In her introduction to *Talkin’ Up to the White Woman*, Aileen Moreton-Robinson explains that her book is “an extension of my communal responsibilities” because she is “representing an Indigenous standpoint within Australian feminism” (xvi). This refusal to abide by the academic fiction of an uninvolved researcher gives notice that a refreshing honesty based in a straightforward telling of the Indigenous view of white Australian women is about to unfold. And what an unfolding it is! Moreton-Robinson explores how white, middle-class women enjoy a racist privilege based in colonization and dispossession of the Indigenous nations of Australia; how notions of the white race continue to legitimate theft of Aboriginal lands, and, subsequently, the existence of the state known as Australia; and how whiteness and nationality are central to white feminists and their theory and practice of white feminism.

Whiteness, as construct and reality, is institutionalized—as it is in the United States and other imperialist countries—through capitalism and its necessary scaffoldings: educational, bureaucratic, governmental, and cultural. In all manner of interactions, whiteness as ideology and practice is shown to confer “privilege and dominance in power relations between white feminists and Indigenous women” (xxi). As an example, Moreton-Robinson reveals how the invisibility of Indigenous peoples in Australia is a direct result of the institutionalization of whiteness, which, by naturalizing the presence of white foreigners on aboriginal lands, erases the history of European genocide committed against Aboriginal peoples.

Dispossession, domination, and domestication were the three prongs of the first stage of colonization, which included, almost as a by-product, the most vicious kinds of murder, and psychopathic mutilations such as castration and the uses of men’s scrotums for tobacco pouches and infants’ heads for polo balls.

The clearing of the continent for European settlement was the engine that fueled the Aboriginal holocaust. After murders and massacres in the early stages of settlement came “assimilation” into white society. This meant removal of Aboriginal children from their parents (the “stolen generations”), forced servitude (Indigenous people were not entitled to wages until the mid-1960s), and specific laws based on an ideology of the cultural and racial inferiority of Aboriginal peoples.

With genocide as the historical background for the contemporary relationship between white women and Aboriginal women, the author reveals how white feminists “supported both the White Australia Policy and the need to increase the population: whiteness became the unifying symbol of Australian nationalism” (98). Embedded within this position was the assumption that indigenous women needed to be “civilized” under the close direction of white Australians.
White feminist agendas, then, addressed only white feminist concerns: equality with white men, access to resources and jobs, antidiscrimination legislation. Through two waves of historical feminism, Aboriginal issues were most notable by their absence. Like the American women’s movement, the Australian feminist movement was a white movement from beginning to end. As Moreton-Robinson concludes: “Whiteness is so pervasive as an invisible norm that race, as difference, still belongs only to women who are not white in Australian feminism” (110).

This has meant that white feminism assumes Indigenous women are defined by their gender rather than their race, that rights achieved by white women will benefit Indigenous women, and that white women and Indigenous women share the same level of oppression.

Given this white feminist blindness, Aboriginal women have made their own movement, grounded in their own issues. They do, however, continue to speak and argue with white feminism, as this book makes clear. Indigenous women cannot ignore white women, because they, with white men, determine so much of the society in which Indigenous women live.

Despite the benefits of white domination, white feminists continue to deny their privilege as white women. They choose to discuss racism from a distance, excluding themselves from the discussion. This “intellectual relationship” with racism reminds me of white women in Hawai’i who claim to support Hawaiian rights while benefiting from the continuous denial of them. For such women, in Hawai’i and in Australia, white privilege and whiteness as ideology are naturalized, like the air they breathe. In this way, power and privilege determine how white feminists view the class and race divisions in their society. For them, the problem is always an Indigenous problem, never a white problem.

Indigenous women have created their own agendas through challenging the Australian nation state. Their issues focus on genocide, land and citizenship dispossession, stolen children, and mass imprisonments. By contrast, white Australian feminist issues concern equal rights with white men as citizens of Australia, a white racist country. The distance between these two agendas is precisely the distance between Indigenous feminism and white feminism.

The experiences with white feminism described by Moreton-Robinson undoubtedly resonate with feminist women of color everywhere. In Hawai’i, our Native women find little common ground with white feminists; as in Australia, white women are generally uninterested in or occasionally hostile to our struggle for land rights, sovereignty, or any form of reparations for the overthrow of our government by the United States in 1893.

Given this, I suspect Indigenous women will discover much in this book that is painfully familiar but reassuringly accurate. Moreton-Robinson has done us a favor by detailing her people’s experiences with white feminism. Now it is up to white feminists to read her book and learn from her analysis.

HAUNANI-KAY TRASK
University of Hawai’i, Mānoa

* * *