



## CHAPTER 1

# TALKING BACK, TALKIN' UP: VOICING INDIGENOUS FEMINISM

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized and the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of “talking back,” that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject—the liberated voice.

bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (9)

In her early, ground-breaking writing on Black feminist thought in the United States, bell hooks explains the importance of the concept of “talking back” and the impact it had on her when she was growing up in a family where “woman talk” was rich, poetic and intense but relegated to the kitchens of Black women and directed inwards, to the community of female friends and family, rather than outwards into the public sphere, as the voices of Black male preachers were (5). “Talking back,” characterized by hooks as “speaking as an equal to an authority figure,” as “daring to disagree” and “having an opinion” (5), is a strategy that many women of ethnic minorities had to learn to use in order to be heard and recognized as subjects capable of expressing their difference in an environment where the emphasis was more on assimilating difference in the name of the common struggle against patriarchy. A decade later, Indigenous scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson used a very similar term to describe the act of Australian Aboriginal women’s talking back. The concept of “talkin’ up” gives title to her influential study of Australian white feminism through Indigenous women’s perspective. In a way reminiscent of hooks’ recollections of her growing up, Moreton-Robinson explains in her introduction to *Talkin’ Up to the White Woman: Indigenous Women and Feminism* (2000) that she was encouraged by her grandparents who raised her, as well as by



female elders of her community, to “speak [her] truth to white people,” to “talk up to white people” (xv). It is precisely this concept of “talking back” and “talkin’ up” that permeates my discussion of Indigenous feminism as it was voiced and articulated theoretically in Indigenous women’s personal non-fiction. For many Indigenous women, writing from their experience and talking back to mainstream feminism and, in some cases, to their own communities remains a “courageous act—an act of risk and daring” (hooks 5). The following discussion provides an exploration of how Indigenous women, alongside other marginalized women, intervened in the domain that had until then been dominated almost exclusively by white middle-class women’s political and personal interests.

Debates concerning the politics of difference and the intersections between gender and race have formed an indispensable part of feminist discourse. The period since the late 1970s has witnessed an important shift in the focus on this intricate relationship as diverse voices of women with different life experiences and cultural histories have challenged what has often been called “white” or mainstream feminism. This term has been increasingly employed to refer to the second wave of first-world, Western, or Euro-American feminist discourse. Julia Emberley’s characterization of Anglo-American feminism can be extended to generally describe the mainstream feminism which women with different life experiences questioned: it is “an institutional configuration, the practices and activities of which engage women in the project of furthering their access to ‘higher’ education, their empowerment through knowledge, and their entry into a professional managerial class” (81). As such, mainstream feminism, as a political and social activist movement, has primarily served white middle-class women’s interests. This conception has been challenged by the so called “third-world” women or “women of color”<sup>2</sup> who have responded with a critique that points to the racist and ethnocentric practices of mainstream feminism that tend to universalize women’s experience as that of an oppressed gender under the patriarchal system. In this way, mainstream feminism has, for a long time, downplayed or even ignored intersections such as gender and race, gender and class, or gender and sexuality. The notion of white feminism has also emerged in accord with developing critical race theory and whiteness studies which maintain that whiteness, as a structurally privileged and discursively invisible category, has become a norm against which other “non-white” experience and epistemology are judged in the construction of

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2 The terms “third-world” women and “women of color” are used interchangeably in this study to refer to all those women who have been excluded from participating in discourses of power, be it in a patriarchal context or in mainstream feminism. The terms are also employed in agreement with Mohanty’s claim that “women of color” are bound by “a common context of struggle” rather than by their skin color (“Cartographies of Struggle” 7). I am aware that this category is complex, problematic, and, as many critics have pointed out, homogenizing as it may erase cultural differences, local histories, and the diversity of life experiences. Therefore, I use the terms in quotation marks in my original text and without quotation marks where the secondary sources employ them in that manner.



identity, representation, subjectivity, nationalism, law, and culture (Moreton-Robinson, *Whitening Race* vii).<sup>3</sup> In this perspective, whiteness remains unnamed and uninterrogated as a difference or “the other.” This theoretical framework gives rise to what Moreton-Robinson, in her discussion of white feminism, calls “subject position white middle-class woman” (*Talkin' Up* xxii), a category constructed in order to make whiteness visible so that it can be theorized.

The responses of “women of color” to mainstream feminism have been numerous and diverse. The theoretical works of bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Patricia Hill Collins sprung from African American studies; Gloria Anzaldúa’s appeared within Latin American studies; and the works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Chandra Talpade Mohanty have proved useful for postcolonial feminist criticism. Indigenous women have also contributed to the body of knowledge within this area by becoming involved in debates exploring the politics of difference and identity, intersections of gender and race, and the role Indigenous women play in what they often perceive as neo-colonial settler societies. In the United States, Canada, and Australia, they have participated in dialogues with other “women of color” as academics, public speakers, and intellectuals, challenging the race and class blindness within the feminist movement. An example of such alliances may be found among Native American women, especially from the South and Southwest, who sometimes collaborate with Chicanas or South American women. Aboriginal women in Australia, including Jackie Huggins, have occasionally referred to work by African American writers and theorists, such as bell hooks and Alice Walker. Increasingly, collaborative projects or edited collections which integrate the standpoints of “women of color” from various geographical regions are being published.

In her introduction to the influential study *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (1991), Chandra Talpade Mohanty offers an analysis of the challenges that “third-world” women<sup>4</sup> pose to mainstream feminism. These challenges include a reconceptualization of the ideas of resistance, community, and agency in daily life, and an integration of the categories of race and postcolonial discourse (“Cartographies of Struggle” 3). Mohanty demonstrates in detail how mainstream feminism has historically focused on gender as the only basis of struggle, ignoring

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3 It is in this sense that I use the term “white feminism” throughout this work, although I am aware that it is reductive and very much constructed for the purposes of theoretical discourse. By no means do I intend to imply an excessive homogeneity of the Western feminist discourse. I use the term explicitly where my sources use it too (e.g. Moreton-Robinson, Jackie Huggins); elsewhere I use it interchangeably with “mainstream”, “Western”, or “first-world” feminism.

4 Mohanty uses the term “third-world” to include women of Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East, as well as minority women, or women of color, in Europe and in settler colonies (“Cartographies of Struggle” 2). Although she does not mention Indigenous women explicitly as being “third-world” women, it is implied that they may be included in this group as they often face similar marginalization and political and cultural struggles within settler societies.



the racial, class, and sexual axis of oppression. Therefore, she calls for Western feminists to examine the construction of whiteness and its relation to power, and to engage more effectively in anti-racism and anti-colonialism. Mohanty's often quoted essay "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," which is included in the same publication, describes the ways in which a coherent and homogeneous category of "Woman" was constructed on the premise that women, because they share the same gender, also share the same oppression under patriarchy. Subsequently the movement has appropriated and colonized the pluralities and differences of "third-world" women's experience, thereby relegating them to the position of an object rather than a subject with agency. This latent ethnocentrism that Mohanty uncovers in her analyses of several white feminists' texts on the issues of "third-world" women is also responsible for projecting the stereotypes of the Other onto the category of the "third-world" Woman. Thus in Mohanty's view the "third-world" women tend to be represented as poor, uneducated, dependent, traditional, domestic, sexually restrained, family-oriented, victimized, and, importantly, as politically ignorant women who need training and education in Western feminism ("Under Western Eyes" 56–57). This process of "othering," not dissimilar from Edward Said's seminal analysis of the ways in which the West has constructed the Orient, may result in what Moreton-Robinson calls white feminists' maternalism, by which she refers to "the superordinate position of the white woman who has the right to judge and make recommendations" about Indigenous women, knowing that the "state will support her request" to, for example, remove children of mixed parentage to institutional care (*Talkin' Up* 25). Moreton-Robinson further argues that such forms of maternalism, allowing white women to maintain a position of superiority which is "informed by white masculine values of separateness and independence" is responsible for precluding positive relationships with Indigenous women (*Talkin' Up* 180).

Mohanty is aware of the danger of operating with the category of "third-world" women and insists that any focus on particular struggles must take into account complex, sometimes even conflicting historical and cultural contexts. In fact, she claims that "third-world" feminists have engaged in the "rewriting of history based on the *specific* locations and histories of struggle of people of colour and postcolonial peoples, and on the day-to-day strategies of survival utilized by such peoples" ("Cartographies of Struggle" 10, original emphasis). However, despite paying close attention to such differences, Mohanty is also aware of the need to use the category of "third-world" woman strategically as an analytical and political entity in order to theorize certain issues. To be able to do this, Mohanty draws on Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities" to talk about an imagined community of "third-world" women where the oppositional struggles invite "potential alliances and collaborations across divisive boundaries" ("Cartographies of Struggle" 4). This allows Mohanty to make useful connections between diverse



contexts of “third-world” feminist struggles—such as the history of colonization, economic exploitation, and race/gender oppression—and the construction of consciousness and identity in writing. In her words, “writing often becomes the context through which new political identities are forged. It becomes a space for struggle and contestation about reality itself” (“Cartographies of Struggle” 34). This is a useful notion which will inform my own analysis of the feminist texts by Paula Gunn Allen, Lee Maracle, and Jackie Huggins and of the ways in which these three Indigenous women writers negotiate the ambivalences between their specific cultural backgrounds, their involvement in feminist movement, and the construction of their selves during the writing process.

The basic premise of Indigenous women’s critique of white feminism is expressed in Moreton-Robinson’s analysis in *Talkin’ Up to the White Woman*. Moreton-Robinson argues that “an Indigenous woman’s point of view is informed by social worlds imbued with meaning grounded in knowledges of different realities from those of white women” (xvi). She further explains that her own personal experience as an Indigenous feminist scholar has led her to challenge white feminism’s subject position of dominance and to seek alternative discourses among African American, Latin American and lesbian feminists. It is precisely these discourses, in Moreton-Robinson’s view, that contest the representation of the universal “Woman” as a white liberal middle-class woman, and propose instead models of diversity and heterogeneity, stressing cultural differences and specific particularities (xvii). In other words, Moreton-Robinson’s statement concerning the inherent difference of Indigenous women’s experience explicitly undermines the assumption made by the white feminists that regardless of their cultural background, women can be characterized as a singular group oppressed by the patriarchal system of values, which is also where Moreton-Robinson’s view comes close to that of Mohanty. Moreton-Robinson’s study, anchored in Australian historical and cultural context, is most useful in her argument that Indigenous women’s life writing, which foregrounds Indigenous women’s self-presentation, actually reveals the extent to which their realities and life experiences are grounded in different histories from those experienced by white women (*Talkin’ Up* xxiii). These experiences include, for example, government-imposed and sometimes unpaid work as domestic servants, which more often than not went hand in hand with sexual molestation or abuse by the white masters and work exploitation by the white mistresses. Other suppressed experiences concern state-sanctioned family policies, such as separating children from their Aboriginal families and forced sterilizations. In this way, Moreton-Robinson argues, Indigenous women’s life writing “unmasks the complicity of white women in gendered racial oppression” (*Talkin’ Up* xxiii). Like Mohanty, Moreton-Robinson points out that the history of white feminists’ relations with Indigenous women in Australia actually demonstrates the way Western feminists normalized and po-



sitioned themselves as knowing subjects, while constructing Indigenous women as the Other (*Talkin' Up* xxiv).

Mohanty's and Moreton-Robinson's works are only two examples of comprehensive theoretical studies by "women of color" which articulate issues important for Indigenous feminist debates, particularly the politics of difference. It has been noted by many Indigenous and non-Indigenous critics alike that Indigenous women have frequently resisted, challenged, or altogether ignored the Western women's movement and mainstream feminist discourse. This has been the case not because their identities are not anchored in a strong sense of womanhood and sisterhood or in a belief in women's alliances and solidarity, but because these women have found much of the Western feminist theory irrelevant to their everyday existence and life experience. From Indigenous women's perspective, the core of their lives is frequently in the everyday survival of their families and communities as well as in grassroots political work rather than in abstract theorizing (Little n. pag.; Felton and Flanagan 53; Tsolidis 37; A. Smith, "Native American Feminism" 121; Jaimes and Halsey 330–331). The reasons for this cautious response to mainstream feminism by Indigenous women include what they perceive as latent racism within the mainstream feminist movement, its negligence in addressing the complicity of white colonial women in the colonization process, and the overly abstract theoretical debates that fail to address everyday social injustices. Thus until recently, mainstream feminism was viewed by some Indigenous women activists and writers as a continuing imperialist project (e.g. Jaimes and Halsey 331–332). Therefore, in order to support Indigenous issues such as sovereignty and self-determination, Indigenous women tend to reject mainstream feminist politics. Consequently, they might be facing a considerable dilemma about what is often perceived as an either/or choice: their potential alliance with feminism can be viewed as colliding with their anti-racist struggles and politics of sovereignty, while their involvement in Indigenous rights movement sometimes involves suppressing their feminist agenda (Tsolidis 33; Jaimes and DeCora Means qtd. in A. Smith, "Native American Feminism" 117).

In the context of the Indigenous women's situation in North America, Devon A. Mihesuah warns that even though the agendas of feminist discourse and Indigenous research have recently grown and the integration of Indigenous women's studies and feminist theory would seem a logical step, it is not desirable unless mainstream feminist scholars become involved in "reciprocal, practical dialogue" with Indigenous women ("A Few Cautions" 1250). The obstacles preventing a deeper integration of Indigenous women's thought into mainstream feminism concern, according to Native feminist scholars, the speaking position of non-Indigenous scholars and researchers who in some cases tend to speak *for* Indigenous women. The implication is that there is an authoritative voice among Native North American women (frequently identified with traditionalist positions), while



this is obviously not so. Such assumptions have a rather damaging effect on Indigenous women's activism as it creates a superficial dichotomy between the so-called "traditionalist" women and the "assimilated" or "progressive" women (Mihesuah, "A Few Cautions" 1248), where the "traditionalist" Indigenous women are positioned as rejecting mainstream feminism as something alien to traditional Indigeneity, while the "assimilated/progressive" strand, on the contrary, allies with feminism. Thus the caution that Mihesuah calls for applies to both mainstream feminists who sometimes tend to disregard the diversity of Indigenous women's experience, and to Indigenous women themselves. As Mihesuah contends, "there isn't a single one [voice] among Native women, and no one feminist theory totalizes Native women's thought. Rather, there is a spectrum of multiheritage women, in between 'traditional' and 'progressive,' who possess a multitude of opinions on what it means to be a Native female" ("A Few Cautions" 1249). The complexity of Indigenous women's involvement with mainstream feminism therefore stems not only from the history of colonization and the imposition of the European patriarchal system onto Native communities, but also from the inevitable diversity of voices among Indigenous women themselves; as such, it is not possible to present Indigenous feminism as a monolithic position.

Although the critique of mainstream feminism by Indigenous women has certainly presented valid arguments, it is also important to stress that there are many Indigenous women who, if not embracing mainstream feminism, at least support some of its ideas. It is therefore misleading to conclude that Indigenous women can never endorse mainstream feminism and, at the same time, their particular communities' interests. In some cases, Indigenous women who want to engage with feminist issues may respond to mainstream feminism by creating their own feminist discourse and/or making allies with other marginalized feminist thinkers, particularly African American or Latin American women (Jaimes and Halsey 335). On the other hand, many Indigenous feminists emphasize that struggles for land and self-determination continue to carry the same weight as feminist issues, even preceding them in importance when the situation demands it. The more recent scholarship of Indigenous women, begun in the 1990s, especially promotes a less reductive and more complex analysis of the engagement of Indigenous women in the feminist agenda. One such re-defining discussion on this topic is offered in the work of the Native American activist and scholar Andrea Smith, who regularly addresses the interventions Indigenous feminism makes in other fields, such as American studies, ethnic studies, and gender studies, and examines their intersections. In her articles "Indigenous Feminism Without Apology" and "Native American Feminism, Sovereignty, and Social Change," as well as in the later work towards her project on Native Feminisms, Andrea Smith argues that "Native women's activists' theories about feminism, about the struggle against sexism both within Native communities and the society at large, and about the importance



of working in coalition with non-Native women are complex and varied. These theories are not monolithic and cannot simply be reduced to the dichotomy of feminist versus nonfeminist” (“Native American Feminism” 118). The forums that Smith organized in 2006 at the American Studies Association conference and in the ensuing special issue of *American Quarterly* in 2008 aimed at establishing a discussion group which would help articulate a theory of Native Feminisms. Native Feminisms “transform how we understand the project of sovereignty and nation-building in the first place. They challenge how we conceptualize the relationship between indigenous nations and nation-states, how we organize sovereignty, and how we tie sovereignty to a global struggle for liberation” (Smith and Kauanui 241). In other words, for Smith, Indigenous women can be both feminists and advocates of Native sovereignty.

In Australia, analyses of the ways in which Aboriginal women engage with feminism and examine the intersections of gender and race were available from the 1970s in the texts by, for example, Roberta Sykes and Pat O’Shane, but gained significant momentum in the 1990s. Scholars, activists and writers, such as Marcia Langton, Melissa Lucashenko, Catrina Felton, Liz Flanagan, Larissa Behrendt, Jackie Huggins, and, in particular, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, have all contributed to making visible the complexities of Indigenous women’s relationship to mainstream feminism, in particular they focused on “whiteness as a hegemonic ideology centered in feminism” (Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin’ Up* 174). Their critique of the white women’s movement in Australia is based on the premise that “incommensurabilities and irreducible differences exist between us [Indigenous women] and white feminists” (Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin’ Up* 151). Moreton-Robinson stresses that Indigenous women in Australia reject the accommodation of difference that is required by the feminist movement, and on the contrary demand that they be allowed to “maintain [their] cultural integrity in [their] struggle for self-determination” (151). White women’s history in Australia is perceived as history “of invasion, dispossession, destruction of culture, abduction, rape, exploitation of labour and murder” (Behrendt 29). This antagonistic discourse—established by Indigenous women’s political activists in the 1960s and 1970s, a time of significant political change for all Indigenous people in Australia—has been enhanced by another arena which was, at least in the Australian context, dominated by Indigenous women since the 1980s—the genre of life writing. This genre, materialized in dozens of Indigenous women’s autobiographies, testimonies, and transcribed oral life stories, influenced how Aboriginal women’s lives were perceived and represented. These images then contributed to challenging the discourse of mainstream feminists by showing Indigenous women as playing very complex roles in families, kinship structures, and communities; as occupying significant positions in the educational, political, and economic spheres; and recently as being co-responsible for passing on Aboriginal knowledge and practices (Brewster, *Literary*



*Formations* 42). By publishing their own and their families' life stories, they have taken up the task of recording Aboriginal family and community life, including women's accounts of gender-specific strategies of resistance through forms of family-based traditional knowledge. As will be demonstrated in the second half of this book through the analysis of North American and Australian Indigenous women's life writing narratives, in the face of excessive assimilationist policies and government surveillance, the preservation of the extended Aboriginal family became a site of resistance and survival.

An illustrative example of a specific project that promotes a complex *theoretical* Indigenous feminist approach in Australia, one that complements the Aboriginal women's cultural production, is the concept of "tiddaism" developed by Catrina Felton and Liz Flanagan in what they call "Tidda's Manifesto" (53, 57).<sup>5</sup> "Tidda" refers informally to "sister" in Aboriginal English, and Aboriginal feminist activists use this term to invoke a sense of sisterhood and solidarity among themselves and their common political and social struggles. Tiddaism has been designed to redress the need for an Indigenous field of analysis working towards "articulating our [Koori women's] experiences and analys[ing] the factors that shape our [Koori women's] reality" (53).<sup>6</sup> It addresses a variety of issues, such as eliminating oppressive impositions of white feminist domination, establishing Koori women's own political and cultural agenda, and developing appropriate methodologies for cultural analyses (53). Tiddaism also demands recognition of the fact that mainstream feminists often speak from a position of power that excludes Aboriginal women: "white feminists possess an inability to look outside their own cultural perspective. Yet they constantly speak with some apparent legitimised authority about our experiences" (Felton and Flanagan 54). According to Janine Little, tiddaism is situated not as a counter-discourse, but as an informing discourse: "To posit tiddaism as counter-discourse would leave the existing critical arena intact as an intellectual field that acknowledges an alternative voice through approaches that apparently work. As an informing discourse, tiddaism challenges the field to go to the informants and ask for whom the approaches work" (Little n. pag.). Although such work may still be perceived as marginal outside the Koori and Murri women's community that stimulated it in the 1990s, it nevertheless demonstrates the need to engage critically with mainstream feminism. Initiatives like this one

5 In addition to Felton and Flanagan's article, other influential writings in the 1990s addressed the relationship between Aboriginal and mainstream feminisms in Australia: Jackie Huggins' "A Contemporary View of Aboriginal Women's Relationship to the White Feminist Movement" (1994), Melissa Lucashenko's "No Other Truth? Aboriginal Women and Australian Feminism" (1994), Georgina Tsolidis' "Theorizing Ethnicity in Australian Feminism" (1993), Eva Johnson's "A Question of Difference" (1994), and Larrisa Behrendt's "Aboriginal Women and White Lies of the Feminist Movement: Implications for Aboriginal Women in Rights Discourse" (1993).

6 "Koori" refers to Aboriginal people of New South Wales, while the term "Murri" refers to Aboriginal people in Queensland.



were crucial in drawing attention to the hegemony of whiteness permeating the feminist movement in Australia, and they called for a new kind of feminism in which white women's racism and Indigenous women's experience of it would be acknowledged (Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin' Up* 171).

Given the context of the development of Indigenous feminism outlined above, the following analysis of texts by Paula Gunn Allen, Lee Maracle, and Jackie Huggins examines three different perspectives from which these Indigenous women writers critically respond to mainstream feminism and, simultaneously, articulate their own alternative versions of Indigenous feminism as they accentuate different issues. So, for example, Paula Gunn Allen's main purpose in *The Sacred Hoop* is to advocate the gynocratic nature of some Indigenous communities in pre-contact North America, which was forcibly erased by the imposed Western patriarchal system. But she also writes from the position of an Indigenous lesbian—a position that has often been repressed, if not ignored, in scholarly examinations of her work. Lee Maracle's *I Am Woman* focuses on condemning any form of sexism and violence towards women within Indigenous communities, while employing a rather radical feminist Marxist perspective. In *Sister Girl*, Jackie Huggins' critique of white feminism in Australia is primarily based on the historical development of racial tensions between white and Aboriginal women. She thus argues for opening a dialogue with Australian mainstream feminists which would be based on the recognition of this historical imperative. Although it is possible to suggest that Allen, Maracle, and Huggins generally reproach mainstream feminism for ethnocentrism and lack of commitment to anti-racist and anti-colonialist struggles, at times even advocating a separatist stance, it is obvious that their specific localities, histories, and cultures account for variations in the intensity and focus of these critiques. The following textual comparison, however, illuminates parallels and common strategies which provide an insight into Indigenous women's perspectives on the women's movement and feminist discourse. It is notable, for example, that none of the authors chooses to simply ignore white feminist discourse. Instead, they all engage intellectually in constructive criticism and initiate dialogues, if not alliances, *with* white women, hoping to bring an end to the injustices within the movement that has based its existence primarily on fighting oppression. By drawing attention to the clashes and contradictions between Indigenous women's experience and mainstream feminist theory, the three authors promote what Julia Emberley calls the "feminism of decolonization" (80).