Whiteness, Religious Diversity and Relational Belonging: Opportunities and Challenges for African Migrants in Australia¹

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Abstract

African communities in Australia reflect the rich cultural and religious diversity of the African continent. Despite their persistence and agency, many members from these communities continue to experience a 'fractured belonging' due to persistent issues of racism and exclusion; issues that have been exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Religious community groups and organizations have long played important roles in assisting new migrants with settlement and belonging in Australia, including African migrants. This article presents preliminary findings from an Australian Research Council project on religious diversity and social cohesion, drawing on census data and interviews with African-Australian community and religious leaders in Melbourne and Hobart, from Mauritian, Ghanaian, Ethiopian, Somali and South Sudanese communities. It explores the roles that religion and spirituality play in both addressing and perpetuating issues of racism, trauma and displacement. It also examines the development of 'relational belonging' and diverse, complex and dynamic identities among African migrants in contemporary Australia. It argues the case for retelling the history of African migration to Australia, to subvert the myth of a white Christian nation that excludes non-white Australians. It centres African migrants' lived experience narratives and theories of belonging developed by African scholars to counter narrow and negative stereotypes perpetuated by political and media discourses.

Keywords

migration; African; religion and spirituality; racism; belonging; Australia.

African Migration to Australia

African migrants³ in Australia form a new and fast-growing set of communities. The majority of African migration to Australia has occurred over just the past three decades, occurring primarily through humanitarian entry programs. Yet, while Australia is regarded as one of the newest destinations for recent African migration, African settlement has been noted as early as in 1788 via the First Fleet, prior to the

3. The term 'African migrants' is used in this article in a broad way to encapsulate generations of African migrants who have settled in Australia through various pathways such as skilled profession, international education and humanitarian programs. This article specifically focuses on black African migrants and their experiences, and excludes non-black Africans since they are relatively 'colourless' and 'invisible' when settling in Western democracies (Mapedzahama and Kwansah-Aidoo 2013: 62–63). The term 'African-Australians' is used when referring to people of African heritage who have settled in Australia, and are part of Australian society. When 'African communities' is used, it refers to diverse ethnic African groups as a collective.

introduction of the 1901 Immigration Restriction Act, better known as the White Australia Policy. African migrants from a few key centres, such as Mauritius, worked in the maritime, mining and sugar cane industries around Australia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Pybus 2006; Reynolds 2003; Zwangobani 2008). By 1861, there were 2,840 Africa-born people in Australia, with 57% coming from South Africa (Hugo 2009: 15).

The White Australia Policy curtailed the migration of non-white people to Australia; subsequently, limited African migration occurred from various British colonies through efforts such as the Colombo Plan in the 1950s and the Special Commonwealth African Assistance Plan in the 1960s, where the aim was to assist in the social and economic development of postcolonial nations, such as Ghana, through education. When the White Australia Policy was abolished in the 1970s, and more progressive policies of multiculturalism were institutionalized, the arrival of black Africans into Australia began to increase primarily through refugee and humanitarian programs. Humanitarian grants increased from 16% in 1998/99 to 70% in 2004/05 to people entering Australia from Africa (Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2009: 43). By 2009 African migrants from Sub-Saharan nations constituted one per cent of the Australian population (Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2009) and the 2016 Census found that 6.3% of the overseas-born population were born in Africa (ABS 2017a).

This article draws on data collected in the 2016 Australian Census, together with data from nine semi-structured interviews with African-Australian community leaders in Melbourne and Hobart, from Mauritian, Ghanaian, Ethiopian, South Sudanese, and Somali communities, arising from the Migration study stream of an Australian Research Council Discovery Project on Religious Diversity in Australia (RDA).⁴

4. The Australian Research Council Discovery Project (2018–2020) on ‘Religious Diversity in Australia: Strategies to Maintain Social Cohesion’, has six streams: Demographics, Migration, Legislation, Policing, Education and Interfaith Engagement. The Chief Investigators are Douglas Ezzy (University of Tasmania), Gary Bouma (Monash University), Greg Barton and Anna Halafoff (Deakin University). The Migration stream is led by Halafoff and Barton (Deakin University). Human Research Ethics approval was provided by the University of Tasmania and Deakin University, and an amendment approved to include questions pertaining to the coronavirus. This project includes a study on Migration comprising 55 interviews with leaders from Afghan, African, Chinese, Indian and Russian communities and stakeholders working with culturally and linguistically diverse communities. Africa is a continent, not a nation, but the continent was chosen in this sample due to its comparable size with China and

The research team⁵ chose to focus on the Mauritian and Ghanaian communities due to their long histories in Australia, and on the newer Ethiopian, South Sudanese, and Somali communities because of their significance as the largest African communities in Melbourne.

This article argues the case for retelling the history of African migration to Australia, and for reframing some of the more recent African experiences through the lived experience narrative that is currently finding more voice (Majavu 2016; Uda 2019). The reframing from victims to survivors shifts the focus to the resilience and adaptability of African-Australians away from the 'inability dialogue' that is attached to the victim narrative (Campbell 2011). The brief history, presented above, and the 2016 Census data and RDA project interviews reveal considerable and complex diversity in terms of culture, religion, citizenship and economic status among Australia's African communities. This is in contrast to the ways in which African-Australians are typically depicted in the media and treated within multicultural and migration policy and discourses.

Interviews conducted with African-Australian leaders⁶ revealed that systemic and institutionalized notions of whiteness continue to impede belonging for members of their communities. Racism and discrimination exist in complex ways, both overt and subtle, in professional and everyday life, within and outside ethnic and religious communities,

India. Five African nations were selected as part of the African case study. The justification for selecting the five is provided in the main body of this article above.

5. The authors of this article come from a mix of European-descent and non-white backgrounds, and all have extensive experience conducting research in partnership with culturally and religiously diverse (CALD) communities. Weng is of Chinese-Singaporean heritage and a first-generation Australian migrant. Halafoff was born in Australia into a white, Russian orthodox family and converted to Buddhism in her early thirties. Campbell is Australian-born and of white, Anglo heritage. Abur is a South Sudanese-Australian who migrated from Africa as a refugee and settled in Australia. Bouma was of white, Dutch heritage but was born in the United States. He was also an Anglican priest. Barton was born in Australia and is of white, Anglo heritage. Weng and Campbell conducted the interviews with African-Australian community leaders for the RDA project. While both scholars are experienced in interviewing CALD community members, as neither are members of African heritage, this may have impacted how interviewees responded to their questions.

6. Research participants' names and affiliations are provided in this article if they consented to being identified. Where research participants were not comfortable being identified, no name or identifying context has been included, only their ethnic diaspora group and a broad description of their position, i.e. community leader. The inconsistent levels of comfort to exposure further demonstrates the significant variety of the lived experience of these African-Australians.

and across media and political discourses. Discrimination continues to dislocate and destabilize what has been described in previous research as a fractured and fragile sense of belonging among African-Australians (Abur 2018, 2019; Abur and Spaaij 2016; Kwansah-Aidoo and Mapedzahama 2018). These issues have been exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic. The interviews also reveal that through their own agency, resilience, spiritual resources and with limited external support, African-Australians are persistently striving to strengthen their sense of ‘relational belonging’ (Woldeyes 2018: 50), and address the multitude of challenges, to equip and provide better opportunities for future generations.

Belonging, Whiteness and Multiculturalism

To belong to a place and community is fundamental to experiencing a sense of safety and being ‘at home’ (Clegg 2006: 67). Belonging is best understood through an intersectional lens, factoring social locations of ethnicity, race, religion and gender (Yuval-Davis 2006, 2016). Developing a sense of belonging is an affective, multi-layered, dynamic process, informed by everyday encounters and practices (Campbell 2011; Yuval-Davis 2006, 2016; Fozdar and Hartley 2014).

Belonging also occurs at a national level through citizenship, where ‘nationalist political projects of belonging’ conflate citizenship with a conditional sense of belonging within a nation state and is based around shared values (Yuval-Davis 2016: 372). Access to rights and services then determines the development of ‘hierarchies of belonging’ (Henderson 2007), where a lack of access and belonging can have severe social and mental impact on those excluded (Yuval-Davis 2006: 198). This ‘civic belonging’ has been criticized because of the expectation that it be achieved through clearing various hurdles such as English proficiency and citizenship tests in Australia (Fozdar and Hartley 2014). Furthermore, this form of belonging is ‘ethnicized’; being Eurocentric and informed by a Judeo-Christian interpretation of ‘Australian values’, making it much more challenging for people from non-English speaking, non-Christian and/or non-white backgrounds (Woldeyes 2018: 46; Halafoff 2006).

In addition, Ghassan Hage (2012: 16–17, 20) argues that ‘whiteness’ is a critical aspect of ‘Australianness’, where white Australians view themselves as “‘governors’ of the nation”, and indigenous and ethnic Australians are viewed as ‘passive objects to be governed’. Black, non-Christian and ‘especially Muslim’ people are at the top of Australia’s

'hierarchy of exclusion' (Stratton 2020: 3, 17, 33). According to Hage (2014: 232–33), racism in Australia is both 'numerological' and 'existential', fuelled by fears of the scale of migration and a belief in the superiority of whiteness. Whiteness can be amassed 'up to a certain point', dependent 'on the social attributes they possess' (Hage 2012: 20). Yet, in this construction of a 'white nation fantasy', the long-standing presence of Australia's cultural and religious diversity, or what Hage (2012: 232–34, 237, 239) calls 'the multicultural Real' is ignored.

Fears of non-whites continue to persist, especially towards 'Aboriginal people and the migrants who deploy an Australian will outside the supervisory tentacles of White governmentality' (Hage 2012: 240). Australia, like the rest of the world, is experiencing a rise in populism centred on an exclusionary nationalism, and whiteness continues to inform and construct ethnic and religious minorities as 'others' within Australian media and political discourses (Halafoff 2015; Halafoff et al. 2021; Weng and Mansouri 2021). Hage (2012: 26) proposes that the antidote to white nationalism in Australia 'lies in the direction of a deeper commitment to a more far-reaching multiculturalism', rather than shying away from it. Likewise, Yuval-Davis (2016: 372, 376) proposes an alternate feminist political project of belonging centred on a 'ethics of care', 'interpersonal relationships', 'common human values', rights and responsibilities, rather than national ones. These proposed ways forward share characteristics of notions of 'relational belonging', as articulated by some African scholars (Woldeyes 2018: 50), that is based on a collective *we* culture, founded on a deep sense of connectedness to community (Campbell 2011; Horta 2017; Ndhlovu 2014).

African Belonging in Australia

The voices of African-Australians have been conspicuously absent in scholarship about them, and this article responds to a call to purposefully consider belonging from their perspectives and lived experiences (Majavu 2020: 28). Mandisi Manjavu (2016: 188 citing Essed 1991) notes, similarly to Hage (2012), that: 'The dominant discourse portrays Africans in Australia in the context of the problems it is assumed they create for the government and ordinary Australians'. African migrants are often constructed as a challenge for integration into Australian institutions, and racism is a persistent reality for many African-Australians (Mapedzahama and Kwansah-Aidoo 2013; Udah and Singh 2019). African-Australian youth especially have more recently become racialized in sensational media and political discourses that associate them

with crime and violence through the rhetoric of ‘African gangs’ (Campbell 2011; Han and Budarick 2018; Nolan et al. 2011; Weng and Mansouri 2021). These youth are grossly overrepresented in mainstream media when comparing crimes committed by Australian-born offenders and offenders from New Zealand, India and UK/Ireland (Campbell 2011; Crime Statistics Agency 2018; RMIT ABC FactCheck 2018). As a result of these constant attacks, African-Australian communities understandably feel a sense of being targeted by the media and politicians, which consequently erodes their sense of belonging and social connection in Australia (Abur 2018).

Kwamena Kwansah-Aidoo and Virginia Mapedzahama (2018: 95) argue that African-Australians experience ‘fractured belonging’ as they face ‘contestation, negotiation, ambivalence and compromise (for spacio-temporal comfort)’. This ‘fractured belonging’ is also ‘politicised belonging, fraught with a power play that positions the racialised “other” as a perpetual stranger who does not belong’ (Kwansah-Aidoo and Mapedzahama 2018: 115). For African-Australians who arrived as refugees from contexts of war and conflict, their sense of belonging has already been disrupted from their sudden displacement and subsequent transplant (Campbell and Julian 2007; Campbell 2011). Given their trauma, the need to belong and feel safe in their new homes is critically important (Campbell 2011; Malkki 1992). As such, belonging for these African-Australians is simultaneously fragile and destabilizing, as they negotiate their new existence amid experiences of racism in finding employment, with educational opportunities and in their daily social life. These traumatic experiences all too often lead to mental health issues such as self-isolation and depression, which can result in a lack of connection with the mainstream ‘host’ community and a mistrust of media and government authorities, further disrupting their sense of belonging (Abur 2019; Benier et al. 2018; Udah 2019).

Finex Ndhlovu (2014: 185) argues that these ‘subtle and overt forms of discrimination and marginalization’ are ‘largely covert and discursive’. While Australia has layers of multicultural policies in place, they are determined by ‘Euro-American’ frameworks that have proven inadequate for addressing a persistent racism that has deep colonial roots and history (p. 190). Racism in Australia, then, ‘remains concealed’ and embedded in its ‘supposedly inclusive and non-racist immigration and citizenship laws and policies’ (p. 33). African-Australians are viewed through these ‘vestiges of Western colonial archives’, which carried ‘normative assumptions and stereotypes’ about their ‘(in)capab[ilities]’ as full citizens (p. 192).

African scholars argue that African-Australians need to draw inspiration from their own cultures in constructing their belonging in a new home (Babatunde-Sowole et al. 2016; Mackenzie, Mwamba and Mphande 2015; Woldeyes 2018) and that ‘decolonial epistemic thought’ is required ‘to circumvent the shortcomings of previous and current paradigms, such as multiculturalism and superdiversity’ (Ndhlovu 2014: 188). This belonging will be ‘a complex, dynamic and continuously evolving combination of homeland identities, cultural experiences accumulated during the migration journeys and settlement experiences gained in Australia’ (Ndhlovu 2014: 190–91). Traditional African concepts of belonging are based on interlinked connections between people, community and land, where one’s wellbeing and identity is dependent on and achieved through one’s view of self and one’s place as part of a community, best seen through the concept of ‘relational belonging’ (Woldeyes 2018). An example of this is the concept of *ubuntu*, commonly understood as an expression of collective humanity, where belonging is dependent on African people’s place and value as part of a wider collective (Horta 2017: 48; Ndhlovu 2014). Experiences of racism in Australia then disrupts this relational belonging, where African-Australians have a cultural need to see themselves as an integral part of their society (Kwansah-Aidoo and Mapedzahama 2018: 115).

Citizenship, Religious Diversity, Belonging and Exclusion in Australia

Tables 1–4 below provide an overview of the citizenship status, religious affiliation, employment status and main occupations of those born in Mauritius, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Somalia and Ghana from the latest Australian Census.⁷ Given that the focus of this article is on African-Australians’ belonging and exclusion in Australia, birthplace data is drawn on as the best available indicator of the demographics and intersectional factors affecting these communities.

Citizenship

In terms of absolute size in the Australian context, African born populations continue to be very small compared with the very large Chinese

7. The Australian Census is conducted every five years; the 2016 data is the most recent available data. These data are generated based on each country of birth, through the 2016 Census QuickStats website (ABS 2017b).

(509,557) and Indian (455,388) born populations. This suggests that the form of racism that African communities face is more existential in nature, even if it is often framed as a numerical problem. Of the African communities included in this study, Mauritians are the largest and also have the highest percentage of Australian citizens (75.8%). In terms of size this is followed by Ethiopians, South Sudanese, Somalians and Ghanaians respectively, with South Sudanese (75.1%) having a comparatively high rate of citizenship, due to their refugee status, compared to Ethiopians (64.3%), Somalians (62.4%) and Ghanaians (61.5%). As discussed above, citizenship status is a key factor of civic belonging and can render people less vulnerable through access to services and support in times of need. This point is especially poignant with regards to the coronavirus crisis, when migrants on temporary visas were excluded from government pandemic assistance programs, which rendered such workers in a greater state of vulnerability and risk (Campbell 2011; Weng et al. 2021). In the face of these gaps, ethnic and religious community organizations have stepped in to provide assistance and support despite their personal challenges and the lack of funding, support and recognition for their assistance, as described in more detail below.

Table 1: People in Australia by country of birth—2016 Census

	Mauritius	Ethiopia	South Sudan	Somalia	Ghana
People	24,328	11,795	7,694	7,671	5,287
Australian citizen	75.8%	64.3%	75.1%	62.4%	61.5%
Not an Australian citizen	22.5%	32.8%	20.7%	33.0%	35.3%

Religious Diversity

African-Australian communities are religiously diverse. Mauritians are largely Catholic but the community includes significant numbers of Hindus, those with No Religion, other Christians and Muslims. The Ethiopian community is composed predominately of Orthodox Christians and Muslims but also includes adherents of other Christian denominations. South Sudanese are largely Christian from a diverse range of denominations including Catholics, Anglicans and Presbyterians. Somalians are largely Muslim with small percentages of those with No Religion, Catholics, Hindus and Orthodox. Ghanaians, like South Sudanese, are largely Christian and affiliated with a range of denominations, such as Pentecostal, Catholic and Presbyterian. They also have a substantive proportion of other Christians and those with No Religion.

This is of significant importance, given the misperceptions perpetuated by the Australian media that African-Australians are mostly Muslim.

Table 2: Religious affiliation in Australia by country of birth—2016 Census

Country of Birth	Mauritius	Ethiopia	South Sudan	Somalia	Ghana
1st largest	Catholic: 63.4%	Oriental Orthodox: 25.6%	Catholic: 39.0%	Islam: 93.4%	Pentecostal: 20.8%
2nd largest	Hinduism: 11.5%	Islam: 24.4%	Anglican: 32.1%	No Religion, so described: 1.5%	Catholic: 16.8%
3rd largest	No Religion, so described: 7.3%	Christian, nfd: 12.7%	Christian, nfd: 5.9%	Catholic: 0.2%	Christian, nfd: 13.3%
4th largest	Christian, nfd: 3.1%	Eastern Orthodox: 9.8%	Presbyterian and Reformed: 5.9%	Hinduism: 0.1%	Presbyterian and Reformed: 11.2%
5th largest	Islam: 2.5%	Other Protestant: 4.1%	Uniting Church: 3.2%	Oriental Orthodox: 0.1%	No Religion, so described: 6.8%

These intra- and interfaith differences can pose challenges and create opportunities for valuing diversity in these communities. For example, Fafa Oforikumah, a youth representative of the Ghanaian Association of Victoria, explained that there are generally good relations between Christians and Muslims in Ghana, and in Melbourne too. Oforikumah added that Ghanaians often participate in one another's religious activities as a way of demonstrating solidarity across the Ghanaian community.

If the Muslims are having one of their major ones [religious festivals] we go celebrate with them, when we're having Christmas we come together also. If it's a funeral we'll go support them, so *we are very harmonic in that we do not have any religious conflicts at all* (Interview, 13 July 2020; emphasis added).

South Sudanese Australian Rev. Paul Aleu Dau is a minister of Springvale Uniting Church and similarly recounted being involved in interfaith peacebuilding activities within his local community, as part of

the Dandenong Interfaith Network. This initiative includes Christians, Buddhists and Muslims. Several interviewees in both Melbourne and Hobart also noted that they frequented multicultural churches that included many African members. Ayantu Gudina described her Pentecostal church communities, the Zion Church and Revive Church, the latter of which she co-pastors, as having, ‘mainly Ethiopians, Eritreans... some Sudanese coming in and... now a couple as well who are Chileans’. She added that: ‘So, as far as diversity, [it’s] mainly African, African people but then we have people coming in and out, but not planted fully from different backgrounds’. In Hobart, a city which is much less culturally diverse than Melbourne, South Sudanese Australian Nelson Lodiong, elder of St John’s Presbyterian Church, says that his church community has ‘people from Asian background: the Chinese, Sri Lankans, Indians, Thailanders and also, people from other parts of Africa... from Zimbabwe, South Sudan, Nigeria, Morocco and Kenya’ within their congregation.

While this diversity was described by many interviewees as enriching their communities, one respondent acknowledged that it is not always easy to navigate or preferable for everyone. This African-Australian Christian leader explained that while he believed that people of diverse cultures ought to be able to worship together, his ethnic African community preferred to have ‘their own congregation, their own ethnic group, their own tribe, almost to the extent of doing nothing with the others’. He added: ‘Now, is that coming out of because they feel unwelcome, or they feel like they are not equally treated, or is it coming out because of being homesick, and they want to feel a kind of homeness... why it happens I’m not sure’. Language is also a challenge, as language barriers hindered his ability, he said, to communicate with other ethnic African communities under the care of his ministry.

Religion and spirituality can be tools of resistance and agency and a way of reclaiming cultural understandings of belonging that has been fractured by colonialism and war. Lem Baguot, Research Director of the Society of South Sudanese Professionals Australia (SSSPA), has lived in Australia for 18 years. He first arrived in Western Australia (WA) as a refugee and is now living in Melbourne. Before he arrived in WA, he was training to become a Catholic priest. He reflected that due to South Sudanese displacement through civil war and trauma, ‘Christianity became a religion of South Sudanese diasporas and refugees, who were removed from their lands’. He believes that Christian belief has displaced the younger South Sudanese from their cultural roots. To

actively counter this displacement and reclaim his cultural identity, he has returned to African spiritual practices, which ‘go back in time, to the predynastic era on the Nile Valley’. Baguot explained that he continues to participate in these ‘old rituals’ in order to maintain his spiritual connection to Africa, particularly whenever he visits his father and extended family who are also in Australia.

Belonging and Exclusion

Table 3: Employment—aged 15 and over in Australia by country of birth—2016 Census

	Mauritius	Ethiopia	South Sudan	Somalia	Ghana	Total ⁸
Worked full-time	60.1%	44.6%	39.3%	39.4%	53.1%	58.0%
Worked part-time	28.4%	32.6%	27.5%	27.0%	30.4%	30.6%
Away from work	4.8%	5.4%	6.8%	7.9%	5.4%	4.6%
Unemployed	6.8%	17.5%	26.4%	25.7%	11.1%	6.8%
Not in the labour force	33.9%	34.8%	37.5%	42.4%	23.2%	32.2%

The Census data above indicates a rich diversity in terms of employment and socio-economic status of African-Australian communities included in this study. The older Mauritian and Ghanaian communities have much larger percentages of professionals and people working full-time, and smaller percentages of unemployed and those away from work compared to the newer Ethiopian, South Sudanese and Somalian communities. Members of these three communities work largely as community and personal service workers, labourers and as machinery operators and drivers, but also have significant percentages of professionals among them. In addition, members of these newer communities work largely in hospitals (e.g., 8.5% of Ethiopians), aged care (e.g., 10.2% of Ethiopians and 8.1% of South Sudanese) and child care (e.g., 27.8% Somalians and 10% South Sudanese), with the South Sudanese and Somalian communities also employed in significant numbers in the taxi, transport (10.8% of Somalians) and meat packing industries (5.8% of South Sudanese). Significantly, these are all front-line, high-risk industries with respect to the coronavirus pandemic, as is discussed below.

8. This is the total of ‘All overseas born’, plus ‘Australian born’ plus those people who did not state a country of birth.

Table 4: Occupation—aged 15 years and over in Australia by country of birth—2016 Census

	Mauritius	Ethiopia	South Sudan	Somalia	Ghana
1st largest	Professionals: 21.3%	Community and Personal Service Workers: 26.9%	Community and Personal Service Workers: 30.9%	Community and Personal Service Workers: 30.1%	Professionals: 25.0%
2nd largest	Clerical and Administrative Workers: 18%	Labourers: 21.2%	Labourers: 29.3%	Machinery Operators and Drivers: 23%	Community and Personal Service Workers: 22.2%
3rd largest	Technicians and Trades Workers: 12.7%	Machinery Operators and Drivers: 16.2%	Machinery Operators and Drivers: 10.9%	Professionals: 11.6%	Labourers: 12.6%
4th largest	Community and Personal Service Workers: 12.5%	Professionals: 13.6%	Professionals: 9.4%	Labourers: 10.1%	Machinery Operators and Drivers: 11.7%
5th largest	Labourers: 11.8%	Clerical and Administrative Workers: 5.2%	Technicians and Trades Workers: 4.7%	Clerical and Administrative Workers: 7.4%	Technicians and Trades Workers: 8.3%

Fractured Belonging

Most of the African-Australian community and religious leaders interviewed in this study recounted disturbing experiences of exclusion and discrimination, especially in the workplace but also within religious institutions. Fartun Farah, founder of the East African Women's Foundation (EAWF) explained how this tended to be worse for women, who experience 'double discrimination' when they are both visibly religious as Muslims and black Africans. These issues are exacerbated by negative media and political stereotyping of African-Australian communities and young people especially. It further contributes to social marginalization for communities already burdened by the trauma of war and displacement.

Baguot, of the SSSPA, recounted his own difficulties in finding suitable and stable work despite his tertiary qualifications, adding that these are common challenges faced by many within the South Sudanese Australian community:

I've done tutoring for quite a while, going back to when I was still in Uni, this is since 2007... but once I got out, I ended up not getting a professional or any other job aligned with my skills... I have done a lot of training and I have tried to upscale every time and still it is the same response. Now I cannot get an entry level job as a graduate, I cannot get any jobs

anywhere. *So, I am stuck like that.* This experience goes with most of our graduates in South Sudanese, there are of course few lucky ones, but we can say *the majority are not in their professions* (Interview, 8 August 2020; emphasis added).

As co-pastor of Revive Church, Gudina ministers to young African-Australians and hears similar stories from her congregation about racism and systemic discrimination that ‘happen on a day-to-day basis’ in terms of employment and in educational institutions:

I’ve got students and youths who come to me and say to me that their career advisors at school tell them, are you sure you want to be a fashion designer, are you sure you want to apply for these subjects because you want to be an engineer? *Your type normally does well like doing hair or carpentry or trade work*, so they would discourage them at schools. This is discrimination, this is, this is not right. (Interview, 24 July 2020; emphasis added).

These forms of racism are both subtle and embedded: Baguot referred to ‘indirect applications of... systemic racism that you cannot really know’ and Rev. Dau mentioned ‘experience[s of] discrimination in a more sophisticated way... that you cannot even explain, but you feel that you have been discriminated against’ that are prevalent and harmful. Racism is also framed through inaction by the African-Australian Christian leader: ‘I think sometimes racists don’t have to say I’m racist or do something racist. They just have to not do anything. Sit quiet. Sit silent. So, silence is no different to the violence in the way it can destroy somebody.’

Several interviewees described how negative rhetoric about, and a lack of support for, African-Australians by political leaders in the media, further destabilize their communities’ sense of belonging in Australia, especially during the pandemic. This exclusion was felt most acutely in Melbourne during the extended lockdown in 2020; the communities felt especially targeted through One Nation leader Pauline Hanson’s racist comments about the public housing lockdown in Melbourne on Channel Nine’s morning television *Today* show. The communities were further aggrieved when racialized and criminalized media frames were applied in media reports of three⁹ African women who flouted flight rules during the coronavirus lockdown. The use of their photos, appearing as mugshots in media articles, was an echo of the ‘African gangs’

9. Some media reports focused on two, rather than three, of the women as two of them were tested positive for coronavirus (Davey and Boseley 2020).

media discourse that continues to associate African-Australians with criminal behaviour. In that regard, Pastor Gudina noted that the media are inconsistent in the way they represent African-Australians' positive accomplishments and challenges:

If Africans were to achieve something they were referred to as Australians. If Africans are defined themselves as in troubles, like any younger Australian would get into, they are referred to as refugees or migrant African gangs getting in trouble (Interview, 24 July 2020).

Farah, founder of the EAWF, recounted her unpaid labour assisting African-Australians living in Melbourne's public housing towers during the hard lockdown. Rather than being thanked for their efforts, African-Australians were subjected to further discrimination in media discourses:

they sacrifice themselves when the government did an announcement for hard lockdown, and, like... the people are shocked already ... having carried this kind of trauma and civil war, and they put it in that hard lockdown, it was really difficult. But the people are really grateful when we talk to them and say yeah, this is the time of saving lives... there is a lot of mentally, emotionally people when that happened, but they accepted this and they been going through, all of them, the test, 14 days in detention. And that minister or someone say in the news [that the virus is spreading more rapidly among] the migrant and that is absolutely wrong, and that's what we've seen in the media escalating and talking about all that negativity (Interview, 7 August 2020).

Like many, Baguot's work in the gig economy as an 'Uber, DiDi, Ola and taxi' driver was interrupted during the pandemic. Others who worked in the trucking industry and in factories faced similar situations. The African-Australian Christian leader's ministry contract was not renewed in 2020 despite the increase in mental health and pastoral issues arising out of the pandemic. These issues have put further strains on relationships and finances within families.

Visibly black African Christian ministers also face exclusion and marginalization within mainstream (predominantly Anglo) religious institutions and find themselves suspended between cultures and belonging. There is an institutional and cultural reliance and expectation of ethnic pastors to minister to same-ethnic congregations. As a 'black person', the African-Australian Christian leader was expected to primarily 'minister the blacks', and this expectation 'became clearer to me after I finished, that when I stopped ministry, actually, the power structures are like that'. When searching for a parish to serve to meet his ordination

requirements, he found that as ‘most of the parishes are run by whites’ and there are not many black Africans within these congregations, he would be excluded from these positions. Furthermore, he felt that this exclusion occurs on an institutional level, through a common unsaid understanding that ‘migrants do not know how to run a parish’.

This routine, systemic exclusion was similarly experienced by Rev. Dau when he was interviewed for a church minister position. He passed his first interview but was rejected at the second one due to reasons that included not having experience with heritage properties and that ‘one of the congregation in the past have had some issues with CALD¹⁰ ministers’. These exclusions, which were not based on what is required of the position, left Rev. Dau to conclude, ‘this is why I say at a professional level or in the church, racism exists, but it exists in a quite sophisticated way’.

Agency, Participation and Representation

Ethnic and/or religious community groups and organizations have long played important roles in assisting new migrants with settlement, and have done and continue to do so for African migrants in Australia (Bouma 1996). Religion can be a tool used to cope with the challenges encountered during migration, the process of settlement and navigating a new life (Pargament 1990; Pargament et al. 1998; Ennis 2016: xiii). These ethnic and/or religious community groups and organizations provide social contexts which offer support, advice and information on a range of issues that new migrants may face including finding housing, employment and navigating Australian migrant support services and broader society (Bouma 1996). The migration journey and processes of settlement can present overwhelming challenges to individuals and their families, and many report that religious organizations and leaders provide vitally important spiritual services, bolstering hope and faith in God, to assist African migrants with building resilience in the face of settlement difficulties (Abur 2019; Abur and Mphande 2020).

Interviewees from both established and newer African communities affirmed the contribution of cultural and religious organizations in enabling participation, representation and a sense of belonging in Australian society. Individuals and communities have invested significant time, emotional and financial resources into building these

10. CALD refers to ‘culturally and linguistically diverse’ and is commonly used in the Australian context to refer to ethnic minorities.

institutions to assist their kinspeople with acquiring English language skills, employment and to celebrate and share their cultures with other African- and mainstream Australians.

The Ghana Association of Victoria (GAV) is one of the more established African associations. It was founded to 'provide cultural, educational, family events for the local Ghanaian community and to showcase their music, food and artefacts etc. for the wider Australian community' (GAV n.d.). The GAV has an active Facebook page where it organizes events that include Ghana's Independence Day celebrations, community BBQs, music, and sports activities. It also advertises other African communities' events and grant opportunities.

The SSSPA is comparatively newer and was modelled on more established migrant associations. Baguot, SSSPA's Research Director, explained that previous generations of African communities, such as the Ghanaians, 'came as skilled migrants, as expatriates', and are thereby 'well established in their professions'. By contrast, 'South Sudanese who came to this country as refugees... are being confronted by a lot of settlement issues'. While facing a variety of challenges, these communities persist in the hope that things can be changed for the better through building up their next generation of African-Australians. The SSSPA was set up to advocate for the South Sudanese community across local, state and federal government, in particular for greater employment opportunities for their young people.

Farah focused on the agency of women and families when she established the East African Women's Foundation (EAWF) in 2007. As a humanitarian entrant from Somali, she recognized the need to provide support for East African people, especially women, in acquiring English language and employment-ready skills. Establishing the EAWF was a way for her to become more involved in advocating for her community and to advise relevant government agencies of her community's needs. Both the SSSPA and EAWF rely heavily on volunteers from within their own communities and receive little to no government assistance or financial support.

Religious organizations play a significant role in assisting with settlement for many African communities, especially in providing them with a sense of 'home'. Nelson Lodiong, elder of St John's Presbyterian Church in Hobart, Tasmania recounted that he was warmly received and welcomed into his church community when he first arrived as a refugee from South Sudan in 1999. Today, he still worships and serves in this church community, actively participating in church life that includes caring for its elderly congregation. Lodiong sees his church community

as a 'family', and as an extension of his natural family in his new home in Australia.

It was not easy coming to a new place and the anxiety to start life again from scratch... St John's... became my big family... On my arrival in Tasmania, some members from the Church picked me up from the airport straight away and they took me to a hotel, *where I was well cared for and that care continued on until today*. St John's family, enabled my family and I to settle without any difficulty, and since then we have built a strong connection (Interview, 20 July 2020; emphasis added).

Growth within churches, and through the formation of new churches, provide visible evidence of religious vibrancy among these African-Australian communities. Gudina joined the mainly-Ethiopian Zion Church as a 19-year-old when she first arrived in Melbourne via Launceston, Tasmania. Zion Church caters to a congregation mainly made up of older Ethiopians and Eritreans with services conducted in Amharic. Now that she has children of her own, she is seeing a burgeoning ministry need for young African-Australians who have grown up in Australia. Recognizing that these young people want to have their own congregation and space to worship, Gudina and her husband initiated and co-pastored Revive Church since 2017, which holds services in English. To engage with the younger generation on the challenges of navigating between African and Australian culture, Revive Church recently established an organization One United with a project on 'Third Culture Kids and Their Challenges' to facilitate such conversations.

In addition, many African-Australians turn to digital transnational communities, created locally and internationally, to connect with and maintain their African identity in Australia. Gudina shared that 'there are different social media platforms where African people can get together to encourage one another. There's different podcasts that people have now started, Instagram pages that people now use to, you know, to shout out or advertise different community work that's happening right now'. These efforts demonstrate the relational solidarity across African communities in and outside of Australia.

Discussion and Conclusion

In *White Nation*, Hage (2012) argues that 'whiteness' is a critical, defining aspect of Australian leadership, governance and institutions. Proximity to this whiteness, especially for non-whites, imbue them with social qualities that make them 'more white' (and Australian).

Throughout different waves of migration in Australian history, various ethnic communities have struggled with issues of discrimination and racism in finding their place and belonging in white Australia. Although a considerable amount of advocacy work has gone into supporting African migrants with settlement in Australia, the legacy of the White Australia Policy persists, through racism and discrimination embedded in Australian institutions and the public (Abur 2019).

Belonging is a complex, multilayered concept that occurs on an institutional level and is also experienced through affective exchanges in everyday interactions (Yuval-Davis 2006, 2016; Fozdar and Hartley 2014). African concepts of relational belonging, such as the concept of *ubuntu*, on the other hand, view the person as one part of a collective, where a person's sense of self, identity and place in society is dependent on the stories, narratives and discourses that the collective reflects back on the person (Horta 2017; Ndhlovu 2014; Woldeyes 2018). Despite the long history of Africans in Australia, and the rich diversity within the African communities, African-Australians' belonging remains precarious, challenged by false negative stereotypes that fuel discriminatory political and media discourses, and by the depiction of their distance from whiteness in culture, values, beliefs, behaviours, practices and visibility. Against this background, we have used the term 'African migrants' when referring to generations of migrants who have arrived in Australia from Africa, and have purposefully used the term 'African-Australian' to recognize their identity, place and belonging in Australian society. 'African communities' is then used when referring to diverse ethnic African groups as a collective.

African-Australians' belonging can be seen as fractured and incomplete in multiple ways. This fracturing can be exacerbated by elements of the refugee journey such as interrupted schooling and health challenges particularly in the early years of settlement. It occurs also through routine experiences of exclusion from employment and opportunities to earn their rights to belong, all of which are detrimental to their mental health (Abur 2018; Abur and Mphande 2020; Kwansah-Aidoo and Mapedzahama 2018). This fractured belonging can further be inflicted from within religious groups and communities that are committed to cultural diversity.

In times of crisis such as the pandemic, media reports that frame African-Australians negatively further reinforces their fragile belonging and degree of unsettledness in Australia. African communities were reported by the media as virus spreaders, when the media spotlighted three African-Australian women and their unauthorized interstate

travel during the Melbourne lockdown (ABC News 2020; Davey and Boseley 2020). In comparison, similar lockdown-breaking activities committed by other non-specified, non-identified Australians were depicted as humorous and silly, framed as larrikin ‘rule-flouting’ rather than criminal behaviour. Media reports included humorous details like people ‘hiding in cupboards and garages, playing Pokémon and eating KFC’ (Pearson and Sakkal 2020). The lens of crime and moral deviancy continues to be selectively applied within these media reports, as was the case with respect to reporting on ‘African gangs’ (Campbell 2011; Weng and Mansouri 2021). Such reporting frames African-Australian communities as being troublesome and not abiding by the rules determined by white Australian society.

The history and resilience of the African-Australian communities, documented in prior studies and in the RDA project, is evidence of their strong desire to continue to advocate for their rights, to support one another and to foster a sense of relational belonging in Australia, even in the face of challenges such as a global pandemic. This persistence endures even with little institutional support and funding. Community and religious organizations such as the SSSPA, EAWF and St John’s Presbyterian were set up with little external funding and represent the fruit of the communities’ labour to build themselves up with the little they have. Rather than segregating based on ethnicity, religion or language, some of these community organizations choose to focus on a pan-African representative identity in Australia so that they can create bridges with other non-African communities and wider Australian society. The strong contributions of African-Australians to caring professions within health, transport, community and service support sectors further demonstrate their essential, yet often overlooked, service to society both before and during the coronavirus crisis. Their contributions reflect African notions of relational belonging in serving the broader Australian community, something that is frequently missing from media representations of these communities.

There is much that Australian leadership and institutions can learn from the quality of African togetherness and in recognizing the decolonial, diverse and *relational Real* of culturally, linguistically and religiously diverse Australia, rather than the socially and politically constructed racist, colonial myth of a white Christian nation. This relational Real acknowledges African-Australians’ true place and belonging as valuable participants and contributors towards a healthier, more caring and genuinely inclusive Australian society, which emphasizes a collective, complex and plural *we*, rather than a simplistic, normative ‘us’ versus ‘them’.

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