

## Chapter 8

# Indigenous Killjoys Negotiating the Labyrinth of Dis/Mistrust

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### ABSTRACT

*Indigenous scholars often feel like they have to do better and be better to fit in the academy. The sense of being an imposter is an emotion that is familiar to many. Indigenous women particularly become very accustomed to the gendered and racialized codes of academia. Raising the issue positions Indigenous women as killjoys – always demanding more than they are entitled. Indigenous scholars bring a lot to the academy and can draw on millennia of Indigenous knowledge as they negotiate a labyrinth of dis/mistrust in the system. Despite this, they will prevail as scholars of substance and worth.*

### INTRODUCTION

After being awarded a PhD in 2012 I was subsequently offered my first full-time permanent position at a university. Like many Indigenous women in the sector, I was the first person in my family to attend university. I had started studying as a mature aged student, in my mid-30s with 4 children in tow. My experience of school had been marred by the low expectations that were applied to me as an Aboriginal person and I left before I could graduate with any formal high school qualifications. In one instance, I was instructed by the principal of the high school I was attending, to think about a career as a cleaner. There were no expectations that an Aboriginal student would or could aspire to anything other than domestic work. There is of course nothing wrong with being a cleaner. My issue with this instruction was that it was given as the only aspiration I should hold. It is by sheer luck that I even went to university. I was doing some family history research when I ended up at the Indigenous support unit on campus at the University of Wollongong, talking to an Indigenous student support officer, who suggested I should apply to come to university.

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As an undergraduate, I experienced the lack of confidence familiar to so many Indigenous students, to many women, gender and sexually diverse students and those from low socio-economic backgrounds. The ‘imposter syndrome’ in particular, was reinforced by the institution through tokenism and, in general, through the ways in which Aboriginal education was devalued. I recall one event which occurred while I was in my first year at university studying a Bachelor of Arts. The class was discussing Aboriginal artifacts and the teacher, a non-Indigenous man, brought a didgeridoo to show as an example of an Aboriginal musical instrument. We know that the Yidaki, as it is known to us, is more than a musical instrument. The teacher closed the door, looked around the room and said, “Aboriginal people don’t allow women to play the didgeridoo but there are no Aboriginal people here today, so you can all give it a go if you like”. In that moment I understood the devaluing of Indigenous knowledges and protocols. I also learnt a lot about the politics of identity. I was determined and although I acknowledged much of the institutional racism that pervades the academy, I managed to navigate a path towards achieving a tertiary education.

### **Pathway to Academia**

While studying I spent a number of years working for my local Aboriginal Medical Service and then while finishing my doctoral thesis, I spent several years as a research consultant working with government, non-government and corporate Australia. When I started university in 1999, many of the Indigenous students were mature aged. I am pleased to see this changing in more contemporary times with many students now enrolling after they complete high school. My work as a researcher was diverse, and among many achievements, I developed an online training package for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) which they rolled out to 165 locations across the country and implemented across all staff. There was much discussion about what to name the training package from “cultural awareness to “cultural competence” and even “cultural appreciation”. While the online course was framed under the banner of a “cultural” course, it was really about highlighting the organization’s coverage of Indigenous content and how this had changed over the years. The course utilized the archival material that was kept by the ABC which was extensive. I have never been supportive of “cultural awareness” or “cultural competence” training even though it was, and still is popular in the health and wellbeing space here in Australia. Health organizations often seek this type of training to address the appalling statistics in Indigenous health. In my experience no such training has ever improved the outcomes or experiences of Indigenous peoples seeking help. Racism remains the most prominent barrier for Indigenous peoples accessing services in Australia (Carlson & Frazer, 2020; Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2016).

Regardless of a fairly productive and successful career in health and research, I always wanted to be an academic. I will never forget my first Indigenous Studies lecture and the impact that it had on me. I remember thinking what a powerful position that would be—to have the ability to influence the thinking of the next generation. I also nearly had a heart attack when I realized to do so, I would need a PhD which meant I would need to write a 100,000-word thesis! I questioned how I would ever be able to write so many words, but I did write it. My thesis, entitled, *The politics of identity: Who counts as Aboriginal today?* won the prestigious Stanner Award in 2013 which is administered by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. It is awarded to the best academic manuscript written by an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander author. Then, in 2016 Aboriginal Studies Press published my reworked thesis as a book with the same title.

For me, traversing the terrains of higher education was made possible by the care provided from the Indigenous community on campus. Trusting ourselves and our young people to these institutions requires

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