

An Open Letter to white women in the Academy

This is an open letter that sits a little differently from others, it is not a singled author call to a specific person or instance rather it is a call and hopeful response from three of us, to many of you. We are three First Nations/ Indigenous/Women of Colour (from South Africa and Australia) who all work within academia. Ours is not a single unified voice rather a melding of voices around shockingly similar experiences. We speak not to a single incidence of racism nor a single perpetrator of aggression but rather to a series of aggressions that happen often with a fierce repercussion despite sometimes no fierce intent. We want this to be a gentle but hard conversation that engages in mutually beneficial constructive conversations that hopefully leads to a small place/space of movement or liberation for us all as individuals participating in it. This is no didactic hammering, no positioning of good or bad just a series of questions and a rare opportunity for us three women, to say for just a moment what it feels like to be excluded, included, diversified, ignored, disempowered, stereotyped and helped. The tip of the benevolent sword is piercing, the thud of being ignored is aching. But the pain of low expectation and stereotyping, of enduring ignorance and a continued investment in not seeing us, our histories, our strengths, our power is palatable and sometimes choking. As warrior women within academia this is a blow and pain that strengthens our resolve to have these conversations, to continue when we are weary and beaten down, for our ancestors, for the next generations, for our peers, this is important work that we do and we would like to share some of it with you.

You will hear our three distinct voices throughout this open letter, we don't presume to speak for each other or to 'know' each other's real and lived experiences. So, this letter may well break with conventions around a single authored or voiced text, it may be jarring to read, so be it, we ask that you persevere.

We will also be quoting an historical document "An Open letter to Mary Daley" by Audre Lorde written on May 6th 1979, we are disturbed by its relevance today.

<http://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/lordeopenlettertomarydaly.html>

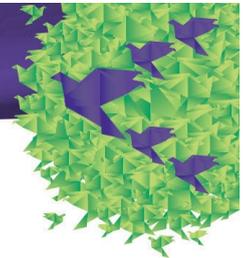
This letter has been delayed because of my grave reluctance to reach out to you, for what I want us to chew upon here is neither easy nor simple. The history of white women who are unable to hear Black women's words, or to maintain dialogue with us, is long and discouraging. But for me to assume that you will not hear me represents not only history, perhaps, but an old pattern of relating, sometimes protective and sometimes dysfunctional, which we, as women shaping our future, are in the process of shattering and passing beyond, I hope. Audre Lorde "An Open Letter to Mary Daley"

'Mabokang:

No one can refute the fact that the transition and journey of growth for Black women academics in South Africa (SA) and perhaps elsewhere is often riddled with obstacles and is never easy. I talk from my own experience and perhaps experiences of others that I have closely worked with, watched or mentored during my 18 years as an academic in what we in SA call Historically White Universities (HWUs) (these universities were open only to White students during the apartheid years and have since 1994 been accessible to all races). Although structures for change have been availed to support the transition, these were not designed for blacks and in particular black women, and furthermore on their own these structures without the willingness of our white counterparts and mentors (who were, and still are celebrated as original inhabitants/occupants of these universities) are still futile in many cases. The culture, on the other hand is still constraining at best even today, with most cultural undertones being subtle and hard to change.

Tracey:

Working as a senior Aboriginal warrior woman in the academy, holds to many challenges (and privileges). I have a location that allows me to see clearly white race privilege and its operations at individual, institutional and ideological levels. And whilst I see myself firmly located in theoretical work that is critical, working to interrogate the intersectionality of race and power I remain constantly aggravated, frustrated, dismayed, disappointed at the little change that has occurred in the academy. Why is this so?



Kathryn:

Fredericks and White (2018) tell us the first recorded Aboriginal person to graduate from any Australian university was Aboriginal woman Dr Margaret Williams – Weir in 1959 (Melbourne University, 2018) with a Diploma of Physical education.

This is an incredible accomplishment as citizenship wasn't given to Aboriginal people until 1967. I acknowledge that I walk on the shoulders of giants as an Aboriginal woman within the academy. That I am of the second generation of women to participate within the academy. This gives me comfort in those times when I am despairing, when I feel a bit worn down from having to educate those around me as well as the students. Because what this says to me is that there exists a generation before me who succeeded in making it, much more alone than I am, without any of the scholarship that I have to call on. I also draw on international women warriors and First Nations scholars who have written about the 'Eurocentrism' of the academy. So, when I feel like who I am, what I believe to be true, what I know to be true is questioned or ignored, when I feel like I have been through a sieve, like weevil filled flour, to separate the good from the bad, I take comfort in the fact that I am not alone. I also kind of despair that the similarities of experiences are so universal that they are a result of colonialism. That the academy is conditioned to behave this way, that it is not just that ignorance is so structured and ingrained in Australian society but also that the tools and recognition that I desire are designed to denigrate me and my culture more broadly.

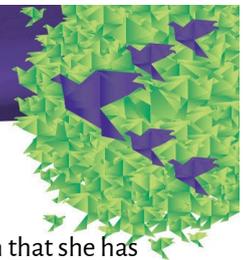
Then I came to the first three chapters of your Second Passage, and it was obvious that you were dealing with noneuropean women, but only as victims and preyers—upon each other. I began to feel my history and my mythic background distorted by the absence of any images of my foremothers in power... To imply, however, that all women suffer the same oppression simply because we are women is to lose sight of the many varied tools of patriarchy. (Lorde 1979).

'Mabokang:

In SA the realities are that attempts to provide black women with equitable opportunities are still marred by many contradictions and discrepancies; (i) black women are often undermined directly and through mediocre support offered, uneven distribution or a scuffle for resources with those who are perceived as legitimate occupants of these universities (HWUs); (ii) there are taken for granted assumptions and perceptions by our counterparts that we black women academics are voiceless, passive, invisible, inarticulate, and do not take initiative for our own development; (iii) policy rhetoric still gives the impression that all is fine while the reality is contrary (just a broken promise); and (iv) there are unequal power relations and cultural stereotypes according to race, gender, identity and language.

Tracey:

In wanting to make the shiFt happen I acknowledge the double labours associated with being black and in the academy. The double is found in not only undertaking the work and duties of our job – teaching students, marking, developing and implementing curriculum, research, writing grants, developing publications, supporting other Aboriginal staff, attending meetings and events, etc. There is another unspoken and hidden labour in which we engage and that is to educate white people who we work with, sometimes, unbelievably, at the point which allows a basic engagement to occur. When you comprise the minority of the workforce and labour in this unacknowledged way in the academy for the majority, who surround you, then the energy expended is exhausting. I also acknowledge that this hidden labour and the engagement – the bridge building – is very much tangled up with ignorance, fetishizing, assimilation, the colonial desire to correct, tokenise and punish and an honesty/integrity to connect. As an educator and if I were to assess the plethora of experiences known and lived through in my 3 decade career I would consistently rate the academy very low and slow in its ability to be able to hear the First Nation's voice, to see the First Nation, to have confidence and competency in engaging with First Nations and to enact First Nations agendas.



Kathryn:

As I read 'Mabokang I am struck by a knowing, a recognising of the issues – a sad and slow realisation that she has written what I feel, voiceless, passive, invisible, inarticulate and that this happens in a climate of unequal power relations. This is the space that I want to acknowledge, when you resource a project less when it is run out of an Aboriginal space, you are saying many things to us. So even with the best of budget or project intentions, you are saying we are less trustworthy than the white space, that we should work harder for less, that you are setting us up to fail, that success can only happen under white leadership. Even if these are not intended they are felt. In a climate and context where you have taken everything from us, we are made to feel grateful for scraps and we are portrayed as angry when we possessively guard our stories and our dignity, when we fight, with a smile so that we can hold our head up high. We enact our sovereignty daily it's just that it happens out of your sight, out of your worldview, out of your capacity sometimes to see, doesn't mean it's not happening.

'Mabokang

While I see our universities as spaces created for all those who reside in this country, and as learning spaces which must emancipate all without any favour or prejudice, for the time that I have been in academia I have come to realise that these places also have a potential to break our spirits as black women academics. For long, SA has suffered a dearth of Black female professors and it is still finding it difficult to turn the tide around. In 2014, there were only 34 black female professors in the whole country, while in my own institution there were 2 in 2017 and 4 currently. At one point in my institution I was the only black female professor, and this came with its own benefits and challenges. Whilst I was celebrated as a role model by aspiring black females, oftentimes I was made to doubt myself and my hard-earned success as a Black warrior scholar.

I had to get in touch with my conscious self, to keep dreaming, to ground myself on my values, and to discover my inner powers in order to turn the tide of disadvantage in my favour. I did not define myself and my identity through the lenses of other people.

Tracey:

'Mabokang speaks words that I know in my spirit, in my blood – *keep dreaming, to ground one's self in my values, discover and bring to the surface (my words) my inner powers in order to turn the tide of disadvantage in my favour, to see the emancipatory platforms of the university and to disrupt boundaries.* Can we maintain this agency when the coloniser remains non-hearing, non-seeing, unconfident, incompetent and indifferent? And when systemic and ideological constraints disavow our contribution to the academy. There is exhaustion in finding the resources to build the bridge, to hold up the bridge, straining under the weight/wait for the other half of the bridge to be built. Why do I work in the academy? I am a First Nations warrior woman and come from people who are the first educators. At point of colonisation First Nations were denied an education but education and specifically a higher education is our right, a sovereign right. My work in the academy is to ensure that all generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are able to exercise that sovereign right – this work is fraught, delightful, anxiety producing, celebratory, demanding, demeaning and yet also liberatory. The work of decolonisation is perhaps a forever becoming. So, what can white women learn from the First Nation experience – let's have this 'neither easy nor simple' dialogue that Lorde raises.

'Mabokang

I constantly reminded myself not to see these beautiful spaces (our universities) through social constructions of oppression, disadvantage, and deficiency, but as emancipatory platforms where individually and collectively we can make a *ShiFt* with our colleagues of other races, to disrupt boundaries that constrain black women's growth in academia.

'Mabokang, Tracey and Kathryn

31 January 2019