
17 Woman Voter, 27 April 1915. For a discussion of the concept of the citizen mother in Australia see Lake, Getting equal.
right to support they would eliminate their need to undertake waged work. While the solution to the problems arising from women’s dependence on men lay in equal pay, the arrival of children, trade union organiser Jean Daley argued, served to ‘complicate the situation’. This dilemma could best be solved if the care of children was redefined as work, with all mothers rewarded accordingly.

It was because mothers without reliable male breadwinners came to be valued for their whiteness that support could be garnered for policies which would support them to stay at home. Towards the end of the 19th century, state children’s departments, influenced by the experience of women on boarding-out committees and state children’s councils, began to grant some mothers boarding-out allowances for their own children. The payments were conditional—intended to ‘assist’ but not ‘maintain’, a recognition of ‘merit’ rather than an entitlement—but they quickly became the primary means by which the states assisted poor children. It was the conditionality of such payments that effectively racialised access. If the employment of married women, as the overwhelmingly male ‘experts’ agreed, led to ‘contraception, neglect of homes and husbands, abandonment of breastfeeding, farming out of babies and increased infant death’, it followed that married women’s employment threatened

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18 Factory inspectors in Victoria, for example, blamed mothers who needed to work for the prevalence of outwork arguing that they ‘can afford to work at almost any rate of pay’. Report of the Chief Inspector of Factories on the ‘Sweating System’, 1235. For evidence as to the attitude of labour feminists to working mothers see Lake, Getting Equal, 74.


20 Lake, Getting equal, 72.

21 Item 3: Notes re work in the State Children’s Relief Board, etc., c.1881–c.1920, Correspondence between Minister and Board on the subject of altering Monetary Regulations against the Recommendation of the Board, published in the forefront of the Annual Report 1913–14, 20 October 1914, President, State Children’s Relief Board, to The Under Secretary, Department of Public Instruction, 9–10, Sir Charles Kinnaird Mackellar Papers, 1871–1922, ML MSS 2100.
the survival of white Australia.22 Such concerns resonated with a sentimental idealisation of motherhood, which argued that motherhood and employment were incompatible because the mother was the best carer for her child, providing the grounds on which the old concerns about pauperisation and dependency could be overthrown, with women’s maternal responsibilities increasingly seen as the essence of their claims to citizenship. The good mother was now defined as the mother who stayed at home. Infant welfare centres and kindergartens, which supported the stay-at-home mother in her mothering, replaced crèches as a focus of charitable effort, and pressure was exerted on government to transform the rudimentary payments for the support of children into pensions for widows and other unsupported mothers.

Working mothers of a different colour

In most such policy-making the imagined mother was implicitly white. The conditionality of the early state payments ensured that an applicant had to demonstrate her worth in order to gain access to the ‘privilege’. The linking of maternalist arguments with wider concerns about white Australia ensured that part of that worth was the whiteness of her offspring. Outside the white community, older models of mothering continued to prevail. Amongst immigrant families of non-English-speaking background, a working mother was as often indicative of a sense of partnership as it was of male inadequacy. Mrs Chun See Tock migrated to Australia as a 20-year-old in 1890, settling in Melbourne’s Chinatown where her husband was the manager of a cabinet-making factory. In addition to giving birth to four children over the period 1892 to 1909, she worked as a housekeeper and from 1915 served in the grocery store located on the ground floor of the family home in Lonsdale.

Street. Amongst the first generation of Italian migrants a similar pattern prevailed, the women drawing on traditional skills and embracing new trades, eager to augment the family income in whatever way was available, with the children expected to help when they got in from school. Giuseppina, for example, migrated alone in 1926, later sponsoring her fiancé to join her in Melbourne. They had three children together and ran a successful greengrocer’s business which supported the family.

Not surprisingly, working mothers struggled to keep state ‘benevolence’ at bay. Koori woman Olive Jackson recalled that her grandmother kept the family ‘on the move, never staying anywhere long, always moving on before the welfare caught up with us … It just wasn’t safe for us to have a settled home’. She took work wherever she could get it, feeding the children from leftovers salvaged from the kitchens in which she was employed.

Aboriginal families also often worked as a unit. In the more remote areas of the country, it was often women and children who came to perform hard physical work that would have been judged unsuitable for Europeans, digging post holes and foundations, carting materials and guarding stock, as well as undertaking domestic work in station homesteads. In the more closely settled districts, Aboriginal families took work whenever it was available, relying on rations on the missions

25 Ibid. 51.
27 Mary Anne Jebb, Blood, sweat and welfare: a history of white bosses and Aboriginal pastoral workers (Crawley: University of Western Australia Press, 2002), 93–4.
when it was not. Koori man Phillip Pepper remembered working alongside his parents from the age of six. ‘Our family went hop-picking at Briagolong and I can remember Mum and Dad would be each side of the bin, and Dora and me were small and we’d be on the side plucking the hops off … We’d camp on the river or live in huts on the farms in picking times’.28 Ellen Atkinson, whose four children were born between 1919 and 1927, supported her family in a similar way. ‘Eddy used to do a lot of carpentering and fishing. We used to camp and fish along the Murray and sell fish in the towns’. In the harvesting season the family would ‘go up for the good pea and bean picking in New South Wales, then move to the Victorian fruit-growing towns, camping for a few weeks wherever work offered but always going ‘home to Cummera’, where they could subsist on savings.29

Many Aboriginal mothers were compelled to support their children without the assistance of a male breadwinner. Pepper’s mother-in-law taught her daughters to make the grass dilly-bags which she sold to support the family between bean-picking seasons.30 At Coonabarabran Janet Robinson’s mother and grandmother walked from the mission into the town to do laundry. As her mother also did domestic work it was the grandmother who took responsibility for the children:

She used to do washin’ at a boardin’ place, Harper’s, and that’s where we used to come and learn how to hang the sheets out and the shirts, properly, they were all white things, and then Mum used to come and iron.31

The new ideal did not acknowledge such racial difference. As the good mother now stayed at home to care for her children, non-white mothers

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30 Pepper and De Araugo, 76.
31 Margaret Somerville et al., The sun dancin’: people and place in Coonabarabran (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1994), 112.
were vulnerable to criticism for neglecting their children by continuing to work. Aboriginal women, uniformly excluded from all government benefits, were left even more firmly constrained within the older construction, all too often losing their children because it was assumed that they would be unable to support them.32 Other women whose whiteness was open to dispute could faced a similar struggle if they came to the attention of child welfare officials to whom the absence of a mother at work was evidence of neglect.

**Not quite the 50s’ ideal families**

In the immediate postwar era, the idealisation of the stay-at-home mother remained unchallenged, but access to the ideal continued to be racialised. While the postwar migration program allowed married women to be supported by their husbands, mothers who came alone had no such protection. Employment was important ‘from an assimilation aspect’, an official noted, lest the women’s ‘continued idleness ruin what slight incentive may remain to accept some responsibility for their own and their children’s welfare’.33 Coming from countries with very different constructions of motherhood, and quarantined by their lack of English from the dominance of domesticity as portrayed in the Australian media, many of the married women assumed that they would work in order to build the family’s future in the new country as well. The willingness of the Australian government to advertise their availability to potential employers and provide child care centres in migrant holding centres would suggest that such women were seen as provisional or probationary

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33 G. A. M. Edson to Secretary Department of Immigration, 1 November 1950, Widows with Dependent Children at Immigration Centres —Employment and Accommodation, Department of Immigration File, A434 (A434/1), 1950/3/27104, National Archives of Australia, Canberra.
whites, more valued for their productive than for their reproductive potential.34

Women of Greek, Italian and Yugoslavian origin constituted the first large cohort of married women with pre-school children to enter the Australian industrial workforce. By the 1960s they constituted 30 per cent of the married female workforce, clustered in the factory and service sectors.35 Commentators struggled to explain this over-representation. ‘I only work because of the money—we need it’, was a common response, but why did migrant women see their families as more needy than their non-immigrant neighbours?36 They had few other thoughts than finding ways to increase the household budget, in order to establish the family, buy a home and provide opportunities for their children. As one woman wrote bluntly on her survey form, she worked to ensure that her children wouldn’t need to work in these ‘shit’ factories. Yet there was little recognition in the Australian community of the difficulties these women faced in a new country. Excluded, as provisional whites, from the ideals of domesticity embraced by the non-immigrant community, they were nevertheless criticised for ‘choosing’ to work and neglecting their families. When sub-standard child care arrangements were exposed, the media coverage that followed condemned the migrant mothers irresponsible enough to entrust their children to such inferior care, rather than highlighting the problem which the absence of reliable child care posed to mothers who wanted or needed to work.

34 Debates about the use of such facilities placed additional strains on women who had only recently arrived in Australia. See: Letter from N.N. Drummond to Olga Leschen, 30 July 1952, A445 220/52/13, National Archives of Australia, Canberra; Letter to Mr Robson from N.N. Drummond, 19 May 1953, A445 220/52/13, National Archives of Australia, Canberra; and Analysis of Creche Services over the period 1 February–3 July 1953, A445 220/52/13, National Archives of Australia, Canberra.
36 Ibid. 302.
Migrant women understood their work as struggle rather than selfishness. The ‘struggle of having little kids, with latch keys, basically who let themselves in after school and working long, long hours … was what they did to get ahead’. It was a struggle which they undertook on their own. Government services designed to assist mothers and babies assumed the presence of the mother at home. Australian kindergartens that emphasised child education and development, and opened only for brief morning or afternoon sessions, were part of another world. Most migrant women were not used to factory work and few enjoyed their jobs. Children were matter of fact about the experience of being latch-key children, recognising that their mothers ‘were trying to supplement the family income as best they could’. Unions were slow to recognise migrant women workers as part of their constituency rather than threats to white labour. The overwhelmingly male Anglo-Celtic leadership often did not see the women’s concerns as legitimate industrial issues.

Aboriginal mothers were even more firmly excluded from the suburban maternal dream. In Brisbane, Aboriginal poet Kath Walker (Oodgeroo Noonuccal), left her children unattended while she did domestic work for Lady Phyllis Cilento. Freed from her domestic responsibilities, Cilento became the leading campaigner for maternal and infant welfare in Queensland, yet did not consider assisting her maid to test her eligibility for the government assistance which would have enabled her to care for her children at home. Walker was one of the many Aboriginal women who, during and after the Second World War, had come to the cities in search of work. Young women educated on the missions might gain access to white-collar work, but most found

37 Anne Sgro, interview with authors, 29 February 2003.
themselves confined to laundry work and cleaning on temporary and sporadic contracts. They might take a young child with them or leave them with a relation or neighbour, and worked if possible while their older children were in school. In rural areas, Indigenous mothers worked alongside their male partners, looking to wider family and community networks for child care. Alongside the men, Aboriginal women undertook fruit picking and canning, vegetable harvesting (potatoes, tomatoes, asparagus, millet), rabbiting, and also heavier tasks such as fencing, burning off, droving and shepherding. These Aboriginal working mothers sought to enhance the family income, but a meagre subsistence was their usual achievement. They wanted to see their children get ahead and have better opportunities than they had had, but seldom enjoyed this satisfaction. The nearer such families moved to non-Aboriginal communities, the more closely their mothering was monitored by Aboriginal welfare officers who had the power to remove children they believed to be subject to neglect.⁴⁰ Mainstream services designed to support the mother at home condemned the Aboriginal mother for falling short of community standards, perpetuating a cycle in which Indigenous women, working to support the white economy, lost custody of their children who were in turn trained to perform similar marginal but supportive labour.

Ruby Langford, who was born in rural New South Wales in 1934, began to work as a casual cleaner at 15. At the age of 17, she had her first child. Subsequently she travelled with her partner through outback New South Wales, where the couple took what work they could find, returning briefly to relatives’ communities for the births of her children, eventually eight in all. She described with graphic detail the trials of undertaking the hard work they were given, with young children around them and often pregnant into the bargain. On one occasion her partner heard there was a job on a property burning off. His mother lent them some pots and pans

⁴⁰ Haebich, Broken circles.
and a billycan, and they had an advance from the job to buy some food. All they had was the car, which broke down, and the clothes they wore. They lived in the car with four children under four, the youngest a small baby. ‘We slept in the car. There was Gordon and me and the four children, and when it rained we locked ourselves in the car till it stopped.’ The kids played around the camp all day. When she was pregnant again they built a lean-to out of hessian bags. It was, she said, hard, physical gut-busting work. She assisted with fencing, sawing wood and digging holes for the posts. When they had a job looking after a property, she fed the chickens and milked the cows while he ploughed and broke horses. But often she assisted in his tasks. Even when pregnant or newly delivered of a child the work had to be done. There was never enough money; they killed rabbits or stole a sheep when they were desperate for food. Despite their hard work they lived worse than the poorest whites, she thought. And they never seemed to get ahead: always, when they had a nest egg, some family crisis would absorb it and they would be again living day by day, virtually penniless.\footnote{Ruby Langford, \textit{Don’t take your love to town} (Melbourne: Penguin, 1988).}

In the postwar era, the wages of both migrant and Indigenous mothers, while low, were essential to sustain household economies. The women seldom had much choice about whether to work, or what kind of occupation to take, and had no time to gain training or education. Most of these mothers considered themselves to be the primary carers of children, and the provider of family services. The aspirations they held related to their children, not to themselves. Their coping mechanisms for hard, alienating, low-paid work lay in their identification as ‘mothers’, but their understanding of good mothering was often in conflict with the dominant discourse within the Anglo-Celtic community.
Conclusion

The women’s movement in the first half of the 20th century, whether liberal women working within female-only organisations or labour women aligned with the unionists, struggled to carve a place of dignity and just reward for their sex in their capacity as mothers. With limited fertility control, with restricted waged work for women, with little or no support for working mothers, their efforts made some sense. Worldwide in the West, only Marxists offered alternative models of married women’s labour, and few in Australia listened to them. But their blindness had sad costs for many other women. The activists, immersed in discourses of whiteness, had little empathy with the numbers of Indigenous and migrant women, poor and marginalised, who escaped their sympathetic consideration.

When a new wave of feminism emerged in the 1960s, some sections of the women’s movement, those who situated the right of women to work as central to their new campaign, would proceed initially in ignorance of such differences. Their claims would be marked by an assumed whiteness, recasting stay-at-home mothering as evidence of female oppression and arguing that women’s liberation could only be achieved if barriers to their active participation in the workforce were removed, but paying little heed to the struggles of women who had always had to work. The response of such women would threaten to fracture the movement along ethnic and racial lines. Arguments that positioned children as an impediment to women’s equality held little appeal to immigrant women who had constructed and justified their working lives around their desire to secure their children’s futures, and campaigns for abortion rights and 24-hour child care were rejected by Indigenous women for whom the greater struggle was to have their rights to bear and nurture their children recognised. At the root of this conflict would lie the failure to recognise that the restrictive maternal role against which the new feminists protested had been but one manifestation of the
privileges of whiteness from which they needed to step aside if their movement was not to similarly compromised.