

Decolonising Gender: Stories by, About and with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women

Sandra Rennie

School of Education, The University of Queensland, St Lucia 4072, Australia

'What is my story? Like you, I have many', wrote feminist academic Sara Ahmed (Ahmed, 2010, p. 1). She asks, what is yours, what is mine? and begins her story at a table. 'Around the table a family gathers', she says, 'Always we are seated in the same place . . . as if we are trying to secure more than our place' (Ahmed, 2010, p. 1). In this paper, I draw upon Ahmed's work on willfulness and diversity work in higher education to explore the gendered stories of pathways through university shared with me by Indigenous Australian students. In the stories told in this paper, the table becomes the university space and the family becomes the students. The stories become more than securing place; they are stories which talk of willful resilience, resistance and persistence within that place called higher education. Grounded in my doctoral work with seven female Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, this paper specifically focuses on the gendered nature of such willfulness to consider the ways in which Indigenous Australian students negotiate pathways and success through university within/against Western colonial and patriarchal institutions.

■ **Keywords:** Decolonising, gender, stories, Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, women

'What is my story? Like you, I have many', wrote feminist academic Sara Ahmed (Ahmed, 2010, p. 1). She asks, what is yours, what is mine? and begins her story at a table. 'Around the table a family gathers', she says. 'Always we are seated in the same place . . . as if we are trying to secure more than our place' (Ahmed, 2010, p. 1). In this paper, I draw upon Ahmed's work on willfulness and diversity work in higher education to discuss the gendered stories of pathways through university shared with me by female Indigenous Australian students at the University of Queensland. In these stories told, the table becomes the university space and the family becomes the students. The stories become something more than securing place; they are stories that talk of willful resilience, resistance and persistence within that place called higher education. Grounded in my doctoral work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, this paper specifically focuses on the gendered nature of such willfulness to consider the ways in which Indigenous Australian women negotiate pathways and success through university within/against Western colonial and patriarchal institutions. Through yarning circles and one-on-one conversations I held with the young women, the experiences we have shared can be met with laughter, but not always. Ahmed warns, 'You

cannot always close the gap between how you do feel and how you should feel' (2010, p. 10) and it is these entangled gendered experiences of higher education to which I turn my attention.

Positioning my study in this story

First let me tell you a little about my study that is on the stories some of the Indigenous students at UQ are sharing with me about their journeys into and through university. For this study I am using story as method, an approach to Indigenous research methodologies, (Chilisa, 2012; Kovach, 2009; Martin, 2003, 2008, 2009, 2014; Sium & Ritskes, 2013; Smith, 2012; Whiteduck, 2013) and so far I have spoken with seven female students and five male students in one-on-one conversations.

The Stories told through everyday conversations with the students form the basis of Story as Method for my study. Stories that are framed by the students as to what they count as success. What they see as the milestones, the

ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: Sandra Rennie, School of Education, The University of Queensland, St Lucia 4072, Australia. Email: s.rennie@uq.edu.au.

struggles and the triumphs throughout their educational journeys.

Using the practice of storytelling that is currently being theorized and enacted in Indigenous communities around the globe as a decolonising method (Sium & Ritskes, 2013), my study aims to give voice to Indigenous students through their stories of transitioning into and through university. It seeks to understand what happens to Indigenous students when they get to university? Where did they transition from (school, VET or mature aged entry) and what degrees are they studying? What are the critical transition points? Do the 'everyday conversations' reveal why some students succeed and others discontinue their studies? Can they shed any light on the broader concerns, highlighted in the 2014 Final Report on the transition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students into higher education as to why it is that universities attract Indigenous Australian students 'at alarming low rates' and why there is a 'disproportionate high Indigenous dropout rate from universities and places of higher learning as well as comparatively low levels of achievement (Kinane, Wilks, Wilson, & Hughes, 2014, p. 8)'?

In this paper, I will be focusing on three of the female students who recently took part in a yarning circle where we talked at length about being an Indigenous woman in the university space.

I chose to do the yarning circle as a follow up to the individual conversations that I had previously had with the students because it's a way of introducing topics that student's may not feel entirely comfortable talking about in one-on-one conversations. It also provides the opportunity to discuss as a group, emerging themes that have arisen out of the conversations.

Yarning circles have been used for thousands of years by Aboriginal people as a way to 'discuss issues in an inclusive and collaborative manner' (Department of Education, Training and Employment, 2011). In the Indigenous Australian research methodology context, a yarning circle is an open-ended method to engender story. It is flexible, allows the student control over the information they wish to share, and everyone gets the opportunity to speak. The yarning circle uses the Indigenous ways of sharing knowledge, which is built on mutual trust, assuming, that the story shared, will be treated with the respect it deserves. Yarning circles as an Indigenous research method closely resemble focus groups. For feminist researchers, focus groups offer the opportunity to hear the 'subjugated voices' (Leavy, 2007, p. 173), of people who have been 'marginalised or silenced' including 'ethnic/racial minorities' (Leavy, 2007 p. 173).

Using Sara Ahmed's (2014, 2012, 2010) quotes on willfulness and on being a feminist killjoy as a way to explore standing up to racism and colonialism, the stories told are written in a style that moves away from the traditional formal style of writing, to one that embraces the everyday informal style of storytelling generally found around the

kitchen table (Whiteduck, 2013). So let me tell you a little about their stories through the conversation that took place. I would also like to share the reflective postcards that I invited each of the students to write to an incoming Indigenous student that tells you something more about their story.

Introducing Kiana, Leah and Atahnee

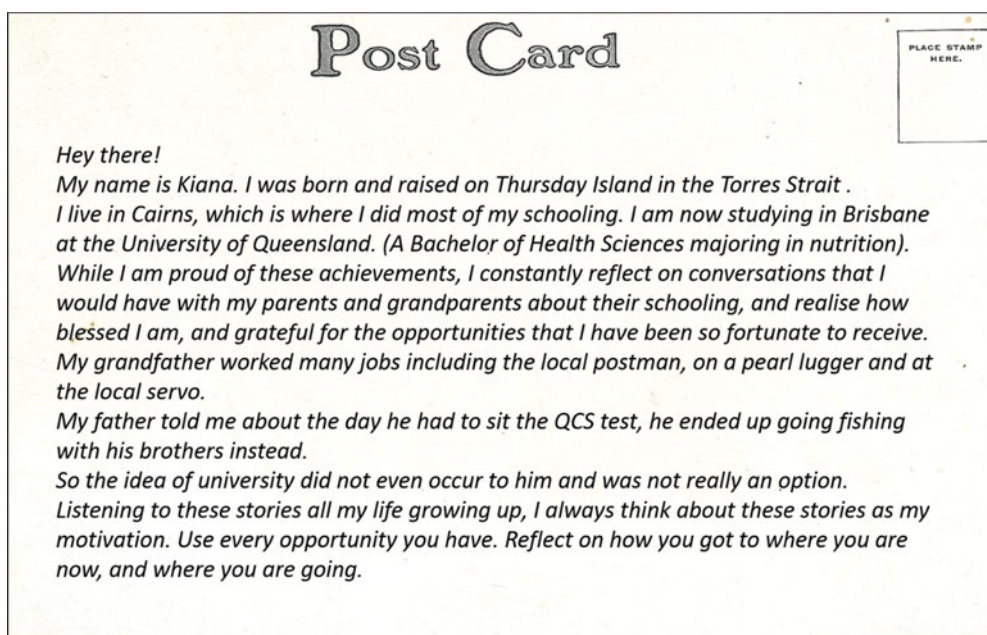
Postcard from Kiana (see Figure 1)

Kiana came to Brisbane to study at UQ straight out of school in Cairns, where she spent the majority of her school years after spending her early childhood in her homelands in the Torres Strait. With a strong connection to family and country, Kiana told us that her main aim to be at university was to get a formal education and skills to take back to her community. Kiana is in her final year of a Bachelor of Health Sciences, and intends to continue on to Medicine next year. Her original intention was to become a medical practitioner. Now, however, through her experiences at University, where she discovered what she described as 'a lack of research in Indigenous health' particularly in her interest area of 'nutrition' she has broadened that vision. In Kiana's words, 'even though the lack of health research for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people is frustrating, it is empowering to me that in the future I can do research in Indigenous health'.

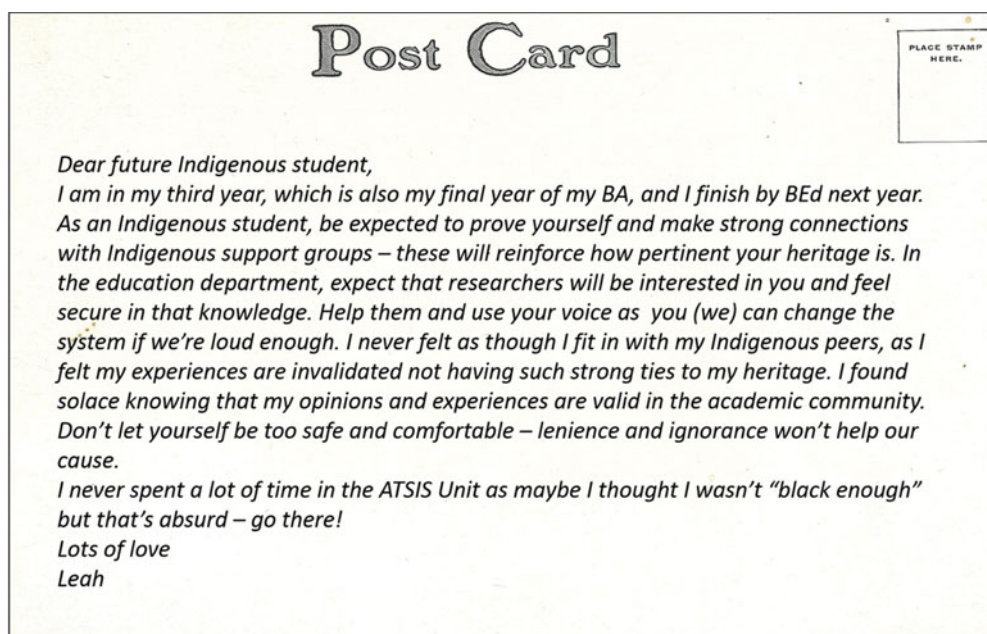
Postcard from Leah (see Figure 2)

Leah is a third-year student who is pursuing Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Education. It was her strong desire to become a secondary teacher who encourages young women to pursue their dreams that led her into enrolling into an education degree, rather than her initial desire to pursue a career in the Math's and Sciences. This came about she said, because of her negative experience at school where she was repeatedly told by both male and female teachers 'that she would never be as smart as the boys' and as a very bright and high-achieving adolescent was dissuaded from continuing on with Maths and Science. She explained in her heartfelt way, 'that's when I went, you know what, I will go into education and I will change this and I won't treat my female students like crap, and actually instill some passion in what they do'.

Leah also grew up in Cairns; however, unlike Kiana she does not have a strong connection to country and community. Yet this has not dampened her relationship to her Indigenous identity. Leah is a strong and proud Aboriginal young woman who is committed to standing up every day of her life, to sexism, racism and colonialism. This, she says, has not always been easy. She gave the example of learning about Australia's colonial past in the Indigenous education course, alongside non-Indigenous education students. She explained 'a lot of people were saying things like, "this doesn't sound real" and I am saying

**FIGURE 1**

(Colour online) Kiana postcard.

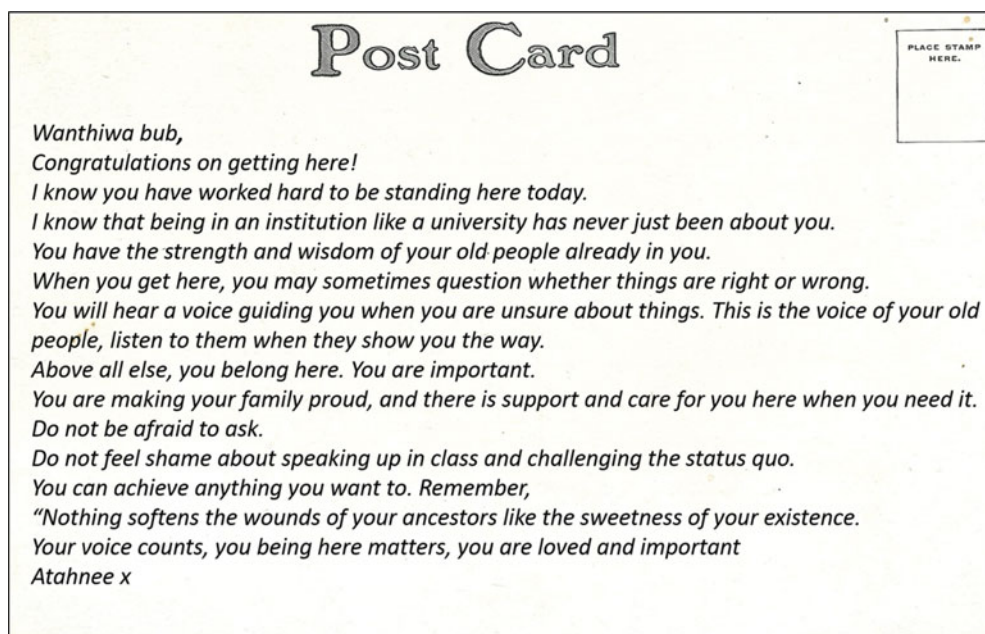
**FIGURE 2**

(Colour online) Leah postcard.

back “I can tell you, it’s real”! She went on to say, ‘because I am so vocal and so persistent, I just won’t let people forget. In class, I don’t even have to be saying anything for people to feel uncomfortable. I try to remind people, well why do you feel uncomfortable, there’s a reason for that’.

Postcard from Atahnee (see [Figure 3](#))

Atahnee is studying Honours in Political Science after completing a Bachelor of Arts in Indigenous Studies in Perth, where she grew up and attended school. Atahnee, has what she calls a big dream to study law and one day, ‘a lot further down the track’ she stressed, change native

**FIGURE 3**

(Colour online) Atahnee postcard.

title law. The track from school to university has not been as straightforward for Atahnee, as the one trod by Kiana and Leah. Atahnee left school in year 11 after a confrontation with a teacher over how Australian history was being taught in class.

'I told my history teacher what she was teaching was bullshit, she kicked me out of the class and a couple of weeks later, I dropped out. I thought, I don't want to be here. I found my way back to university somehow, but I never thought I would come here, I never thought that I would belong here'.

'I was never encouraged to come to uni. I was never told that I was good enough to be here. I came here after going to an Indigenous dance school. I realised I was a shit dancer but I really loved doing the assignments. And that's when I started to think maybe I should come to uni. Our people have valuable knowledge, and it is about time that university started to recognise that. They may not have done a PhD. They may not have come to university, but just because it is not their system doesn't mean it is not valuable knowledge that they hold. So how can I use that valuable knowledge and intelligence in a place like university that dictates the rules'?

Becoming Acquainted with Sara Ahmed's Work on Willfulness

When I mentioned to my advisor that I wanted to focus on the themes of resilience, resistance and persistence in the yarnning circle that I was planning to hold with some of the young women in my study, she suggested that I look at

the writings and ideas put forward by feminist academic Sara Ahmed.

'Ever since you talked about resilience, resistance and persistence', she explained, 'I thought of the work of Sara Ahmed on willfulness and the idea of being willful can be any one of those things'. While I am still relatively new to Ahmed's work, since I first picked up her writings on being a feminist killjoy and on being willful, I have found myself on a quest to learn more about what she has to say, because not only do I find her work both interesting and inspiring, but it also adds a depth of understanding to the issues that I want to explore that are so relevant to the students in my study. It gives me, as a non-Indigenous researcher in this contentious space, a way to approach the topic with the students on being an Indigenous woman in a traditional White male space and what that experience might mean to them.

Ahmed writes about diversity work in higher education and in particular how non-White people including herself are positioned in that space. She talks of the tension that this creates within institutional life. She also speaks of her experience in the role of diversity worker when bringing up the issues of racism within the walls of the institution and how this speaking out positions her as the black feminist killjoy.

'To be the object of shared disapproval', she writes, 'those glances that can cut you up, cut you out. An experience of alienation can shatter a world' (Ahmed, 2010, p. 1). 'As feminists we have our own tables', she continues. 'We can place the figure of the feminist killjoy alongside the figure of the angry Black woman', the one who also

points out racism within the political sisterhood of feminism (Ahmed, 2010, p. 1).

Ahmed writes that her experience of being a member of a diversity research team taught her that to embody diversity means that one cannot even speak about racism and that you are expected to just get over it. Yet she argues, 'racism is not something you can get over . . . To get over it before it is over would keep things in place. We must be the trouble they claim us to be: we must persist in being the cause of their trouble' (Ahmed, 2009, p. 51).

'To be persistent one must be insistent', argues Ahmed (2012, p. 15). It is this persistence and insistence that I take note of when making links with the themes resilience, resistance and persistence that I am exploring in my study. Ahmed tells us 'Some have to "insist" on belonging to the categories that give residence to others' (Ahmed, 2012, p. 15). It is this insistence on developing a sense of belonging in a place traditionally of nonbelonging, that is the university space, that Atahnee, Kiana and Leah all speak of in their own ways. Persistence is 'willful work' (Ahmed, 2012, p. 12) that requires resistance against the wall. 'To those who do not come against it, the wall does not appear: the institution seems open, committed, and diverse' (Ahmed, 2012, p. 12). Perhaps, argues Ahmed, (2012) by transforming the wall into a table, one can turn the 'tangible object of institutional resistance into a tangible platform of institutional action' (Ahmed, 2012, p. 12).

The Yarning Circle

We sat around the table in the small but comfortable meeting room in the education block where the three students and I met for our first yarning circle. It was late in the semester and the end of semester exams were looming, so I was grateful that they were willing to give up some of their precious time. I thought an 1 hr and ½ would probably be adequate, but taking a cue from Indigenous Canadian academic Margaret Kovach (2009), I wanted to let the conversation take its natural course and not let time dictate the flow of our talk. As it turned out, we sat chatting for 2 1/2 hours so a lot of ground was covered.

I explained to the young women how I was particularly interested in us talking about identity and gender, and if they were happy to, I would like to talk about how they are experiencing university as a woman, and this could be about the ways of being a woman in a westernised space that is traditionally seen as being a place for White males. I also introduced the overriding themes of resistance, resilience and persistence, that had come out of the conversations I had had with students in our one-on-one conversations and to help us explore these themes, I suggested that we look at the writings of British-Australian, feminist academic, Sara Ahmed.

I told the students some of what I had learnt about Ahmed and had come to understand about her work. Ahmed, who immigrated to Australia with her family in

1973, has a Pakistani father and an English mother. Ahmed writes about the position of non-White people in higher education, what that means and how that is experienced. She also writes about willfulness as resistance and persistence, defining willfulness as audacity, and as standing against. (Ahmed, 2010, p. 6) and explains . . .

'Willfulness can be rethought of as a style of politics: a refusal to look away from what has already been looked over. The ones who point out that racism, sexism, and heterosexism are actual are charged with willfulness: they refuse to allow these realities to be passed over' (2010, p. 9).

I told the students that being willful might mean that you actively choose not to get in the way of the institutional will. You don't get in the way of the colonial processes so that you can achieve what you want and that in itself is seen as a willful act of resistance even though you appear to be compliant. And, I went on to say, it is perhaps this messy entanglement of willfulness as resistance that their presence in this space already provides. The fact that they are here at university is already a resistance against the usual university story, which is one usually about White men.

I then showed the students a number of quotes taken from Ahmed's books and journal articles and asked them to choose any that particularly resonated with them. Here are some of the responses to the quotes that I have chosen to share.

Some more than others will be more at home in Institutions that assume certain bodies as their norm. (Ahmed, 2012, p. 3)

'The first one is quite relevant to where I am at the moment as a very novice researcher', said Atahnee. 'I don't look Aboriginal so people don't realise that I am until I start to say certain things and when I am in class, sometimes before I open my mouth, I feel like it is a coming out. To let them know, actually I am Aboriginal and this stuff does matter. But, it makes people uncomfortable and it stops my ability to interact and learn and bounce off ideas'.

She went on to say, 'It is pretty much a given now that bias exists within everybody, everybody researches from a position, everybody experiences life from a position, but they still, particularly in political science, talk about things as being scientific, they still try and make things measurable and separate. It doesn't feel like there is a space for the way I view the world in those classes'.

Becoming the race person means you are the one person who is turned to when race turns up. (Ahmed, 2012, p. 5)

Leah jumped in and said, 'all throughout primary school, high school, and here at uni, when Indigenous perspectives are brought up, everyone just kind of looks at me. I felt that way in the Indigenous Education course and it was a bit overwhelming for me, because my tutor

would always say to me and Mara, my Indigenous friend, “so Leah and Mara, what do you guys think about this?”

I can see why she wanted to do that. She wanted to acknowledge us and we both understood that. But by the end of it I just got to a point where I was like I can’t answer that, I can only tell you my experiences and we are not a collective group. We don’t have one experience’.

Atahnee then spoke. ‘Whenever people would figure out that I was Aboriginal then the moment things would get heated, I could feel everybody in the room listening to what I had to say, so you are very aware of it. I don’t experience racism personally walking down the street, but in hearing negative comments and listening to what people say about Aboriginal people, it makes you feel no good, because that’s your family who they are talking about regardless of the way you look. But I don’t play into identity politics anymore. It used to upset me but I don’t give a shit. I know who I am. I know where I come from; I know who I belong to. If I am with a group of blackfellas they don’t question me, it is always White people who question you on your identity. Well that’s my experience anyway’.

I placed the next quote gently on the table, and as they started to read all three of the young women nodded their heads and sighed in agreement.

Willfulness is ordinary stuff. It can be a daily grind . . . willful subjects can recognize each other . . . and create spaces of relief . . . breathing spaces . . . in which we might be inventive . . .

There can be joy in creating worlds out of the broken pieces of our dwelling spaces: we can not only share our willfulness stories, but pick up some of the pieces too. And we can hear each other in each other: can be moved by each other . . . we can even tell each other to let it go, at the moments when holding on demands too much. (Ahmed, 2014, p. 169)

I want to talk about this one said Kiana. ‘I live at one of the Colleges and just the other day my cousin and I sat down and we started talking about how much we miss home. He is in 5th year now, and he has lived here at boarding school. He was so thankful that myself and my sister and a couple of other guys are here because he needed to finally just talk normally. He likes the fact that we can speak our native tongue. We actually cried for a good half hour, just the fact that we miss home. Being here, living away from home and our everyday culture, we miss that. But it is the compromise and the sacrifice that we made to get a good education, but at the same time we are missing out. I think he was crying as well because he had just come back from his grandfathers funeral and hearing all the Island songs and seeing all the dancers and going to the feasting and eating all the food. This is what we grew up on, being here in Brisbane, we miss that, and it was nice to talk like that and not feel like I am on my own, so talking about creating spaces, that was our night and that is what we had’.

Leah nodded and said, ‘with my friend Mara, it is just nice to relax and be able to discuss these issues and these experiences, and not have to defend myself. Just completely feel comfortable and not feel so alone. Because all the time I get told I am making it a race thing, it makes you feel like so isolated because it is like, well I can’t be the only one that feels like this but no-one else is speaking out. And when I met Mara, and she was so vocal about it as well, it was like finally there is someone else that has the same opinions’.

As I placed the final quotes on the table, that I had previously decided belonged together, I waited in anticipation for their responses.

To speak out of anger as a woman of color is then to confirm your position as the cause of tension; your anger is what threatens the social bond . . . we are often told we are creating a mood of helplessness, ‘preventing white women from getting past guilt’, or ‘standing in the way of trusting communication and action’. (Ahmed, 2010, p. 5.)

Do you go along with it? What does it mean not to go along with it? To create awkwardness is to be read as being awkward . . . to refuse the place in which you are placed, is seen as causing trouble, as making others uncomfortable. (Ahmed, 2010, p. 6.)

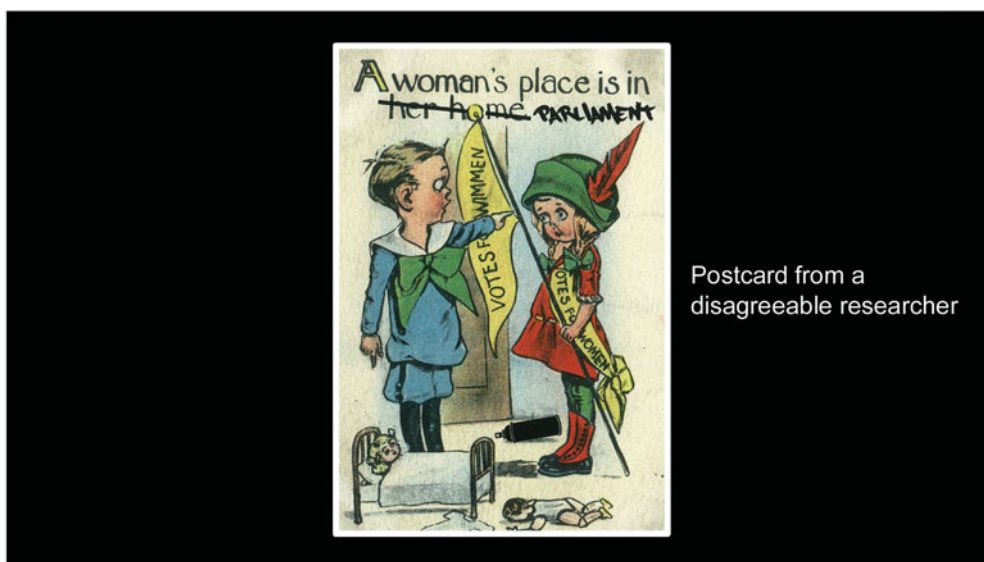
‘I really like this Sara Ahmed’, laughed Leah. ‘All those things about cause of tension, stubbornness, all the time I am told by people “you’re making it a race thing”. And I say, No, I am just acknowledging that it is racist. What you are saying, you can’t walk around and expect not to offend me. I can’t help that I am offended when you say something like that, and I am sorry but I am not going to be quiet and be complacent and not let you know that I found it offensive’.

A lot of people say, ‘it’s just a joke’. And I say, ‘well unfortunately, your jokes have consequences, and those jokes have been the source of oppression for many, many years’.

Talking about Willfulness and the Cup Cake Story

I turn now back to our discussion around Ahmed’s table, where I sat chatting and laughing with these three strong, outspoken, and what Ahmed would call ‘disagreeable young women’ who were very aware of the ‘White male privileged’ environment that they are working in. Atahnee summed it up when she said,

‘White male privilege is really prevalent in institutions like universities. When you read all the research methods and epistemologies, a lot of it does cater towards the idea of dead white men. Even though they tell you to question that, it is always the first thing that they teach you’. Yet, she said, in her passionate and forthright manner, ‘research is more than just research, it is a space of resistance and it is a way to get your voice heard. You are always reminded when you are here that you don’t belong here by what you



Postcard from a disagreeable researcher

FIGURE 4

(Colour online) Postcard, written and authorised by Tony Krone, Canberra. Original image used with kind permission from: Palczewski, Catherine H.

are taught. So it's a hard space to be in but it makes you want to be here to change that'.

On that note, as Leah leant forward to dunk a cup cake in her coffee, and Kiana passed Atahnee the chocolate and nuts we were also munching on, I asked them if there was anything further that we hadn't discussed that they thought the university could be doing to better support them. After a moment Leah said, 'the cup cake story, that's a good thing to talk about'.

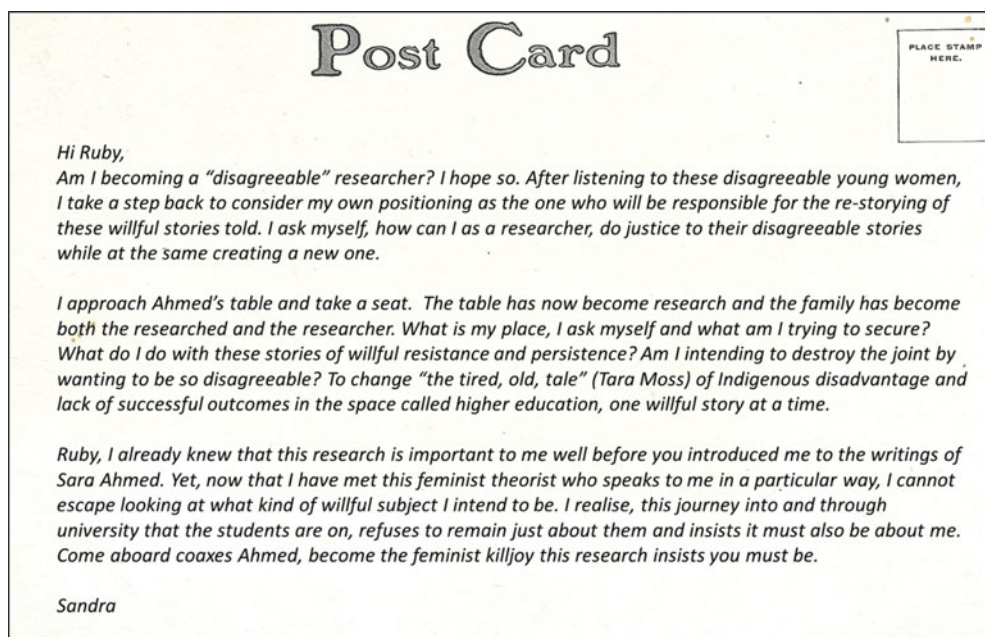
Leah was referring to an incident that occurred in the first week in April this year during U.Q. Feminist week, where a group of students from the UQ Union and the Women's collective held a cup cake stall, where the cup cakes were priced according to privilege. Students from marginalised groups and women were charged less than White males. The cup cake stall was met with such an outraged response from some of the male students that it caught the attention of the right wing media (Mitchell-Whittington, 2016). The women were disparaged in the broadcast media and on-line. So what was just meant as an exercise to highlight the inequality of wages between men and women and of marginalised people, sparked a threatening war of words against these 'disagreeable women'.

Ahmed tells us 'Feminism' has 'a history of disagreeable women!' (2014, p. 154), and goes on to say, 'If we hear this sentence as an exclamation it can sound empowering. And yet, when you are filled with the content of disagreement, others do not hear the content of your disagreement. There is a "not hearing" at stake in the figure of the feminist killjoy, without question. And there is no doubt that some of these experiences are wearing, even when we convert that figure into a source of energy and potential'. (Ahmed, 2014, pp. 154–155)

It is this drama caused by the cup cake story that Atahnee, Leah and Kiana returned to when speaking of their frustration over White male privilege that is so entrenched in the university space. 'That's what the university could do', said Kiana. 'Make sure that women are paid the same amount for a start. I thought it was hilarious', she laughed. I think it is about time, said Leah, also laughing. 'I think they got their point across through the fact that so many people got so angry about it. That just proves it is still a problem. Like why else would a privileged White male get so mad that he has to pay more for a cup cake!'

Postcard from a 'Disagreeable' Researcher (see Figure 4)

Ahmed writes, 'don't look over it if you can't get over it' (Ahmed, 2012, p. 187) and surely this is the message that she would ask each of us who care, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to keep close to our hearts. The stories told in this paper, by Kiana, Leah, and Atahnee talk of their resilience, resistance and persistence in their determination to succeed regardless of the brick walls placed around and in front of them. Ahmed's image of a brick wall that accompanies her maxim: don't look over it, if you can't get over it (Ahmed, 2012, pp. 187–188) talks of the need to 'get in the way' to obstruct the flow and to 'become the blockage point by pointing out the blockage points' (Ahmed, 2012, p. 187). It is this pointing out that Leah told us happens to her on a daily basis where she has found herself since a child standing her ground and speaking back. It is this refusing to go with the flow, to keep going and 'to push harder than any of those individuals who are going the right way', (Ahmed, 2012, p. 186) that Atahnee found herself doing when she left school because she felt

**FIGURE 5**

(Colour online) Postcard from a disagreeable researcher.

that there wasn't a place for her in an education system, where her people's experiences and knowledge's were both unrecognized and denied. Ahmed says 'For some, mere persistence, to continue steadfastly, requires great effort, an effort that might appear to others as stubbornness, willfulness, or obstinacy' (Ahmed, 2012, p. 186). Through returning some years later to get the formal education that she required to fulfil her dream of working in Native Title law, Atahnee enacted her willfulness.

Sitting at the table with Kiana, Leah and Atahnee, I wondered about their maturity, their willingness to stand up for their beliefs and put themselves out there at such a young age. I spoke my thoughts aloud, what did they think had made them so brave? Softly spoken Kiana, talked of her shyness over standing her ground and speaking back until she made a close friend at the ATIS unit who she described as a 'feminist and an activist' that 'brought her out of herself, and through her example, helped her to find the courage to be 'more assertive and speak her mind'. Leah paused for a moment and then answered, 'by the end of high school, I was just so fed up with everything and I was having a really hard time, so I took a gap year to focus on my health. By the time I got to uni, it was just an "I have nothing to lose" attitude, because I have seen the end of what it could turn out like, that there is no point to be silent anymore. That if I am going to stick around and really put effort into being here at university, then I am really going to make my experience memorable'.

With these courageous and inspiring words from these willful young women that fill me with awe, I now conclude my paper with a postcard (see Figure 5) of my own written

to my supervisor Ruby, who I mentioned at the beginning of this story, introduced me to the writings of Sara Ahmed.

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About the Author

Sandra Rennie is undertaking her doctoral research through the School of Education in association with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit at The University of Queensland (UQ). She has worked within the landscape of Indigenous education at schools, TAFE'S and Universities in teaching, research and administrative roles and is currently a tutor in the Indigenous Knowledge and Education program at UQ, as well as Literacy and Pathways Advisor at Brisbane Indigenous Media.