

# **African Australian Youth: Homogenisation and the Dynamics of Identity**

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores the dynamics through which young migrant youth, in this case African Australian youth, deal with the complexities of developing a new identity and vernacular, which incorporate a sense of 'belonging' in Australia while being distinctly African. The very idea of being 'African' or indeed 'African Australian' involves problematic assumptions about the homogeneity of these identities and my particular concern in this article is with this problem of forced homogenisation. Based on ethnographic research into African Australian youth in Canberra I explore the influence of large scale migration of African refugees into Australia throughout the last decade and particularly those discourses that depict Africans as unable to integrate into Australian society. Focusing on a range of responses to the migration of African refugees, the paper explores how young African youth who arrived to, or were born in, Australia prior to this recent refugee intake, resist the process of homogenisation by distancing themselves from newly arriving refugee youth. The result is that differences are polarised rather than productively engaged in the development of a distinct identity. I contextualise the homogenisation of Africans as a particular racial group within a history of responses by the dominant culture to migrations in Australia's past.

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At the structural level we might see this as a rite of passage into hegemonic relations through which 'minorities' are positioned as 'Other' to the dominant culture and may also subsequently engage in 'othering' minorities. At the experiential subjective level this creates emotional and embodied anxieties within youth as well as the potential for everyday racism.

Keywords: everyday multiculturalism; everyday racism; intercorporeal encounters; black African youth; forced homogenisation.

## **Introduction**

Everyday multiculturalism is a catch phrase in discourses about Australia's diversity, in particular in relation to youth. Yet, how and why does there occur a slide from this image of (sub)urban multiculturalism, in which difference is produced and contested, into an everyday racism where difference and solidarity are in fact refuted? This has been the prevailing theme of my ongoing ethnographic research with youth in Canberra's culturally diverse African community, in which I have explored multiple sites of belonging, affiliation, solidarity and disjuncture.

This article concerns attempts by African Australian youth in Canberra to create their own identity and vernacular, with a special focus on the role that difference, belonging, and emotions have had in youth's production of this identity. I seek to fill a gap in the literature on Africans in Australia, particularly those youth that have been in this country prior to the latest migrations of black Africans in the last decade. I first explore how these youth engage their differences in what is commonly referred to as an everyday multiculturalism or, to adopt Paul Gilroy's (2005) term, an 'organic urban multiculturalism', before a process of forced homogenisation emerged that has destabilised such a multiculturalism. Forced homogenisation amounts to a 'slide' for the youth in my study, namely from producing and contesting difference in the development of an 'African Australian' identity to the rejection of difference when these very same youth are confronted

with an influx of black African refugees. I do not attempt to explain the lived realities of these refugee youth, nor provide their perspective in detail; instead I explore those discourses produced by conservative white Australia that form the context that makes possible the abjection of such refugee youth by my participants.

This paper is based on research into African Australian youth in Canberra where, over six years, I have been conducting an ethnographic case study of the social dynamics in this community. Between 2004 and 2006, I began following the lives of six key informants who completed their secondary education in a public college on the south side of Canberra (hereafter, 'the College'), through participant observation. This was a highly progressive college near the diplomatic core and with an international curriculum; it is renowned in Canberra for its high level of academic achievement and the cultural diversity of the student population. My observation of these African youth continued from 2007 in various sites and through various mediums once they had completed their secondary studies, including a number of private and public spaces: home, cyberspace, church and social settings. Every eight months between 2006 and mid 2009 I also conducted in-depth interviews with my key informants in which we most often talked about their life in Canberra, their relationships, changes and influences in their lives, their feelings and the community; here I was able to flesh out the observations I had made in the field.

The findings of my research suggest that African youth in Canberra are positioned in a complex multicultural environment governed by dominant political discourses, identity micro-politics and diasporic sensibilities. I reveal that, within this complex environment, the identity formation of youth are affected by a particular conjuncture in the development of an African Australian collective identity by a hegemonic process I have called forced homogenisation. This is a moment when my participants, in their attempts to forge progressive individual and collective identities, are confronted with being pushed into a multicultural minority and the

lingering effects of racism and xenophobia towards black Africans by the dominant white culture – a dynamic that then spills over into the African community. The extent to which African Australian youth in Canberra were affected by this process and the implications it has for thinking through everyday multiculturalism and everyday racism are the focus of this paper.

## **Historical-developmental Trajectory of African Australian Youth in Canberra**

To sketch the complexities of my participants' social and historical-developmental trajectory and the dynamics of their identity construction as encountered in the field I adopted what Hage (2005) calls 'double gaze'. Hage (2005: 474) writes:

“[O]f all the disciplines deployed in studying globalization, migration and mobility, none are better equipped to capture the complexities of such social realities than an ethnographic analysis. This is because, more than ever, such realities still require the double gaze capable of capturing both descriptively the lived cultures with all their subtleties and analytically the global which structures them, both people's experiences and the social environment in which this experience is grounded, both the experiential surrounding that people are aware of and the macro-global structures that are well beyond their reach.”

In my own research, I have sought to capture participants' subjective experiences and cultural practices in the everyday as they were shaped by macro-global structures and shifts. The reality of participants was markedly affected by events such as changes in Australia's migration policies creating a ground swell in the black African population, or the political push for a hegemonic national identity, and even events as far reaching as war, genocide and subsequent humanitarian crises in the African continent. While such events may not have born directly on the

consciousness of my participants they nonetheless had a bearing on their sense of self and community, as their subjective experiential accounts, their everyday thoughts, feelings, emotions and experiences reveal.

Throughout this trajectory there existed changing levels of social and cognitive awareness across the group of participants. Certain shifts or perceptual changes in the social and emotional world produced a paradox in the identity formation of African Australian youth, both at the individual and collective level. This paradox emerged when the 'pull' towards an individual and collective progressive identity encountered the 'push' of forced homogenisation and racism (or downward assimilation) when these youth were subjected to the larger hegemonic discourses, which positioned Africans in Australia as a multicultural minority. This particular historical-developmental trajectory occurred within Australia's contested political space in which nationalism, articulated together with racism and citizenship, competes with a hegemonic multicultural policy. This is a space in which my participants were forced to reckon with their own identities.

Black African migration to Australia is clearly not new, nor are the socio-political discourses that have accompanied such migration; it can be traced through particular moments in this country's history. Black Africans were aboard the First Fleet sent to establish Australia as a colony in 1788 (Pybus 2005); they were later refused entry following the introduction of the Immigration Restriction Act in 1901 to prevent non-whites migrating to Australia; black migration commenced once again with the abolition of the Immigration Restriction (1901) Act or White Australia Policy and the subsequent adoption of a policy of multiculturalism in 1973 by the Whitlam Government; and most recently, since the early 2000s, significant changes in Australia's migration policy fuelled an influx of Sub-Saharan Africans entering Australia as refugee-humanitarian migrants.

This chequered migration pattern of Africans in Australia was scantily researched until the last decade (see Gow 2002; Udo-Ekpo 1999; Pybus 2005) and it was in the 1990s that 'African Australians' really emerged as a demographic. Reporting on the 2001 census, Hugo (2004: 28) brings into view the changing African population as it began to increase between 1996 and 2001:

“The other very fast growing region of birth of recent immigrants between the 1996 and 2001 censuses was Sub-Saharan Africa whose numbers doubled, although as a proportion of all recent migrants increased from only 3.5% to 6.8%.... Nevertheless a recent feature of Australian immigration has been the substantial movement of refugee/humanitarian immigrants into Australia from other parts of Sub-Saharan Africa especially Zimbabwe, Ethiopia and Somalia. In fact recent migrants made up over half of Australian residents in these groups. The increase in the Sub-Saharan non-South Africa, African-born population has added another dimension to Australian multiculturalism in the last decade.”

Following Hugo's logic, the "African-born" population was accelerating and was now making a contribution to Australia's multiculturalism, a multiculturalism that in the late 1990s was being criticised as a "top down" social policy (see Stratton and Ang 1998) unable to encourage or promote an everyday politics of encounter. In a more recent study commissioned by the Australian Human Rights Commission, Hugo (2009) delves further into the history of African migration to Australia. This time, however, Hugo is less nonchalant in celebrating the contribution of African migrants to Australian society. Rather than adding "another dimension to Australian multiculturalism" the message here is that the impetus of the growing "African-born" population was having a dire effect on Australia's social cohesion. Hugo (2009: 31) states:

“The other major area of concentration is in the refugee-humanitarian area... 6.4% of all settlers were accepted under this category in 2007-08, a total of 23.1% of this group were from Sub-Saharan Africa. There has been a shift in the origin of refugee-humanitarian settlers toward the Horn of Africa. In 1997 only eight per cent of Australia’s offshore refugees came from Africa, the number had increased to 70.6% in 2003-04 and 34.5% in 2007-08. In 2004 the Minister of Immigration announced that Australia would substantially increase its refugee intake from Africa, especially Sudan (Vanstone 2004). This resulted in a considerable increase in the number of refugee-humanitarian settlers from Africa... there was almost a doubling between 2003 and 2004 and the share of Africans of the total refugee intake also doubled to 70.6 percent. However, the last Immigration Minister of the Howard Government reduced the African intake of refugees because of concerns regarding their ability to adjust to Australian society and their numbers reduced somewhat after 2004-05. The growth of these groups presents challenges for their successful settlement since they are *culturally very different to the host community* (my italics); they often lack English language, may have a history of broken or limited education and have large families which can sometimes lead to difficulties in finding suitable housing. This group of migrants also experience considerable problems in entering the Australian labour market. “

I quote Hugo in detail here, for although his work is quite distinct in identifying shifts in the origin of African migration towards refugees from the Horn of Africa, this passage foregrounds the increasingly common perception that African migration to Australia represents a refugee phenomenon. Hugo also raises concerns, which I suggest impact directly on African youth; namely, the supposed inability of Africans to integrate into the “host community” due to their cultural difference. He therewith evokes those conservative discourses that, with a broad brush, homogenise the diversity within the African community whilst calling for a

reduction in African migration. Both of these concerns, I argue, are indicative of the political climate prevailing over the last decade, which has affected the cohesiveness of the African community; a climate that is overly concerned with integration (quasi assimilation) and the threat of cultural difference. Rather than deal with these issues in an abstract sense, however, I explore the impact of these discourses on the respondents in my study, for who I will firstly provide some context.

### **The Politics of Belonging and Engagement with Difference**

It is significant that my key respondents – Ahmed, Amena, Keren and Talia – were already living in Australia prior to the first wave of refugee-humanitarian migration in 1996 as described by Hugo (2004). Talia (Nigerian) and Keren (Dutch-Eritrean) were both born here in the early 1990s, Talia to Nigerian parents who were economic migrants and Keren to her European mother and Eritrean father who arrived in Australia as a young man in the late seventies. Whilst Ahmed (French-Nigerian) and Amena (Ghanaian) were not born here both arrived in Australia as infants, accompanied by their parents who migrated to Australia to further their higher education. Two other respondents, Jomo (Zimbabwean) and Selam (Eritrean), arrived around the time the second wave of migration took place (between 2003 and 2007) as the children of diplomats. All had differing trajectories throughout their childhoods, yet coincided at the College in 2005/2006 at the time the African population in Canberra was becoming more visible and political through its engagement with Canberra’s multicultural community.

In exploring the idea of an everyday multiculturalism as an appropriate analytical tool for understanding the ways in which young people deal with cultural difference, Harris (2009: 193) suggests that schools are a site in which “prosaic negotiations” are compulsory. That is to say, in such sites youth must move beyond the mere co-presence of others through a deeper engagement with difference through everyday exchanges and cultural interaction. It is this notion of the everyday that is vital to my



inquiry, for it shapes our thinking and understanding of how we are able to live together with difference in relation to “everyday multiculturalism” as well as “everyday racism”. In Essed’s (2002) thinking the notion of the “everyday” is that which is often used to refer to a familiar world of practices we are socialised with in order to manage in the system.

“In our everyday lives sociological distinctions between "institutional" and "interactional," between ideology and discourse, and between "private" and "public" spheres of life merge and form a complex of social relations and situations” (Essed 2002: 177).

In this form the everyday can be understood as that which is systematic, recurrent, and infused into familiar practices; it involves socialised attitudes and behaviour that link the structural and systemic with routine and mundane interaction.

Hence, within a site of prosaic negotiation – the College – I began to observe how, through everyday encounters, the progressiveness of my participants’ identities began to emerge. Through encounters critical points of differentiation or everyday differences surfaced, the most pertinent of which in my analysis was “belonging”.

Belonging to the broader Australian cultural realm and associated positioning within the national collective was a given for Ahmed, Amena, Keren and Talia. Yet for Jomo and Selam it was a question of “becoming” Australian with the adopted kudos of the “host country”. Claiming authenticity as an African also provided a subtle fissure among the group, with Talia, Keren and Ahmed all claiming to “not know” what it meant to be an “African”. I argue that it was through such ruptures that the processes of identity formation took place. They provided opportunity for producing and contesting difference through exploration, discussion, humour, even criticism of the dominant cultures, both “African” and Australian. In particular, they allowed deeper reflection on each other’s differences and sameness that goes

beyond monocultural forms of identity and produces new forms of belonging. This identity play, the habitual performance of invoking a new identity and vernacular, are attempts to account for differences in what I suspect is a true form of organic multiculturalism among black African youths. This is a multiculturalism in which belonging, while politicised, still furthers solidarity, as the following light-hearted extract from my ethnographic notes implies; it is a multiculturalism constituted through repetition and habitual exposure to difference.

It was the week following year 12 Graduation in late 2005. I had spent the better part of the year with Selam and Talia on campus, engaging with them in the classroom, observing them in their friendship groups and within the college surrounds. Both were about to take a gap year. Selam was still unsure of what she was going to do the next year and was still attempting to secure her permanent residency, Talia on the other hand was going to work her gap year in a boutique finance agency before going on to university.

Although I had planned to interview Selam and then Talia a day apart, on the first day of interviews as I was preparing to interview Selam, Talia stopped by to say hello. We chatted for a while. Talia had with her a novel that she was reading. Selam was surprised that Talia had a book with her and made an offhand comment before Talia departed, and Selam and I began the interview picking up on their interaction:

“Now Talia was here a minute ago”, I said. “Yeah”, responded Selam. “And you said to Talia that she was Australian born”, I continued. “Yeah”, she replied. “And that was why she reads books!” (We both broke into laughter, Selam blushing slightly.)

Selam, while laughing, decided to clarify for me: “Ok, I have a lot of African friends here and we all share similar interests. And we all don’t like books,

and I know a lot of Africans that don't like reading books, especially the ones that were born back home. Or that have lived there at least, you know."

"And what do you think the difference is?" I asked. "I don't know. I suppose different values, the different..." Selam paused for a minute. "Culture", she went on. "Back home you don't need to read stories; you don't need to read books other than your schoolbooks. You don't need to. Whereas here people give you books to read, the teacher suggests books to read...and that is why I've never read a book. I think in my life I think I've read only one book (giggling shyly). And you know that book is about a Somalia woman. I read like three hundred pages and I was so tired. I don't think I'll ever go back to reading books. And that is recently, the beginning of year 12!"

Selam was still struggling with the English language, although she spoke Arabic and Tigrinya fluently, her dress code and appearance were more "ethnic" and the majority of her life world was reducible to her experience as an African first and foremost. Nevertheless, she strived to adopt and adapt to "her" Australian way of life to the extent that a close family friend and member of the Eritrean community once mentioned that Selam's parents were concerned that she and her brother were "becoming" too Australian.

The next day upon interviewing Talia, I opted to start with the same interaction:

"Now, Selam said yesterday that Africans don't read books", I teased. Talia laughed, though you could see she was holding back her anger. "Yes they do." "Yes they do!", she reiterated for emphasis. "Is there friction? Was there friction between you, you've already mentioned before there are 'differences' but is there friction between someone who is born here, as yourself as an African Australian, as opposed to somebody that has come to this country?" "I think that there is misunderstanding; there are some things that I look at and go, oh - 'why do they do that! (She raises her hands to her

head in frustration.) Sometimes I think there is a certain difficulty let's say for an African moving here and accepting that this is just the Australian life and that is what you comply with, and then they look at me and say, 'why is she just conforming, isn't she an African?' So I think there is friction there and misunderstanding. 'Cause I know that I am guilty of saying, 'Oh, they are so fresh, so African!', and not in an encouraging way."

Whilst belonging is often seen as attributable to ethnicity or nation, this belonging was, although a point of difference, a form of engagement in which "African Australian" was a new and politicised position for my participants. It was a new identity that allowed them a form of agency and inter-group cohesiveness, through which participants engaged rather than suppressed fissures, ruptures and breaks in essentialist forms of identity and so too engaged in the process of becoming African Australian. This was only one of numerous ongoing interactions and discussions that I had with my participants concerning their similarities and differences at school, throughout which they presented a new kind of collective sometimes called a "new ethnicity", which as in everyday forms of multiculturalism, engages with difference rather than suppresses it (Hall 1996a: 162). I suggest with this came new, more deeply rooted, more sensuous forms of belonging, which evoke Hall's (1996b: 4) notion of identity as that which constitutes that which we are or have become. Nevertheless, the example of Talia's and Selam's engagement with each other also leaves room for uncertainty over what it means to be an African Australian.

Meanwhile, at the level of the broader context, the African population was slowly building. Africans at this time were still very much "under the radar" in the national discourse on immigration, and yet by 2006 I found myself having to deal with the effect of the sudden intake of humanitarian entrants from Africa under Australia's Special Humanitarian program and, in a post 9/11 environment, sudden shifts in the dominant culture's perception of Africans in Australia. Now whenever mentioning my research to scholars or members of the community the immediate assumption

was that I was researching Sudanese refugees; it was as if the only African population that existed in Australia were the refugees or humanitarian entrants, or that these were the only ones worth studying.

## **Forced Homogenisation**

The struggle with difference takes a radical turn when black African youth are faced with dominant discourses that prolong a tradition, a cultural norm in Australia's socio-historical and political past that, in adopting the now common lexicon, "others" difference. This is a process that occurs in everyday encounters in which identity is produced within the larger hegemonic discourse, which seeks to cling to the notion of a White Australia. In depicting othering as cultural norm, I allude to the various migrations to Australia that have been positioned in terms of unwanted migrants threatening the social cohesion of a once White country. I do not have space here to elaborate on this process nor on the migrations that have attempted to resist this process of othering and the various ethnic groups that have been racially homogenised as they attempt to settle in what was once seen as a White nation. Rather, I intend to illustrate how people are being forced into a homogenous pool of "ethnic Others" by mere virtue of being a "black African", and African youths' response to such hegemony. In doing so, I explore how racism can undermine attempts at the anti-racist solidarity that may occur through engagement with difference.

At this juncture the progressive urban multiculturalism that was forming between black African youth was to be challenged by the processes of what I have called forced homogenisation. As Gilroy (2005: 146) suggests, the small triumphs of anti-racism that emerged (such as my participants' engagement with difference) evaporated once the "invasive immigration" of African refugees was constructed as an intractable problem with national dimensions. My key respondents' sense of a progressive identity as African Australians was now problematic in Australia's

changing socio-cultural, political context and the sense of black solidarity that was occurring through engagement with difference was ruptured when faced with the challenge of incorporating black African refugee youth into their collective sense of identity.

This should not have been surprising. As early as 2005 outspoken conservatives had begun to make public statements in the media brandishing “African youth” (in this instance referring primarily to newly arriving refugee youth from the Sudan) as delinquents who formed gangs and participated in crime. Andrew Fraser, a Macquarie University academic, was challenged for making strident comments on the risk of allowing African migration to Australia. Fraser (2005, cited in Dick 2005) claimed that “an expanding black population is a sure-fire recipe for increases in crime, violence and a wide range of other social problems.” Such comments were further exacerbated in 2007 by political figures, such as former leader of the One Nation Party, Pauline Hanson and the then Minister for Immigration, Kevin Andrews, who called for a reduction in the intake of African “migrants” because of their inability to integrate into Australian society (Pearlman 2007). These comments coincided with several regional towns’ local councils refusing to accept African refugees:

Last week Tamworth City Council rejected a proposal by the Immigration Department to resettle five refugee families in the area after concerns were raised by residents that such a resettlement could stir racial unrest. According to the objectors, some 393 out of a population of about 35,000, the cultural differences exhibited by a dozen Sudanese already living in Tamworth were such that an increase in their numbers could spark a repeat of last year's Cronulla race riots in Sydney. These Sudanese, as well as committing a number of traffic offences and being involved in one sex-offence case, had shown a tendency not to take direction from authority. “They are very nervous people, they tend not to want to give out their name.

They find it difficult to assimilate into our community because they have a fear of authority”, was how mayor James Treloar defended the decision, before claiming Tamworth had insufficient health services to cope (Canberra Times 2006).

How this ongoing media exposure of Africans as delinquents unable to integrate into Australian society racialised the Sudanese Other in the “psychic domain” (Brah 1992 cited in Hall, 1996b) of my participants and affected their perception of the newly arrived African refugees is difficult to gauge. So too is the impact of the associated push by the Howard Government during this time to validate a hegemonic White national identity. What was evident however was a sudden hostility towards “them” – newly arrived African migrants who were being othered not only by the more dominant culture, namely White Australia, but gradually also by my participants. They, I suggest, were encountering what Sara Ahmed (2004: 30) describes as the “contact zone of impressions”, the space in which intercorporeal encounters occur and the perception of others causes an emotional response. To put this another way:

As soon as we get in contact with another person, our bodies interact and cause subtle sensations in each other. Our bodies understand each other, even through we cannot say exactly how this is brought about. These non-verbal interactions are to such a large extent determined by earlier experience that we may speak of as an intercorporeal memory, which is implicitly and unconsciously present in every encounter. (Fuchs 2012: 14)

As we shall see the emotions that arise when bodies impress upon each other may determine our routine responses to difference as a result of our intercorporeal memory or “histories of association” (Ahmed 2004). In this case I suggest my participants experienced discomfort surrounding the alterity of the Other and anxiety over their own identification as African Australian. The effect of these

conservative discourses was to contribute to the polarisation of difference rather than engagement with difference when African youth encountered the influx of refugee-humanitarian Africans and the bodies of such youth began to impress upon my participants' psychosocial space.

Further to this is the fear of being trapped in the vulnerable role of perpetual outsider (Gilroy 2005: 123). The "elementary logic" in youth distancing themselves from and othering other African youth is that those who have suffered due to marginalisation or fear being seen as outsiders, will subsequently replicate this process of marginalisation with others or outsiders through the politics of inclusion and exclusion (*see* Hage 2006). This racialised identification is presumably the best way to prove that they are not real immigrants at all but somehow already belong to the home-space, thus attempting to embrace and inflate the ebbing privileges of Whiteness (Gilroy 2005: 101) through reproducing racist and xenophobic reactions to difference.

### **Into the Contact Zone of Impressions**

As early as 2006 deep fissures in the community were starting to appear as the following vignettes depict; here my ethnographic texts portray the situation more clearly. In an informal meeting with Keren at one of Canberra's more upmarket restaurants in Manuka, we had a candid conversation, one of the first in which Sudanese youth were discussed. Keren had been working here as a waitress since only just managing to finish school; the owner was mentoring her in fine dining, and she had already built up her own client base. We met for coffee one summer afternoon after her shift at work had finished; it was late 2006. Although a busy afternoon on the terrace with several animated conversations occurring at nearby tables, Keren and I were able to enter into a deep conversation concerning her



experiences with her African friends and family. We had been talking for close to an hour before the topic of Sudanese youth arose:

“It’s funny”, Keren started, “but when I go to Sydney, I don’t see as much of it here (in Canberra), but in Sydney you see a lot of African people around, I mean especially this time when I went to see a performance and it was an R & B venue so there were lots of African people there. But I was really surprised to see this huge fight erupt between the Sudanese and other African youth. It made me realise how racist they are!” “To one another?” I asked surprised that the topic had turned in this direction. “Yeah”, Keren replied, “like when Africans are talking about Sudanese people, it’s not like they talk about them as they normally do about each other. They say “the Sudanese”, in a derogatory way. And it’s like why?” Her face amplifies her confusion over the treatment of the Sudanese. “And, you know, they say that they are really stingy people as a whole”, she adds. I sought clarification: “Who, the Sudanese?” “Yeah, it’s like they are always trying to find a back door or something”, she smirks.

“I can’t believe it, there is just this huge tension between Sudanese and other African youth. And they say...”, Keren chuckles and decides not to use the term she was thinking of. “Let’s just say that they say they are confused because they speak so many different languages.” She pauses before adding, “I just don’t understand why they were so against the Sudanese though!”

I found myself reflecting on my own thoughts on the Sudanese. That same year I had begun committee work with a local agency that provides support for refugees integrating into the Canberra community; the main clients were now the Sudanese. I had quickly become familiar with the community attending local soccer tournaments and Sudanese Association meetings. I was taken aback at how quickly the community had arrived in Canberra and the extent to which local organisations,

churches and government were supporting them. I had never seen a migrant group politicised so quickly.

Keren continued to explain her thinking. “I think it also because they have such a different look! Normally with Africans it is really difficult to tell where they are from until you start talking to them. But with the Sudanese they just have that look – they are really skinny with small heads and really long necks!” Keren laughs a touch nervously, I join in. She adds, “And I think maybe that is why they are standing out so much.”

Although Keren was diplomatic in nature and kept her distance from making judgements on the Sudanese, the intercorporeal moment surfaces when she describes “that look”, a look that began triggering the fear and anxiety that was rippling through various pockets of the community. Most Africans can pass as Africans, yet the Sudanese were Sudanese. Their bodies, “really skinny with small heads and really long necks” cause an impression, an impression through which Keren regresses to other impressions, past encounters with other Africans. The surfacing of the Sudanese body and the impression that it makes on Keren could be seen as the start of a slide from productive engagement with difference to the performative process of othering: the repeating of past associations as well as the generating of the object (Butler 1993, cited in Ahmed 2004: 32) of disgust, the object that is read as an invasion of bodily territory, identity and vernacular, as well as of the nation. While Keren could be interpreted as productively contesting difference in her laughter, there remains a degree of anxiety and a failure to know how to interpret the Sudanese, especially when faced with “the Sudanese” as a derogatory utterance by other African youth.

Talia provides a slightly different perspective on the contact zone of impressions as they are based on histories of past contact and the fear of forced homogenisation – being cast in with refugee youth. On more than one occasion in 2007, Talia

demonstrated a complete disjuncture with the newly arrived Sudanese and Sierra Leonean youth who were not part of the African population at the College. When addressing the topic of newly arrived refugee youth Talia put up barriers and preferred to keep her distance from talking about these African youth. In our third in-depth interview, when the topic arose, Talia looked at me and responded, “I’ve told you what they are like”, rolling her eyes and indicating “don’t go there”. She was referring to the only time that we had discussed her interaction with Sudanese people; a particular encounter with a Sudanese man on her way home from work during her gap year:

I was riding the bus home one day from work... I’ve told you how I find buses are the real tell tale sign for racism.... Anyway, I’m minding my own business sitting on the bus, when out of nowhere this Sudanese guy comes and sits next to me. I’m like thinking to myself, “there are numerous other seats on the bus so why are you sitting here?” He suddenly leans in close to me, looking me up and down, and then says: “I love you”. I didn’t know how to respond. I just looked at him. (Talia put an expression on her face, raising one eyebrow, pulling her head back turned slightly looking at me from the corner of her eyes. It was a, ‘what the fuck?’ kind of expression.) I’m not sure for how long, maybe just a couple of seconds. “Then what’s my name?”, I asked. I immediately broke through his façade as his eyes dropped. “I don’t know”, he replied, “but I love you”. I got up and moved away.

I interpret this particular encounter as the contact between Talia and the Sudanese Other that triggered a perceivable emotional response. It recalls Ahmed’s (2004: 31) discussion of those intercorporeal encounters that create a perception of the Other, which is “dependent on histories of reading that come as it were before an encounter between subject and another takes place”. For her part, Ahmed provides the example of a White racist subject who encounters a racial Other and may subsequently, due to past histories of interpreting the racial Other as threatening,

respond with a barrage of emotions (fear, hate, disgust, pain), reproducing old impressions and creating new ones. With this in mind, Talia's case may be seen as an encounter based on past histories of continual contact in the everyday multicultural process of contesting difference with newly arriving diplomatic and economic migrants that spills into a repudiation of difference. With these "earlier arrivals" such as Selam, familiarity and productive engagement with difference required creative and tenuous tension; in African Australian vernacular, they were "fresh", "FOB", or "African Africans". The encounter with a Sudanese man brought to the fore these past impressions of contestation, and they now culminated in an overt emotional response in which difference was rejected. To use an old adage, this was the straw that broke the camel's back. The failed encounter, which may be expected in such non-routine sites of engagement (*see* Wise 2010: 96), was more pressing when the Sudanese man appeared in Talia's habitual site of engagement with difference, her local church. Here, in defence of her personal space, Talia narrates how she "put him in his place":

Anyway, the following week I was attending church as always on a Sunday morning. This morning I performed at church as usual and then afterwards I opted to mix in with congregation and talk. When out of nowhere I saw this Sudanese man there, I had never seen him at church before. I walked straight up to him and in front of his family said to him "So what's my name?" He didn't reply of course. He was in my territory; I just looked at him and held my gaze, intimidating. I quickly put him back in his place.

That Talia was unable to clearly articulate the origin or nature of this repudiated difference puts her at odds with the solidarity and pan African approach to which she had earlier subscribed. Her earlier narratives indicated that she believed in an essentialised bond with other Africans, a bond that in her words was, "a belief that Africans are always there for one another and will always acknowledge one another as a community or a spiritual group of people". Such open acknowledgement, that,

through its confrontation with the changing African population, proved itself to be a naïve essentialism, was now gone.

In these and similar instances I would like to think of my participants' reaction to the Sudanese as an anxiety surrounding their own collective identity as African Australians. This is compounded by the possibility that their collective identity will be jeopardised as larger discourses surrounding African migration tend to negate what it means to be an African in Australia. Let me take Ahmed's reading of Fanon's foundational analysis of his encounter with a little white boy – "look mama a Negro." Ahmed (2002a: 4) notes that anxiety and fear are both generated through particular objects:

In anxiety, one's thoughts often move quickly through different "bits" of one's life that are yet to be resolved. Each thought accumulates the helpless and generalised feeling of anxiety; anxiety hence tends to stick to objects that are nevertheless not its cause. Given this, I would argue that anxiety becomes an approach to objects rather than, as with fear, being produced by an object's approach. The slide between fear and anxiety (from one to the other, or between each other) is hence indicative: it shows us how an approach of an object can easily become an approach to an object, and vice versa.

In the slide from anxiety to fear, a form of "postcolonial melancholia" (Gilroy 2005) sets in. When faced with the fear of becoming "perpetual outsiders" youth seek that which protects them, makes them feel secure, in this instance claims to an authenticity as citizens and authentic African Australians. In distancing oneself from those youth that are othered whilst engaging in the process of othering the rite of passage into hegemonic relations is complete. This distancing is a movement away from bodies that have attempted to inhabit their social space and have a direct bearing on their particular identification as black Africans cum African Australians. The rejection of the black bodies of the Sudanese by black youth in forging their new

ethnicity is based on attempts to expel the Sudanese from the White social space and results in a sudden slide from everyday multiculturalism to everyday racism – by African Australian youth. This negation is fundamental to the nation-state in the “turning” that constitutes the citizen as a subject of the state. One could argue that such negative discourses have found their mark with my participants in turning them into subjects who distance themselves or abandon their ethnic identity and solidarities in order to align with more dominant discourses that will constitute them as Australian and contest their being structurally homogenised as African. Ironically the rubric “everyday racism” it has been argued, is “a strategy reserved for reasserting monocultural hegemony”, or, put differently, it is “understood as an antagonistic production of difference in the effort to re-centre white entitlement” (Harris 2009:199). Yet in this instance it could also be seen as an attempt to claim black entitlement and authenticity, namely, as I hope the next vignette will illustrate, through black youth clinging to the fading privilege Whiteness offers.

This final vignette relates to Amena, who shared a similar trajectory to Talia insofar as she was born to African migrant parents who arrived in Australia when Amena was only 18 months of age. For Amena the new immigration of Africans created an emotional betrayal to her own sense of what it meant to be an African Australian, which resulted in a profound intersection of the fear and anxiety generated through both intersubjective encounters and long-established racist discourses.

Two years after Amena had completed college we met at the Canberra University for another in depth interview; it was 2008. Amena seemed agitated, though I had no bearing on what was wrong. We began with our usual catching up –what we had been up to since we last met – and I enquired as to how her family was, which led into Amena talking about her desire to go to America to visit her grandmother:

“Australians are too malicious in their racism”, she said, “I mean I can’t honestly say because I haven’t been to the US, but let’s say that when you are

African American in America and you say 'I'm American' no one is going to question you, no one is going to give you a hard time about it." I began thinking about the fact that in America Blacks were there since slavery and while Africans (not to mention Indigenous Australians) have been here since colonisation, Australia's policies of exclusion may have been what has made recognition as an Australian so difficult.

As I began to speak, Amena, catching me unaware, continued her line of thought as if I had not even spoken. "The stupid Sudanese...I hate the Sudanese", she spat with vehemence. "Whoa! Why?" I replied. "Sudanese or Sierra Leone...I think it might be both. The way they are just running amuck. They come over here as refugees and just run amuck. I remember when that thing was really big." "You mean in the media?" I asked. "Yeah. People use to come up to me and ask me. 'Are you from Sierra Leone?', and I would say – 'NO WAY! Not, no, NO WAY!' Because I hate those people for what they have done, they've just made it harder for everyone else and given everyone a bad name." Amena was clearly agitated with the situation. I was not sure what had prompted her outburst. "And people on the bus would talk about it while you were there, as if they were trying to send a message to you. I'm not from Sierra Leone; I'm not from Sudan. I have been here my whole life. People my age have been here just as long as you have if not more, don't treat me like that." I attempted to deflect her anger: "Is it their fault (the Sudanese) or is it still just part of that maliciousness you were talking about?" Amena folded her arms across her chest and decided to concede some ground. "It is the Sudanese fault and the maliciousness", she replied. "A bit of both", I responded. "Yeah", she agreed pausing for a second, "but the Sudanese people are the reason that things are so malicious."

Within the responses that I have encountered occurs the repetitive performance of emotions. Hate, for example, "may generate the other as object of hate insofar as it

repeats associations that already read the bodies of others as being hateful” (Ahmed 2004: 32). As an adolescent, Amena had already begun to reproduce those discourses that positioned refugees and asylum seekers as a danger to the integrity of the social cohesion of the nation. The dog whistle politics surrounding African migration thus immediately surfaced in her emotions, in particular as such political discourses negating the African migration had direct bearing on her own identity and subjectivity as an African Australian.

“The thing is”, she continued, “I have been here my whole life...and what makes me so mad is that they come from war torn countries to seek refuge in Australia and they give Africans a bad name as now people don’t look at you and think that she’s Ghanaian – all they think is she’s ‘African’! It’s not fair, why should I have to suffer because of them? I have so much against the Sudanese or Sierra Leoneans because it hasn’t just affected them, it has affected all Africans living in Australia.”

## **Conclusion**

One cannot overlook the profound complexity and paradoxes that the participants in my research face in attempting to position themselves as African Australians. With an absence of recorded African migration in Australia’s historical past, unlike in Europe and North America, African migrants have been faced with the task of building their own collectivity and their own identity in a country with a turbulent past in relation to non-White migration. For the youth in my study in particular, those who were born here or migrated here at a young age, with little if any knowledge of their own African heritage, and those that arrived more recently as economic or diplomatic migrants adjusting to the Australian way of life, this vernacular has been based on a syncretic, hybrid practice of adopting and blending various cultural and ethnic traits from both the core Australian culture and their own understanding of their African heritage. African youth were thus engaged in a



form of everyday multiculturalism, an urban multiculturalism in which difference is produced and contested as a form of engagement and solidarity. These youth shared various trajectories pertaining to their gender, ethnicity, colour, migratory status, and so forth. Yet they used their engagement to produce a shared understanding of what it meant to be African Australian enmeshed with a particular vernacular – FOB, token White, ‘African African’. While such identity positioning was still susceptible to homogenisation within its heterogeneity, the term “African Australian” itself reflects that this was an emerging collective position in which difference and sameness were negotiated.

I have argued, however, that the homogenisation of African youth, particularly through those hegemonic discourses that positioned newly arriving refugee youth as deviants, participants in crime, uneducated and, most importantly, Africans unable to integrate into Australian society, is effectively undermining an existing organic black multiculturalism. This process is encompassed by another one – that of “migrant minorities” going through a forced rite of passage into hegemonic relations. That is to say, the dominant culture will, in a routine response to difference, other ethnic minorities, forcing them to accede to the position of a multicultural minority before acceptance or celebration of difference occurs. This is an attempt to cling to the once White nation and a melancholic reaction (Gilroy 2005) to the loss of Whiteness as the core culture.

The confrontation with later waves of immigration forced earlier immigrants to come to terms with their own alterity when faced with the threat of being forced into a homogenous “multicultural minority”. This was a moment in which my participants encountered an event that compelled them to re-assess their status as a Black person, a minority. They were forced to reflect upon their position in the dominant culture, either reinforcing or rejecting those social institutions and norms that potentially subjugate the self through positioning it as “Other”. I agree with Harris (2009: 202) that everyday multiculturalism(s) consider youth as “social

actors with a range of complex strategies for living in cultural diversity rather than as passive vessels for identity or attitude problems...people with agency". I suggest, however, that in the context of the youth researched, the impact of continual engagement with difference and the multiple processes of negotiating their own alterity against dominant norms and a discourse that was homogenising African youth as Other, resulted in these youth reproducing dominant forms of everyday racism rather than once again negotiating difference. We should not understate the effects of racial discourses that prevailed in the early part of this century on youth's positioning and attempts to negotiate identity.

Countering the ongoing preoccupation with the Sudanese population by academics and politicians alike, I have attempted in this paper to provide a broader view of African youth and the complexities they face as they attempt to negotiate their identity amongst various discourses, which attempt to conflate multiculturalism with more hegemonic approaches to national identity. Beyond this, I have sought to highlight the potential of ethnography to broaden our understanding of the racial milieu in which young people now find themselves. As Werbner and Fumanti (2010: 10) suggest in their study of first generation African diasporans: "Increasingly, we need to know more about the second generation of young Africans growing up in the diaspora, and the kinds of associations and leaderships this new generation will form when they reach maturity."

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