

Commentary

## Dear Reviewer *n*: An Open Letter on Academic Culture, Structural Racism, and the Place of Indigenous Knowledges, With a Question From One Indigenous Academic to the Decolonising Academics Who Are Not

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### Abstract

This is an open letter on academic culture, structural racism, and the place of Indigenous knowledges.

### Keywords

Indigenous knowledge; sovereignty; structural racism

### Issue

This commentary is part of the issue “Indigenous Emancipation: The Fight Against Marginalisation, Criminalisation, and Oppression” edited by Grace O’Brien (Queensland University of Technology), Pey-Chun Pan (National Pingtung University of Science and Technology), Mustapha Sheikh (University of Leeds), and Simon Prideaux ((In)Justice International) as part of the (In)Justice International Collective.

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Dear Reviewer *n*,

I am writing this open letter to you in response to your latest review of an Indigenous-themed article written by me, a deaf and Indigenous scholar writing on Indigenous community leadership of disability research by applying Indigenous values and methodology. You may remember me as the one whose work you deemed unfit for publication, lacking in scientific rigour and originality. I had wanted to reply to you personally, but you did not leave your name, so I write this as an open letter in order that you might recognise yourself.

By way of context, you were one of five reviewers who had their say on one of my papers. Reviewers of my work have remained silent regarding their positionality and placed my research within a range from *good* to *excellent*. You were the one who reported that they were not Indigenous, qualifying your position in the Indigenous research space by citing an extensive network of Indigenous collaborators. By coincidence, a self-identifying non-Indigenous reviewer is also the sole dissenting voice on my scholarly worth.

For the benefit of spectators who have wandered into this clash of cultural values within learning institutions, here is what I understand to be the essence of your

criticism. You start your assessment by signalling the “originality” of my work as *poor*, its “scientific soundness” as *very poor*, and you recommend declining the submission. You then make your “constructive recommendations” by making your way through my article and providing a non-comprehensive list of structural and grammatical defects where I have failed in my clumsy attempts to make Indigenous community knowledge recognisable to institutional research. Closing your act of tough love, you leave some encouragement to “have another go” at salvaging it by restructuring the article using a form and language that is recognisable in the “Western way” of doing research. “Remove its soul,” you infer, “and I shall reconsider.”

Your review is the *n*th occasion that I have observed or been told by academics who are not Indigenous themselves of the legitimacy of Indigenous research within higher education. “At what point does the retelling of other Indigenous Peoples’ stories constitute original research?” one lamented. “What you are doing [with community-led truth-telling] is not *really* research,” stated another in an apologetic, protracted twang (being deaf as well as Indigenous, I also encounter the version that ponders whether deaf people have the *capacity* to participate in research, but let’s save an account of

ableism in the academy for the next thematic edition). Having heard it all before, it was tempting to discard your review from the outset. However, its value lies in its representativeness of an anonymous view within academia that an undetermined number of others would not put their name to, remembering, of course, that the peer-review process protects you from having to put your name to it either.

If the Indigenising and decolonising agendas of universities are to be accepted in good faith, then there needs surety over the rightful place and purpose of Indigenous scholarship within them. In the spirit of accountability and reciprocity, you are as deserving of tough love as I, and my act of tough love is to draw attention to the contradiction between how you act and write when in private compared to your demonstrations of decolonisation and Indigenous allyship in public.

On one hand, the manner in which you conduct yourself in private sets and sustains Western scientific rigour as the standard of acceptance for an Indigenous researcher. Western science has not been kind to Indigenous people and people of colour. Yet Indigenous scholars are expected to suspend their values and history and conform to the Western way in order to find a home within the academy. It starts with the systematic literature review, where Indigenous scholars must first pay homage to prior research as a foundation for their scholarship, even if the prior research has actively excluded their people. Then, knowledge that comes from communities must be categorised as “grey literature,” a “not quite white, not quite black” moniker that is oblivious to the odious terminology of “half-caste,” “quadroons,” and “octoroons” found in the types of social engineering policies that led to the removal of Indigenous children from their communities, amongst other things. The research methods must be structured and remain within the defined scope, and any issue that Indigenous people might see as important that sits outside that scope is to be left for future research. To have “impact,” research must be presented within the institution as a “discovery” of knowledge, irrespective of what was well known by Indigenous people before you went into their communities with your list of research questions. These are the institutionalised artifacts that came from an era that did not have the participation of Indigenous people in the academy in mind. In uncritically regurgitating them, you are merely replicating the ways of thinking and acting that enable colonising power structures to be preserved.

Your public persona paints a different picture. As a champion for social justice within your institution, you have remonstrated for the inclusion of groups within universities. You have stood at the forefront of Indigenous rights and equality, leading the research teams that have brought Indigenous people on as advisors, acting as the mentor who guides their navigation through the university system. You are relentless in your pursuit of Indigenous people to add to your program of research.

You cite select readings from the leading Indigenous scholars in critical feminism (although bypassing their criticisms of white women’s privilege and assertion of Indigenous intellectual sovereignty). Your publications lament the absence of Indigenous voices in research, and you are the staunchest advocate for the next research grant that you will lead to find out why. You are an unabashed decoloniser within your institutions and you are celebrated for it.

The contrast between your publicly espoused championing of Indigenous rights with your private acts creates a dilemma that I have trouble reconciling. Your aura as a leading decoloniser is so bright that it casts a shadow over the independent sovereign voices of Indigenous scholarship that you purport to advocate for. If your future leadership credentials in the Indigenous space are to be considered, yet you are seen to abide by the power structures within Western knowledge, I have one question for you: *Where is your theory of change?*

When you have been asked this via a challenge to your institutional ways, you reply: “It is the way of the academy, as it has always been, and there is nothing to be done about it.” You appear so deeply conditioned by the institutional parameters of your upbringing that there is no room for self-reflection, no accommodation of Indigenous ways of thinking and being. It is the parable of the frog and the scorpion crossing a river together: “Why did you sting me?” the frog asks as they both sink to the depths. The scorpion replies: “Because it is in my nature.”

This is not change and does not cultivate the conditions that will allow for Indigenous advancement. Indigenous scholars come to learning institutions with the gift of their cultural knowledge that can contribute an understanding of social problems that Western ways of thinking have found themselves incapable of solving. You are welcome to accept this gift up to the cultural boundaries in which it can be offered. But if you are true to your decolonising aims, then this gift of knowledge is not yours to exploit, appropriate, or stand in front of.

As the frog and the scorpion find themselves interlocked in a death spiral, both are as deserving of tough love as each other. In the spirit of reciprocity, my survival message to you, Reviewer *n*, is to step back and accept the knowledge that Indigenous people bring for the gift that it is and allow it to be expressed in their own voice and exist within their own cultural values and beliefs. The harder you resist by attempting to recreate Indigenous scholarship in your own image, the less relevant you will be.

*Ngarranga, djurumi* (listen, and I will see you again)

Dr. Scott Avery,

deaf, Worimi

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stands in solidarity in decolonising learning institutions through their sovereign voice and according to their cultural beliefs and values.

### **About the Author**

**Scott Avery** is a deaf and Aboriginal educator and researcher from the Worimi people of Australia. He is a senior lecturer in Indigenous disability and inclusion at the School of Social Sciences, Western Sydney University, and research partner of the First Peoples Disability Network (Australia), an Indigenous disabled peoples organisation. He has authored the book *Culture is Inclusion* (2018) based on community-led research conducted with the Australian Indigenous disability community, and has been appointed to numerous expert advisory groups to the Australian government across the intersection of Indigenous, disability, and social policies.