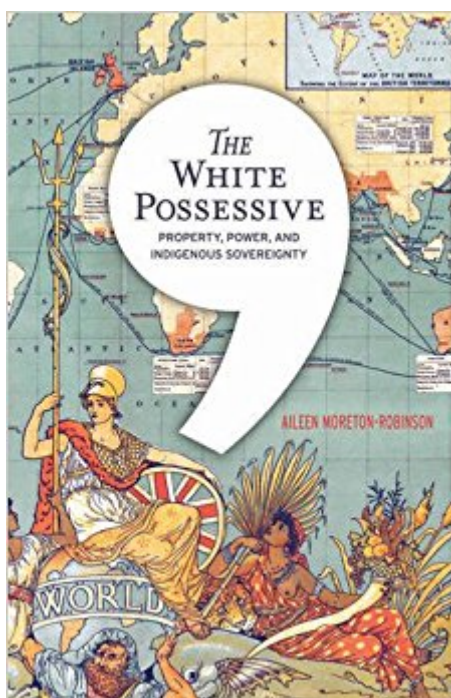


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# The White Possessive: Property, Power, And Indigenous Sovereignty (Indigenous Americas)



## Synopsis

The *White Possessive* explores the links between race, sovereignty, and possession through themes of property: owning property, being property, and becoming propertyless. Focusing on the Australian Aboriginal context, Aileen Moreton-Robinson questions current race theory in the first world and its preoccupation with foregrounding slavery and migration. The nation, she argues, is socially and culturally constructed as a white possession. Moreton-Robinson reveals how the core values of Australian national identity continue to have their roots in Britishness and colonization, built on the disavowal of Indigenous sovereignty. Whiteness studies literature is central to Moreton-Robinson's reasoning, and she shows how blackness works as a white epistemological tool that bolsters the social production of whiteness—displacing Indigenous sovereignties and rendering them invisible in a civil rights discourse, thereby sidestepping thorny issues of settler colonialism. Throughout this critical examination Moreton-Robinson proposes a bold new agenda for critical Indigenous studies, one that involves deeper analysis of how the prerogatives of white possession function within the role of disciplines.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Aileen Moreton-Robinson brilliantly shows how systematically identifying whiteness with possession and dispossession deserves foregrounding in Indigenous studies."—David

Roediger, University of Kansas, author of *Seizing Freedom: Slave Emancipation and Liberty for All*"The *White Possessive* showcases the unique intellectual contribution of Aileen Moreton-Robinson, both within Australia and internationally. Prising apart concepts of race, ethnicity, and cultural difference, her book makes visible and accountable to patriarchal white subject of possession that subtends them." — •The International Journal of Critical Indigenous Studies"Moreton-Robinson provides her readers with an indispensable theoretical analysis with which they can (re)think the way in which the possessive logics of whiteness structure racialised populations, particularly Indigenous subjects, experiences of (non)belonging and displacement in contemporary settler colonial life." — •Sociology"Most of the essays in the volume are on Australian Indigenous issues, but have relevance globally. This book provides many thought-provoking insights that could help bridge divides between scholars of indigeneity and those of whiteness." — •Tribal College Journal

Aileen Moreton-Robinson is professor of Indigenous studies at Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, Australia, and is director of the National Indigenous Research and Knowledges Network. She is author of *Talkin' Up to the White Woman: Indigenous Women and Feminism* and editor of several books, including *Sovereign Subjects: Indigenous Sovereignty Matters*.

Very good, compelling read that really makes clear how settler colonialism functions on both a structural and individual level (though the analysis obviously works more on a structural level--I do think it can be applied to individual white settler folks, and to bring home how they/we can continue to be complicit in settler colonialism.) Some of the essays sort of repeat themselves, and her use of Foucault left me completely baffled (and why is she using biopower and not necropolitics!!!!) but I am a pendant who should be ignored. I will also say that her explanation of Australian history is almost non-existent, which may be intentional but does make following the court cases that she frequently cites hard to do, and is an interesting choice given she's published this with a US press. But her framework is really powerful and I think very important in thinking about settler colonialism in the future. Def recommended!

*The White Possessive* is an essential read for anyone seeking to understand the role of race in creating and sustaining political conflicts endemic to liberal democratic states that were established upon and continue to occupy Indigenous countries. Its arguments build on strong foundations

established in Talkin *Up to the White Woman*, Moreton-Robinson's first book, published in 2000. That sociological study provided a forensic analysis of how the subject position of middle-class white woman both produced and circumscribed the anti-racist capacities of white feminists. Bringing together her writings about race, whiteness and possession, published over the past decade, her latest book places white institutional practices and subject formation under a scrutiny that is both theoretically informed and supported by empirical evidence through case studies. In doing so, it probes difficult questions about identity and inter-subjectivity that scholarship of racism and Indigenous rights often fail to address. *The white possessive*, Moreton-Robinson's original concept and hypothesis, organises these essays and successfully shifts the terrain of current debates about race and Indigenous people. It also produces a compelling explanation of why academic and political projects organised around such virtuous objectives as fighting racism and recognising Indigenous rights can serve to entrench the captivity of Indigenous people within schemas of difference (coded variously as racial or cultural). Moreton-Robinson clearly positions her work within a broader academic and political programme of critical Indigenous studies. She identifies several threads within debates over the focus of this growing body of Indigenous scholarship. These include: calls for a focus on Indigenous cultural difference to be displaced by attention to the epistemological complexity of Indigeneity, deeper engagement with Western disciplinary formations and adopting queer theoretical orientations towards the normalising logics that define Indigenous identity with reference to a fixed political referent. While acknowledging the value of all of these approaches, Moreton-Robinson suggests that other forces are at play to circumscribe the intellectual scope and political efficacy of critical indigenous studies. It is in this context that she introduces the *white possessive* as a lens through which to understand living legacies of colonisation for Indigenous people in white-settler-colonial nations. As she powerfully writes: For Indigenous people, white possession is not unmarked, unnamed or invisible; it is hypervisible. In our quotidian encounters, whether it is on the streets of Otago or Sydney, in the tourist shops in Vancouver or Waipahu, or sitting in a restaurant in New York, we experience ontologically the effects of white possession. These cities signify with every building and every street that the land is now possessed by others; signs of white possession are embedded everywhere in the landscape. The

omnipresence of Indigenous sovereignties exists here too, but it is disavowed through the materiality of these significations, which are perceived as evidence of ownership by those who have taken possession. This is territory that has been marked by and through violence and race. Racism is thus inextricably tied to the theft and appropriation of Indigenous lands in the first world. In fact, its existence in the United States, Canada, Australia, Hawai'i, and New Zealand was dependent on this happening. (xiii)

The first part of the book contains four essays framed by the theme of 'Owning Property' and highlight, in different ways, how whiteness operates as property in Australia and the US. The first essay, 'I Still Call Australia Home: Indigenous Belonging and Place in a Postcolonizing Australia' is a key intervention within discussions of post-colonialism in Australia from the early 1990s, when concepts of hybridity and multiculturalism were routinely deployed against essentialist understandings of national or racial identities. This conceptual work leads readers into the second essay's discussion of 'Britishness' as a theme within political, academic and literary discourses about Australian identity. Moreton-Robinson demonstrates how calls to recognise and celebrate the contribution of the nation's British heritage, and political and cultural institutions are founded on a necessary, but often disavowed, construction of Indigenous people as embodying racial difference that makes whiteness a property potentially available to immigrants from different parts of the world. The third essay explores an art installation by Vernon Ah Kee which responds to violent racial protests on Cronulla Beach in 2005. Through this discussion the reader is led to see how cultural spaces are imbued with values of patriarchal white sovereignty and how a sense of possession can be disseminated through popular culture and embodied in normalised everyday practices such as 'enjoying the beach'. The fourth essay, 'Writing off Treaties: Possession in the US Critical Whiteness Literature', is a crucial piece of comparative research written at a moment when whiteness studies were emerging as an international field for interdisciplinary research. Placing the Australian literature within this broader context, she demonstrates how a black/white binary, together with tropes of migration, effectively sustain the nation as a white possession, silencing and marginalising political and epistemological challenges posed by Indigenous sovereignties.

Part two 'Becoming Property-less' opens with a foundational essay from the author that elaborates the concept of patriarchal whiteness in Australia through a case study of the government's response to the Mabo (1992) decision overturning of terra nullius in the Native Title Act (1993). Building on the concept of whiteness as

property developed by Cheryl Harris in 1993, Moreton-Robinson powerfully demonstrates what is at stake for Indigenous communities who seek limited empowerment through native title recognition when the racial production of property relations through the nation-state is in the first instance disavowed. But what does the white possessive look like beyond formal political institutions of law courts and parliaments? The seventh essay, *Leesa's Story: White Possession in the Workplace*, explains how possessive white subject formations operate in the everyday lives of Indigenous people in Australia. This detailed case study highlights the challenge for Indigenous people who appeal to anti-discrimination law to counter racism at work as they confront a prevailing discourse of colour-blindness. The shift of focus in the final essay in this section of the book from the topic of everyday racism in the workplace to the agency of Captain James Cook in the late 1700s, is both disruptive and inspired. *The Legacy of Cook's Choice* draws on the explorer's diaries considers the so-called discoverer of Australia to be an Enlightenment subject, whose will to possess was fundamentally tied to a way of knowing and seeing Indigenous people as marked by race. At a moment when sovereignty and treaty have been removed from the agenda of Indigenous constitutional recognition in Australia, Moreton-Robinson's reinterpretation of the iconic Captain Cook narrative could not be more relevant. The final section of the book, *Being Property*, opens with a call to a new research agenda shaped by the capacity of Michel Foucault's (2004) reflections in *Society Must be Defended* to stimulate the sociological imagination (125). After discussing the use of his concept of biopower in postcolonial studies of race, Moreton-Robinson suggests that critical whiteness studies literature be brought to bear to understand pressing questions relating to Indigenous dispossession. This would create more nuanced accounts of the agonistic relationship between white nationalist projects, on one hand, and Indigenous sovereignties, on the other. The implications of this Foucaultian research agenda are significant because they expose the role of disciplinary scholarship dedicated to knowing and advocating for the rights of Indigenous and other dominated populations as possible tactics and strategies of race war. *Writing Off Sovereignty* shows how the discourse of national security is mobilised within a white body politic that is nominally multicultural even as it is braced against outsiders. Reading Ghassan Hage's thesis about

Paranoid nationalism, together with extracts from speeches about security delivered by former Prime Minister, John Howard, the author demonstrates the inextricable link between the discourse of security and “an anxiety about dispossession shaped by a refusal of Indigenous sovereignty with clear roots in white supremacy” (152). The penultimate essay, “Imagining the Good Indigenous Citizen”, pursues the implications of this possessive orientation towards securing the nation for discourses surrounding Indigenous welfare. In particular, she highlights the function of discourses of citizenship as a tool through which Indigenous Australians are subjected to ongoing race warfare via state interventions to address their ascribed pathology (172). The final essay, entitled “Virtuous White States: White Sovereignty and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)”, is a powerful intervention regarding debates in critical whiteness studies at a global level. The term “states” in this essay is polyvalent and applies across national, institutional and individual actors. An incisive discourse analysis reveals the shifting position of white-settler-colonial nations, the US, Canada, New Zealand and Australia, on the draft contents of UNDRIP developed over a period of more than two decades. It is shown how these state parties defended their fierce opposition to Indigenous sovereignty with recourse to proclamations reiterating their virtue against the intentions of Indigenous parties positioned as being destructive and as promoting disharmony. Moreton-Robinson notes, with reference to their blanket dismissal of collective Indigenous rights, “With missionary zeal, these states have already determined what is best for their Indigenous peoples by defining what Indigenous rights are acceptable. In this way they stake a possessive claim to us” (184). Her final move considers a political twist, whereby the objecting states were brought to agree to the declaration without conceding any of the moral high ground they previously occupied to oppose it. They acknowledge that bad things happened in the past, they cite the good things they have already done, and they note that the declaration is not legally binding for their national governments. In other words, these states use their support for the declaration as a pretext for public performances of virtue that commit them to nothing that is not already being done at national and international levels of governance. This, of course, begs the question of “what will prevent continuation of abuses committed in the past?” Rather than offering easy answers to this question,

Moreton-Robinson's book establishes how the "white possessive" as a subjective orientation, as a pattern of intersubjective engagement and as an institutionalised form of power deployed to protect white settler property interests, serves continuing inhumanity against Indigenous people.

Incisive critique of the linkages between settler colonialism, indigeneity, racial formation, property, and gender, with strong connective analysis across Australia and the Americas- would recommend highly regardless of your prior knowledge about these topics.

Excellent!

This is really just the same poorly written essay repeated twelve times, cobbled together to make a book. The author's premise is rubbish. I can't believe this was published. It's the same old "all white/European people are evil" fallacy that has been made popular by the ubiquitous (and culturally dangerous) victim mentality. Don't waste your money on this pseudo-academic trash.

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