

Traveling Stories, Colonial Intimacies, and Women's Histories in Vanuatu

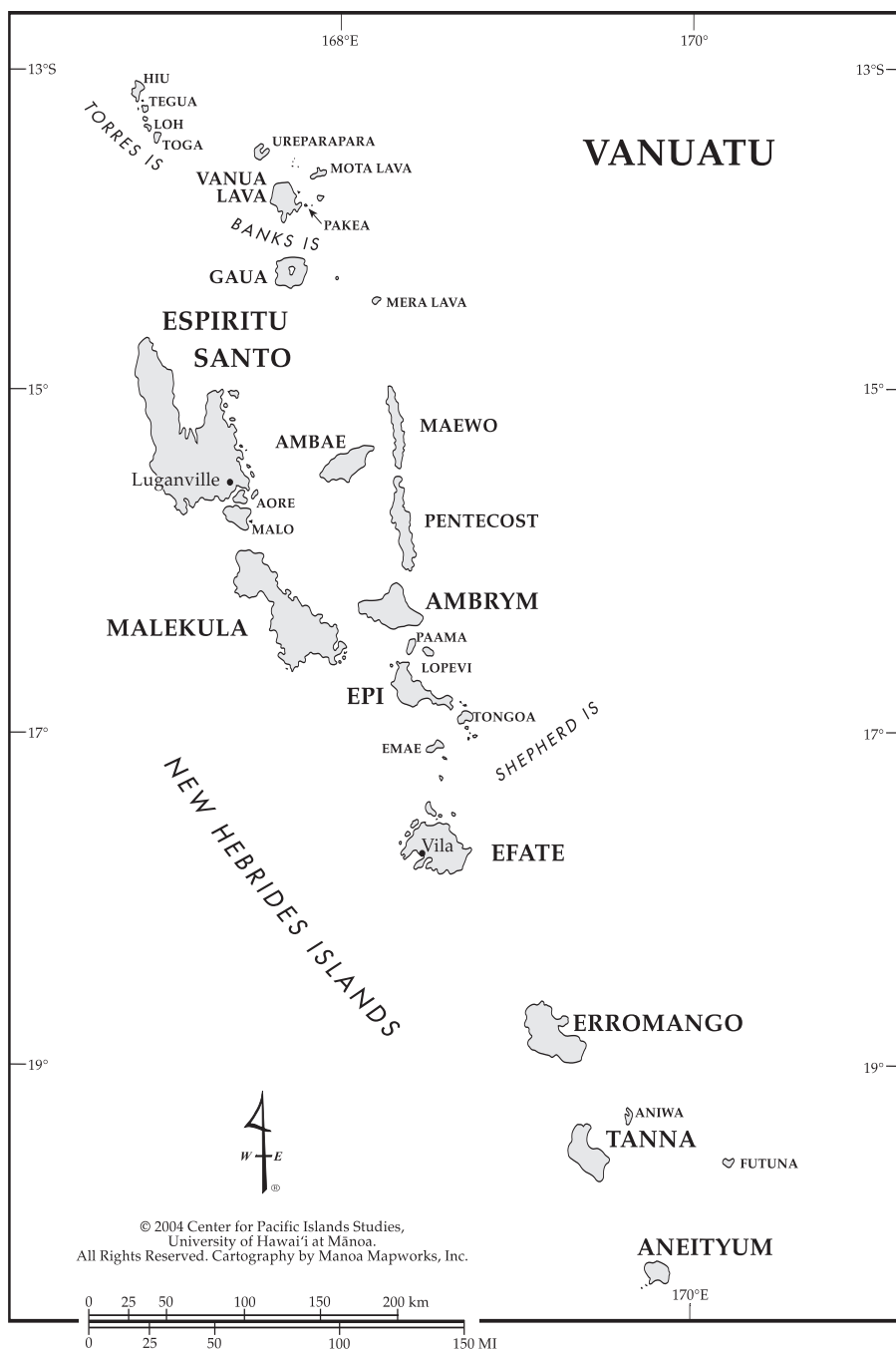
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INTRODUCTION: DREAMS AND NIGHTMARES

Pakea is a sailor's dream of an island (figure 1). Only five square miles in area, within sight of Vanua Lava in northern Vanuatu, the low, sandy atoll seemed a solution to the problems facing Captain Frank Whitford and his wife, Alice (née Ford) when, in the 1890s, they settled approximately two hundred kilometers to the south at Malekula. Pakea was truly a dream, one that Whitford family stories attribute to fear of cannibals. Alice was accustomed to life in Vanuatu. She had been born in the islands to an Irish father and an indigenous (ni-Vanuatu) mother, but neither she nor her



FIGURE 1. Pakea (foreground), Nawila islet on far side of lagoon, Mota Island in distance. The island of Vanua Lava is out of the frame to the lower left. (Aerial photo courtesy of Violet Bowhay)



MAP I.

English husband felt safe when they encountered Malekulans who claimed to be carrying cooked human arms home from a cannibal feast. Alice demanded that Frank find another home for them and their baby, and he dreamed of Pakea, which he had visited on one of his trading voyages. Pakea's attractions included a few acres suitable for coconuts from which to make copra, a lagoon, and only two indigenous residents, an old man named Tom and his daughter Retwal, who reported that Fijian exiles in a war canoe had wiped out the rest of the population. In 1895, Frank and Alice settled there and stayed to raise their family of four sons and four daughters (see figure 2).

Forty years later, Frank and Alice were dead, the children were grown, and only one, Dorothy (born in 1907), still lived on Pakea (figure 3). Although she was a single mother at the time, Dorothy claimed she "worked as hard as any man." She ran the family trading and copra business with ni-Vanuatu employees. Retwal, the indigenous woman who had



FIGURE 2. Whitford children. Standing: Walter. Seated L–R: **Dorothy**, Jim, Laura, Donald, **May**, Frank, **Chrissie**. (Names in bold feature in article). Sydney, circa 1915. (Photo courtesy of Violet Bowhay)

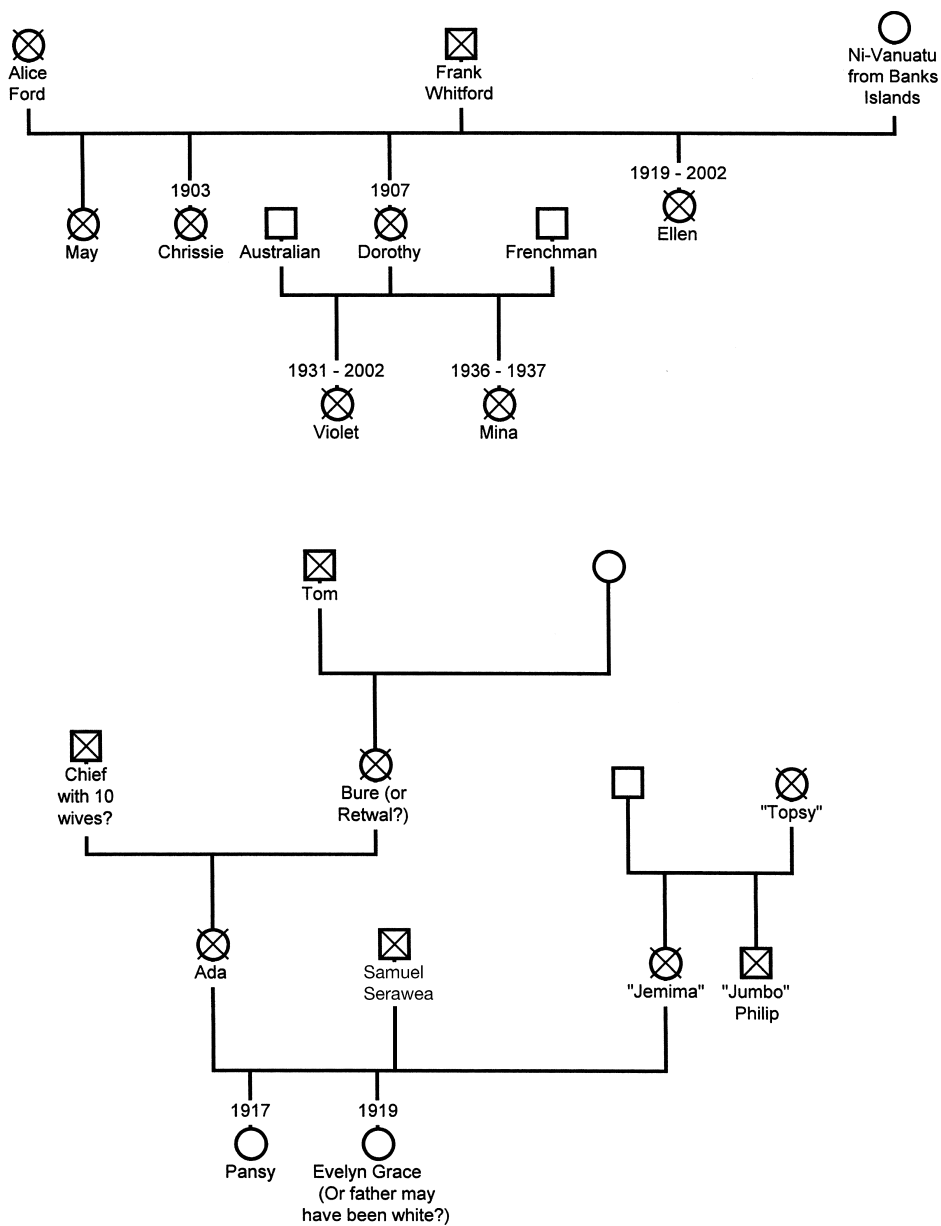


FIGURE 3. Genealogy of key individuals.

survived the Fijian attack, eventually gave birth to a daughter, Ada. In turn, Ada had two daughters, Pansy and Evelyn, and Evelyn grew up to work as a nursemaid to Dorothy's children: half-sisters Violet (born in 1931) and Mina (short for Wilhemina, born in 1936).

Violet (whose married name was Bowhay), contributed extensively to this research project from 1998 until her death in 2002. I begin with her version of what happened, and later I turn to Evelyn's account. Some of the events in Violet's story occurred before she was born and others took place when she was as young as six. She was very close to her mother, Dorothy Whitford. Dorothy's voice and memory are intertwined in unknowable ways in Violet's story. Dorothy's two daughters were born before she married and the fathers of her children are peripheral to Violet's narrative: Violet's Australian father does not figure in this story at all, and the Frenchman who fathered Mina is important only for the coincidence that he also fathered another child in the story. Ada's father, and the father of her daughters, Evelyn and Pansy, are each given one identity in Violet's story and another in Evelyn's version, as will become apparent later. In this article, women are the central characters, the focus of attention in both the settler women's and ni-Vanuatu stories.

In August 1937, Dorothy took her six-year-old daughter Violet with her to Ambrym Island, where they visited Dorothy's older sister, Chrissie, who had recently married a planter and moved there from Pakea. Chrissie had brought along Pansy, her ni-Vanuatu housegirl. Chrissie planned to adopt Dorothy's other daughter, Mina, but on this trip the seventeen-month-old girl was left on Pakea in the care of Pansy's sister Evelyn and her boyfriend, Len Stephens. Len was the son of an Englishman and a Tongan woman who had settled on Espiritu Santo. He was keen to bring Evelyn back to live with him on his family's plantation. He knew his mother would take a dim view of his relationship with a ni-Vanuatu woman, so he had to come up with a reason for Evelyn to be at Santo. When little Mina developed a bad cold, she provided Len and Evelyn with the perfect excuse. They decided to take the child on Len's brother's copra boat to the hospital, which not coincidentally was at Santo. In Violet's words, "Len and Evelyn were playing Mummy and Daddy. Mina, who had a bad cough, was taken aboard a smelly, dirty, copra-loaded ship and taken to Santo. She developed pneumonia and died a few days after Mum got there. Mum kicked Evelyn out and it was many years before they spoke again."¹ Not only did Dorothy hold Evelyn and Len responsible for the nightmare of Mina's death, but Len's mother threw Evelyn off the family plantation. Evelyn went to work for another of the Whitford sisters elsewhere at Santo and that was

the last Violet knew of her. Six months after Mina's death, Chrissie Whitford adopted another infant girl, who, ironically, was another half-sister of the deceased Mina. (The same philandering Frenchman who had fathered Mina had impregnated a married English mother of three while her husband was away.)

TWO APPROACHES TO GENDER HISTORIES

What became of Evelyn? What was her version of these events? What other experiences did she have, both with the Whitfords and beyond her life with them? This article is about two interconnected ways of answering these questions: one a theoretically informed, descriptive approach, the other methodological detective work. I use both approaches to recover and articulate gendered histories of diverse women, indigenous and otherwise, amid particular colonial experiences.

Traveling Stories and Colonial Intimacies

The first approach builds on the work of Ann Stoler and James Clifford. It looks for understandings of colonialism's tensions in verbal, textual, and visual accounts of past experiences. I use the account that begins this article as a starting point from which to move through the particular to the more general. It is a traveling story about domestic, social, and often intimate relationships. Ann Stoler has argued that "who could be intimate with whom—and in what way—[was] a primary concern in colonial policy" (2002, 2). Her work, which focuses on colonial policy and archival material, with some interviews of ex-colonial house servants, portrays colonial domesticity as a highly contested site (see Stoler 1991, 2002; Stoler and Strassler 2000). It seems tailor-made as a framework for understanding—though not reconciling—the inconsistencies, points of contradiction, and uncertainties in the linked stories I present here. How gender and race were defined in domestic situations created inequalities that theoretically were basic to imperial authority (see Stoler 1991), but there has been little ethnographic research in this arena. Here I am fortunate to be able to apply Stoler's argument to ethnographic, historical particulars by juxtaposing the recollections of an indigenous nursemaid/housegirl with those of her employer's family and with the interpretations of contemporary ni-Vanuatu women fieldworkers.

While the story I began with is unique, such stories are common among descendants of the settler families I am studying, and I have recorded many similar stories in my field research. Adding James Clifford's notion of traveling culture (1992, 1997), these are *traveling stories*, both in the sense that they are about travel and in the sense that the stories themselves travel, being told in places as diverse as rural Vanuatu and Sydney, Australia, and changing in their travels. They are stories about interconnections between people's lives that constitute and cross cultural boundaries of gender and race. Such stories, I suggest, are routes toward better understanding of indigenous and expatriate women's historical constructions of gender roles in the Pacific Islands. In traveling, the stories connect and entangle multiple voices and subject locations. And while they are texts, they implicate bodies and spaces as well as voices. The stories I consider here are embodied and spatialized histories of women from the 1890s to the 1930s, which women told me as part of my ongoing research project.

Traveling stories provide opportunities to explore discursive dimensions of the history of gender relations. They are told at the intersection of indigenous and expatriate spaces and subjectivities. Expatriate and indigenous women were differently situated in many regards, yet sometimes there were fewer differences between these women (in terms of the issues they dealt with historically) than between them and men of their respective cultural backgrounds. The conclusion to this article discusses some ways in which entangled themes of power, race, violence, danger, and loss associated with travel, work, and reproduction emerge as gendered experiences that indigenous and settler women of the period both shared and contested.

Recovering Indigenous Women's Histories

A second way of answering questions about Evelyn's life begins by rephrasing the questions in methodological terms. How can the unwritten histories of women's experiences be recovered in a Pacific Island context? How can women write their own histories of gender in the contexts of colonial experience? How can nonindigenous anthropologists work at once with expatriate, mixed expatriate-indigenous, and indigenous women? What roles can indigenous fieldworkers play in this process? My project makes use of interviews and group discussions, and it also examines colonial texts, but it emphasizes collaborative research to interweave multiple subject locations through oral history. Colonial documents are crucial for piecing together historical, cultural constructions of maleness and female-

ness in the Pacific Islands. Oral accounts, of course, are also key to many historical research projects. Here I use particular, interrelated traveling stories to illustrate a technique developed in my research on gender and history in Vanuatu. One strand of this approach is colonial archival research using the New Hebrides British Archives and the Western Pacific High Commission Archives.² Reading colonial records against the grain can reveal, for example, the agency of indigenous women in sexual liaisons with settler men.³ Another strand is interviews I conducted between 1994 and 2003 with mixed-race descendants of expatriate settlers and Melanesian women, many of whom have moved to Australia and elsewhere. These interviews point to the ambivalence of these women's experiences of childhood, work, marriage, and community, among other racialized and gendered subject positions. A third strand is collaborative work in which ni-Vanuatu women fieldworkers throughout Vanuatu collected stories from local women who had lived and worked in settler spaces, and discussed them in a workshop in 2001. The fieldworkers' stories provoked questions and comments that explored race and sexuality.

Interweaving these strands of research, I describe and analyze narrativized events that link Evelyn's and Dorothy's families in Vanuatu. This process is supported at some points and interrogated at others by information from participants in the workshop and from other Whitford relatives.

HOW TO FIND EVELYN

Was Evelyn still alive? If so, where and how could I find her? The answers to these questions grew out of an awareness of all the voices I felt were missing from my book, *Houses Far From Home: British Colonial Space in the New Hebrides* (2001). For that project, I concentrated on archival research and interviews with retired colonial officers and their families. I came to realize that settlers were far less visible in the colonial record than occupants of other social positions, including missionaries and even indigenous people. Moreover, other Europeans often took a dim view of settlers, stereotyping them as semiliterate, non-church-going people of dubious morality. Yet the settlers, far more than colonial officers and more than most missionaries, regarded the islands as home. Many had children with ni-Vanuatu women. Their offspring have continued to intermarry with Islanders and mixed-race children of other settlers for four, five, or

more generations. Today their descendants are caught between one state, Vanuatu—in which they can never own land because they are not ni-Vanuatu—and other states (Australia, France, etc), where some live in what they regard as exile.⁴

In tracing the histories of these families, the stories of indigenous women surface and recede but in many cases are difficult to access directly. Clearly, there were many women living in rural parts of Vanuatu who had experiences with settler or other colonial families, but how could I find them? And even if I found them, would they be willing to talk to me? I thought that an effective way to recuperate the missing voices in my research might be to draw on the women fieldworkers trained by Lissant Bolton and Jean Tarisesei at the Vanuatu Cultural Centre (vcc). In consultation with them and the vcc director, I applied for Canadian funding for a workshop on the “History of Housegirls,” which we held 2–6 July 2001.

This theme was chosen as one that would elicit a variety of experiences, and that was concrete and thus easy for fieldworkers to ask questions about as they conducted research. I also wanted to learn about sexual experiences with colonizers, and the theme of housegirls, whose employers often entered into sexual relationships with them, seemed an effective yet nonthreatening way to access this information from those willing to provide it.

Housegirls are domestic servants, whose work includes such tasks as housecleaning, laundry, babysitting, cooking, and gardening. Today, many housegirls work for ni-Vanuatu as well as nonindigenous employers. Before independence in 1980, in contrast, they worked almost entirely for expatriate government officials and missionaries, for Chinese entrepreneurs, and for settler families. In the early days of the Anglo-French administration, houseboys were more common than housegirls, but in living memory, paid domestic employment has been women's work. Ni-Vanuatu houseboys were a rarity after 1942 when American troops came to Vanuatu (then known as the New Hebrides), and indigenous men were recruited to help with the war effort.

Jean Tarisesei coordinated all the local arrangements for the workshop on the history of housegirls with the assistance of other staff at the Vanuatu Cultural Centre. Lissant Bolton, an anthropologist who is a curator at the British Museum, facilitated the workshop. Participants, in addition to ourselves, included several vcc staff members and twenty indigenous

women from eleven locations throughout the country, ranging from Tanna Island in the south to the island of Vanua Lava some 650 kilometers to the north. Half of these twenty participants were VCC-trained anthropological fieldworkers. The other half were ni-Vanuatu women who had worked as housegirls twenty or more years ago. Each ex-housegirl came to the workshop with the fieldworker from her area. We enjoyed a very productive week, living together in a dormitory, sharing meals, spending recreational time with each other, and working every day in a classroom.

In the workshop, fieldworkers' reports on interviews they had conducted in their home islands for this project alternated with ex-housegirls' firsthand accounts of their work experiences. Lively discussion among all participants began with the first report and continued unabated through the week. By the end of the workshop, the window into the past that the history of housegirls provided had connected us to important events in the pre-independence period, such as the Santo Rebellion of 1980.⁵ The workshop also described the systematic performance of domestic tasks for colonial employers of English, French, and Chinese-speaking backgrounds, as well as for ni-Vanuatu female employers. Daniela Kraemer, a York University master's degree student, recorded the workshop on digital audiotape.⁶ Audiotapes and notes also provide a thorough documentation of the presentations and discussion. These are all in Bislama, one of Vanuatu's national languages, which developed as a pidgin among labourers and employers on plantations.

The workshop was a milestone in a process that began when Jean Tariesei and Lissant Bolton established the VCC Women's Culture Project in 1991–92. This in turn led to their creation of the VCC Women Fieldworker Network in 1994. Many years earlier, in the late 1970s, a training program had been established for male ni-Vanuatu fieldworkers in conjunction with an Oral Tradition Training Project (Tryon 1999). The VCC fieldworker program is unique in the Pacific. Both men and women fieldworkers have focused on recording and reviving *kastom* (traditional knowledge and practice). A moratorium on expatriate research in Vanuatu from 1985 to 1994 was partly an expression of national identity that "involved the assertion of *kastom* as the property of ni-Vanuatu, not to be made subject to expatriates" (Bolton 1999a, 4). During the moratorium, the fieldworker programs gained strength through annual training workshops, which continue today. Following local gender divisions, these workshops have always been separate for men and women. Since 1997,

the annual workshops have been documented, resulting in published, non-academic reports.

Our workshop was the first to focus on history and the first to contribute to an academic research project other than the training of women fieldworkers in Vanuatu. Participants addressed history, rather than *kastom*, for the first time in Vanuatu. The fieldworkers and ex-housegirls were proud to highlight indigenous women's experiences as part of colonial history. In so doing, they began to redress a balance, for a male-dominated view of the colonial era predominates in Vanuatu. The publication that results from the workshop will help to bring public attention to indigenous women's experiences as participants in colonial history. It will also provide direct expression for women's voices on this subject.

The housegirls project is innovative in linking indigenous research, with its documentary goals, to academic research, with its different theoretical and methodological objectives. It is also unusual in involving indigenous women (the ex-housegirls) as "key informants" in research and publication. This collaboration has enriched both indigenous and academic research agendas, while respecting the ex-housegirls' contributions to both sets of goals.

TRAVELING STORIES

Through the methodological techniques described above, Evelyn popped back into the research record in July 2001. She called herself Evelyn Grace, rather than simply Evelyn. She was living in a remote village in Pentecost Island and said she was a hundred and one years old, although her chronological age was probably about eighty-five. VCC fieldworker Siaban Denison wrote Evelyn's life story in her notebook and presented it to our workshop in Port Vila. Denison (as she called herself) had hoped to bring the old woman with her to the workshop, but Evelyn declined, saying that she was too old and that she was having problems with her hands. So Denison painstakingly recorded the story in her notebook. "You will see," she told workshop participants, "that the story of Evelyn Grace and her family connects all of our islands."⁷ This woman spent her long life among white men in a world connected by boats that moved people from one island to the next. "So," Denison said, "you may hear the name of someone from your own family or from your own place in this story, and that's the reason—that and the fact that this woman is so old. She turned 100

last year, in 2000. She spoke, and I took down her report. It was a slow report, because she would have to stop and think about the parts of the story she couldn't remember, then carry on. [Smiles from workshop participants.] Also she used some old-fashioned words."

I present Evelyn's story here, including her time with the Whitfords, crosscut by Violet Bowhay's version. The two stories are at odds on almost every point: the name of Evelyn's mother, where she came from, whether Evelyn's father was really her father, what happened to him, and so on. In the workshop discussion following Denison's recounting of Evelyn's story, another "fact" was debated: Was Evelyn *ni-Vanuatu* or "half-caste?" If the latter, was she the daughter of Captain Whitford or some other white man? The implications of these controversial points concerning Evelyn's and the Whitford's lives are discussed in the final section.

Evelyn began her story with her grandmother, a woman from West Ambae named Bure, which means "tattooed woman." Bure was married to a chief with ten wives. One day the wives had a big fight. Bure put her small child, Ada, on her back, tied her in place with a piece of calico, and ran away. They hid in the bush near the shore and begged some neighboring villagers for a firebrand, which Bure used to hail a passing schooner. The ship belonged to Captain Frank Whitford, who often stopped to take runaway women on board. Such women were a source of labor; they could become housegirls or sexual partners or both. Bure spoke to the captain in Ambae language, which he did not understand, but her gestures made clear her request to board the ship.

Captain Whitford took Bure and Ada to his home on the small island of Pakea.⁸ Bure worked for Captain Whitford's wife, whom Evelyn referred to as Sarah, a Gilbertese.⁹ Eventually, Bure died and Ada, by then a grown woman, took her mother's place as a housegirl working for Mrs Whitford. At about that time, Captain Whitford recruited a Banks Islander named Samuel Sarawea to become a "workboy" on his ship. Soon Samuel became the head of the ship's crew. Samuel asked Whitford for permission to marry Ada. Evelyn quoted Captain Whitford's response in Bislama (translated here): "My boy, if you want to marry Ada the two of you must spend your lifetimes together. Moreover, you must stay here with me always." Samuel replied in English, "I will." The Anglican bishop married Samuel and Ada. Before long, however, Samuel was lost at sea while attempting to save the ship's boat in a storm.¹⁰

Evelyn was probably born about 1919 and her sister Pansy a couple of years earlier. Each became a housegirl for one of Whitford's daughters. Evelyn grew

up working for Dorothy, while Pansy worked for Chrissie. By the early 1930s, Evelyn was working as a nursemaid for Dorothy's children, first Violet, then Mina. In Denison's words, at that time Evelyn "just hung around with white men" (hemi stap wokabout wetem ol waetman nomo). She was a pretty teenager and light-skinned for a ni-Vanuatu, which led to speculation about who her father was, both when she was living with the Whitfords and later, in our workshop.

What Denison did not report (because, interestingly, Evelyn had not mentioned it) was the story of Mina's death in 1937 with which this article began. Nor had Evelyn mentioned Len Stephens. Instead she told Denison that she met a man named Dennis who was also working for Dorothy Whitford at Pakea. Dennis "stole" her away and took her to Efate Island where they worked for fifty dollars a month for a Frenchman, Auguste Henin, who owned a coconut and cattle operation. But Mr Henin wanted Evelyn for himself. He kept telling Dennis to let go of Evelyn. Finally he sent Dennis to far off Sola, on Vanua Lava Island in the north, to work on Henin's ship, the *Percival*. While Dennis was away, Evelyn gave birth to his daughter. Whenever Dennis returned on the ship to Efate to unload a cargo of copra, Henin refused to let him come ashore because he knew Dennis would try to see Evelyn. Soon Mr Henin got Evelyn pregnant. When Dennis heard that she had given birth to Henin's child, he was furious. He defied Henin's orders, came ashore, and ran Evelyn out of her house. He beat her, threw all of her belongings out of the house, and chased her away. She ran with Henin's baby and the small daughter she'd had with Dennis to Bellevue, another plantation in the area, where she worked for Mr DesGranges for thirty dollars a month.¹¹

While Evelyn was working for DesGranges she met a man from Pentecost who was also working on the plantation. DesGranges objected to their "making friends" on the job, but the Pentecost man, Evelyn said, was determined to have her. DesGranges ran them off the plantation and the two of them went through the bush to north Efate, where they stayed at a plantation in Havanah Harbour. Evelyn stayed with the man from Pentecost and had five children with him (she listed their names). Eventually, they returned to Pentecost.

Denison concluded, "This old woman spent her long life with white men. Now she is very old, but if you go to her house you can see she has lived with white people all her life. When she left a master, even if she ran away, they would give her presents—saucepans, plates, clothes. When you see her house you can tell it is true that this is a woman who worked for white people in the past."

I sent the first draft of this article to Violet Bowhay in January 2002. We had had a telephone conversation in which I asked her if she thought

her grandfather, Frank Whitford, had fathered Evelyn. She said that it was possible—he had no doubt fathered children with ni-Vanuatu women—but that she did not think Evelyn was his, although she was lighter skinned than her sister Pansy. Violet spoke with some relatives who felt that Evelyn had confused the drowning of Sam Sarawea with another drowning incident.¹² They presented a very different genealogy for Evelyn than the one in her own story (see figure 3). The Whitford relatives had been told that the name of the woman Frank Whitford picked up in his ship was Topsy, not Bure, but they knew that this probably was a name the Whitfords had given her. They said she came from the island of Maevo, not Ambae, and that she had a small girl, Jemima, at her side and a baby, Jumbo, on her hip. After Sam had fathered Pansy and Evelyn with Ada, he married Jemima. And Ada was the daughter of Retwal, one of the two survivors on Pakea when Frank Whitford arrived. Violet reported, “Topsy eventually left Pakea for Vila [and] worked for some folks there who later took her with them to Norfolk Island. She was very happy, we’re told. She died and is buried at Norfolk Island as are a lot of Banks people; I’ve seen their graves.”

INTERSECTING AND DIVERGENT PATHS OF GENDER HISTORIES

Evelyn’s and Violet’s histories were independently constructed and their life experiences diverged, but their stories become mutually constituted through their own, at times contradictory, memories and the contributions of other participants in this research, both Islanders and expatriates. Their stories entwine in ways that exemplify the complexity of “colonialism’s cultures” (Thomas 1994). In other words, their stories reveal some of the multiple intersections and contradictions of empire and indigenous spaces that produce particular racialized and gendered categories. These were both rigid and fluid, as indicated in the tensions around Evelyn’s parentage and her childcare responsibilities. Her father may or may not have been white—both alternatives were acknowledged as plausible in the workshop and in Violet Bowhay’s enquiries among the Whitford relatives. Evelyn is constructed in both her own and Violet’s stories as at once more than and less than ni-Vanuatu. She has the saucepans and clothes that mark her as living ambiguously with white men or among white people.¹³ She acted like a white woman in mothering Mina when Violet’s mother felt she should have behaved as a housegirl. Yet Violet’s mother did not

express the remorse or guilt she may have felt for having been away, leaving Mina in effect motherless, when her young child fell ill.

Academic approaches to colonialism's cultures have been characterized by a western orientation, which has attracted critics as well as defenders (Cowlishaw 1998, 2000; Dirks 1992; Said 1995, 38). The research on which this article is based contributes to literature that problematizes historical boundaries between westerners and indigenous people in theoretical and methodological terms (Denning 1980; Sahlins 1985; Borofsky 2000). In the stories I am working with, such as the ones told here, boundaries between "western" or "expatriate" and "Islander" or "indigenous" people are often ambiguous, contested, crosscut, eroded, and sometimes rigidly maintained.

One objective of exploring entwined and divergent gender histories can be to increase understanding of colonial experiences that affect ongoing labor, gender, familial, and race relations. Approaching this topic through research on housegirls and with settler women assumes with Anne McClintock that "imperialism cannot be understood without a theory of domestic space" (1995, 17). Stoler (2002) has developed this theory considerably in her recent book, and her approach provides many of the conceptual tools for my analysis. Here, my focus is specifically on the historical anthropology of Vanuatu, but I hope that the material will be food for thought in other research situations. Further, because Britain and France jointly administered the islands as the New Hebrides, the project has broader relevance to other colonies of both imperial powers.

HIDDEN HISTORIES

This piece does not lend itself to a neat conclusion that ties up loose ends, nor is that my goal. Instead, I hope that Evelyn's and Violet's stories will raise more questions than they answer and provoke more research on gendered histories, male and female. Almost all "the facts" in the intersecting parts of Evelyn's and Violet's story are contested. Yet the hidden histories of women in colonial Vanuatu flow in at least four currents through these turbulent waters. These can be discussed in terms of social locations, gendered expectations, place and movement, and partial truths.

Social Locations

The stories told by and about Evelyn provide insights into women's subject positions. Evelyn's social location was quite different from Dorothy's,

for whom she worked, although Dorothy's mother was half ni-Vanuatu. Dorothy and Chrissie lived as British settlers despite their own mother's indigenous roots, while Evelyn lived as a ni-Vanuatu even though she may have had expatriate ancestry. How one lives is as important as who one's parents are in shaping subject positions. Even in her old age, Evelyn seems to know this too, and her village home on Pentecost evokes a white plantation, though it would not be mistaken for one. Social parentage and citizenship mark a difference here. No British citizen acknowledged Evelyn as his child (if in fact she was) or registered her as a "British Protected Person." In contrast, consider Violet Bowhay's aunt, Ellen Whitford O'Shea, who provided some of the information about Evelyn drawn on here. Ellen was Captain Whitford's daughter by a ni-Vanuatu woman from the Banks Islands, with whom he had one child while his wife, Alice, was still alive, and subsequently two more, Ellen being the last-born. Violet Bowhay recorded in her memoirs:

When old Frank Whitford died, he had asked Mum [Dorothy Whitford] and Auntie Chrissie to look after Ellen, bring her up and care for her, and of course, [because of his] not being married to the mother—the Banks' people are a very matriarchal society—they all came and demanded Ellen back because she belonged to her mother's people. Mum said no, she couldn't let Ellen go because Mum had promised her father they would look after her. Anyway, they demanded a court hearing then, so Mr Blandy, who was the British [Resident] Commissioner in Vila, made a trip as they used to do in those days to settle any disputes, check on . . . everything and everyone. He made this trip to Pakea, and arrangements were made for all of [the Banks'] family to come over. Mum always said to me they dressed Ellen up, put ribbons in her hair, little white shoes and socks and titivated her up like a doll. Mr Blandy said, "Well, she is now six years old, so she's old enough to decide whether she wants to stay with her sisters or go stay with Chrissie and Dorothy." There, we go . . . [Ellen's choice was to stay with "Auntie Chrissie and Auntie Dorothy."]¹⁴

The implication is not that Ellen was *old enough* to decide for herself, but rather that her sisters had succeeded in making her *white enough* to decide for herself. This choice was not always her family's, or the British Resident Commissioner's, to make. When the Whitford family sent Ellen to Australia to enrol in a "ladies' college," she was not accepted: "The colour question in those days was, of course, the thing and they took one look at Ellen and said, 'Sorry, we don't board coloured people'" (see figure 4).

Gendered Expectations

Colonial efforts to civilize often centered on redefining the home and fostering domesticity, for example, by training young women as housegirls (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992, 265–295; Douglas 1998; Hansen 1992; Jolly 1991). Such training and the desire for work led young women into settlers' homes. Like earlier encounters between Pacific Island women and European men on shipboard (Chappell 1992), on plantations (Adams 1986; Shineberg 1999), or on beaches (Ralston 1977), relations between housegirls and their employers were structured in multiple ways by gendered expectations on all sides of various cultural divides. These expectations, and the degree to which they were met or challenged, became evident in the housegirls' workshop and are particularly notable in Evelyn's and Violet's stories. For example, in leaving little Mina in Evelyn's care, Dorothy Whitford implicitly expected Evelyn not to cross the boundary between nursemaid and "playing mother." Evelyn may never have shared this expectation but she was seen as challenging it, using the role of "playing mother" as a cover that allowed her to spend time with her lover.



FIGURE 4. Ellen Whitford and her older half-sisters. L–R. Dorothy, Laura, Chrissie. Pakea Island, Vanuatu, circa 1925. (Photo courtesy of Violet Bowhay)

One gendered expectation shared by all the women in this story was that they accepted bearing the children of some men whose sexual attentions they tolerated, in return for favors or simply because the power differential between them made it impossible to say no. Ellen Whitford said that the Frenchman (Henin) with whom Evelyn lived was “a brute.” Mina’s father was also described to me as boorish. The Whitford descendants I spoke with uniformly credited Jumbo, who became Dorothy Whitford’s trusted ni-Vanuatu servant, with more integrity than her eventual husband. Part of this integrity rests in their belief that he was never her lover. Perhaps he was not viewed as a sexual being where white women were concerned; perhaps he was respected for his personal integrity—or both. In any case, Violet said that Jumbo disliked the man Dorothy Whitford eventually married “because of his womanizing while married to Mum.”¹⁵

Place and Movement

This article also points to the historical importance of understanding the social construction of places in the Pacific (eg, Kahn 1993; Lindstrom 1990; and contributors to Rensel and Rodman 1997), and especially of “home” and women’s places in domestic environments in colonial and postcolonial contexts (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992; Dominy 2000; George 1996; Jackson 1995; Jolly and McIntyre 1989). Both Evelyn’s and Violet’s stories construct place and home as dynamic, moving targets. Movement between places is integral to their traveling stories.

Although the women move through multiple locales, neither is placeless. Evelyn has a village to call her home on Pentecost in her old age. Violet became an Australian citizen and lived in Sydney most of her life. Movement is dramatic in Evelyn’s traveling story.¹⁶ It carries her plot forward and, as Denison said during the workshop, the story wraps diverse places and people throughout Vanuatu into a single tale. Evelyn’s mother, born on Ambae (or Maewo?), spent her adult life in the Banks Islands, where Evelyn was born. Evelyn moved from the Banks to Santo, to several places on Efate, and finally to Pentecost. People’s relationships to places are gendered in Vanuatu, and women opened “roads” of marriage, establishing relationships with other places and people (Bolton 1999b; Jolly 1994). Evelyn’s movements trace a chain of relationships, with the men in her life, with her family, and with her male and female employers in islands throughout the group. If we add employees to employers, the same could be said for all the settler women I have interviewed.

Partial Truths

Of course, everyone's memories of Evelyn's story are partial, including Evelyn's own. It is not surprising that Violet remembered Evelyn's affair with Len, which resulted in her half sister's death. But what about the silences? Why did Evelyn not mention Mina's death? Perhaps because it did not directly relate to the questions Denison asked her about being a housegirl? But Evelyn told her story the way she wanted to tell it, with long pauses while the old woman recollected and formulated her narrative. And after all, Mina's death was closely related to Evelyn's job as housegirl/nursemaid. Perhaps Evelyn was ashamed of having been blamed, along with Len, for the little girl's death? Perhaps it simply wasn't important—after all, her own small child died, too. Perhaps Dorothy remembered it partly to be able to blame someone other than herself for her child's death. Violet's own memories of Dorothy as a mother were ambivalent, and this story may have been memorable for her partly because it expressed some of that ambivalence while focusing on another child who was almost the same as Violet, but not quite.

Despite the differences, there are striking similarities between Evelyn's life as a ni-Vanuatu woman and those of the Whitford women who identified as British. These include physically hard work, violence at the hands of men, little money, the deaths of small children, sexual relationships outside marriage, producing children with a few men they loved, and others whose power they feared, or tried to use, or both. Not only are their gender histories entangled, they are overlapping, despite contradictions of "fact" and differences in the construction of their race, class, and gender positions.

This article and the research in it build on Ann Stoler and Karen Strassler's study of servants' memories of colonial work in Indonesia (2000).¹⁷ They view memory as recursive, interpretive work that is less about events in the past or even identity than about "how idioms of the past are reworked with a differently inflected but equally active voice in the present" (Stoler and Strassler 2000, 9). In this sense, colonial memories, like all memories, concern the present as well as the past (Lowenthal 1985). As Jonathan Boyarin wrote, in individual and collective memory there is "a potential for creative collaboration between present consciousness and the experience or expression of the past" (1994, 22). Like some of the Melanesians featured in Andrew Lattas's special issue of *Oceania* on memory (1996), the ni-Vanuatu and expatriate women involved in this research

move between individual and collective memories. The conversations and interwoven pasts that emerged in this research trace a new, or at least a “remade” Pacific history (Borofsky 2000, 29), a history in which indigenous and expatriate women’s voices are loud and, if not clear, compellingly real in their complexity.

* * *

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Notes

1 Violet Bowhay, unpublished memoirs, courtesy of Anne Mooney, 2003.

2 In 2002, these archives were relocated to the University of Auckland library where access to them is less restricted than it was when I consulted them in the United Kingdom in 1993–94.

3 I made this argument most recently in an article in the *Journal of Pacific History* (Rodman 2003).

4 They can be citizens of Vanuatu but not ni-Vanuatu, which is an ethnic, indigenous category.

5 Jimmy Stephens and his Na Griamel followers proclaimed the breakaway Vemarana Republic, initiating the Santo Rebellion (27 May to mid-August 1980). Troops from Papua New Guinea helped to put down the rebellion after Vanuatu became an independent country on 30 July 1980.

6 Kraemer’s master’s thesis research concerned contemporary housegirls working for expatriate and ni-Vanuatu employers (2003).

7 All quotes are translated from the Bislama audiotapes of the workshop.

8 Whitford probably took Bure on board his ship only a year or so after relocating his own wife and small child from Malekula. He planted the island in coconuts, which Evelyn remembered as an impressive sight.

9 Evelyn told Denison that Mrs Whitford's name was Sarah, but Australian descendants make no mention of Sarah. Their grandmother was Alice (née Ford), born in 1874 on Tukutuk Plantation, near Vila. Alice was half ni-Vanuatu rather than part Gilbertese.

10 Violet Bowhay's response to this part of Evelyn's story was that Sam Seraweia had not drowned but rather had been shot at Big Bay, Santo: "Whoever he was working for had them sleep with their muskets alongside. One morning Sam was found dead in his bed. Law and order were lax; the tale was told that his gun had accidentally discharged during the night. Our mothers said he'd been murdered. As [my cousin Dorothy] said, who would have done anything? No doubt there was jealousy about women and so on; after weeks away from home and hearth, the men were no saints" (pers comm, fax, 22 Jan 2002).

11 Evelyn did not say whether the baby she had born to Henin was male or female, but she did tell Denison that the baby had died in infancy.

12 Violet spoke about this with her cousin, Dorothy Morris, and her aunt, Ellen Whitford O'Shea (1919–2002).

13 The language in which we conducted the workshop (Bislama) has a single word for "men" and "people" and therefore allows for ambiguity about whether Evelyn received the gifts from men (implying male admirers) or simply from the families for whom she worked.

14 Violet Bowhay, unpublished memoirs, courtesy of Anne Mooney, 2003.

15 Violet Bowhay, pers comm, fax, 22 Jan 2002.

16 Violet Bowhay's and other settlers' stories also share this characteristic but detailed discussion of them is beyond the scope of this article.

17 A revised version of this piece appears in Stoler 2002.

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Abstract

The story of the 1937 death of an eighteen-month-old girl named Wilhemina (Mina) Whitford in the care of her ni-Vanuatu nursemaid, Evelyn, frames this article. The Whitford's version of this story was heard in the course of fieldwork with descendants of settler families. They tie Mina's accidental death to an affair Evelyn was having with a male settler. What about Evelyn? How could she be located

and her version of events recorded? More generally, how can the unwritten histories of women's experiences be recovered in a Pacific island context? How can indigenous women write their own histories of gender in the contexts of colonial experience? The article offers, first, a theoretically informed descriptive approach, which finds answers in the gendered and racialized content of contemporary descriptions of past experiences, such as the story of the child's death. A second way of finding Evelyn involves methodological detective work using the network of ni-Vanuatu women fieldworkers trained through the Vanuatu Cultural Centre. A 2001 workshop provided a forum for fieldworkers and women who had worked as housegirls in the colonial (pre-1980) period to discuss work, violence, gender, race, and history. During the workshop, a fieldworker brought Evelyn's story to light. Conclusions point to new ways of integrating indigenous and expatriate women's voices in historical and anthropological research in the contemporary Pacific.

KEYWORDS: Gender, subject locations, race, narrative, indigenous methodologies, settlers, Vanuatu