

Talkin' Up to the White Woman: Indigenous Women and Feminism

Aileen Moreton-Robinson

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The issue of 'difference' has been troubling feminism for far too long. The fact that it continues to cause trouble is the troubling part. The 'difference' challenge to mainstream feminism has tended to come in one of two forms. First, women writing from the standpoint of 'others' within or outside feminism (women who have variously identified themselves as Black, Latina, women of colour, Third World women, Indigenous women, women of non-English speaking background, lesbians, women with a disability, or a combination of these) have castigated mainstream feminism for presuming a white, Anglo/First World, able-bodied, heterosexual and most often middle-class subject of feminist theory and activism, and for claiming that the interests of this subject are those of all women. Second, poststructuralist feminists have engaged in a thoroughgoing critique of the subject, insisting that difference resides within as well as between women, and that the category 'woman' is itself contingent, unstable, temporally and locationally specific and discursively constructed.

The trouble has arisen from the fact that these arguments have been treated by many academic and activist feminists invested in their jobs and their politics as peripheral at best, and at worst as highly dangerous. Some academic feminists have developed a superficial form of acknowledgment which involves adding an extra sentence or paragraph to their general analysis describing Black women and other 'outsiders' as doubly oppressed. Others have contended more strongly that all women really *are* oppressed in the same way (we are raped, beaten, excluded from public life and exploited as carers the world over), so that any differences are simply marginal.¹ And some insist that feminism simply cannot exist or be politically effective without a unitary concept of woman, and that anyone who suggests otherwise is trying to destroy the movement. While these denunciations, refusals and brush-offs persist, books such as Aileen Moreton-Robinson's will continue to be written.

Talkin' Up to the White Woman locates itself within a variety of 'traditions' or political spaces, old and new. Rhetorically, it invokes the imperative mode of address adopted by such iconic texts in the field as Ruth Frankenberg's *White Women, Race Matters* (US), Hazel Carby's 'White Women Listen!' (UK) and Sherene Razak's *Looking White People in the Eye* (Canada).² Intellectually, it contributes to critical race theory's burgeoning and fruitful analysis of whiteness,³ while philosophically it falls within the first category of feminist writings on 'difference' identified above — those that

¹ For example, MacKinnon (1991).

² Frankenberg (1993); Carby (1997), p 45; Razak (1998).

³ In a legal context, see for example Galbraith (2000); Gross (1998); Harris (1993); Mahoney (1995); Sawyer (1997). In an Australian context, see Hage (1998) and the essays in Docker and Fischer (2000) and McKay (1999).

speak from a specific, non-mainstream standpoint.⁴ Culturally, Moreton-Robinson locates herself within a tradition of Indigenous warrior women, and explains the book as an extension of her communal responsibilities. As such, *Talkin' Up to the White Woman* is well credentialled and thoroughly grounded within both the academic and Indigenous worlds, but it is also utterly unique. A sustained analysis of the position of Indigenous women within white Australian feminism, and the position of white Australian feminism in relation to Indigenous women, has not been written before. And, of course, the situation in Australia is 'different' from that of the United States, the United Kingdom, India, Canada, New Zealand or wherever else, both because of the specific historical form and conditions of colonisation in Australia and because of the relative paucity of Indigenous women in Australia writing from within the academy.

The book is organised around a series of reflections on representation and self-presentation, in turn organised around the opposition between Indigenous women and White women. Chapter 2 looks at representations of White women in feminist theory, while Chapters 3 and 4 consider representations of Indigenous women in, respectively, White women's ethnographic writings and White Australian feminism. Chapter 5 discusses the self-presentations of White feminist academics, while Chapters 1 and 6 concern Indigenous women's self-presentations, first in Indigenous women's life writings and then within White Australian feminism.

Moreton-Robinson's three central points seek to effect a shift in the way White Australian feminists represent themselves and engage with Indigenous women. First, white feminists need to stop externalising race and treating it as a category belonging only to the 'Other'. Rather, we must displace 'the subject position middle-class white woman' from its 'unmarked and unnamed status' and make it 'visible in white feminist academic discourse' (p 149). In the words of Fiona Nicoll, we need to 'come out' as white women,⁵ and to own and acknowledge our whiteness.

Second, this means owning, acknowledging and challenging our white race privilege. Moreton-Robinson makes the point forcefully that the opposition White women/Indigenous women is a matter not simply of difference but of domination. Indigenous women were subjugated, dehumanised, objectified and exploited by White women during the process of colonisation, in particular through the domestic relationship of mistress and 'servant'. White women further objectified and constructed Indigenous women according to self-serving disciplinary concerns in the 'professional' relationship of anthropologist and subject/native informant. And then the White sisterhood of second-wave feminism ignored, excluded or at best

⁴ Examples are numerous. In North America, see Collins (1991); Moraga and Anzaldúa (1983); Narayan (1989), p 256; Sandoval (2000). In Australia, see Huggins (1991), p 6; Huggins (1994), p 70; O'Shane (1976). In feminist legal theory, see Behrendt (1993); Cain (1989-90); Crenshaw (1991), p 195; Harris (1990); Kline (1989); Matsuda (1989).

⁵ Nicoll (2000).

patronised Indigenous women in advancing its own particular concerns while purporting to represent all Australian women. Moreton-Robinson powerfully suggests that, given the social indicators establishing that Indigenous women have far and away the greatest needs of all Australian women, they should be the first to be attended to by the women's movement, not the last.⁶

Third, White feminists need to understand and support Indigenous women's particular concerns rather than either assuming or seeking to define what they are. Specifically, 'Indigenous women's politics are about sustaining and maintaining our cultural integrity and achieving self-determination' (p 177). Indigenous women will continue to pursue these aims apart from feminism until White feminists are able to 'theorise the relinquishment of power so that feminist practice can contribute to changing the racial order' (p 186).

Moreton-Robinson draws upon a wide range of material in making her arguments, including feminist theoretical literature, ethnographic writings, the history of colonisation and of the first- and second-wave women's movements in Australia, and Indigenous women's academic and political interventions in the latter. The focus on Indigenous women's life writings in the first chapter presents a deliberate and valuable corrective to the White (and particularly White legal) tendency to rely on accounts *about* rather than *by* Indigenous people.⁷ The analysis in this chapter is compelling and at times illuminating. The other interesting aspect of Moreton-Robinson's research is her interviews with twelve White Australian feminist academics. The interviews cover questions on teaching about gender and cultural difference, and also questions on personal experiences of and attitudes to race and cultural difference. The interview material forms the basis of Chapter 5, and of the conclusion that White feminist academics' anti-racism rarely includes sociality with racial 'others' or consciousness of their own whiteness, resulting in a mind/body split:

Their anti-racist practice, as an intellectual engagement, is evidence of their compassion, but racism is not experienced as part of their interiority. Their extrinsic and almost extraneous relationship to 'race' is evidence of why the subject position middle-class white woman, as a site of dominance, needs to be interrogated. (p 149)

⁶ A similar point has been made by US feminist legal scholars Kimberle Crenshaw (advocating that feminist theory should be shifted to the intersection of gender, race and other 'outsider' identities, 'placing those who are currently marginalised at the centre'), and Donna Coker (arguing that feminist domestic violence reformers should give priority to laws and policies which improve access to material resources for women in greatest need — that is, those most dramatically affected by inequalities of gender, race and class): Crenshaw (1991), p 212; Coker (2000).

⁷ See in particular the decision of Olney J in *Members of the Yorta Yorta Aboriginal Community v State of Victoria* [1998] FCA 1606 (18 December 1998).

By contrast, it is impossible for Indigenous women to ignore their own race, or to avoid the constant reminders of colonisation corporeally represented by White feminists.

It is never comfortable to be reminded of one's own failures and shortcomings, but this is an important book despite (or perhaps because of) that. It would be possible to mount a poststructuralist critique of Moreton-Robinson's argument, but to do so would simply serve to prove her point about the deflecting and dominating tendencies of White feminism.⁸ *Talkin' Up to the White Woman* is a fine piece of scholarship as politics, a well-aimed and crafted piece of talkin' up, performing the impressive feat of successfully negotiating both Indigenous and academic cultural codes. As such, it presents a model of effective engagement, while theorising the difficulty for White feminists of doing the same. And it contains a message, too, for White male academics, especially those who would like to read this book as further evidence of the failures of feminism. Interrogate your own privileged whiteness *and* masculinity before passing judgment on anyone else.

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⁸ Margaret Davies and Nan Seuffert (2000), p 274 make a similar point.

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Case

Members of the Yorta Yorta Aboriginal Community v State of Victoria [1998] FCA 1606 (18 December 1998).

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