

Review: *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty*

By Aileen Moreton-Robinson. University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

Timo Houtekamer

Since the emergence of poststructuralism and postcolonial studies, race has continuously been a topic of scholarly interest. It has repeatedly been argued that race is socially constructed rather than biologically determined, and extensive attention has been paid to the differentiating function of race. According to Indigenous Studies scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson, the academic literature that focuses on the racial category of whiteness – something that has become especially prominent since the 1990s – designated it as a form of power, as supremacy, as hegemony, as ideology, as epistemology, and as ontology (Moreton-Robinson 2015, xix). However, the characterisation of whiteness as a form of property has rarely been addressed, which is why Moreton-Robinson takes this approach in *The White Possessive. Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty*. She argues that when Indigenous sovereignty is taken into account in these whiteness studies as well, it becomes clear how white supremacy is fundamentally dependent on the possession of indigenous lands. The aim of this book is to reveal how whiteness operates possessively through a process of racialisation by disavowing indigenous sovereignty, which leads to the social construction of whiteness as the dominant entity in a racialized hierarchy.

The White Possessive is divided into three parts, each part consisting of four different essays. In the first part, titled ‘Owning Property’, the possessive function of whiteness is further elaborated. The first chapter is of a theoretical nature and explores the differences between white national belonging and indigenous national belonging in the context of postcolonial Australia. In the second chapter, a white Australian national identity is examined and the roots of its core values in Britishness are exemplified, in order to expose the connection to British imperialism. Moreton-Robinson traces the genealogy of white possession from a postcolonial national identity to an earlier form of British imperialism, and she concludes that possession is not only characterised as a logic of whiteness, but also as a form of colonialism (Moreton-Robinson 2015, 32). This makes the second chapter especially rich for scholars of colonial history. In the third chapter, Moreton-Robinson critically engages with feminist scholar Judith Butler’s conception of performativity in order to demonstrate how the white possessive functions in Australian beach culture. This case study supports the theoretical claims made in the chapters before, and in addition argues that

raced and gendered norms are indeed maintained through performances, as Butler's theories state, but that they are also existentially and ontologically tied to patriarchal white sovereignty. Moreton-Robinson closes the first part with a critical analysis of the various studies of whiteness that proliferated since the 1990s, pointing out that this literature basically fails to address the imperial continuities of the postcolonial nation-state. Acknowledging these continuities and critically engaging with them, Moreton-Robinson argues, will expose postcolonial nation-states such as Australia as white possessions with indigenous sovereignty in its employment. This is what she tries to do in her own book too, while simultaneously creating a niche for the indigenous perspective in the academic field of whiteness studies as well.

The second part, 'Becoming Propertyless', focuses on how white possession is actually implemented at the cost of indigenous sovereignty in several different contexts. Both the fifth and the sixth chapter describe how patriarchal whiteness has shaped and still shapes social relations throughout Australia. This patriarchal whiteness is, according to Moreton-Robinson, mainly exercised through a legal discourse that is being employed by the Australian government and circumscribes indigenous title rights. Through this institutionalisation, the logic of white possession starts to circulate subsequently in all kinds of common-sense knowledge, social conventions, and decision-making bodies. In the seventh chapter, the arguments presented so far are further substantiated by means of a case study of an Aboriginal nurse's experiences with racism in her work environment. After the previous theoretical chapters, this chapter adds greatly to Moreton-Robinson's argument. She often takes her study of the white possessive to certain levels of abstraction, which might take the reader's attention away from the actual encounter with (institutionalised) racism. Chapter seven, however, discloses this in a very intimate way, which proves that Moreton-Robinson's knowledge of the topic is beyond mastery. In chapter eight, she closes the second part by tracing the legal discourses that institutionalises white possession back to James Cook's declaration of Australia as a *terra nullius* (no man's land), which again highlights the continuities of colonial endeavours into the present.

Moreton-Robinson opens the third part of her book, 'Being Property', with a chapter on Michel Foucault's conception of race. She explains that according to Foucault, race is a linguistic category that precedes the modern nation-state. Because of the dividing effects of race and its effect on the nation-state, modern society is characterised by a continuous form of hidden social warfare. Foucault argues that this means that race should therefore be analysed as such of warfare, corresponding to its grid of tactics and strategies (Moreton-Robinson 2015, 128).¹ Moreton-Robinson does not criticise the fundamentals of Foucault's theories, nor does she provide an alternative interpretation, but she does point out that Foucault did not explain how this

¹ The term 'hidden social warfare' is explicitly used by Foucault and taken over by Moreton-Robinson.

conceptualisation of race is tied to knowledge embedded in tactics or strategies of war. Subsequently, she sets up an agenda for further research, combining Foucault's insights and her own. She argues that racial strategies and tactics in academic disciplines such as history, political science, anthropology, and legal studies should be closely studied in order to discover how white possession works in postcolonial discourse and regulatory mechanisms (Moreton-Robinson 2015, 132-135). In chapter ten, eleven, and twelve, the functioning of white possession in Australian nationalism is further explored by means of a discursive analysis of national security, pathology, and (white) virtue respectively, which further substantiates the arguments made in the theoretical chapters in the first part of *The White Possessive*.

Although Moreton-Robinson does not move away from the classical notion that whiteness is defined at the cost of the indigenous, she does provide significant new insights in this matter. For Moreton-Robinson, indigenous peoples are not an Other against which white people can define themselves by emphasising their differences – although neither denies that this happens and has happened (Moreton-Robinson 2015, xvi).² Rather, she argues, whiteness is defined by means of the possession of indigenous peoples and their lands. This approach allows for the concept of 'indigenous sovereignty' instead of the concept of 'indigenous Otherness' to be central to the social construction of whiteness, which leaves significant room for an indigenous perspective in this field. The characterisation of whiteness as a form of possession at the cost of indigenous sovereignty, which is the core argument of *The White Possessive*, make this book very recommendable to everyone who is interested in matters of race. Its theoretical insights are relevant for students of both colonial and postcolonial situations because of the continuities that Moreton-Robinson traces between them. This book can offer an alternative perspective for anyone who wants to move beyond the characterisation of race as a marker of difference. Together, the twelve chapters in *The White Possessive* provide a variety of perspectives on how whiteness possessively exploits Indigenous sovereignty, which makes it a fruitful and original account in the field of Whiteness studies.

² Moreton-Robinson does not explicitly engage with the concept of 'Othering', but she does point out that studies of race often tend to see it as a marker of difference. She argues that we need to move beyond this conception.