

THE AUSTRALASIAN REVIEW OF AFRICAN STUDIES
VOLUME 34 NUMBER 1 JUNE 2013

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Negotiating Diasporic Black African Existence in Australia: A Reflexive Analysis

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Abstract

The past twenty years has seen a somewhat steady flow of continental Africans into Australia. The arrival of such people, often constructed as 'blacks,' raises several questions with respect to identity and belonging. For example, what does it mean to be and 'live black' in a society that not only abandoned its White Australia policy only a little over thirty years ago, but must also now grapple with the transnational nature of its citizenry, which includes African blacks? We use reflexive narratives to present a snapshot of our everyday experiences as black Africans, negotiating the multiple complex layerings of not just our blackness, but also our diasporic African existence. We address the challenges and contradictions of negotiating reified and homogenised black/African migrant/outsider labels and identities. In particular, we reflect on our endeavours to confront stereotypical and distorted interpretations that seek to identify and categorise our existence in terms of the problematised 'other': as the unknowing, uneducated, oppressed and dispossessed persons of colour. The ensuing analysis is not intended as a theoretical discussion of race, racism or race relations in the wider Australian context. Rather, these are 'our tales of blackness,' of the dilemmas of negotiating subjectivity, of the multiple and paradoxical ways of being 'other' in a society that claims to be multicultural and is hailed as such worldwide.

Introduction

In this article we construct self-reflexive narratives to provide snapshots of our everyday experiences and the multiple complex layerings of our existence as black Africans living in Australia. Utilising "the autobiographic materials of [ourselves], the researcher[s], as the primary

data”¹ that informs our analytic tactic, we address the challenges and contradictions of negotiating reified and homogenised black/African migrant/outsider labels and identities. More than meaning-making, the objective of our reflexive processes here is to expose our identities in Australia not only as shifting but also as contested terrain: how we identify ourselves as skilled black African migrants, and the constructions and representations of blackness (i.e., the black body) and the African diaspora in Australia. Our aim in bringing our experiences into the centre of analysis here is to provoke further (public as well as academic) debate and analyses on ‘living black’ in Australia, and to show how the blackness we embody is fraught with contradiction. Ultimately, this article seeks to contribute to the under-researched yet significant sub-areas of ‘visible’ migrants, first generation black African migrants, living black, and problematising blackness in Australian diasporic studies.

Throughout this article, we use the term ‘black’ in reference to ourselves (and other skilled African migrants) despite our objection to being reified as generic ‘black’ by the white gaze.² We do, however, acknowledge a two-fold problem with using the term ‘black’: first, it could inadvertently be seen as implying that all new diasporic Africans in Australia are black. On the contrary, there are many non-black (white) African migrants in Australia, particularly from countries such as South Africa and Zimbabwe. We argue, however, that, unlike black African migrants, white Africans become ‘colourless’ or largely

¹ Heewon Chang, “Autoethnography: Raising Cultural Consciousness of Self and Others,” in *Methodological Developments in Ethnography (Studies in Educational Ethnography Volume 12)*, ed. Geoffrey Walford (Boston: Elsevier, 2007), 207.

² In doing so, we therefore subscribe to Stuart Hall’s view of the post-modern subject “as having no fixed, essential or permanent identity. Identity becomes a ‘moveable feast’: formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are presented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us [...] The subject assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent ‘self’” (Hall, 1992: 277). Accordingly, within the context of this article, we assume the identity of ‘black’ as a critique of both the identity/term ‘black’ and the Australian cultural system that reproduces that generic identity/term. Our use of the term is therefore a way of politicising and appropriating its use. We remain, however, conscious of the dilemmas and implications that can arise out of its depoliticised and uncritical and even homogenising use.

'invisible'³ upon migration to Australia, and therefore experience realities that are (arguably radically) distinct from those of their black counterparts⁴

Secondly, blackness and the black body are not new to Australia. In fact, the original inhabitants or owners of the land (Indigenous Australians) are people with black skin, and the people of Torres Strait Island who come under Australian rule are also of the same black skin colour. These two groups have long been part of the Australian sociocultural landscape. What is new is the continental African black who is both culturally and physically distinct from the aforementioned groups. In this article, therefore, we use the term 'black' in reference to the collective group of people with the same phenotypic cues (of dark skin colour) who, though of diverse sociocultural and political backgrounds, come originally from continental Africa and have migrated to Australia over the past three decades or so.

Nevertheless, grouping all black African Australians together as a category is controversial; it ignores, among other things, significant sociopolitical and cultural differences, as well as emigration pathways. Thus we are aware that by using the term 'black,' we run the risk of subsuming ourselves within a broad heterogeneous category of people, many of whom we do not necessarily share similar histories with, apart from a (perhaps) distant ancestry and our blackness. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this article, there is sufficient room to strategically delineate such an essentialising category while still remaining cautious not to homogenise the category 'black,' or 'black' experiences.

Clarifying 'New' African Diaspora

We adopt here the definition proposed by the Commission of the African Union in 2005:

The African Diaspora consists of peoples of African origin living outside the continent, irrespective of their citizenship and nationality and who are willing to contribute to the

³ Peter Gale, "Construction of whiteness in the Australian media," in *Race, Colour and Identity in Australia and New Zealand*, ed. John Docker and Gerhard Fischer (Sydney: University of Sydney Press, 2000), 256.

⁴ Val Colic-Peisker, "'At least you are the right colour': Identity and social inclusion of Bosnian refugees in Australia," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 31:4 (2005): 616-638.

development of the continent and the building of the African Union.⁵

While we acknowledge the limitations of this definition—in particular the dilemmas associated with its emphasis on ‘willingness to contribute to the development of the continent’—we contend nonetheless that, for the purposes of this article, it is sufficiently expansive and inclusive.

Much writing and theorising of ‘African diaspora’ is dedicated to the forced trans-Atlantic movements of black Africans into the Americas during the period of slavery. Such writing, as Ifekwunigwe argues, “...either privileges the narrative of transatlantic slavery or addresses the social and historical processes of imperialism.”⁶ Some writers, however, recognise the changing nature and constant redefinition of ‘African diaspora’ as a group. For example, Palmer distinguishes five distinct ‘streams’ of African diaspora:

The first African diaspora was a consequence of the great movement within and outside of Africa that began about 100,000 years ago...The second major diasporic stream began about 3000 B.C.E. with the movement of the Bantu-speaking peoples from the region that is now the contemporary nations of Nigeria and Cameroon to other parts of the African continent and to the Indian Ocean. The third major stream, which I characterize loosely as a trading diaspora, involved the movement of traders, merchants, slaves, soldiers, and others to parts of Europe, the Middle East, and Asia beginning around the fifth century B.C.E...The fourth major African diasporic stream, and the one most widely studied today, is associated with the Atlantic trade in African slaves. The fifth major stream began during the 19th century particularly after slavery's demise in the Americas and continues to our times.⁷

⁵ Cited in Obiama Nnaemeka, “Re-imagining the Diaspora: History, Responsibility and Commitment in the Age of Globalisation,” *Dialectical Anthropology* 31 (2007): 127-141.

⁶ Jayne O. Ifekwunigwe, “Recasting ‘Black Venus’ in the New African Diaspora,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 27 (2004): 397-412.

⁷ Palmer 1998, cited in Nnaemeka, “Re-imagining the Diaspora: History, Responsibility and Commitment in the Age of Globalisation,” 130.

Our particular interest lies with/in the last stream. We prefix the term ‘African Diaspora’ with ‘new,’ to illustrate our interest in contemporary, postcolonial migration processes of continental Africans, the “new epistemologies of the African diaspora.”⁸ Our interest in this group is twofold: first, we maintain that, given that the modern day diasporic conditions and experiences of ‘new’ African diaspora are not necessarily shaped by the exact processes that produced the African diaspora of transatlantic slavery, it is important to centre the experiences of this increasingly large group of continental Africans in contemporary analyses of African diaspora. This is not to say that the two do not intersect. We recognise that new African diaspora enter into current dialogue in the west, that has been, and still is, informed by experiences of the transatlantic slavery era. Nonetheless, not all contemporary movements of Africans from the continent are forced, at least not in the same sense as was the case during the transatlantic slave trade era. A significant number of continental Africans in the west are skilled migrants, thus by implication their movements out of Africa are voluntary.⁹ Because of this, studies of African diasporic spaces and experiences should be more expansive, to incorporate diversity even within the ‘new’ group of contemporary African diaspora. Secondly we are part of this latter group of new African diaspora, we are skilled migrants. This article is thus our endeavour to contribute to the literature that places the experiences of this group at the core of analyses.

The Self-Reflexive Narrative Approach

“My voice seems firmer and more compelling when I concentrate on my experiences...”¹⁰

In this article we employ a self-reflexive narrative approach within an interpretive phenomenological framework,¹¹ in order to explore and

⁸ Ifekwunigwe, “Recasting ‘Black Venus’ in the New African Diaspora,” 397.

⁹ We acknowledge here that there are differences between refugee-background and non-refugee background African migrants in Australia with respect to education, class, ethnicity, culture, gender and migration pathways. However, a detailed discussion of these differences is beyond the scope of this article. For a detailed discussion of African migration in Australia, and an articulation of these differences see, for example, Hugo (2009)

¹⁰ Patrick Diamond, “Writing to Reclaim Self: The Use of Narrative in Teacher Education,” paper presented at the American Educational Research Association, Atlanta, 12-16 April 1993.

make sense of our experiences as first generation black African migrants in a white dominated society, where the black African body is still perceived as somewhat new. Such an approach, as Schweitzer et al note, “allows for the explication of personal perceptions or accounts of phenomenon based upon an exploration of the personal world, while at the same time recognizing that any explication requires a degree of interpretive activity.”¹² Through this approach we highlight and interrogate the complex juxtapositions that inform our everyday lives in Australia, providing insight into how we organise meaning and action¹³ and negotiate our multiple identities.

Given our location as migrant academics belonging to a black African group who experience the heightened hostilities and suspicion directed at ‘newcomers,’¹⁴ we believe a self-reflexive narrative approach is justified. This approach is not only appropriate but also supports the need for subjects of particular experiences to be given a voice to directly articulate their experiences. Furthermore, it answers, and lends credibility to, the call for academics (particularly minority academics) to acknowledge the importance of location (whether it is of self or others) and the need to explore critical political issues from that position.¹⁵ In centring experience ‘as text,’ narrative writing becomes a “means of examining the ways in which individuals make sense of their lives within a changing sociohistorical context.”¹⁶ As Diamond asserts:

¹¹ Jonathan A. Smith, Maria Jarman and Mike Osborn, “Doing interpretative phenomenological analysis,” in *Qualitative Health Psychology: Theories and Methods*, ed. Michael Murray and Kerry Chamberlain (London: Sage Publications, 1999), 218.

¹² Robert Schweitzer, Jaimi H. Greenslade and Ashraf Kagee, “Coping and resilience in refugees from Sudan: a narrative account,” *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 41 (2007): 282- 288.

¹³ JoAnn D’Alisera, “Review of Ghosts and Shadows, by Atsuko Matsuoka and John Sorenson,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropology Institute* 9:1 (2003): 189-190.

¹⁴ Val Colic-Peisker and Farida Tilbury, “Integration into the Australian Labour Market: The Experience of Three ‘Visibly Different’ Groups of Recently Arrived Refugees,” *International Migration* 45:1 (2007): 59-83.

¹⁵ See, for example, Bochner and Ellis (1992); Diamond (1993); Daiute and Lightfoot (2004); Freeman (2006).

¹⁶ Phinney 2000, cited in Colette Daiute and Cynthia Lightfoot, “Introduction: Theory and Craft in Narrative Inquiry,” in *Narrative Analysis: Studying the Development of Individuals in Society*, ed. Colette Daiute and Cynthia Lightfoot (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2004), vii-xvii.

Narrative permits us to articulate and clarify our understandings. The process involves the retrospect recognition of experience (or the inner life of meaning) that cannot know itself once and for all at the time of experience. Reflexive writing serves the... function of transformation of perspective.¹⁷

Bolton goes even further by stating that "...lives are made sense of and ordered...[by narratives] recounted; told and retold daily through actions, memories, thoughts."¹⁸ Likewise, Bruner advances this notion, claiming narratives are the only way of writing about, and capturing, the "sense of lived time."¹⁹

Furthermore, self-reflexive narratives "expose experiences to critical scrutiny."²⁰ Thus they are not mere descriptions of events; rather in a sense they are a way of looking back from the present, of bringing past experiences into the present awaiting future recall. In this way, they are (cultural and temporal) acts of remembering that move back and forth in time to engage processes of understanding one's own experiences.

In presenting our memories and moments from our lived realities we interpret and re-interpret those experiences to create a reflexive process that advances clarity and insight, transforming the taken-for-granted experiences and phenomena into more enlightened perspectives. Our self-reflexive narratives bring "personal issues into consciousness,"²¹ [re]presenting space and opportunity for us to write ourselves as text, within which we can then explore and make meaning of the multiplicity of our existences as black migrant bodies in Australia. Far from being 'simple' uncritical recountings of our experiences of black embodiment, the narratives bring together the duality of our voices, the personal and the critical, to transform our everyday diasporic identity negotiation into

¹⁷ Diamond, "Writing to Reclaim Self: The Use of Narrative in Teacher Education," 19.

¹⁸ Gillie Bolton, "Narrative Writing: Reflective Enquiry into Professional Practice," *Educational Action Research* 14:2 (2006): 203-218.

¹⁹ Jerome Bruner, "Life as Narrative," *Social Research* 71:3 (2004): 691-710.

²⁰ Bolton, "Narrative Writing: Reflective Enquiry into Professional Practice," 205.

²¹ Belenky et al., cited in Diamond, "Writing to Reclaim Self: The Use of Narrative in Teacher Education," 19

formal and critical patterns of meaning. Following Sparkes,²² our narratives are interplays of facts, facticities and fiction; wherein ‘facts’ are actual events that happened, facticities refer to how we lived and experienced those facts, and fiction is the narrative we construct to deal with those facts and facticities.²³ The notion of ‘fiction’ in this sense, then, is not to invent a story that never happened; rather it is to expand the re-telling of what happened by constructing critical analyses thereof.

Tales of Blackness

In the reflexive narratives following, we selectively draw from past memories and moments (represented by particular racial or racialised incidents) in our daily lives, or what Carbado calls “incidents in the life of a black person, part of the racial mystique of life,”²⁴ to advance our exploratory analysis. Though the incidents we recount are distinct and discussed under separate themes, they also necessarily overlap; they are all about “micro-aggressive racial encounters,” about “the colorline.”²⁵ The themes and incidents we have chosen are by no means exhaustive or fully representative of our entire diasporic experience, but we perceive them as significant in shaping our identity [re]making and re/negotiation processes—the process of becoming black and the contradiction of blackness; embodying the visible and simultaneously invisible black body.

It is worth noting here that, although our narratives provide useful insight into the lived experience of black continental African migrants in Australia, they are only our accounts and therefore by no means representative. We acknowledge, for example, our differential positioning and relative privilege as skilled academic migrants who have not directly experienced the structural racism in the labour market that other black African migrants (may) have.²⁶ Likewise, in keeping with

²² Andrew Sparkes, “The Fatal Flaw: A Narrative of the Fragile Body-Self,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 2:4 (1996): 463-494.

²³ Norman Denzin 1989, cited in Sparkes, “Embodiment, academics and the audit culture: A story seeking consideration,” 467.

²⁴ Devon Carbado, “How I became a black American,” in *Race, Racism and the Law: Speaking truth to the power!*, 23 December 2007, <http://academic.udayton.edu?Race/01race/AfrAm04.htm> (accessed 30 April 2009).

²⁵ Carbado “How I became a black American,” 3.

²⁶ See, for example, Colic-Peisker and Tilbury, “Integration into the Australian Labour Market: The Experience of Three ‘Visibly Different’ Groups of Recently Arrived Refugee.”

the essence of the narrative turn of this article, our vignettes reflect different voices, with each incident narrated in and reflecting our own unique and individual ways of “articulating and clarifying our understandings”²⁷ and the differences in our attempts at reflexive sense-making and capturing what we lived at the time.²⁸

Re/Thinking Identity: Be/coming the Black African in Australia

Award winning Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, wrote in a 2006 article to the Washington Post:

I realized that I was African when I came to the United States. Whenever Africa came up in my college classes, everyone turned to me. It didn't matter whether the subject was Namibia or Egypt; I was expected to know, to explain....²⁹

Like Adichie, we also ‘became’ black *and* African when we came to Australia. We became aware, very early on in our migration experience, of the attention we attracted when we walked down the street, the fact that most people would turn back to take a second glance at us. We can still remember the (white) gaze, and the self-consciousness and confusion we felt being subjected to that gaze, and our attempts to make meaning of the gaze. That we had (overnight) become ‘objects’ of curiosity for the ‘white gaze,’ with all of its prejudicial embodiments and connotations, was a point of confusion for us. What we could not comprehend was that, by virtue of our dark skin, we had now been racialised into a racial category—‘black’—complete with all of the inferiorisation that is embodied within it in the Australian context. Although on the African continent people are not necessarily colour-blind (and we were not), there the connotations of colour and associations with the colour black are different.

Growing up in Africa, we have always been aware of bodily differences and known our bodies to be dark. Given the racism initiated by colonialism, and its associated dominance and segregation of indigenous

²⁷ Diamond, “Writing to Reclaim Self: The Use of Narrative in Teacher Education,” 19.

²⁸ Bruner, “Life as Narrative.”

²⁹ Chimamanda Adichie, “Our Africa Lenses,” *Washington Post*, 13 November 2006, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/11/12/AR2006111200943.html> (accessed 5 May 2009).

peoples (particularly in Zimbabwe), we were cognisant of the hierarchies of race based on skin colour. Yet, even then, dark skin was the norm, the dominant, so being dark-skinned did not come with the same kind of racial valorisation that happens within contemporary democratic, multi-ethnic western societies. We were not different in Africa; at least, not in the same way that blackness is experienced and juxtaposed with whiteness in the west. Wright contends that blackness only became a racial category with the presence of (West) Africans in the Western Hemisphere.³⁰ Thus our dark skin, which we had always taken for granted and normalised growing up in Zimbabwe and Ghana, in fact set us apart as an identifiable, exotic, black ‘other’ in Australia. The identities we have always had, as *Shona* or *Akan* in Zimbabwe and Ghana respectively, no longer held significance or made sense in our white-dominated Australian setting. Our dark skin only categorised us as ‘black,’ and identified us only as African, stripping us of not only our ethnic identities but also our national identities. In migrating to Australia we were suddenly confronted with a ‘new’ range of identities and identity markers that we had never struggled with on the African continent.

Vignette 1

Realising I was black was something that happened soon after I arrived in Australia. My deeper comprehension of the ‘consequences’ of my black embodiment, and the racial scripts that accompanied my blackness however, came many years later: in 2004, at a hospital in Adelaide. Though this was not my first racial episode of being ‘Africanised’ and ‘other[ed]’, this particular episode is significant in that it coincided with my deepening interest in, and heightened understanding of anti-racist feminist literature/writing at the time. I was at this hospital (the same hospital where I had had my daughter four years earlier) for a simple day-surgery procedure. I recall presenting at the front desk, explaining the reason I was there, producing all the necessary paperwork as I had been advised prior to the visit. I recall standing there, waiting for the (white) woman behind the desk to respond to me, and my surprise when she finally did; by asking — almost shouting, and speaking very slowly — “Do you know why you are here?” Mystified by the relevance and appropriateness of this question, I stood there, a myriad of questions running through my head: Did she not hear what I just explained? Was I

³⁰ Michelle Wright, *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 1.

expected to repeat everything that I had just said? Why was she shouting? Why was she speaking so slowly? I realised then, in my perplexed state, as did Ibrahim,³¹ that my black body had spoken “a language of its own” ritualising and homogenising me into a script of the unknowing, unintelligible, non-English speaking ‘black woman’. The effort of the well-meaning white woman at speaking slowly and loudly was for my benefit, the black body that is expected to not understand her, let alone comprehend the procedure that she was about to have done on her body.

Vignette 2

I remember the moment when I realised the ‘limitations’ and narrow interpretation of my black skin in Australia. It was in my first year in Australia, the first year of my PhD candidature. Given that all my attempts to secure part-time work as a sessional tutor at my university had been met with disinterest, I was working as a cleaner in a hotel. I recall a particular conversation with some colleagues I was working with at the time (also non-white Anglo-Saxon migrants), about our hopes, aspirations and plans for our future in Australia. I remember my contribution to that discussion: that I could not wait to finish my PhD and get a ‘proper’ job. I also remember the look of both confusion and mockery on their faces; and my shock when one of them said to me – almost mockingly – “In your dreams! Do you really think the PhD will get you a better job than this one? Who do you think will give you that job?” Later, as I looked back at this encounter, I realised then that although most of the people I worked with knew that I was a student, they neither cared nor could comprehend what exactly it meant to be doing a PhD. To them, all that mattered was that I was a black African migrant, and was, so to speak, one of them, a cleaner, who was destined to always remain a cleaner. Regardless of the significance and the opportunities that came with completing a PhD, my body spoke a different language and in that language I could not become anything more than what I was in that moment: a hotel cleaner. These migrants, though not white, had bought into the circulating dominant discourses that relegated the black body to the bottom of the racial hierarchy. Despite my qualifications (which they knew about), I was still perceived as the unknowing, oppressed and dispossessed person of colour who had no hope of climbing the socio-racial ladder.

³¹ Awad Ibrahim, “One is not Born Black: Becoming and the Phenomenon(ology) of Race,” *Philosophical Studies in Education* 35:1 (2004): 77–87.

Reflecting on our individual experiences above, we realise now that the encounters had been racially predetermined. All that had mattered in those moments was that ‘we’ were black bodies. In both incidents it is clear that no matter what we did or said, we were, as Carbado notes, “trapped inside their racial imagination” and for them, “the body of evidence – that is to say, our race – was incontestable.”³² Awad Ibrahim argues the same:

...[H]aving arrived into North America as a refugee from Africa, I enter, so to speak, a social imaginary, a discursive space where I am already imagined, constructed and treated as “Black” by hegemonic discourses and groups, respectively.”³³

Like Ibrahim, we did not choose blackness as a racial category, nor the meanings attached to it, for ourselves; it was always available to us by virtue of being black African migrants to a white-dominated Australia.

The significance of these early experiences is that they confirm debates that (self) identity is never an issue until it is questioned, challenged or in crisis. For us, it was through the realisation that the perceptions central to our self-identities as Shona Zimbabwean and Akan Ghanaian were ‘in crisis,’ and our awareness of the significance that skin colour takes on in the west, that we began the process of questioning to—as Diamond so aptly points out—“reclaim the self.”³⁴ In this process of reclaiming ourselves we ask if the label ‘black’ is stuck on us, and whether we have come to accept it. We ask ourselves then: are we becoming black or have we *become* black already? We can recall some moments in the past that could suggest that we already see *ourselves* as black—we have indeed *become* black. For example, we can both remember occasions when we have self-identified as ‘black’ in order to make it easier for people we are meeting for the first time to locate us in a crowd of predominantly white people, moments when we chose to use the phenotypic cues for black identity as our main identity marker, perhaps without even thinking about the implications for our self-

³² Carbado, “How I became a black American,” 6.

³³ Ibrahim, “One is not Born Black: Becoming and the Phenomenon(ology) of Race,” 78.

³⁴ Diamond, “Writing to Reclaim Self: The Use of Narrative in Teacher Education,” 19.

identity and/or the social construction of blackness. It was ‘simply’ meant to help *them* identify *us*. Yet in so doing we implicitly accepted that we *are* black.

Nevertheless, reflecting on such moments now, we begin to problematise our own actions and words and their implications. We question, for example, why, if we have always insisted that we do not self-identify as black, from the moment we realised—years ago—that this racial category was readily available to us because of the colour of our skin, do we apply this identity marker to ourselves? Why is it that despite our multiple identities and identifiers, in those situations we chose ‘black/ness’ with all its implications and stereotypes? Do we choose black because we know that is what people see when they look at us? More disturbingly, we question: when did we start to see ourselves as black? If it is true that if people are perceived a certain way over a long period of time they begin to embody the view people have of them, then perhaps the critical question is: have we (finally) come to accept ‘black’ as our default identifier? Are we finally black? If we are finally black, then the larger question also arises: how much of one’s self-identity is chosen at will? In other words, did we have a hand in choosing our blackness or was it imposed on us? What role does agency play in all of this, if any?

The questions we raise by no means attract simple answers, but they do remind us that identity formation and self-identification is an ongoing process of negotiation and reflection that involves, not just ourselves, but many more (significant) others and a plethora of other factors including context and meaning. All of these combine to create a veritable nexus that informs the way we think about ourselves and who we are. Langton rightly sees it as “a process of dialogue, of imagination, of representation and interpretation.”³⁵ What is clear, then, is that identity formation is not a simple process; rather it is a complex “fluid and contextual”³⁶ process that takes place over time. This complexity is aptly captured and well summarised by Paradies when he observes that:

³⁵ Marcia Langton, *Well, I heard It on the Radio and I saw It on the Television* (North Sydney: Australian Film Commission, 1993), 33.

³⁶ Yin Paradies, “Beyond Black and White: Essentialism, hybridity and Indigeneity,” *Journal of Sociology* 42:4 (2006): 355-367.

Identities are complex, multifaceted socio-historical constructs which are established through public acts of self-representation, private accountings of oneself or through the experience of being named by others, including by prevailing discourses.³⁷

Thus, we can say that as ‘new’ black bodies in Australia, our identities are bound to be challenged and that through a process of introspection, discussion, argumentation, reflection, representation, interpretation and re-interpretation we will not only forge our identities as first generation black African migrants in Australia, but also come to terms with the spatio-temporal influences on our identity, making it transient—an ongoing project.

The Paradox of Black [In]visibility

The contradiction of the black body in public space in Australia is that it is visibly different; or, as Ibrahim articulates, has “ultra-visibility,”³⁸ yet is also invisible. We became conscious of this quandary of in/visibility soon after arriving in Australia. We learnt through the pain of invisibility that accompanied being completely ignored in the shops, and the ultra-visibility that largely meant (and still means) an empty seat next to the black body on the bus or the train.

Vignette 3

My first real ‘blow’ of invisibility occurred a few days after my arrival in Australia: in a cellular phone shop waiting my turn to enquire about purchasing a cellular phone. I realised, after 15 minutes of waiting to be served, that there were three shop assistants in this shop who could have assisted me as soon as I walked into the shop (there was only one other customer in the shop already being helped by another assistant). Despite being the only other customer, I continued to wait and even as I got up to indicate my desire to be helped, the shop assistants instead all stood behind the counter, looking at their computer, not acknowledging my presence. After what seemed to be a lifetime of waiting, I started to leave, disheartened, yet still hoping that at least one of them would finally stop to ask if they could help. None of them did. Making my way

³⁷ Paradies, “Beyond Black and White: Essentialism, hybridity and Indigeneity,” 356.

³⁸ Ibrahim, “One is not Born Black: Becoming and the Phenomenon(ology) of Race.”

back to where I was staying, I re/played the experience in my mind, attempting to make sense of my invisibility in that shop. I realised then, that what I had experienced in that shop was a complete opposite of what I had experienced a few days before, on arrival in Australia: whereas I had been subjected to the ‘white gaze’ on the street, in the phone shop, my presence had not been recognised, or acknowledged. And so I was confronted with a different set of identity questions. Perhaps they had not seen me? Perhaps I should have spoken up? Where is my voice anyway? Had my voice been lost in my newly acquired ‘black’ identity? Or maybe, ‘race’ had nothing to do with it? Why should it?

Vignette 4

I recall a distinct moment in 2004 when the simultaneous visibility and invisibility that my dark skin commands became clear to me. It was at a particular embassy in Melbourne, while applying for a visa to attend a conference in one of the European Union countries. Despite getting to the embassy at the appointed time, I was asked to wait in an adjacent room. I remember having to wait for more than an hour before the ‘visa clerk’ came and ushered me into yet another room where he re/viewed my application and interrogated me further about the nature and purpose of my ‘trip’. I answered all his questions patiently, but was taken aback when he asked me how I was going to support myself (financially) while in that country. Despite my surprise, I responded that I would use a combination of cash and credit card and then he went on to ask if I had the cash to show him. I responded that since the trip was at least two months away, I had not changed any currency yet. Not satisfied with my response about the cash, he came up with a most audacious and insulting request. He asked: “Can you tell your bank to write a letter to us saying that your credit card will be okay to use while you are over there”? Unclear about the relevance of such a request (given that part of the usefulness of credit cards lies in their ability to be used in different countries), and upset at the way the interrogation was unfolding, I responded by asking him if he thought it plausible that a university lecturer such as myself would find it hard to take care of himself on a week-long, professional visit in their country, or whether I would risk leaving my tenured job in Australia to become an illegal immigrant in theirs. I also told him flatly that I would not ask my bank to write such a letter and that he should pass on my application for processing as it was. Driving back to work that day, I could not help wondering if the interrogation in that room had been already predetermined because of

the colour of my skin. Did it even matter to the clerk that I was a university lecturer, going on a university funded professional development trip? Or did it only matter that I was a visible black body that they needed to be cautious about before letting into their country? Why is it that despite the evidence in documentation before him (that I was a responsible academic) he chose to dwell on the colour of my skin? I could not help thinking about how from the minute of my arrival, though visible, I was ignored for a period of time; about how the lack of apology for the lateness and the subsequent questioning and ridiculous request for the letter from my bank were all part of a racial script that sought to position me, based on my dark skin, as underprivileged and untrustworthy.

Years later, re/reading Wright's book *Becoming Black* and reflecting on the encounters above, we start to untangle the paradox of our everyday experiences, then and now, 'living black' in Australia, and making sense of her contention that blackness in the west has always been produced in contradiction (to whiteness).³⁹ We realise now that negotiating black African diaspora subjectivities in the west involves not only negotiating distorted interpretations of our black bodies but also varying (and contradictory) degrees of in/visibility, which adds to the constraints in our social interactions.

The paradox of black [in]visibility in Australia means that even seemingly simple encounters such as the ones recounted above, which ordinarily should be about two people engaging in a commonplace transaction, become one of power, of whiteness over blackness. And again, we question why this is so? Perhaps the answer lies in the observation by Tettey and Pupilampu that:

[E]ven though the genotype, the invisible genetic make-up of human types, is the same across all groups, there is a tendency to emphasize the phenotype, the outwardly visible expression of the genes that varies across human types. This socially constructed emphasis on the latter is deeply ingrained because of the convenience it provides for creating hierarchies among humans, with attendant power imbalances (emphasis added).⁴⁰

³⁹ Wright, *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora*, 1-2.

⁴⁰ Wisdom Tettey and Kobla Pupilampu, "Continental Africans in Canada: Exploring a Neglected Dimension of the 'African-Canadian' Experience," in *The African*

So, for example, in Vignette 4, even a visa clerk, who has no power to grant or deny anyone a visa, tries to exercise power within what he sees as a hierarchical racial relation based on our ‘different’ skin colour. The behaviour of the visa clerk in this context then is akin to what Vambe and Zegeye call the “vulgarity of power”⁴¹ and which Mbembe describes as clothing oneself in a “cheap imitation of power to reproduce its epistemology.”⁴² The epistemology of the power reproduced in that encounter was the hegemonic power of the discursive space that had the dark body already constructed and treated as black, with all its connotations.⁴³ In these instances, what we with our black bodies did was to engage in racial transactions where routinised social power was freely expended upon our black bodies.⁴⁴ In such encounters we are mapped against what Ibrahim refers to as “the hegemonic white state of mind,”⁴⁵ and usually there is nothing we can do to prevent that from happening.

Conclusion

In this article we have tried to explore the “complex juxtapositions”⁴⁶ that inform our everyday lives in the new African diaspora in Australia, by making our experiences the focus of analysis in order to capture our individual and collective sense of lived time.⁴⁷ By interrogating and explicating our personal perceptions and accounts⁴⁸ of incidents in our everyday diasporic lives in Australia, we have written ourselves as ‘embodied’ text⁴⁹ in order to take “responsibility and control of our

Diaspora in Canada: Negotiating Identity and Belonging ed. Wisdom Tettey and Kobla Pupilampu (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2005), 11.

⁴¹ Maurice Vambe and Abebe Zegeye, “Notes on theorizing black diaspora from Africa,” *African Identities* 5:1 (2007): 5-32.

⁴² Achille Mbembe, “On the Postcolony: a brief response to critics,” *African Identities* 5:1 (2006): 143-178.

⁴³ Ibrahim, “One is not Born Black: Becoming and the Phenomenon(ology) of Race,” 78.

⁴⁴ Carbado, “How I became a black American.”

⁴⁵ Ibrahim, “One is not Born Black: Becoming and the Phenomenon(ology) of Race,” 78.

⁴⁶ D’Alisera, “Review of Ghosts and Shadows, by Atsuko Matsuoka and John Sorenson,” 190.

⁴⁷ Bruner, “Life as Narrative.”

⁴⁸ Robert Schweitzer, Jaimi H. Greenslade and Ashraf Kagee, “Coping and resilience in refugees from Sudan: a narrative account.”

⁴⁹ Sparkes, “Embodiment, academics and the audit culture: A story seeking consideration,” *Qualitative Research* 7:4 (2007): 521-550.

lives, professional and personal,”⁵⁰ rather than re/cast ourselves in the ‘problem’ (or victimhood) paradigm that denies us any agency.

In migrating to Australia we are confronted with a ‘new’ range of identities and identity markers that hitherto were not part of our conscious self-identities. This has led to us being identified by others, and sometimes identifying ourselves, as ‘black’; a label that was not available to us in our respective homelands of Zimbabwe and Ghana. This ascription, as Carbado notes, “is part of a broader social practice wherein all of us are made intelligible via racial categorization.”⁵¹ While we accept that our (self) identity can and is affected by wider societal discourses, trends, interpretations and contexts, we do not deny the role of agency—our own selves—in forging this identity through a process that conflates our experiences, reflections, interpretations and reinterpretations.

We have also argued that our black bodies in public space in Australia evoke contradictory responses, possessing as they do ‘ultra-visibility,’ while at the same time inviting invisibility and/or avoidance. In this regard, we identify closely with Carbado when he summarises his experiences in the United States thus:

I was closely followed or completely ignored when I visited department stores. Women clutched their purses upon encountering me in elevators. People crossed the street to avoid me. The seat beside me on the bus was almost always racially available to another black person.⁵²

We argue that our experiences as discussed in this article not only re-affirm Carbado’s contention, but also reveal the challenges that confront those of us embodying this contradiction. For us, what makes our experiences a contradiction is that they occur in a society hailed as multicultural which promotes discourses of tolerance, diversity and harmony. Yet, as our experiences suggest, even though multiculturalism—particularly as policy—is celebrated and promoted in Australia, as a society it is still imagined as ‘white’. Consequently, white hegemonic power still operates to not only construct the non-

⁵⁰ Bolton, “Narrative Writing: Reflective Enquiry into Professional Practice,” 205.

⁵¹ Carbado, “How I became a black American,” 1.

⁵² Carbado, “How I became a black American,” 1-2.

white 'other' in problematic ways, but also to silence any meaningful and progressive discussions of racism. While we are cautious of writing that slips into and reinforces some unitary notions of new African diaspora, we believe that narrating our experiences can provide some insight into how we as first generation skilled African migrants (as opposed to those who have had other emigration pathways) confront and deal with the dilemmas of negotiating subjectivity and the paradoxical 'other-ness' in the new Australian diaspora.

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