
*The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty* collects a decade of writing by Aileen Moreton-Robinson interrogating the racial politics of Australian settler colonialism. An Indigenous woman belonging to the Goenpul tribe of the Quandamooka people, Dean of the Indigenous Research and Engagement Unit at Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, and Director of the National Indigenous Research and Knowledges Network, Moreton-Robinson presents a powerful challenge to resurgent white nationalism in Australian settler society. Through the book, she unpacks the racial logics undergirding a structure of colonial territorial possession that continues to disrupt the exercise of Indigenous territorial sovereignty. Her work draws Indigenous studies into dialogue with critical analyses of whiteness and biopower, exposing how a settler discourse of security rationalizes interventions to control Indigenous populations as a potential threat to white national patrimony. Most provocatively for geographers, Moreton-Robinson extends analyses of the territorial dimensions of white possessiveness often neglected in critical studies of racialization and biopolitics.

The book is organized into three parts, which respectively position her interventions with relation to understanding whiteness, settler law, and colonial biopolitics. Each part contains four essays. There is a degree of overlap and repetition between the chapters, as each was originally written and published as an independent piece. Reading the essays together, however, provides a better understanding of Moreton-Robinson’s oeuvre. In a new introduction framing the collection, Moreton-Robinson positions the various essays as components of a broader project bridging Indigenous and whiteness studies. As she describes it, Indigenous studies historically developed in association with Indigenous struggles for land and self-determination, and specifically sought to elevate and revalorize Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies. To
understand the colonial conditions that continue to constrain the exercise of Indigenous knowing and being in the world, she argues that it is necessary to develop a critique of white settler society. Theorizing the coloniality of whiteness requires a substantive reorientation of whiteness studies, which initially developed as an outgrowth of Black studies.

Bringing analysis to bear on the relationship between whiteness and Indigeneity, Moreton-Robinson draws upon and significantly extends the work of scholars such Cheryl Harris and George Lipsitz. Her starting point is Harris’ now classic article, “Whiteness as Property” (1993), which highlights the historic racialization of property through chattel slavery and settler colonialism, as well as the endurance white racial entitlement in contemporary cases around affirmative action. Specifically, Harris argues the racialization Indigenous peoples obviated legal recognition of their territorial possession, enabling the colonial settlement and seizure of Indigenous lands. “Possession—the act necessary to lay the basis for rights in property—was defined to include only the cultural practices of whites” (Harris 1993: 1721). Whiteness as a sign of entitlement is, for Harris, embedded into the very legal definition of property. The structures of white supremacy accorded whites with relative economic, political, and social advantages, which “became part of the settled expectations of whites” (Harris 1993: 1777). In his book, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (1998), Lipsitz extends this analysis, attending to the racial dimensions of housing markets, asset accumulation, economic restructuring, and school segregation. Connecting white attitudes and interests, Lipsitz demonstrates how racism is motivated by desire to protect opportunities for asset accumulation and social mobility. Thus, white supremacy is not simply driven by hate but commitments to maintain a system of racialized structural privileges that enhance the well-being of white families.

In *The White Possessive*, Moreton-Robinson pushes beyond the internal workings of proprietary rights or economic markets, situating whiteness within a territorial register. Moreton-Robinson highlights that white territorial possession is the irreducible foundation of settler
regimes of property law and asset accumulation. While Indigenous people are regularly racially
excluded from the benefits of whiteness, in terms of wealth and well-being, their marginalization
diffs in important ways from that of other racially marginalized communities, as the original
violence of colonialism is the displacement of Indigenous sovereignty and the dispossession of
Indigenous lands. While Indigenous people can personally benefit from efforts to address
discrimination within the settler society, the fundamental struggle of Indigenous peoples remains
a collective one against jurisdictional and territorial displacement by settler society. Thus,
Indigenous struggle is not for greater incorporation into settler society but rather against settler
infringements upon the autonomy of their community and traditional lands. Addressing
whiteness in this context, in terms of settlers’ collective investments in the continuing possession
of Indigenous territory, Moreton-Robinson extends and reframes the discussion of whiteness to
think through the politics of the settler nation.

The first part of the book, “Owning Property”, features a set of essays that position
Moreton-Robinson’s scholarship with reference to postcolonial, Australian, gender, and
whiteness studies. Chapter 1 troubles both the dominant narratives of postcolonial studies and
Australian nationalism, highlighting the centrality of British migrancy within settler colonialism.
While postcolonial theory laudably valorizes migrancy and transnationalism as a counter to
exclusionary nationalist discourses, Moreton-Robinson emphasizes the importance of
disaggregating the category of migrant and attending to power relations that underlie settler
histories of migration. As she details, settler attachments to Australia overwrite the pre-existing
and ongoing Indigenous ontological connections to the land. Chapter 2 continues to insist that
thinking about Australian nationalism necessitates thinking about race because the celebrated
construction of the landscape as a white possession is built upon the disavowal of Indigenous
sovereignty. Importantly, the displacement of Indigenous geographies is not simply situated as a
historic event, as Indigenous peoples continue to exist and struggle for the land. Thus, as Chapter
3 discusses, the contemporary corporeal occupation of the beach—as white surfers, lifesavers,
soldiers, and concerned citizens embody their claim to and care for the land—continues to performatively anchor discourses of Australian national belonging that obscure the presence of Indigenous ways of maintaining territorial relationships. These white occupations normalize, as Moreton-Robinson emphasizes, a particularly patriarchal form of white possession. Finally, Chapter 4 shifts to the antipode, examining how US discussions of black-white race relations take for granted that the United States is a white possession. This renders invisible not only the colonial history of the country but also the existence of Indigenous struggles that call into question the foundational territorial appropriations that undergirds US geography.

The second part of the book, “Becoming Propertyless”, shifts to focus on the legalities of white settler colonialism. Chapter 5 begins with an analysis of the 1992 Mabo decision and subsequent Native Title Act 1993. In Australia, colonial authorities never bothered to treaty with Indigenous peoples before settling the land. In the Mabo case, the High Court determined that Native title could be abolished by the government when it had a clear and plain intention to do so, but it recognized that Indigenous legal traditions and claims remained intact except where modified or extinguished by government action. Responding to the case, the Native Title Act 1993 established a system to adjudicate Native title claims that protected the status of settled lands. While these developments are often celebrated as a victory for Indigenous peoples, Moreton-Robinson critiques how the law provided security of tenure for white pastoralists and mining companies and circumscribed Native title to the interstices between an established grid of settlement and development. Moreover, she clearly highlights the injustice of colonial legalities that place the burden of proof on Indigenous claimants. Chapter 6 extends this critique, examining the 2002 Yorta Yorta decision, in which the High Court determined that the Yorta Yorta people did not retain the right to their traditional territories. Unpacking the decision, Moreton-Robinson stresses the naturalized white entitlement to the land, and how it continually operates to privilege settler possession of and authority over Indigenous lands. Chapter 7 shifts to the work environment, highlighting how normative assumptions of white entitlement and
Indigenous inferiority operate to render workplace discrimination invisible to the majority of white workers. Chapter 8 shifts the conversation from the contemporary to the originary, examining Captain James Cook’s rationalization of his decision not to follow instructions and treaty with the Indigenous peoples of Australia. Cook determined that Indigenous people were ignorant of concepts of property and exchange value, and thus unable to treaty. As Moreton-Robinson documents, Cook decided that Indigenous people were not sovereign but rather part of nature because they did not display the form of possessiveness that he expected. Thus, as the embodiment of patriarchal sovereign authority, Cook defined the land as unoccupied and claimed it as terra nullius.

The final section of the book, “Being Property”, addresses biopolitics, and specifically how Michel Foucault’s (2003) lectures on sovereignty, race, and biopower can provide a useful framework to advance critical Indigenous studies. In Chapter 9, Moreton-Robinson issues a call for Indigenous scholars to engage with Foucault’s thinking about biopower and race in relation to questions of Indigenous sovereignty. Provocatively, she argues that scholars need to track the marks of white possession through the discourse of Indigenous rights, as well as the normative knowledge of rights-bearing Indigenous peoples within the disciplines of law, political science, history, and anthropology. I remember encountering this chapter in its earlier article form at the beginning of my graduate education. Returning to it a decade later, its prescience is remarkable. I continue to be challenged by questions such as “How do ‘rights’ contribute to creating bodies of knowledge and multiple fields of ‘Aboriginal’ expertise?”. In her call to recognize colonial structures of power/knowledge, Moreton-Robinson mirrors the engagement with Foucault’s late work by postcolonial scholars such as Ann Laura Stoler (1995), and prefigures its uptake by critics of settler colonialism, such as Penelope Edmonds (2010), Renisa Mawani (2010), Scott Lauria Morgensen (2011), and Mark Rifkin (2011).

She extends her engagements with the biopolitics of security in the final chapters of the book. Chapter 10 impressively employs the framework of security to link the imperial alliances
of Australian international policy to domestic immigration and Aboriginal policy regimes. Here Moreton-Robinson addresses how white anxieties inform not only foreign policy adventures to secure regional stability, but also domestic policies aimed at securing the threat that Indigenous peoples and asylum seekers might unsettle the normative whiteness of the nation. Chapter 11 highlights how the Australian government continually positions Indigenous life in a state of exception, in order to address Indigenous pathologies and “save” Indigenous life. Rather than positioning Indigenous health and education statistics as a result of colonialism, the government pathologizes Indigenous communities, blaming the practice of Indigenous self-determination for the conditions of Indigenous life. Throughout the regulatory apparatuses of state, Indigenous people are disciplined to be Australian citizens rather that members of self-determining Indigenous societies. Moreover, citizenship while officially colour-blind is nonetheless differentiated. Indigenous people have limited access to avenues of asset accumulation or social mobility; yet they are blamed for their disadvantage because “if Indigenous people behaved properly as good citizens, then their poverty would disappear” (p.72). Their inherent rights are only recognized when it is convenient, and they remain adversely incorporated within a society based on their dispossessing and marginalization. The book closes with a discussion of the hollowness of the settler state’s approach to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in Chapter 12.

As a collection of writings originally published in a wide variety of venues over a decade, *The White Possessive* evokes a range of responses. The collection at times feels repetitious, often reiterating the conceptual framework established in the previous chapter. The same examples, such as the Mabo decision often reappear in different chapters without actually adding new details. Moreover, some of the insights of the older contributions now seem well-established. However, the extent to which Moreton-Robinson’s analysis has been embedded within critical approaches to study settler colonialism reflects the importance of her contribution. In a number of cases, her intervention served to open new and original directions of inquiry, and it is worth
returning to her original work to recognize the significance of her impact on the field. But understanding Moreton-Robinson is important for more than an intellectual history of settler colonial studies. Her ranging engagements with Indigenous, Black, postcolonial, feminist, queer, and poststructural thought provide a model for the theoretical depth that is possible through reading a wide critical literature. Her analysis highlights white interests and commitments to maintaining a regime of white privileges that extend beyond property to the perpetuation of a national community and legal order founded on the displacement of Indigenous sovereignty. Her focus on the active maintenance of white possession points to the necessity of engaging with the colonial present as well as the colonial past, while her focus on the anxieties around white possession point to its contestability and instability. Whiteness is important to follow in part because it is not secure. Moreton-Robinson provides important conceptual tools to think through how we interpret and contest settler sovereignty today and into the future.

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References


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