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Special Issue - Editorial

Towards Afrocentric Counter-Narratives of Race and Racism in Australia

Kwamena Kwansah-Aidoo

Guest Editor, Special Issue, Australasian Review of African Studies
Professor and Rector, Ghana Institute of Journalism
kkwansah@gij.edu.gh

Virginia Mapedzahama

Guest Editor, Special Issue, Australasian Review of African Studies
Research Affiliate, University of Sydney
virginia.mapedzahama@sydney.edu.au

When in 2001 the United Nations (UN) enthusiastically adopted the Durban Declaration and Program of Action (DDPA) – a document which proposed measures to combat racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and intolerance – it was done with optimism in what it could achieve particularly where racism towards people of African descent was concerned. Yet, not much progress had been made when over a decade later in 2014, the General Assembly through its resolution 68/237 proclaimed 2015 – 2024 as the ‘International Decade for People of African Descent’ (United Nations, 2014). At the launching of the Declaration, the then United Nations Secretary General Ban-Ki Moon noted: “[W]e must remember that people of African descent are among those most affected by racism” (UN, 2014, n.p.). In making the Declaration, the UN cited the need to reinforce national, regional and international cooperation to ensure “the full enjoyment of economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights by people of African descent, and their full and equal participation in all aspects of society” (United Nations, 2014, n.p.) as a reason for the heightened focus. The concerns of the UN remain highly relevant and perhaps more urgent than even before when thinking about the Australian context.

In Australia, racism against people of African descent (read: black Africans) and indeed the indigenous population who are also black, albeit, not of direct African descent, is rife. In 2017 for example, a United Nations envoy criticised the country “for ‘deeply disturbing’ levels of racism”

(Taylor, 2017, n.p.). In fact, as recently as 18 October 2018, Mandisi Majavu noted that “Anti-black racism is rife in Australia, and the trope of associating blackness with criminality and gangsterism is widespread in the Australian mainstream media” (Majavu, 2018, n.p.). The fact that the occurrence of racism is an ongoing concern in Australia is very worrying, but even more disturbing within the Australian context, is the fact that in spite of its history of racism and discrimination etched in its racist colonial policies such as the ‘White Australia’ policy (overturned in 1973), a ‘denial of racism’ still dominates Australian public and popular discourse on race relations and there are usually subtle and not so subtle attempts to silence those who want to speak boldly about racism within Australian society (see, for example Mapedzahama & Kwansah-Aidoo, 2017).

Since the beginning of 2018, and particularly the second half of the year, an even more worrying trend has been emerging over the political horizon; what Dr Tim Soutphommasane, the immediate past Australian Race Discrimination Commissioner called “The return of racial politics”, in his final official speech as Commissioner, delivered on 6 August 2018. In the said speech, he warned:

We must remain vigilant because race politics is back... In one sense, race and racism have never gone away. This is the paradox of our multiculturalism: for all we have been transformed into a diverse and vibrant nation, racism remains alive in our society, and not only as a vestige of an old bigotry and chauvinism. (Soutphommasane, 2018, n.p.)

This quote provides the Australian ‘race’ context within which this *special issue* of ARAS is being published. While Soutphommasane’s warning and indeed his entire speech reaffirms the existence of racism, Australia is still very much characterised by colour-blindness and colour-mutism when it comes to race. During his 2017 visit to Kununurra, the *New York Times* National Correspondent John Eligon (who writes/reports on race issues in America), observed that the “conversation about race in the US is a very hard one to have, [...] it’s even harder in Australia [...] Australians [need to] confront the conversation head on. You need to be willing to argue about it” (Eligon, 2017, n.p.).

Where discussions of race and racism occur, they still remain very contentious debates. In fact, we would argue, in tandem with Manglitz, Guy and Merriweather Hunn (2006, n.p.) that current dialogues around race in Australia are “frequently constrained by the emergence of an ideologically conservative, hegemonic discourse that reframes and rearticulates the experiences of [racialised] persons. This rearticulation bears little

resemblance to their actual experiences”. Most importantly then, Soutphommasane’s warning signals the need for and significance of a multiplicity of voices in ‘race talk’ in Australia.

Currently, Australian race talk privileges (white) ‘majoritarian’ stories. Majoritarian stories, as Love (2004) explains, are the “description of events as told by members of dominant/majority groups, accompanied by the values and beliefs that justify the actions taken by dominants to insure their dominant position” (pp. 229-230). Solorzano and Yosso (2002) further note that “because majoritarian stories generate from a legacy of racial privilege, they are stories in which racial privilege seems ‘natural’” (p. 28; see also, Love 2004, p. 229). Majoritarian stories are not only mono-vocal master narratives that silence the voices of people of colour, they also mask “the power of white privilege in constructing stories about race” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 28). In Australia, denial and deflections of racism dominate majoritarian race master narratives and these abound most noticeably in media and political discourse. In the political arena for example, as Hewitt (2016) notes “politicians use a number of specific, digressive tactics in order to deny accusations [...] including: unmitigated denial, total avoidance of the word racism, deflection onto positive presentation through national rhetoric, and deflection onto other societal problems such as unemployment and poverty” (p. 1).¹ The dominant discourse in the media is not much different. Hewitt further notes that the media “plays a crucial role in shaping public discourse around issues of racism, yet despite its ability to challenge political discourse, the media has repeatedly reinforced positions of denial” (2016, p. 2).

Moreover, “when ethnic minorities occupy a central role in mainstream media, they are often portrayed as threatening to the Anglo mainstream” (*All Together Now*, 2017, p. 9). This is nowhere more evident than in recent reporting of ‘out-of-control African-Australian gangs’ in Melbourne, particularly since the beginning of 2018. Amid politicians’ (unsubstantiated) claims that Melbourne was facing a major crisis from African-Australian (read as: Sudanese-Australian) youth crime, making Melbournians feel unsafe in their own homes; for months the Australian mainstream media was ablaze with such headlines as:

- *Malcolm Turnbull: Sudanese gangs a ‘real concern’ for Melbourne* (The Guardian, 17 July 2018)

¹ A typical example of such national rhetoric is Attorney General Christian Porter’s statement that he is uncomfortable with efforts against racial discrimination and prefers to focus on the happier concern of ‘harmony’ (cited in Soutphommasane, 2018).

- *10 more examples of the African gang myth* (Andrew Bolt, Herald Sun, 4 August 2018)
- *Three more brutal crimes by African gangs* (Andrew Bolt, Herald Sun, 12 July 2018)
- *African gangs: It's not racist to name it for what it is* (Ayaan Hirsi Ali, The Weekend Australian, 21 July 2018)
- *'There is a problem': Tony Abbott questions all African immigration amid gang violence debate* (Michael Koziol & Melissa Cunningham, Sydney Morning Herald, 25 July 2018)

For us, such headlines whether intended or not, hyper-criminalise African youth in Australia, and create a moral panic within the wider (non-African) population. We have previously written about racist media reporting of African migrants in Australia (see Kwansah-Aidoo & Mapedzahama, 2015) and these recent reports only serve to continue the trend we have captured in previous writings. In spite of a few cases of 'counter-reporting' from other (predominantly non-mainstream) media outlets (see for example Budarick, 2018) the hyper-criminalisation and hyper-problematisation of African youth in Melbourne (and by extension, Australia) prevailed and even continues. It is not surprising then that Soutphommasane, the former Race Discrimination Commissioner, in the speech referred to earlier, stated that "it feels like there has never been a more exciting time to be a dog-whistling politician or race-baiting commentator in Australia" (2018, n.p.).

Indeed surprisingly (and interestingly coincidental), two days after Soutphommasane's speech, Katter's Australian Party (KAP) Senator Fraser Anning delivered his maiden speech in parliament imbued with highly racial and racist overtones. Senator Anning called for a ban on Muslim immigration on account of Muslims' criminality and overburdening of Australia's social welfare system and subtly implied a preference for a return to a White Australia Policy. While some politicians called out Senator Anning's speech for being highly 'inappropriate', there were no explicit discussions about its racist overtones; 'race' was never mentioned in these political condemnations. In our view, the national debates that ensued (or did not even take place) reflect not only a nation divided on this issue of race and racism, but the increasing popularity of far-right views and a deeply embedded national denial of racism that cripples any productive discussions about race and racism.

Furthermore, a few weeks after Senator Anning's racially charged speech, Australian politician One Nation Party leader Pauline Hanson (no surprises there), submitted a Notice of Motion for the sitting of the Senate on 20 September 2018 to acknowledge that it is "okay to be white". Following the

usual trend, Senator Hanson's motion gained national media coverage, but much of this reporting did not critically and/or explicitly discuss the racist nature of the motion. In other words, much of the media reporting did not unequivocally condemn this as a racist and racially motivated motion, grounded in white supremacist thinking. For instance, mainstream media outlets in the main, did not (at the time of reporting the motion) highlight the long history that the slogan: "it's okay to be white" has in the white supremacist movement (see for example, Dunne, 2018; Pearson, 2018; Latimore, 2018; and Wilson, 2018). Following Cassar's (2016, n.p.) assertion, we would argue that: "the media won't care to admit it, but they've aided Pauline Hanson's career just as much as her own staff", and that the lack of balanced reporting aids Senator Hanson's agenda (intentionally or otherwise). Furthermore, the fact that the motion was only 'narrowly defeated' (31-28) in the initial senate vote in October 2018, reaffirms Soutphommasane's claim that race politics is 'back' in Australia, and that politicians and the media are at the core of this 'return'. It also highlights the need to unequivocally acknowledge his warning that "we must remain vigilant", and to take the necessary steps to ensure that the country does not slip back into habits, behaviours and policies of an era that we consider a blot on Australia's history; these are at odds with the United Nation's efforts at combating racism.

What is needed within this Australian context of increasing popularity in far-right racist thinking, denial and deflections of racism and moral panics about 'African gangs' or escalating African crime then, are narratives that 'counter' the deficit in dominant racial storytelling and racial discourse. These counternarratives can only, and must be "grounded in the experiences and knowledge of people of colour" (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002 p. 23). Race/racial counter narratives (or counter storytelling), as noted by Merriweather Hunn and Guy (2006), can "expose race neutral discourse to reveal how white privilege operates within an ideological framework to reinforce and support unequal societal relations between whites and people of colour" (p. 244). At their core, racial counter narratives trouble and complicate 'master narratives', or 'false narratives' on race. Merriweather Hunn *et al* (2016, p.244) argue that critical race theorists can employ counternarrative as a methodology to contradict racist characterizations of social life, and we are in full support of such a proposal.

Amidst this socio-political context of denial and moral panics as discussed above, this *Special Issue* of ARAS is very timely as it comes at a time when Australian multiculturalism is not only at cross-roads but perhaps even under threat from the conservative political far-right. It is a time where

we are increasingly witnessing what the Soutphommasane called the “politicization and monitisation of racism” (2018). We propose that this Issue of ARAS is timely for two main reasons. First, and perhaps more obvious, is that the articles (re)present Afrocentric counternarratives to current discourses – in particular discourses that not only racially hyper-criminalise Africans in Australia, but also that continue to frame Africans in terms of a ‘deficit’ or a problem. The articles in this *Special Issue* are written mostly by African-Australians, about race matters in a community of which they are a part. In most cases, the authors are, so to speak: both the researchers and the researched, and as such their racial counternarratives bring a ‘unique person-of-colour voice’ to race talk in Australia. The authors have an embodied vantage point from which to talk about race.

Second, more than being ‘simply’ written from the point of view of African-Australians, the articles constitute counternarratives that are a form of Afrocentric resistance against current dominant forms of race talk in Australia. As Mora (2014, p.2) notes,

the idea of ‘counter’ - itself implies a space of resistance against traditional domination. A counter-narrative goes beyond the notion that those in relative positions of power can just tell the stories of those in the margins. Instead, these must come from the margins, from the perspectives and voices of those individuals.

Counter-narratives therefore facilitate “survival and resistance among marginalized groups” (Manglitz et. al, 2006, n.p.). They “contradict racist characterizations of social life and expose race neutral discourse, revealing how white privilege operates to reinforce and support unequal racial relations in society” (Manglitz et. al, 2006, n.p.).

As indicated earlier, this *Special Issue* on racism is being published at an opportune time, given the current socio-political milieu and the concerns raised so far, make the issues discussed in the articles assembled here very timely. Despite the declaration by Liberal National Senator Ian MacDonald earlier in the year that it is “very difficult to find any but very rare cases of racism in Australia” (cited in Soutphommasane, 2018, n.p.), the contribution by Hyacinth Udah and Parlo Singh shows that racism is well and alive in Australia and is in fact very much a part of the everyday experiences and realities of black African migrants and refugees living in South East Queensland. Going by the title - *It still matters: The role of skin colour in the everyday life and realities of black African migrants and refugees in Australia* - the article shows how race, skin colour and immigration status interact in a rather unfortunate way to shape the everyday lives and social

relations and relationships of respondents. Much like our *'There is really discrimination everywhere': Experiences and consequences of Everyday Racism among the new black African diaspora in Australia*, published in the previous edition of ARAS (Volume 39, Number 1) (Kwansah-Aidoo and Mapedzahama, 2018), Hyacinth Udah and Parlo Singh's article "illustrates some disturbing trends in our democratic society" (Lyons, 2018, p. 10) and shows that racism is more widespread than many in society, especially our politicians, would want us to believe. With the return of race politics in Australia as highlighted earlier with the quote from Soutphommasane, we would like to re-echo the recommendation made by Lyons (2018, p.10) that these articles become "compulsory reading for all Australian politicians".

Cultural racism continues to present itself in various guises in the Australian society, particularly in the employment market and workplaces where people with different racial and/or ethnic backgrounds or with a non-English name routinely face discrimination (see, for example Booth, Leigh, & Varganova, 2012; Elias & Paradies, 2016). Virginia Mapedzahama, Trudy Rudge, Sandra West and Kwamena Kwansah-Aidoo pick up on the theme of cultural racism with their article *Making and maintaining racialised ignorance in Australian Nursing Workplaces: The case of black African migrant nurses*. The article uses the experiences of black migrant nurses as a case to show how ignorance is constructed, maintained and utilised in the nursing workplace, causing structural violence, while retaining and supporting a nursing workplace that is racialised and racialising in its functioning and functionality. This research is particularly significant given Australia's efforts at maximising the gains from its skilled migration program. The article demonstrates how race, gender and history intersect to influence the way/s in which black African migrant nurses are seen, constructed/deconstructed, known and un/known in their Australian workplaces. It also shows how "intersectional epistemological ignorance" (Bowleg et al., 2017, p. 578) influences workplace interactions and relationships and how a variety of forms of ignorance are used to maintain colour-blindness and the racialisation of black migrant Registered Nurses. All of this helps to sustain the dominance of whiteness in the nursing space/workplace by creating a workplace that is fraught with racial micro-inequities and the faces of black nurses are actively and negatively coded with allegorical signs invested with cultural meaning (Benson, 2008). Ultimately, this article by Virginia Mapedzahama, Trudy Rudge, Sandra West and Kwamena Kwansah-Aidoo shows that the Australian nursing workplace has structures and strictures in place which result in more than just the underutilisation of the black migrant nurses' skills. These constrictions

help to reproduce institutional racism, negate the potential economic benefit of migration and undermine the rationale for the initial recruitment of black African migrant nurses to the nursing workforce. Given how much time, money and effort goes into the skilled migration program, we call on the health sector, and indeed all Australian institutions and workplaces, to put in place structures and frameworks that address the scourge of institutional violence enacted through racism which ultimately undermines what could be a useful socio-political and economic initiative – the skilled migration program.

Kwadwo Adusei-Asante and Hossein Adibi's contribution comes at a time when according to the immediate past Race Commissioner, Soutphommasane (2018, n.p.), "Australian multiculturalism is at a crossroads". That observation makes the subject matter of their article titled *The 'Culturally and Linguistically Diverse' (CALD) Label: A critique using African migrants as exemplar*, both timely and of immense significance. The article critiques the widely accepted and institutionalised official label CALD, used in political, government, research and popular discourse to refer to non-English-speaking and non-Anglo-Saxon minority groups (other than indigenous Australians). Drawing on labelling theory, the authors argue that the label CALD others, racially profiles, stereotypes, homogenises and inferiorises minority groups to whom the label is applied, noting that CALD labelling not only reinforces institutional racism in Australia, but also informs lived experiences of racism. The article shows that people from CALD communities are more likely to be victims of racist attacks and that CALD groups tend to be treated differently. Using Black African Migrants in Australia (BAMIA) as exemplars, the article points out that the CALD label (i) is a racialised and racialising label that overtly divides people into 'us and them', (ii) provides a conceptual pretext for legitimising institutional racism against non-English-speaking and non-Anglo-Saxon minority groups, and (iii) inferiorises migrant communities, projecting the image of an analogous population who need 'fixing'. On the basis of their argument and within the context of the observation that Australian multiculturalism is at a crossroads, and also given the desire for integration and social cohesion, the argument can be made that continued use of the CALD label in Australia can potentially work to hinder social integration and prevent a large number of people from participating fully in Australian society. On that note, it would seem, as the authors argue, that, the CALD label has outlived its usefulness in contemporary Australian society.

Staying within the multiculturalism framework, Kwamena Kwansah-Aidoo and Virginia Mapedzahama's contribution titled *Black bodies in/out*

of place? Afrocentric perspectives and/on racialised belonging in Australia, touches on very important issues which oftentimes get lost in discussions about racial diversity and multiculturalism in the Australian society. For the most part, racial discrimination gets enacted through forms of social exclusion, assigning those who experience it to citizenship at the margins of the societies in which they live and this article on belonging touches on how racism affects Black Africans' sense of inclusivity and belonging in an Australian society that is hailed as a success story in multiculturalism. Using data interpreted through the conceptual lens of everyday racism (Essed, 1991) and aided by their own situatedness and autobiographical investment, the authors demonstrate the pervasiveness of racial discrimination in the lives of their participants and point out how that affects their sense of being. Through centering participants' experiences of racism, the article outlines a four-point typology which exposes the complexity and contested nature of belonging when constructed within narratives of subjective experiences of racism. They propose that this should be understood as a typology of belonging – *fractured belonging*, with four dimensions: contestation, negotiation, ambivalence and compromise (for spacio-temporal comfort). Taken together, these four dimensions unmask how experiences of racism construct feelings of 'otherness' and function as an impediment to a sense of national belonging, resulting in a sense of (non)belonging or splintered belonging. One major consequence of the feeling of (non)belonging or splintered belonging, according to the authors, is that, it fuels a desire and fantasy of return to one's homeland, making them cling on to what Chang (1996, p.1) calls the "nativist dream of return". This dream of return is in part fuelled by, and also an outcome of the power play that dislocates them through experiences of racism; through processes that racialise and other them, and through constant reminders that they are not from 'here', embodied in identity questions such as 'where are you from?', which destabilize their sense of citizenship and belonging. Again, just like the article on CALD, this contribution by Kwamena Kwansah-Aidoo and Virginia Mapedzahama on belonging is timely and of crucial importance within the context of a desire for social cohesion and inclusivity in Australia and the need to take the right path to forge a way forward from the crossroads where Australian multiculturalism finds itself. The article exposes the complexity and contested nature of belonging when constructed within narratives of subjective experiences of racism and thus argues for more nuanced understandings of *fractured belonging* among Black African migrants in Australia, and the implications of this for their subjective realities and their full participation in the wider Australian society as *bona fide* citizens.

Alfred Mupenzi's article, *Educational resilience and experiences of African students with a refugee background in Australian tertiary education*, rounds off the contributions. It provides a positive and fitting conclusion to this *Special Issue* by presenting what we would call a 'feel good' story/account to round off the counter-narratives provided here. The article showcases the educational and general resilience that higher education students from refugee backgrounds exhibit in overcoming challenges such as language barriers, culture shock and indeed racism, amongst others, in their new Australian environment. By so doing, the article serves as an intervention in and disruption of the 'deficit logics' that have hitherto shaped research and scholarship in this area. It also works as a 'space opener' for situated and embodied discussions and understandings of the broader resettlement experience for students from refugee backgrounds. When one considers how research shows that a refugee has only a very slim chance of completing even secondary school (Pflanz, 2016) and also that as the UNHCR (2016) has observed, only one in every 100 of the world's refugees goes on to tertiary education, the stories presented in this article should be seen as nothing other than inspiring. This article, premised on the concept of resilience and the aspirations demonstrated by refugee background students to stay in school and finish tertiary education is a welcome breather, especially given the overwhelmingly negative media coverage that young Africans from refugee backgrounds (read: Sudanese youth) have received. We the editorial team, are happy that the central findings in this article run contrary to both research and conventional wisdom regarding refugees, their educational pursuits and achievements. Those featured here have braved the odds and now stand at the threshold of the possibility of experiencing the upward mobility needed as adults to make them full contributors and partners in shaping and participating in the wider Australian society and it is our hope that they will be an example for many within their individual communities and beyond. The stories presented in this article suggest alternative ways of imagining and enacting resilience in students with an African refugee background, which diverge from the focus on constraints related to language, literacy and cultural barriers. On that note, and from a research perspective, this article and all the other contributions in this *Special Issue* taken collectively, show that the current deficit-driven analyses of skilled migrant experiences — which reduce the problematisation of migration to the individual migrant, situating the migrant as 'the' problem, and fail to expose or challenge the normative assumptions underpinning systemic and systematised processes — are totally inadequate.

To conclude this editorial, we deem it fitting that we return to the beginning — the *UN Declaration of 2015 – 2024* as the ‘International Decade for People of African Descent’; a Declaration which was made in anticipation that it would foster discussions to promote respect, raise awareness, and generate solutions to tackle the challenges of racism faced by people of African descent (United Nations, 2011, 2014). On that note, it is our hope, that, despite the Australian Attorney-General Christian Porter’s expressed discomfort with efforts against racial discrimination and preference for a focus on the happier concern of ‘harmony’ (Soutphommasane, 2018), the contributions in this *Special Issue* will help to disrupt the silence around discussions of racism in Australia, particularly as it pertains to the ‘new’ African Diasporas. We are optimistic that the Afrocentric counternarratives provided here can help generate discussions that will go a long way in sensitising all concerned about the social canker that is racism and encourage Australia to adopt a framework that will enable the Race Commission, civil society and other relevant actors to continue to reduce inequality and combat discrimination against people of all races, and particularly those of Black African descent.

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