



Australasian Review of African Studies

The African Studies Association
of Australasia and The Pacific

Promoting African Studies in the region since 1978

Volume 42 Number 2 DECEMBER 2021

CONTENTS

Editor's Introduction

Articles

Rethinking the Influence of Colonialism on Secession in Africa: the Case of the Western Togoland Independence Movement in Ghana

- Samuel Adu-Gyamfi, Sebastian Paolo Angzorokuu,
Edward Brenya, Dominic Degraft Arthur and John Mensah Letsu

Afrocentric Digital Belonging: Perspectives from Black African Young People in Australia

- Claire Moran and Virginia Mapedzahama

Studying Africa in the Australian Capital Territory: Bureaucratisation, Disciplinisation and Projectisation

- Ibrahim Abraham and Rocco Weglarz

Book Reviews

THE AUSTRALASIAN REVIEW OF AFRICAN STUDIES VOLUME 42 NUMBER 2 DECEMBER 2021

THE

Australasian Review of African Studies

VOLUME 42 NUMBER 2 DECEMBER 2021



AFRICAN STUDIES ASSOCIATION
OF AUSTRALASIA AND THE PACIFIC

THE AUSTRALASIAN REVIEW OF AFRICAN STUDIES

Volume 42 Number 2 DECEMBER 2021

The Australasian Review of African Studies aims to contribute to a better understanding of Africa and the African Diaspora in Australasia and the Pacific. It is published twice a year in June and December by The African Studies Association of Australasia and the Pacific. ARAS is a multi-disciplinary journal that seeks to provide critical, authoritative and accessible material on a range of African affairs interesting and readable to as broad an audience as possible, both academic and non-academic. All articles are:

Double blind peer reviewed by two independent and qualified experts in their entirety prior to publication. Available electronically through Informit Databases, and the AFSAAP website www.afsaap.org.au open access. Indexed through:

- SCOPUS
- ProQuest Social Science, Sociological Abstracts and PAISIndex
- European Reference Index for the Humanities (ERIH)
- Clarivate Analytics Web of Science Core Collection (ESCI) Emerging Sources Citation Index
- Ranked within the Excellence in Research for Australia journals (ERA ID 18727).

Full details and guidelines for authors are available from <http://afsaap.org.au/publications/aras/>

Editor: Geoffrey Hawker PhD, Macquarie University, editor@afsaap.org.au

Associate Editor - Finex Ndhlovu PhD, editor@afsaap.org.au

Co-Editors: Mengistu Amberber PhD; Anne Bartlett PhD; Souheir Edelbi PhD; Mariam Koslay; Peter Limb PhD; Tass Holmes PhD

Book Reviews Editor: Nikola Pijovic PhD, bookreviews@afsaap.org.au

All correspondence should be sent to: editor@afsaap.org.au

ISSN No: 1447-8420

Online ISSN: 2203-5184

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22160/22035184/>

International Editorial Advisory Board

Chair: Tony Binns, Department of Geography, University of Otago, New Zealand

Dmitri Bondarenko, Institute for African Studies, Russian Academy of Science

Jean Burke, Australian Catholic University, Australia

Graeme Counsel, University of Melbourne, Australia

David Dorward, History Program, La Trobe University, Australia

Bina Fernandez, School of Social and Political Sciences, The University of Melbourne, Australia

Farida Fozdar, Department of Anthropology and Sociology, University of Western Australia

Gareth Griffiths, English and Cultural Studies, University of Western Australia

Heidi Hudson, Centre for Africa Studies, University of the Free State, South Africa

Preben Kaarsholm, Department of Society and Globalisation, Roskilde University, Denmark

Martin Klein, History, University of Toronto, Canada

Scott MacWilliam, College of Asia and the Pacific, Australian National University, Australia

Jay Marlowe, University of Auckland, NZ

Jody McBrien, College of Education, University of Florida, USA

Apollo Nsubuga-Kyobe, School of Business, La Trobe University, Australia

Thomas Spear, Department of History, University of Wisconsin at Madison, USA

Joan Wardrop, Curtin University of Technology; and University of Notre Dame, Australia

Helen Ware, Peace Studies Centre, University of New England, Australia

AFRICAN STUDIES ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALASIA AND THE PACIFIC

Membership of the **African Studies Association of Australasia and the Pacific** includes subscription to *The Australasian Review of African Studies*, the AFSAAP monthly newsletter *Habari kwa Ufupi*, and invitations to AFSAAP's annual conference, and other opportunities.

The annual subscription fee is modest and enables AFSAAP to promote African Studies and research in this region.

AFSAAP encourages interested parties to subscribe to this journal to support AFSAAP's aims.

Annual Subscription Fees (2022)

\$100 Regular Member in Australasia Pacific Region (outside the region \$110)

\$180 Organizational Membership (outside the region \$200)

\$70 Student Member/ Pensioner/ Concession

Please refer to the AFSAAP website for updated membership and payment information
www.afsaap.org.au

Views expressed in articles, reviews and notes published in ARAS do not necessarily reflect the views of AFSAAP, the ARAS Editors or the International Editorial Advisory Board.

AFSAAP Executive 2021-22

President - Anne Bartlett PhD

Email: president@afsaap.org.au

Vice President - Mengistu Amberber PhD

Email: vice-president@afsaap.org.au

Secretary - Souheir Edelbi PhD

Email: secretary@afsaap.org.au

Treasurer - Shanil Samarakoon PhD

Email: treasurer@afsaap.org.au

ARAS Editor - Geoffrey Hawker PhD

Email: editor@afsaap.org.au

ARAS Associate Editor - Finex Ndhlovu PhD

Email: editor@afsaap.org.au

Postgraduate Representatives -

Adjoa Assan

Leighann Spencer

Email: postgraduate@afsaap.org.au

Executive members (Ordinary)

Tass Holmes PhD

Chiemezie Nwosu

THE AUSTRALASIAN REVIEW OF AFRICAN STUDIES

VOLUME 42 NUMBER 2
DECEMBER 2021

CONTENTS

Editor's Introduction

Articles

Rethinking the Influence of Colonialism on Secession in Africa: the Case of the Western Togoland Independence Movement in Ghana

Samuel Adu-Gyamfi, Sebastian Paolo Angzoorokuu, Edward Brenya, Dominic Degraft Arthur and John Mensah Letsu 4

Afrocentric Digital Belonging: Perspectives from Black African Young People in Australia

Claire Moran and Virginia Mapedzahama 26

Studying Africa in the Australian Capital Territory: Bureaucratisation, Disciplinisation and Projectisation

Ibrahim Abraham and Rocco Weglarz 54

Book Reviews

Finex Ndhlovu and Leketi Makalela. *Decolonising Multilingualism in Africa: Recentering Silenced Voices from the Global South*

Vera Williams Tetteh 79

Dike Okoro. *Lupenga Mphande: Eco-critical Poet and Political Activist*

Benjamin Kwakye 82

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Europe burns, but much of Africa stands aloof from the war in the Ukraine. If voting in the United Nations General Assembly is to be taken as an indication, then somewhat more than half the nations of sub-Saharan Africa voted against, or abstained from, or found reasons not to be present for, the vote on 2 March 2022 that “Condem[ed] the 24 February 2022 declaration by the Russian Federation of a ‘special military operation’ in Ukraine”. Those nations totalled twenty-two, those in favour just nineteen. That makes sub-Saharan Africa the least supportive region in the world of Western and allied actions.

This is not the place to debate the rights and wrongs of the twenty-two or the nineteen. Raw numbers are not everything, and no doubt behind a vote in the United Nations for any nation lies a complexity of factors that can be too readily generalised; political leaders of different persuasions can come to the same conclusion for reasons that differ and they do not necessarily reflect broader opinion in their nations. But a minority of commentators have been willing to say that the war arouses conflicting sentiments in Africa when memories of colonialism, of ongoing dependence on Western aid with strings, of racism in Europe in recent years and more specifically arising from the Ukraine situation, and of course, it is true, the dependence of some on Russian resources including armaments, all make for a volatile mix of motives.

ARAS is a journal of scholarship not of polemic, unless a polemic is clearly identified as such, and our tradition is to address such issues from a secure basis of research evidence. Thus this edition contains material that relates to those themes, even though none is directly or even remotely connected to the present situation in Europe. The first paper, by Adu-Gyamfi, Angzoorokuu, Brenya, Arthur and Letsu, deals with the tortuous history of secession movements in Ghana and documents the ongoing struggle for secession in part of that nation; it shows how, as elsewhere in Africa, colonial legacies built both an apparently strong state but also one that encapsulates within it certain tensions that continue to fuel secessionist movements.

The following two papers are very different in approach but continue a long standing preoccupation of this journal with Africans of the diaspora in Australasia and with the study of Africa, and associated research and teaching, in universities and other educational locales. The paper by Moran and Mapedzahama documents many of the negative pressures experienced

by African immigrants to Australia; but it also documents how individuals through their digital lives can negotiate and overcome those issues and create for themselves lives beyond the digital that refute so many of the racist prejudices still evident in Australia. This paper offers new insight into the experiences and strategies of young African Australians especially.

The paper by Abraham and Weglarz extends a tradition in the journal brought forward especially by an earlier editor, Dr Tanya Lyons. They examine the ways in which Australian academics in a specific locale of high significance have developed African themes in their teaching and research and been able to consider themselves as Africanists - or, in many cases, have not been able so to consider themselves, due to the demands to show a disciplinary identity, to conform to bureaucratisation in the university sector, and under funding pressure to become unduly project oriented. Their analysis has lessons for intellectual work broadly considered.

Taken together, the papers show that the universities and independent scholars alike continue to produce research based findings of quality that deepen our understanding of historical and contemporary problems. Such work is not easily undertaken however. The situations of Australasia, Africa and a Europe at war are not to be lightly linked but it is clear that “speaking truth to power” remains an objective across the globe that has to be pursued with whatever means are available. ARAS welcomes further contributions to critical scholarship.

Geoffrey Hawker
Editor-in-Chief
editor@afsaap.org.au



Rethinking the Influence of Colonialism on Secession in Africa: the Case of the Western Togoland Independence Movement in Ghana

Samuel Adu-Gyamfi*
Sebastian Paolo Angzoorkuu+
Edward Brenya*
Dominic Degraft Arthur*
John Mensah Letsu*

*Department of History and Political Studies, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana
+Department of History and Political Studies, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana and School of Political Science and International Studies University of Queensland, Australia

Abstract

Secessionism or separatism has featured prominently in the literature on state formation and statehood, especially in post-colonial settings such as Africa, where complex historical and socio-political developments have often turned nationalism into separatist movements and security crises. While the debates largely view colonial structures as key enablers of nationalist and separatist movements, there is insufficient discussion about another important dimension of the subject: how colonial boundary-creations both enable and impede the success of nationalism and separatism in some jurisdictions. We use the case of the Western Togoland Movement to illustrate how the foundations of colonialism both enable and inhibit movements for the secession of the previously known Western Togoland from the state of Ghana. Data for this study were drawn from archival documents and interviews with major stakeholders with extensive knowledge of the subject. The study furthers understanding of the modern state system in post-colonial territories that embody contentions about legitimacy while appearing resilient and representative of strong, unified political entities.



Introduction

Scholarly interest in European colonisation of the African continent has grown significantly in recent decades (MacKenzie 2016), primarily because the impacts of colonialism did not end after independence and still permeate the cultures and identities of formerly colonised peoples. The official colonisation of the continent began with the Berlin Conference in 1884-1885 when the partitioning of the continent among competing European powers, particularly Britain, France, Germany, Portugal, and Belgium, split the territories of certain ethnic groups by arbitrary boundaries and separated some kin and kith from their entire lineages. This divided Africa into permanent boundaries that define the size and territorial integrity of contemporary states in the continent (Griffiths 1986; Heath 2010; MacKenzie 2016), though the Berlin conference did not halt subsequent competition for territories in Africa by European powers. Importantly, the post-World War I Treaty of Versailles dispossessed some powers, especially Germany, of colonial territorial possessions, which mainly went to France, Britain and other Allied nations, while some jurisdictions were placed under the supervision of the League of Nations. Consequently, some colonial territories have come under more than one colonial administration (Heath 2010; MacKenzie 2016). Thus German Cameroon and German Togoland were shared between Britain and France respectively post-Versailles. In sum, the colonial boundary creation and transitions from the Berlin Conference and Versailles Treaty have laid a foundation for some of the most destructive conflicts due to claims of identity, nationalism, and separatism (Alex, 2004).

Scholarly analysis accords nationalist and separatist claims a long-standing history globally (Van Evera 1994; Brown 1980; Brown et al. 2001). Yet, the continent of Africa has been captured in the literature as the most affected by separatist activities, due to the continent's unique colonial and post-colonial experience which both causes and exacerbates complex socio-political relations, fragility, and instability within and across many nations (Olayode, 2010). We seek to give nuance to the scholarly debates that usually concentrate on establishing a positive relationship between colonialism and nationalism and separatism. Our study is derived from a broader research project, "Regional Unification in AFRICA: A Historical Study of the British West Togoland Question from 1956 to 2019", in the Department of History and Political Studies, KNUST.



We show that colonialism has both impeded and promoted separatist movements, giving to some polities a semblance of strength whilst shrouding them also with fragility. Jackson and Rosberg (1982), for instance, have cited neighbourhood and international community support for the conspicuously weak but seemingly strong nature of the African state. Besides, others have also linked the resilience of African states to a long-standing phenomenon of decentralised patronage politics which binds various units and sub-units within polities together, and the same networks with the support of the international community, contribute to peace and sustenance of the modern state (Clapham 1998; Renders & Terlinden 2010; Kenny 2015). However, these accounts pay scant attention to how complex political histories from colonialism may have contributed to the ‘weak but strong’ nature of some states in Africa.

Using the case of the Western Togoland separatist movement in Ghana, we demonstrate how the colonial context in the country has not only promoted nationalist and separatist activities but also hindered them. Through a plebiscite in 1956, Western Togoland (British Togoland) became part of the Gold Coast (modern-day Ghana) at Ghana's independence in March 1957. The plebiscite itself was not a colonial legacy—a ‘democratic’ UN instrument, its application was necessary because of the previous colonially imposed structure—but its outcome revealed a split of opinion between the upper and lower Western Togoland. While a section of the people in Trans-Volta Togo, Upper Volta (notably Dagomba, Gonja, and Mamprusi) stood for the integration of the British Togoland with the Gold Coast, others (mostly the Ewes to the South) demanded that the territory should remain as a separate entity under trusteeship status with the UN for deliberation in the future. This rejection of the integration of the Western Togoland into the Gold Coast resurfaced after independence with groups such as the National Liberation Movement of Western Togoland and Homeland Study Group Foundation attempting to secede Western Togoland, or at least the Volta and Oti regions to the south, from Ghana (Brown 1980; Buah, 1998). The emergence of such groups and the dynamics of the reactions from across the social compositions within the former Western Togoland portray the crumbling but resilient nature of the Ghanaian state, rooted in the colonial political architecture.



We make three disclaimers. First, we do not suggest any support for the colonial enterprise, neither do we ascribe a value judgment on the concept and practice of the modern state. Second, we do not claim that colonialism has caused stability in some settings and instability elsewhere. Third, this paper mainly illustrates how the context of colonialism laid the foundation for the semblances of both integration and disintegration in the post-colonial state, and the ambivalences of statism, peace, and security. Thus, the object is to provoke a new conversation on colonialism and the seeming stability of the modern state, without any judgment of its implication on the healthiness or otherwise of domestic, regional, and global politics and economies.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. The first part presents the research methodology, following which we examine the central conceptual issues of secession and plebiscite, giving some manifestations of the concepts in Africa. We then present the historical account of the events leading to the 1956 plebiscite of the British Togoland, which provides the relevant background to the subsequent discussion about the attempts at secession of the Western Togoland emanating mainly from the 'Eweland'. This helps to better understand the section of the Western Togoland which has been pushing the separatist agenda and how that is reflected in the rest of the former Western Togoland territory. We then present the activities of the Homeland Study Group from the Eweland section of the Western Togoland (now Oti and Volta regions), who have been championing the independence of Western Togoland. Here, the authors have not observed or argued that there is a direct connection between colonial structures and the ideology of the secessionist movement. The findings have mainly indicated that colonial foundations have provoked the separatist movements, while in the same vein, the colonial structures inherited within the contemporary state architecture, also hinder the success of secessionism. The conclusion affirms that the colonial boundary creation both enables and weakens secession in the former British, German, and French colonies that have now been amalgamated into the Ghanaian state.

Methods of the study

This paper interrogates the dual influence of colonialism on secessionism and territorial stability in Africa, using the Western Togoland independence movement in Ghana as a case study. The study deployed



qualitative methods and context analysis to understand the interactions among the different actors, as well as their interests and perspectives of the subject matter. Data were collected in two months, May - June 2020, from both primary and secondary sources. The primary data were generated through face-to-face interviews using unstructured questions with participants, including members and leaders of the Homeland Study Group Foundation, and community leaders from various parts of the former British Togoland, who were chosen through the purposive and snowballing approaches. In addition, written interview questions were administered via emails to scholars, politicians, and practitioners in different institutions in Ghana with considerable knowledge of the subject matter. Secondary and primary written sources of data for the study depended largely on documents on the historical and contemporary political developments of the Homeland Study Group in the Volta Region of Ghana (the former Western Togoland), retrieved from the Public Records and Archives Administration Department (PRAAD) in Accra and the Volta region. Finally, the primary data obtained through unstructured interviews and archival sources were supplemented with secondary data generated from documentary analysis of the subject matter. These secondary data were triangulated with transcripts and notes collected from the field and subjected to content and thematic analysis.

Conceptual Issues - Secession

Although rooted in different political and legal leanings, assessments, and justifications, scholars have generally converged on the definition of secession as the withdrawal of territory and sovereignty from an internationally recognised state (Morse, 1986). Secession suggests at least the withdrawal or detachment of territory and its population from the territory of an established state or political unit, in which case a state is said to have lost its sovereignty or the capacity to exercise its sovereignty over the detached territory (Pavković & Radan, 2011). Siroky (2011) analyses the definitions of secession along three broad dimensions - (a) the means which are used to affect the withdrawal or detachment from the state (that is either the use of force or the threat of the use of force or its absence in the secession process); (b) the effect of the withdrawal on the territorial integrity of the state from which the withdrawal is made or sought to be made (that is, whether the detachments have breached the state's territorial



integrity, or the detached territories are not considered part of the state's bounded jurisdiction); and (c) the effect on the legal and political identity of the state from which the withdrawal is made (that is, some states retain their previous legal/political identity after the withdrawal, while others change and/or lose it altogether).

Though secessionism and the associated activities predate the modern state system, the post-World War II period and in particular the ending of the Cold War prompted or enabled new secessionist movements and reinvigorated dormant separatist claims all over the world, due to the spread of people's rights to self-determination. McGee and Lam (1992) argue that secession is not an instant and simple fact, but usually involves complex series of claims and decisions, negotiations, and struggle, which may or may not lead to the creation of a new state. To McGee and Lam, secession processes flow complexly through both domestic and international arenas. Usually, international law sets up a 'due process' that guides the creation of states in case of secession. This process includes three rules addressed to the secessionist movement's authorities: there must be no foreign direct or indirect military support; there is consent of the majority of the local population expressed through a referendum; and there is respect of the *uti possidetis* principle (McGee & Lam 1992; Monahan 1995).

Secession in Africa

Englebert and Hummel (2005) reveal, perhaps surprisingly, that Africa has experienced fewer secessionist movements over the past forty years than any other place in the world, even though the continent is otherwise characterised by political violence and many of the factors usually associated with separatism—Africa has weak sovereignty equilibrium. Correspondingly, Natsios, and Abramowitz (2011) have also observed that during the past four decades, only 10 of 48 (now 54) African countries have experienced secessionist movements while 30 of them have suffered non-secessionist conflicts. The data further shows that “since 1960, 44 percent of domestic conflict years in the Middle East and North Africa, 47 percent of those in Asia, and 84 percent of those in Europe have had separatist content, as against 27 percent in sub-Saharan Africa” (Englebert & Hummel, 2005: 400). A possible reason for the relatively small number of secession movements in Africa, Englebert and Hummel (2005) claim, is



that regional leaders are usually expected to capitalise on local grievances to promote separatism. However, some nationalist leaders in Africa envisage few potential rewards for the seceded or autonomous territory compared with the benefits they receive when integrated with or under the partial control of institutions of the sovereign national state. Consequently, most nationalist leaders and regional elites fail to capitalise on the preconditions for separatism because of the lack of economic diversification that usually attracts material benefits for the ruling elites of autonomous entities (Herbst & Mills, 2009). Nonetheless, the accuracy of these data has been criticised - whether, for example, the absolute definition of a successful secession as a complete detachment from a state may ignore other resulting adjustments and benefits in favour of the separatist region(s), or whether an absolute detachment (e.g., South Sudan from Sudan) is indeed a success in itself for the growth of a polity (see Spears 2004; Zachary 2011; Caspersen 2013).

Plebiscite

According to Qvortrup, O'Leary, and Wintrobe (2020), a plebiscite is an instrument usually deployed by governments or multi-national organisations that involves voting by a populace on political decisions such as the creation of new administrative regions or proposed constitutional changes or policy issues, such as those concerning human rights. Wintrobe (2007) suggests that plebiscites gained prominence from the end of World War I, when decisions had to be taken on territories such as northern Schleswig and Upper Silesia, which were returned to Denmark and Poland respectively through plebiscites. Wintrobe (2007) argues, however, that since World War II plebiscites, while following democratic procedures, have been used mostly in undemocratic systems to attain political ambitions. In the post-Cold War era, plebiscites have been applied to test the effectiveness of totalitarian parties (Linz, 2000). Qvortrup et al. (2020) suggest such practices have a long genealogy. Their analysis of 162 referendums from 1800 to 2012, in states defined by Freedom House criteria as undemocratic, found that nearly all results, mostly yes-votes, were pre-determined in one way or another. Thus a plebiscite was used as the favourite device of French Emperors Napoleon Bonaparte and Louis Napoleon to endorse their charismatic leadership (Fimiani, 2011). In the modern era, European despots such as Hitler and Mussolini held



plebiscites in which rejection of their proposals were unthinkable (Wintrobe, 2007). Nonetheless, all the foregoing discussions acknowledge that plebiscites also can promote democratic values, as they enable citizens to feel part of governance, while others feel liberated when their demands for detachment are met, for instance in South Sudan and Eritrea.

The plebiscite and secession of British Togoland (Western Togoland)

To understand the British Togoland question, it is imperative to engage the history of British colonialism in the Western stretch of Togo. Here, we first discuss a brief history of how Western Togoland became integral to modern-day Ghana followed by an examination of the demand by part of 'Eweland' for an autonomous Western Togoland. The Germans were the first European power to occupy this territory, starting with German missionaries in 1847, followed by German merchants who launched a base at Anécho on the coast (History World, 2020). Commissioner Gustav Nachigal arrived in 1884 and convinced several tribal chieftains to admit the protection of the German emperor and to fly the German flag above their villages. Togoland became a German protectorate in 1884 just forty years after the Bond of 1844¹ was signed between the Chiefs in the Gold Coast colony and Commander Hill, the British colonial representative (Buah, 1998). In 1885, the Berlin Conference upheld Togoland as a German colony, bordering Britain's Gold Coast to the West and France's Dahomey to the East (Bulgarelli, 2018).

During World War I, France and Britain allied and invaded Germany's Togoland protectorate in 1914. The two allies divided Togo between themselves, administering the regions adjacent to their colonies (Zimmerman 2012; Ashon 2019). In the Treaty of Versailles, 1919, Germany renounced its sovereignty over all her African colonies including Togoland. The League of Nations gave mandates in 1922 to France and Britain for the areas of Togo which they were already administering under

¹The Bond of 1844 was the formal instrument that established British rule over the Gold Coast. The bond was signed between chiefs from the coastal part of the Gold Coast and the British for protection against the Asante. The Bond of 1844 thus represented the handing over of Africa's sovereignty to colonial masters, aiding the British to effectively start colonial rule in the Gold Coast (see Danquah, 1957).



a bilateral agreement of 1919. Britain took possession of the German territory bordering the Gold Coast lying to the West of the central plateau. This became British Togoland, Western Togoland. On its part, France took over the entire coastline and the railway network to the East, French Togoland (Global Security 2020). However, the initial 19th-century boundary between the Gold Coast and Togoland had cut through the tribal territories of the Ewe in the south and the Dagomba and Mamprusi in the north of modern-day Ghana. Yet, both spheres of the territory form part of the Western Togoland. The geographic north versus south divide of the Western Togoland was of great significance when independence approached in the 1950s and still plays out in contemporary secessionist movements.

Following Germany's defeat in World War II, its Togoland territory was to be controlled as a mandated territory under the League of Nations and as a trust territory under the United Nations (UN) in 1945 (UN/SA collection, 1956). In the plebiscite of 1956, British Togoland voted by a majority of 57.9% to unite with the Gold Coast and against the connection to French Togo. The pattern of voting mirrored the shared ethnic and dialectal identity and the pre-colonial political acquaintances of the people with a leg on each side of the original Anglo-German turned Anglo-French boundary.

In the districts of British Togoland associated with the Mamprusi and Dagomba to the north, there was great support for union with the Gold Coast, while in the Ewe-speaking areas of the south, the desire was strongly in favour of separation from independent Ghana, as indicated in the voting pattern (see table 1). In the center, the desire for a union was not so strong. In the Buem/Krachi district, for instance, the Akan-speaking origins might have supported unification with the Gold Coast while the marginal Buem and other ethnic groups would have opted for secession. In the Kpandai area of the Gonja district, the Nchumuru and the Konkombas abhorred Gonja domination and have persistently sought to establish their independence, hence the relatively large vote against amalgamation with the Gold Coast, which the Gonja voted for (Kumah, 1943). With the majority vote in the plebiscite, Western Togoland officially became part of Ghana when the country gained independence on March 6, 1957.



Table 1. Result of the 1956 plebiscite

District	Number of Votes Cast for:	
	Union	Separation
Mamprusi	17,870	3,429
Dagomba	28,083	6,549
Gonja	3,166	2,729
Buem/Krachi	28,178	18,775
Kpando	8,581	17,029
Ho	7,217	18,981
Totals	93,095 (58 %)	67,492 (42 %)

Source: *Yearbook of the United Nations*, 1956 (chapter V, p. 368)

As shown in table 1 above, most of the Ewe in the south (the districts of Buem/Krachi, Kpando, and Ho) voted for separation from the Gold Coast. Rejecting the outcome of the 1956 plebiscite, thus the union of Western Togoland and Ghana, some groups (notably the Homeland Study Group Foundation) have emerged from the Ewe section of the Western Togoland seeking to secede from Ghana to form the ‘Republic of Western Togoland’. This nationalist and separatist movement started before Ghana (the union of Gold Coast and Western Togoland) gained independence. For instance, on the eve of Ghana’s independence on 6 March 1957, the government had to put down an armed Ewe rebellion by the people of Alavanyo, in the southern section of British Togoland, who were against integration with the Gold Coast despite the outcome of the plebiscite (Bening, 1983).



Map of Western Togoland (shaded), now integral within Republic of Ghana



Source: African-European Fellowship (2019)

The Eweland and the Western Togoland secession question

The Eweland is the area occupied by an aspect of the Northern region, the Upper East region, and the whole of the former Volta Region which has been divided into the Oti and Volta Regions of Ghana (Yayoh, 2015). Although the Ewe recognise that they are one group, they are separated into various customary, decentralised states (dukowo) and chiefdoms (Amenumey, 1969). Colonialism split the Ewe into several groups found in



modern-day Benin, Togo, and Ghana. These groups have always expressed their desire to reunite. With “boundary agreements between Britain and Germany (1885-1890), the Ewe territory was split into two. The states of Anlo, Some, Klikor, Peki, and Tongu became part of the Gold Coast Protectorate, and the rest of the Ewe country became part of the German Protectorate of Togoland” (Amenumey, 1969:67).

Thus, when the proposed partition of Togoland was made known in 1919, the Ewe people in the Lome and Keta districts, that is, from both the French and British spheres, immediately protested. In September 1919, some Ewe chiefs sent a despatch to Lord Milner, the British Secretary of State for the Colonies, indicating that on account of tribal, territorial, educational, and economic considerations, they wished to be under British Rule. They further protested the absorption of Togo into the French colonial empire as such a move would sever the Ewe in Togo from those of the south-eastern Gold Coast, which would have economic implications for the Ewe country (Amenumey, 1969:70). Nonetheless, by the time the German Togoland was ceded to the French and English post-World War II, the Eweland was split into three: (a) the section under French Mandate, (b) the section under British Mandate, and (c) the section under the Gold Coast colony (Amenumey, 1969:69).

By 1956 most chiefs from the secessionist zone were seeking autonomy, resisting to join Ghana. They include chiefs from Anfoega, Gbi, Ve, Tsrukpe, Goviefe, Lipke, and Santrokofi, who wrote to the governor through the Provincial Commissioner’s Officer of Koforidua. The petitioners requested instead a federal status (“Duko-Blanuwo”). This petition was preceded by one on 14 January 1941 to which the secretary for native affairs replied requesting the petitioners to form an amalgamation for the separate region they demanded or join the already existing amalgamation (Ghana). However, given the ethnic and sectoral divisions within the Western Togoland, this large amalgamation was never achieved and is still far from being achieved. This tradition of Ewes seceding from socio-political units is carried down from the colonial to the post-colonial era, usually triggered by a feeling of the suppressed political right not to be dominated by any other ethnic group (Permanent Mandates Commission, PMC1938; Amenumey 1969). This view is however described by Brown (1980) as merely stereotypical.



Following efforts by the chiefs to promote Ewe unity, the Ewe-educated intelligentsia became actively involved in calls for ethnic unity after the partitioning of the Eweland, as 'an autonomous Ewe state'. Subsequently, however, this goal tended to give way to the demand that all Ewes should be brought within the Gold Coast, under British jurisdiction. This seemed the best way of ending the oppressive colonial regime in French Togo and appealed to the Ewes already in the Gold Coast since it would increase their population from about 9 to 20 percent, thereby partly empowering the Ewe to reduce the Akan majority domination in Ghana. One variation of this demand favoured, for example, by Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first president, was that the whole of French Togo, and not just the Ewe areas, should become part of an enlarged Gold Coast. This however failed to come to fruition. By the mid-1950s, the colonial powers had effectually limited the instant options concerning the Ewe partition (Brown, 1980). The vision of uniting all the Ewes within the Gold Coast thus began to fade, and political agitation therefore progressively focused on the narrower issue of ending the disruptive Anglo-French boundary by reuniting the two sections of the old German colony (Brown, 1980).

After Ghana's independence, the grievances of secessionist movements were about economic difficulties or discrimination from incumbent governments, as well as the thirst for political power by some nationalist leaders within the Togoland or the Volta region to carve out an autonomous Eweland. One of the triggers of the twentieth-century secessionist activities is minority sentiment on the part of the Ewes and discrimination from ruling governments. Special mention is usually given to the Second Republic of Ghana, led by Busia, who was accused of excluding the representation of the Volta region in his cabinets (Brown, 1980). The Progressive Party of Busia's administration declined all developmental projects and expenditures in the Volta region. A crisis emerged in February 1970, when the regime embarked on a purge of civil service and police, ostensibly to reverse previous acts of nepotism; but a disproportionate number of the 568 people to be dismissed were Ewes (Smock & Smock, 1975). The leading Ewe officers were removed from their position of command as military officers, notable among them Brigadier Amenu, Lieutenant-Colonel Kattah, and Brigadier Ashley-Lassen. These discriminations were among the justifications of the military coup by Colonel Acheampong in January 1972 (Chazan, 1983).



At that time the National Liberation Movement of Western Togoland was formed and in November 1972 the leadership of the movement sent a petition to the Organisation of Africa Union (OAU), indicating that they were suppressed under colonial rule and expected a better treatment after independence; but to them the suppression had rather intensified in the post-independence period after Nkrumah's reign (Skinner, 2010).

The successor to the Progressive Party, the National Redemption Council (NRC) government under Col. Acheampong, pledged to eradicate tribalism from all forms of society but was a replica of the former. Three of the nine members who were Ewes from the Volta region (Selomey, Ago and Ashley–Lassen, the last appointed as chief of Defence Staff), were forced to retire from both their political and military positions. Acheampong believed that internal cohesion was threatened by the Ewe-dominated security forces. These among other discriminations made most Ewes feel not part of Ghana, and many were attracted to secede from Ghana (Awoonor, 1984). Nonetheless, the development and discrimination narrative is also spread across other regions apart from the Volta region. Thus the Central and Northern regions have been noted for underdevelopment over many decades, yet, as the plebiscite results showed, most parts of the Northern Western Togoland voted to integrate into Ghana and did not wish to secede. This makes the Western Togoland secession issue an Ewe question, and thus an identity-based issue.

The Homeland Study Group Foundation (HSGF)

Perhaps the most ambitious separatist movement for an independent Western Togoland is the Homeland Study Group Foundation (HSGF). The leader of the HSGF, Charles Kormi Kudzordzi (Papavi), declared an “independent Western Togoland state” from Ghana before a gathering of separatist supporters in Ho, the Volta regional capital on September 16, 2019 (Bokpe, 2019). Thus, of all the previous separatist movements, the HSGF became the front line organisation with a definite aim to restore “the independence of the pre-independence Western Togoland territory” that became part of Ghana following the 1956 plebiscite (Bokpe, 2019). Led by a cross-section of Ewe intelligentsia and nationalists, the HSGF was formed in June 1994, two years into Ghana's Fourth Republic. Its founding leader, Charles Kormi Kudjorji, had been a director of education in the Ghana Education Service at Kejevi (Interview, Public Relations Officer



[PRO] of HSGF, Ho, 15th May 2020). The group was birthed under the new constitutional regime in Ghana that favoured political activism. It claims to champion the history and the value of the Ewes, mainly focusing on bringing the 1956 plebiscite to question through critical analysis, and thus has been concerned to unearth the political history of the Ewes. The activities of the HSGF characterise it as a secessionist movement, educating their people that the plebiscite is a fraud and injustice on the people of Western Togoland. For instance, the PRO of the HSGF stressed that “this plebiscite was organised with a lot of acrimonies because Nkrumah who does not have the right to enter Western Togoland went to the territory to campaign for the unification of the Western Togoland and Gold Coast” (Ibid.). Most of the interviewees argued that a majority of the Southern Togoland were disenfranchised or did not take part in the voting, with the main claim that they did not find it necessary to vote to join their towns with another.

Although the outcome of the plebiscite favoured the unification, the HSGF still pushes to secede from Ghana. The group believes that the plebiscite was not only undemocratic against the southern Togoland, but also that the UN-supervised plebiscite did not deliver a union with Ghana, as claimed in most public commentaries and the literature. The group’s PRO claimed in different interviews that if there is a union between Ghana and the Western Togoland then Ghana should prove the documentation of the Union and those who appended their signatures to the Union. He indicated that the group has written letters to the office of the Attorney General and the Ghana Library Board, but the replies were that no documents exist on the union of Ghana and Western Togoland. The Group further wrote to the UN but got the same reply. Again, they perused the documents in the national archives of Ghana, which was established in 1946 (Henige, 1973), without success to get evidence of the documentation of the union document. Given this backdrop and following the public commentaries about the Ewes being foreigners, especially predominantly by the Akan group, the HSGF wanted to declare the Western Togoland an independent state from Ghana (Interview, PRO of HSGF, Ho, 17th May 2020). This push by the HSGF to secede Western Togoland from Ghana has provoked many confrontations between the group and the government of Ghana, creating security issues with the Volta region and neighbouring areas.



On March 7, 2017, the police arrested the leaders of the HSGF, led by Charles Kormi Kudzordzi, as they were preparing to declare the independence of the Western Togoland on May 9, 2017. This day is very significant to the group because the contested plebiscite was conducted on May 9, 1956. Therefore, May 9, 2017, would serve as the 61st anniversary of the plebiscite. On that day, the group hoisted the flag of Western Togoland and branded T-shirts and other paraphernalia of an autonomous Western Togoland (Globalsecurity 2020). Before the declaration was done, however, the leaders and active members of the group were arrested and subsequently charged with treason on April 11, 2017. Given the contention over the legal status and less structured nature of the HSGF, neither academic nor policy literature has been able to provide an estimated number of members of the group. Depicting the massive support for the group's activities, however, one of the author's surveys at Ho revealed that out of the fifty people questioned on the HSGF aim to secede from Ghana, only seven were opposed to their activities. The minority respondents argued that most members of the movement are rather self-seeking, power-drunk citizens.

Conversely, seventeen respondents of the remaining forty-three pledged to put their lives on the line to defend their motherland in times of any political unrest, which means promoting the activities of the HSGF. However, about twenty-eight target respondents from the corporate sector and state departments declined to respond, citing fear of victimisation. Besides, the Northern part of former Western Togoland has rejected association with the activities of HSGF.

Since its self-declaration of independent Western Togoland, the HSGF has at various times surfaced with trained separatist 'rebels' and auxiliary groups who are usually recruited by a separatist group of Western Togoland, using both covert and overt means of recruiting young men and women into the 'Western Togoland army'. The group emphasised that they have failed to get the government of Ghana to engage in a dialogue with them, thus forcing their decision to make a declaration of autonomy. In September 2020, a supporting group to the HSGF—the Western Togoland Restoration Front (WTRF)—blocked some major roads from Eastern and Greater Accra regions to the Volta region, launched attacks on some police stations in the North Tongu District of the Volta Region and moved to eject the national security forces from the Volta region.



Supporting the HSGF, the WTRF demanded that the UN should facilitate negotiation for an independent Western Togoland. Before these attacks, some unknown people purportedly linked to the HSGF erected signboards on major roads in Somanya in the Eastern region, leading to the Volta region, with inscriptions such as “welcome to” or “you are leaving ”Western Togoland (Boakye, 2020). Again, the Ghanaian state security arrested the leaders of the group and charged them with treason. The charges were however later dropped (Agbozo, 2018).

As indicated, the separatist groups have largely remained in the southern part of the former Western Togoland, being denounced by their northern neighbours who have shown unflinching support for the territorial integrity of the Ghanaian state. Visits by the leaders of the separatist group to some parts of the Western Togoland, especially to the north, were said to have been rejected by traditional leaders who were approached to join the course of the secession. The Yaa-Naa (overlord of the Dagbon Kingdom in the northern region), for instance, chased out from his palace (the Gbewa palace) some of the leaders of the secession who visited the king to solicit the support of the northern part of the Western Togoland (Ghana News, 28 September 2020).

Discussion and conclusion

The foregoing accounts have illustrated how the colonial foundations of the state have shaped cooperative but conflictual relations within political units in Ghana and the African continent. In Ghana as in most post-colonial settings, colonialism re-engineered the socio-political ordering of societies, producing both alliances and disunities. The arbitrary lumping and splitting of pre-colonial polities was accompanied by a transition of the polities under different colonial masters and policies. This trajectory largely laid the foundation for nationalist and separatist feelings and movements. The complex nature of the state formation under the multiple colonial policies and governments has, nonetheless, also stimulated a force of cooperation between even conflictual ethnicities and political units, thus aiding post-colonial states not to disintegrate from secessionist or separatist movements.

The Western Togoland separatist movement in Ghana helps to illustrate how colonialism not only caused identity conflicts and destructive nationalism, but also explains the seeming stability of Ghana,



even though the state, like others in Africa, is characterised by multiple, and often conflictual, ethnic groups. The Western Togoland was comprised of different ethnic groups that were at different times colonised by the Germans, British, and French. This dispersed the Ewe, the most vibrant group seeking secession from Ghana, into Ghana, Benin, and Togo, and further split the Ewe in Ghana into East and West—the East having experienced German and British colonial rule while the West experienced British colonialism and claimed always to be part of Ghana. Similarly, some ethnic groups in the north-eastern part of Ghana (part of Dagomba, Mamprusi, Kusase, Bimoba, Konkomba, etc.) fell under the Western Togoland initially colonised by the Germans and later the British.

Like the Ewe to the south, some of the northern groups, especially the Konkomba and Bimoba, still interact regularly with their kinsmen in Togo, but do not seek autonomy ostensibly because these groups fear that by their relatively smaller number, they will be dominated by the Ewe if they form a state or separate political unit with them, and thus the elite will lose the state benefits they currently enjoy in Ghana (see Herbst & Mills, 2009). This manifested in the 1956 plebiscite results and the recent rejection of calls for independent Western Togoland by chiefs from the northern part of that territory. More so, the Western part of the Ewe land (in the Volta and Oti regions) that claim to have always been part of Ghana and never transitioned from German rule to British rule (for example the Anlo people), also indicated that they do not support the separatist movement.

This suggests that the separatist movement is supported by the Eastern part of the Ewe land (for example Ewedome). Nonetheless, the separatist movement seeks to secede from the entire Volta/Oti region and the northern half of the former Western Togoland. This study found that the deep-seated disagreement among residents of the Western Togoland about the independence of the territory illustrates both the integrating and disintegrating force of colonialism in Ghana. Although the swift handling of the secessionist activities by the state could contribute to the weak mass support for the movement, the analysis indicates that the complex history of ethnic and linguistic relations also points to a significant weakness of the state in terms of stability, as it struggles to control its jurisdiction.



References

- Agbozo, G. E. (2018). 4A3: World War One & Africa: Contesting History, Nation, and Identity in 'Western Togoland', "Armistice & Aftermath", A WWI Symposium Michigan Tech, 28-29 September 2018, <https://digitalcommons.mtu.edu/ww1cc-symposium/program/program/24/>.
- Amenumey, D. E. (1969). The Pre-1947 Background to the Ewe Unification Question: A Preliminary Sketch. *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana*, 10, 65-85.
- Ashon, E. (2019). Western Togoland: Blame UK and UN not Ghana. Graphic Online. Nov. 22, 2019, <https://www.graphic.com.gh/features/features/western-togoland-blame-uk-un-not-ghana.html>.
- Awoonor, K. (1984). *The Ghana Revolution: Background account from a personal perspective*. New York, Oases Publishers.
- Beacháin, D. Ó., Jessen, R., Bohn, T., Corner, P., Fimiani, E., Goldman, W., ... and Schedler, A. (eds.) (2011). Germany: Comparative perspectives. In *Voting for Hitler and Stalin: Elections under 20th century dictatorships*, Campus Verlag, 231-253.
- Bening, R. B. (1983). The Ghana-Togo Boundary, 1914-1982. *Africa Spectrum*, 191-209.
- Boakye, H. A. (2020). The Western Togoland issue: 'Why does it matter how we define conflict and its causes?', Graphic Online, <https://www.graphic.com.gh/features/opinion/the-western-togoland-issue-why-does-it-matter-how-we-define-conflict-and-its-causes.html>, retrieved 03/11/2020.
- Brown, D. (1980). Borderline politics in Ghana: The national liberation movement of western Togoland. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 18(4), 575-609.
- Brown, M. E. (1997). The causes of internal conflict: An overview. In Brown et al. eds, *Nationalism and ethnic conflict*, 3-25.
- Brown, M. E., Miller, S. E., Coté, O. R., and Lynn-Jones, S. M. (eds.). (2001). *Nationalism and ethnic conflict*. Massachusetts, MIT Press.
- Buah, F. K. (1998). *History of Ghana*. London. Macmillan Education.



- Caspersen, N. (2013). *Unrecognized states: The struggle for sovereignty in the modern international system*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Chazan, N. (1983). *An Anatomy of Ghanaian Politics: Managing political recession, 1969-1982*. Boulder, CO.
- Clapham, C. (1998). Degrees of statehood. *Review of International Studies*, 143-157.
- Diamond, L. (2002). Elections without democracy: Thinking about hybrid regimes. *Journal of Democracy*, 13(2), 21-35.
- Englebert, P., and Hummel, R. (2005). Let's stick together: Understanding Africa's secessionist deficit. *African Affairs*, 104(416), 399-427.
- Fimiani, E. (2011). "Elections, plebiscitary elections and plebiscites in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany". In Beacháin et al. (2011).
- GlobalSecurity (2020). Togo – History, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/africa/to-history.htm>, retrieved on 03/01/2021.
- Griffiths, I. (1986). The scramble for Africa: Inherited political boundaries. *The Geographical Journal*, 152(2), 204-216.
- Heath, E. (2010). Berlin Conference of 1884-1885, *Oxford Encyclopaedia of Africa*, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195337709.001.0001/acref-9780195337709-e-0467>.
- Henige, D. P. (1973). The National Archives of Ghana: a synopsis of holdings. *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 6(3), 475-486.
- Herbst, J., and Mills, G. (2009). There is no Congo. Why the only way to help Congo is to stop pretending it exists. *Foreign Policy*, 18.
- History World (2020). The History of Cameroon, <http://www.historyworld.net/wrldhis/PlainTextHistories.asp?ParagraphID=pau>, retrieved 01/11/2020.
- Kenny, P. D. (2015). The origins of patronage politics: State building, centrifugalism, and decolonization. *British Journal of Political Science*, 45(1), 141-171.
- Kumah, K. (1943). A letter to the Hon. W. H. Ingrams; Letter No. 98/26/1943. S. F. I. of 11 Feb., 1943, NAGT/ ADM/1/385.
- Linz, J. J. (2000). *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes*. Lynne Rienner
- Lonely Planet (2018). Togo - History. <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/togo/history>. Retrieved 03/01/2021.



- MacKenzie, J. M. (2016). Partition of Africa. *The Encyclopedia of Empire*, 1-8.
- McGee, R. W., and Lam, D. K. K. (1992). Hong Kong's option to secede. *Harv. Int'l. LJ*, 33, 427.
- Monahan, P. J. (1995). The law and politics of Quebec secession. *Osgoode Hall LJ*, 33, 1.
- Morse, H. N. (1985). The foundations and meaning of secession. *Stetson L. Rev.*, 15, 419.
- Natsios, A. S., and Abramowitz, M. (2011). Sudan's secession crisis-Can the South part from the North without war. *Foreign Aff.*, 90, 19.
- Olayode, K. (2010). Self-Determination, ethno-nationalism and conflicts in Nigeria. Department of International Relations, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife.
- Pavković, A., and Radan, P. (eds.). (2011). *The Ashgate research companion to secession*. Farnham, Ashgate Publishing.
- Permanent Mandates Commission. (1938). 35th session Oct.-Nov. 1938, C.418 M.262 1938 VI, 2nd meeting, p. 18.
- Qvortrup, M., O'Leary, B., and Wintrobe, R. (2020). Explaining the paradox of plebiscites. *Government and Opposition*, 55(2), 202-219.
- Renders, M., and Terlinden, U. (2010). Negotiating statehood in a hybrid political order: The case of Somaliland. *Development and Change*, 41(4), 723-746.
- Skinner, K. (2010). Local historians and strangers with big eyes: The politics of Ewe history in Ghana and its global diaspora. *History in Africa*, 37(1), 125-158.
- Smock, D. R., and Smock, A. C. (1975). *The politics of pluralism: A comparative study of Lebanon and Ghana*. New York: Elsevier.
- Spears, I. S. (2004). Debating secession and the recognition of new states in Africa. *African Security Studies*, 13(2), 35-48.
- Thomson, Alex. (2004). *An Introduction to African history*. New York. Routledge.
- United Nations (UN/SA) Collection (1956). United Nations Visiting Mission to the Trust Territories of Togoland under British Administration and Togoland under French Administration, 1955.
- Van Evera, S. (1994). Hypotheses on nationalism and war. *International Security*, 18(4), 5-39.



- Wintrobe, R. (2007). "Dictatorship: analytical approaches." In Boix, C., and Stokes, S. C. (eds.). (2007). *The Oxford handbook of comparative politics* (Vol. 4). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 263–294.
- Yayoh, W. K. (2015). German rule in colonial Ewedome (Ghana), 1890–1914. *African Notes*, 9(1&2), 129-145.
- Zachary, G. P. (2011). After South Sudan: The case to keep dividing Africa. *The Atlantic*, 11, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/07/after-south-sudan-the-case-to-keep-dividing-africa/241705/>.
- Zimmerman, A. (2012). *Alabama in Africa: Booker T. Washington, the German empire, and the globalization of the New South* (Vol. 3). Princeton, Princeton University Press.



Afrocentric Digital Belonging: Perspectives from Black African Young People in Australia

Claire Moran
Monash University

Virginia Mapedzahama
African Women Australia Inc.

Abstract

African Australian diasporic literature has drawn attention to the highly racialised, criminalised and discriminatory experiences that shape the way that Black Africans experience belonging in Australia. We build on Kwansah-Aidoo and Mapedzahama's (2018) typology of 'Fractured Belonging' by exploring Black African young people's digital practices and experiences of social media. To do this, we draw on a multi-method study with African young people in Australia (n=15), which used social media ethnography and multiple participant interviews to argue that African young people use social media to agentially craft and claim their own spaces of belonging. We suggest a typology - 'Afrocentric Digital Belonging' - that involves three core processes: (re)cultivating identities and Black spaces; evoking boundaries; and forging digital and physical connections. We propose that through these core processes, digital spaces can offer new ways of navigating, contesting, (re)imagining and forging new understandings of belonging for Black African young people who live in predominantly white spaces.

Introduction

Academic enquiry as to how belonging is experienced, navigated and created by migrant groups has been at the forefront of migration research over the past decade. In Australia, studies have examined African migrant experiences of belonging in relation to policing (Weber, 2020; Benier, Blaustein, Johns & Maher, 2018), identities (Gebrekidan, 2018; Zwangobani, 2011; Udah & Singh, 2019; Anderson, Cumings & Gatwiri, 2019), sport (Nunn, Spaaij & Luguetti, 2021), school (Baak, 2019; Harwood, Heesch Sendall & Brough, 2021), media representations (Windle, 2008; Han & Budarick, 2018; Davis, 2021) and health and well-being (Gatwiri & Anderson, 2021; Young, 2020). Kwansah-Aidoo and Mapedzahama's (2018) typology of 'Fractured Belonging' centres the



racialisation and experiences of ‘everyday racism’ (Essed, 1991) of Black African people in Australia as fundamental to their experiences of belonging. This typology exposes the complex and contested nature of belonging by highlighting how blackness prohibits and dislocates Black African people from belonging in spaces that are majority white.

This paper expands notions of belonging by exploring how digital spaces offer Black¹ African² youth in white-dominated spaces in Australia the capacity to agentially craft and claim their own spaces of belonging. We use critical race theory, African Australian diasporic literature, and digital media scholarship to weave together, and make sense of, the everyday lived experiences and digital practices of African youth in Australia, in relation to their feelings of belonging.

The aims of this article are two-fold: firstly, to present Afrocentric perspectives of belonging – that is, centring African youth experiences and perspectives as ‘knowing belonging’. Secondly, to theorise African young people’s digital practices within a typology of ‘Afrocentric Digital Belonging’. We situate these digital practices against a backdrop of racialisation and racism for Africa young people in physical settings in white Australia.

Conceptualising ‘belonging’

Analysis of the academic literature on belonging shows that there is no consensus on what it means to ‘belong’ with a variety of terms used by scholars to conceptualise it. For example: an ‘emotional attachment’ (Yuval-Davis 2006), feeling ‘at home’ (Hage, 1997) and ‘safe’ (Ignatieff, 1995). Belonging is rarely absolute (Nunn et al., 2021). Rather, scholars

¹ We intentionally capitalise the term Black throughout this paper to signify our reference to people who are raced as ‘Black’, acknowledging the significance of Black embodiment on their shared experiences as a racialised ‘other’.

² The ‘new Black African Diaspora’ in Australia constitutes a heterogeneous group of people (Mapedzahama & Kwansah-Aidoo, 2018b), reflecting a multitude of ethnic, socio-cultural and political backgrounds, as well as different migration pathways into Australia. Our intentional use of the term African is to highlight the commonalities amongst their shared diasporic experiences as racialised ‘others’ in Australia.



agree that it is a non-linear, social process with connections to people, places, practices, and institutions that are continually (re)established, maintained, and transformed (Yuval-Davis, 2011; Nunn, 2017). Studies show that there are a multitude of factors that can be examined in relation to belonging, such as identity, culture, ethnicity, and citizenship. As such, belonging is shaped by relational factors, multifaceted life experiences and socio-historical and socio-political structures of everyday life (Andreasson, 2016).

Yuval Davis (2006; 2011) contends that in order to understand belonging there must be a focus on discourses and practices of inclusion and exclusion that separate ‘us’ from ‘them’. Belonging involves those in the dominant position ‘granting’ belonging to those who are ‘seeking’ it, resulting in a complex interplay of ‘hierarchies of belonging’ (Back, Sihha & Bryan, 2012). It is within these conceptualisations of belonging that the interrogation of race is central – in the case of this paper, blackness – to understand how the racialisation of Black African migrants positions them within the hierarchy of belonging in settler-colonial Australia.

In this study we’re interested in understanding belonging from Afrocentric perspectives, that is, where African experiences and narratives are at the centre of ‘knowing belonging’ and ‘talking about belonging’ (Kwansah-Aidoo & Mapedzahama, 2018, p. 96). Afrocentric perspectives are grounded in experiences of racism and racialisation, which re-affirm the contested and complex nature of belonging for Black Africans in Australia that warrants a nuanced analysis that explores belonging in relation to experiences of blackness (Kwansah-Aidoo & Mapedzahama, 2018). We’re interested in understanding how belonging is lived and negotiated in the everyday sense, as it relates to both the self and the structures of African young peoples’ lifeworlds. We hold the term ‘belonging’ lightly, allowing for our participants to articulate how they experience belonging and how digital spaces influence, intersect and intertwine with it. In this project we have remained flexible and open, allowing for the possibilities of different meanings, definitions, and understandings as they apply to Afrocentric perspectives.



African migrant belonging in Australia

Black African migrant belonging in Australia is situated within a settler-colonial context that constitutes a deeply racist history of white possession (Moreton-Robinson, 2015). Australia's 'obsession for white racial purity' (Foley, 1999) drove efforts to exterminate the original Black/Blak³ inhabitants of 'Terra Nullius' - the Indigenous Australian and Torres Strait Islander First Nations people. Australia's early immigration policies, such as the Immigration Restriction Act 1901, prioritised white European settlers, while excluding, amongst other racial groups, Black Africans (for a comprehensive overview of African migration to Australia see Hugo, 2009; Jakubowicz 2010; Yusuuf, 2020).

Australia's treatment of non-white people over the past two hundred years highlights racial preferences that have been a core part of Australian ideology since colonisation. Despite the celebration of contemporary Australia as a multicultural 'success' story (Turnbull, 2017), many scholars contend that whiteness continues to be an important criterion for belonging in contemporary Australia (Moreton-Robinson, 2015; Mapedzahama & Kwansah-Aidoo, 2010; Hage, 1998). The Black African migrant – 'too tall, too dark, too culturally diverse' (Ndhlovu, 2013) stands in stark contrast to the imagined white nation (Hage, 1998). Under the 'white gaze' (Yancy, 2008; Fanon, 2008) the African migrant identity is singularised (Udah & Singh, 2018), by white 'majoritarian narratives' (Love, 2004) of 'deficit' and 'deviant' (Mapedzahama & Kwansah-Aidoo, 2018), which criticise and problematise them for their 'failure to integrate' (Wright, 2007), resulting in their continued exclusion as 'perpetual outsiders' (Mapedzahama & Kwansah-Aidoo, 2010).

Black African migrants in Australia are subjected to experiences of discrimination that 'fractures' or diminishes their sense of belonging and acceptance in Australia (Ndhlovu, 2013, 2014; Majavu, 2017, 2018, 2020; Kwansah-Aidoo & Mapedzahama 2018, 2018a; Baak, 2019; Macaulay & Dappeler, 2020; Mapedzahama & Kwansah-Aidoo, 2010, 2013, 2017;

³ In Australia, the terms "Black" or "Blak" or are commonly used as descriptors for Australia's First Nations people, to examine their experiences and as a way of representing the racial divide between the Indigenous people of Australia and their colonisers (see for example: Foley, 1999; Paradies, 2006).



Gebrekidan, 2018; Gatwiri & Anderson, 2021; Kamaloni, 2019; Benier et al., 2018, 2021). A significant theoretical contribution to understanding Black African migrant belonging in Australia - ‘Fractured Belonging’ - has been proposed by Kwansah-Aidoo and Mapedzahama (2018). These authors draw on critical race theorist Philomena Essed’s (1991) concept of ‘everyday racism’ to arrive at a four-part typology – contestation, negotiation, ambivalence, and compromise - that centres racialisation as fundamental to a sense of belonging for Black Africans in Australia. It draws on the often ‘small’ and ‘invisible’ experiences of racialisation that non-white people encounter in their day-to-day interactions with the dominant white group, which are often ‘disregarded, easily rejected and undetectable’ (Kwansah-Aidoo & Mapedzahama, 2018, p. 101). Their typology is based on a study of first-generation continental Black African migrants (aged 34-55 years old) and situates their belonging by examining their everyday experiences in offline ‘physical’ spaces (Jurgenson, 2011).

In line with Kwansah-Aidoo and Mapedzahama (2018), we situate the experiences and narratives of racialisation as critical to Black African young people’s feelings of belonging in Australia. We build on their typology by centring Black African young people and their digital practices on social media to explore how belonging can be navigated, shaped, and (re)cultivated. Our main contention is that these digital spaces create (new) opportunities for (re)claiming or expanding belonging beyond the physical and national boundaries of belonging in ‘physical’ spaces, leading us to conceptualise this belonging as Afrocentric Digital Belonging.

Social media and belonging

Social media presents an interesting site in which to explore belonging due to its increasing importance and embeddedness within the everyday lives of young people (Fu & Cook, 2020). In recent years a number of studies have explored how racialised users seek out and cultivate racial spaces online to seek safety, engage in solidarity, activism, and anti-racism (Asante, 2018; Petray, 2013; Carlson & Frazer, 2015, 2018; Carney, 2016; Moran & Gatwiri, 2022) and to test, expand, articulate, and cultivate new/hybrid/alternative identities (Frazer & Carlson, 2017; Mahali, 2017; Moran & Mapedzahama 2022). At the same time a number of studies have examined social media as spaces in which racism is mediated, amplified, and perpetuated against racialised users (Matamoros-Fernandez



& Farkas, 2021; Daniels, 2012). In Australia, studies have found that social media facilitates widespread racist abuse and discrimination against Indigenous Australians (Carlson & Frazer, 2018; Kennedy, 2021).

This body of literature documents the complex, multi-faceted practices, and experiences that racialised users navigate in digital spaces. The literature identifies social media as both a space of possibility - where inclusive experiences can be sought out and created through connection with others - and also as a site that is embedded in the existing hegemonic structures of the material world, where racialised users are subjected to racial violence.

Positionality

As discussed above, we centre the racialisation of Black African young people at the core of our theorisation of belonging in digital spaces. It is therefore important that we position ourselves as researchers and authors in relation to this research. The second author is a critical Black African feminist researcher, who has published extensively on issues of race, racism, the Black body and the ‘new’ African diaspora in Australia (see for example: Mapedzahama & Kwansah-Aidoo, 2010, 2013, 2017). She has worked extensively with Black young Africans, and importantly, shares similar lived experiences of racism, racialisation, and discrimination that our participants face. In this way, she is an “insider” to the Black African community in Australia, whose ‘voice of colour’ is important for analysing and (re)presenting the voices of Black African young people we centre in this paper. We, therefore, specifically discuss the positionality of the lead author, who is neither Black nor African nor a migrant. We find it appropriate to switch to first-person voice in this section to bring out the author’s voice as she critically reflects on her own positionality and what it means for this project.

I am a white Anglo-Saxon, middle-class, Australian woman. I am the ‘invisible default’ (Case, 2012) race in Australia and have benefitted from racial privileges my whole life. I am an ‘outsider’ to the African Australian community and unlike the participants of this research, have never experienced discrimination, alienation, and exclusion because of my race. In undertaking this research I have therefore made conscious efforts to consistently reflect on my racial privilege, as well as to remain aware and critical of power plays and power imbalances inherent in the research process when white people do research wit and in racialised minority



communities. As a racially privileged white body, the risk of ‘speaking for’ historically oppressed racially marginalised groups is something that I acknowledge, reflect upon and address, leading to a number of multiple conscious acts embedded in this research. I actively engage in critical and reflective anti-racism informed by a strong conviction for racial equity. Even so, as someone who does not have lived experience of blackness, my role is not to ‘take up’ speaking spaces but rather to use my racial privilege to ensure that the voices of those with lived experiences of racism are centred and elevated. I am deeply connected with Black African communities (through social media, formal and informal community events and presentations) and am also mentored by and collaborate with Black African scholars who not only have embodied experiences of racialisation but also subject matter expertise, to ensure that the ‘voice of colour thesis’ (Mapedzahama & Kwansah-Aidoo, 2017) informs and guides the analysis and discussion of findings from this research. For example, we have drawn on the second author’s ‘insider positionality’ as a Black African migrant in Australia to situate embodied experiences of being Black and African in Australia. I strengthen my racial literacy by engaging extensively with scholarship by Black African Australian researchers (for example: Kamaloni, 2019; Majavu, 2017, 2018, 2020; Kwansah-Aidoo & Mapedzahama, 2010, 2013, 2017, 2018, 2018a; Ndhlovu, 2013, 2014; Gatwiri et al., 2019, 2021).

Mixed-methods study design

Fifteen young people (16-25), self-identifying as African, and living in Australia were recruited to participate in this study. Participant numbers were purposefully kept low due to the intensity of data collection which included six months of social media ethnography and multiple participant interviews. Participants were recruited initially through the first author’s personal networks (n=5), and subsequently through wider calls on social media (n=2) and participant snowballing (n=8). Participants in this study self-identified as: South Sudanese (n=5), Zimbabwean (n=2), Zimbabwean - Australian (n=2), Rwandan / Rwandese (n=2), Kenyan - Sudanese (n=1), Rwandese - Congolese (n=1), Somalian (n=1), and Ethiopian-Australian (n=1). Eight participants arrived in Australia with Humanitarian visas, and seven arrived under the Skilled or Family Stream.



The study utilised two different methods concurrently: social media ethnography, in which participants consented to the first author following and/or friending them on social media and closely observing their behaviour for a six-month period; and in addition, multiple interviews - comprising an initial, individual ‘scroll back interview’ (Robards & Lincoln, 2017), as well as ongoing discussions via social media direct messaging and individual exit interviews at the conclusion of the six month observational period. The benefits and limitations of these methods have been discussed elsewhere (see Moran & Robards, 2020).

The scroll back interviews were conducted at the beginning of the six-month ethnographic period and were an important starting point to building rapport with participants as well as understanding how they used their social media in their everyday lives. In ‘scrolling’ through participants social media profiles with them, the researcher and participant became ‘co-analysts’, with the researcher asking questions to elicit participants reflections and narratives of their digital content. This shaped the matter ‘that comes to matter’ (Robards & Lincoln, 2017, p. 716) and produced in-depth insights into the digital practices of participants that have been essential in the analysis presented in the forthcoming findings. Scroll back interviews were conducted in English, were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim, with each recording ranging from 60 to 90 minutes.

The six-month social media ethnography commenced and concluded at different stages between June 2019 and June 2020 as recruitment was staggered during this time. The majority of participants were observed across three social media platforms - Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat. For platforms such as Snapchat, where most content is directly messaged to selected users, participants were asked to send content to the first author that they felt comfortable sharing. In some cases, the first author was included in private stories on Snapchat or added to ‘close friends’ groups on Instagram. The social media content was collected through a series of screen captures on a smartphone, and would often feature field notes, for example, if the screen capture was of a video. At the conclusion of the data collection period, there was in excess of 1,600 screen shots of participant data. These screen captures and notes were transferred into NVivo, and alongside the multiple participant interviews were thematically analysed (Bryman, 2012).



Due to the nature of the social media ethnography, the first author engaged in an ‘on-going dialogue’ with participants, where she would occasionally probe for further details around participants social media posts through direct messages, which produced further insights into their social media practices. Additionally, participants would often send content directly to the first author that they wanted ‘added to their script’. In this way, participants envisioned the social media ethnography as part of a much-longer interview, where they would continually share their thoughts and reflections on their digital practices and experiences. These on-going dialogues resulted in sustained, ‘behind-the-scenes’ perspectives into the context of participants digital practices over the six-month ethnographic period. The social media ethnography concluded with an ‘exit interview’ which was conducted individually with participants via direct messages on Facebook Messenger. The exit interview was an opportunity for participants to update the first author of any changes in their digital practices (such as the uptake of the new social media platform TikTok amongst participants), as well as invite participants to unfollow or remove the researcher as a friend or follower from their social media network, formally bringing the study to a close.

Findings

The findings of our study demonstrate that social media is used extensively by African young people in Australia. Participants estimated the average time they spent on social media to be 2-3 hours per day. This was generally slightly higher for the younger people in the study (16-21) than the older participants (22-25). Amongst the younger participants in the study, Instagram and Snapchat were the most popular social media platforms, while Facebook remained more popular for the older participants. The exit interviews conducted at the conclusion of the study indicated the growing popularity of TikTok. Participants in this study emphasised the importance of social media in their day-to-day describing it as essential for ‘staying up to date’ (Amy, 19, Zimbabwean-Australian) with their social networks, and current news and events. Without social media they would feel ‘disconnected’ (Rosalina, 18, South-Sudanese), ‘isolated’ (Nya, 18, South-Sudanese, ‘Dinkan’), and like they were ‘missing out’ (Trey, 20, Zimbabwean-Australian). These findings align with broader research on youth and social media use in Australia (Shipley & Walker, 2019; Fu & Cook 2020).



It was clear from the outset that social media presents a ‘new frontier’ where African youth can navigate, explore, and cultivate a sense of belonging on their own terms and in their own way. In this paper, we explore the agential digital practices of Black African young people who carve out these digital spaces for themselves and their communities in our three-part typology ‘Afrocentric Digital Belonging’: 1) (re)Cultivating identities and Black spaces; 2) Evoking boundaries; and 3) Forging digital/physical connections. We explore these digital practices of belonging as ‘conditional’ due to the underlying presence and influence of the ‘white gaze’ in digital spaces, which participants must ‘work’ (Ngo, 2015) to manage. We therefore draw on and also expand Kwansah-Aidoo and Mapedzahama’s (2018) typology of ‘Fractured Belonging’ which emphasises how experiences of racism and racialisation contest belonging for Black Africans in Australia.

1a. (re)Cultivating identities that ‘belong’

Our research shows that a significant aspect of the ‘belonging process’ is identity (re)formation, or what we call: (re)cultivating identities (or the self) that belongs. ‘Belonging’ itself was described as ‘unconditional acceptance’ (Obama, 17, Rwandese), ‘no matter what colour you are’ (AM, 20, South-Sudanese). Acceptance involved having the ‘power to determine who I am’ (Mark, 24, Rwandan) and not having to ‘hide who I am’ (Sarah, 19, Zimbabwean-Australian). Social media was seen to be important in helping achieve these aspects of belonging by providing participants with a space in which they had the ‘power’ to express themselves and articulate and navigate their belonging to different communities, cultures, and places (Australia, Africa and elsewhere).

Our findings demonstrate how the Black African ‘self’ can be (re)cultivated in digital spaces. Participants saw social media as providing them with the ‘freedom to express myself’ (Amy, 19, Zimbabwean-Australian), a space where others could ‘see the person that I am’ (King, 18, South-Sudanese). They spoke about being ‘in control’ of digital spaces and how they could employ the ‘creativity’ of platforms to cultivate a self on their own terms, that was ‘authentic’ to who they are. Mark (24, Rwandan) explained that on Facebook ‘you can give yourself a different persona’. For Mark, who had come to Australia as a refugee, social media allowed him to challenge how people perceived refugees in Australia. Rather than be seen as vulnerable or helpless – as is common



within the ‘deficit’ narratives (Mapedzahama & Kwansah-Aidoo, 2018) of Black African migrants - Mark presented himself as a young person thriving in Australia.

Like the other participants in this study, he used social media to share his passions, successes, family life, friendships, and contributions to the Australian community. When Black African young people share their experiences in this way, their posts inherently become counter-narratives (intended or not) to the dominant white majoritarian narratives which are problematising, and racist (see Moran, 2022). Our findings highlight the sense of empowerment and ‘freedom’ that African young people feel in expressing themselves and their stories on social media. These findings are significant given that much of the previous research on African young people – Sudanese youth in particular – has found that they feel powerlessness to challenge harmful media narratives (see for example: Macauley & Deppeler, 2020; Benier et al., 2018).

Participants in our study also discussed, at length, their desire to express the different ‘parts of themselves’ (Jasmine, 17, Kenyan-Sudanese) on social media – their hybrid identities as ‘Australian’, ‘Black’, ‘African’ (or specific ethno-national identities like ‘Kenyan-Sudanese’) – and to have these ‘parts’ be socially accepted by their social networks. This is particularly important given that these young people are part of ‘diverse’ groups. Jasmine explained this in relation to her friendship groups:

I want both of them to understand that I belong to both of them.. Although I might hang out with Black people, they are also part of me and hanging out with my white friends is also part of who I've become.

Navigating belonging to different groups through expressing different ‘parts’ of oneself, leads to a careful cultivation of what social media scholars refer to as the ‘presentation of self’ (Goffman, 1959; Abidin 2018) where multiple expressions of the self can be carefully curated and controlled. Significantly our data shows that this desire to belong in both ‘worlds’ which Jasmine talks about, has resulted in Black African young people cultivating identities that are: 1) seemingly ‘ordinary’ and behaviourally similar to other non-Black Australian youth and at the same time; 2) uniquely Black.



The seemingly ordinary and behaviourally similar ‘self’ that our participants presented was often visible in the more public⁴ aspects of their social media profiles. This was particularly evident amongst the participants who had established more inter-ethnic and white social networks. A number of our participants described how their profiles would be perceived by their social networks, often emphasising parts of themselves that would be considered typical ‘Australian’ traits, such as being ‘easy-going and loves a drink’ (Eddie, 23, Ethiopian Australian) and being seen as someone who ‘you’d be mates with’ (Trey, 20, Zimbabwean Australian).

Participants used social media to highlight their interests, passions, and likes/dislikes, conscious of how making these things visible identified them as being similar to other (Australian) users. Amy (19, Zimbabwean-Australian), for example, had listed her interest in netball on her Facebook profile. She explained that identifying herself as a netball-enthusiast was an important starting point for being accepted by others. She explained,

Other people see that, and they think, ‘Oh she’s not so different to me’. Then they accept me more because they’re like ‘we like netball and you like netball, so we’re really similar’.

Amy saw this as essential to helping her belong in digital spaces, saying:

Online people can discover that you’re sort of living similar lifestyles so they’re less likely to put a stigma against you as a person. Like they sort of stereotype you less because you can express yourself and the things you like to do.

⁴ Public here refers to participant content that was visible to the majority of their friends/followers. We use this term to contrast the ‘private’ content that our participants would post through the use of ‘close friends’ and ‘private’ groups on social media. We acknowledge here that there are many scholarly debates about the ‘public-ness’ and ‘private-ness’ of social media platforms (such as Lincoln & Robards, 2017; Walsh & Baker, 2017).



For our participants, being able to establish their identities in digital spaces outside the confines of negative perceptions and stereotypes of Black African young people was an important part of the ‘freedom’ they perceived social media as providing them with as they were able to emphasise the similarly ‘ordinary’ and Australian ‘parts’ of their identities that helped them articulate their belonging to local groups and spaces. Because Amy had deduced that netball was a common hobby amongst other young Australian women, she highlighted her interest in it, using it to establish herself as belonging to this group.

There is emerging evidence in this study, amongst some participants, that social media is ‘sometimes used’ to cultivate an identity where they appear as ‘less African to fit in’ (Amy, 19, Zimbabwean Australian). Participants who spoke about this directly, did so by referring to the negative stereotypes of Africans that have been popularised in popular media and political discourse of ‘African gangs’ (see for example Majavu 2020; Benier et al. 2018). For example, King, (18, South-Sudanese) explained that when he created his Bitmoji[A bitmoji is a personal emoji that users create and then use on their various social media accounts (particularly Snapchat). The bitmoji is an expressive cartoon-like figure which can have different hairstyles, face-shapes and outfits] avatar he wanted it to be perceived as ‘friendly and nice’. In reflecting on why he did this he stated:

People sometimes they just look at your profile and they think you’re a bad person or a bad influence based on your picture. They’ll assume that you’re like other Black people they’ve seen in their life, they’ll assume you’re the same person.

He explained that people had negative assumptions about Black people in Australia because of all the ‘bad stuff on the news’. His need to escape these negative stereotypes of African youth in Australia, led to him actively employ strategies on social media to present himself in counter to the stereotypes. His cultivation as someone who is ‘friendly and nice’ meant that King considered himself as deserving of belonging in Australia. He explained ‘I belong here because I don’t do anything bad, and I don’t cause anyone to feel bad in anyway or intimidated’. King cultivated his identity as someone who should belong in Australia because of his ‘good



behaviour’ that he emphasised by de-emphasising his Africanness on social media.

Helen Ngo’s (2015) work on the bodily experiences of racialisation is useful in analysing these practices, as she demonstrates the ‘work’ that is involved for those who must live and copy with racism. She details the ‘bodily adjustments’ that racialised people make in an effort to manage experiences of racism (even its anticipation). This ‘work’ can be ‘called upon at almost any time and place’ (p. 73), due to the pervasiveness of racism even in seemingly ordinary moments of everyday life. Here, we can theorise participants’ digital identities as the ‘work’ that they must do to manage their experiences (and anticipation) of racism. The disassociation of their identities from the criminalisation and problematisation of the ‘African gangs’ label is strategy that is employed to self-protect and self-preserve. Even in digital spaces, Black bodies must adjust themselves to mitigate the harm of racialisation and racism. Many studies in recent years have explored the damaging impacts of ‘racial battle fatigue’ and ‘racial trauma’ that has been associated with the exhausting ‘work’ racialised people engage in to manage, avoid, and counter experiences of racism (Smith et al., 2008; Hardy, 2013).

At the same time, participants used social media to make themselves visible as Black young people, who had confidently cultivated belonging amongst Black communities and Black spaces. Jasmine explained that she made conscious efforts to present herself as belonging to Black networks:

I try to hang around with Black people and take photos with them to show that I also belong with them. Because usually when I go out with a bunch of my Black cousins, they usually take photos and then I post them on social media, so they can see I'm part of them too.

Additionally, participants saw social media as a space where their blackness was seen to be ‘unique’ and worthy of celebration. Amy explained:

Online, people celebrate their differences more. Offline, it’s still a bit... unaccepted. But online we see a variety of people and it’s okay to be different. I feel like everyone appreciates the unique qualities of people online.



Consequently, participants would make visible their blackness and their Africanness when they felt racially safe doing so. For some participants this was in more private parts of their profile - such as 'close friends' groups - for others it was more public - such as identifying themselves using a hybrid identity marker like 'Sudanese-Australian' on their profile bio information. In particular, we noticed a change in the way our participants visibilised their blackness during the resurgence of the #BlackLivesMatter (BLM) movement in 2020.

During this movement, all our participants - including those who had previously 'worked' to manage their African identities (such as King) - shared content that highlighted their experiences of racism and racial violence as young Black people in white-dominated Australia. Participants used the visibility of this movement as a discourse on which to build their own narratives of blackness, and through engaging in content produced by other Black creators, were able to (re)cultivate and (re)affirm their own understandings of their subjective experiences of racialisation. In doing so, this movement created space for Black African young people in Australia to articulate their identities and belonging, where their experiences were validated amongst the global Black diaspora. We've written about this in-depth elsewhere (Moran & Gatwiri 2022).

The cultivation of these identities, and the acceptance of them from others online, helped participants re-affirm their sense of self and belonging to communities where 'who they are' matters. We theorise these spaces as providing participants with a canvas on which to cultivate and make visible their own identities, from their own perspectives. African Australian diasporic studies have found that the 'single story' of Africans that is presented by the Australian media denies Africans the opportunity to be 'multi-storied' (Gatwiri et al., 2021, p. 7). Social media is, therefore, a creative tool where African young people feel empowered to cultivate and present their 'multi-storiedness' – sharing their interests, passions and contradictory identities. There is room here to (re)negotiate, to challenge preconceived ideas and majoritarian narratives, that Black African young people do not often get the opportunity to do – or feel racially safe doing - in physical spaces.



1b. (re)Cultivating Black spaces

Significant in our dataset is the essential role that social media plays in facilitating digital connections for African youth to find safety, solace and sustenance amongst Black communities and Black spaces. Participants in this study had a strong desire to cultivate Black African spaces where they could ‘escape’ their embodied experiences of racism. These spaces were racially safe, where they could express their frustrations and find support among other Black digital users who embodied similar racialised identities and experienced similar moments of non-belonging in their physical spaces. Nya for example spoke about the cultivation of her digital spaces as being ‘mostly Black’. She explained:

I've consciously decided to follow a lot of Black people online. People who look like me, people who understand the material experiences, people who I think are pretty well informed.

In cultivating these Black-centric digital communities, our participants were able to find spaces where they could express and celebrate their blackness in ways that helped them to find a sense of coherence and acceptance in their Black identities, where they can ‘belong’. Nya, for example, described social media as what ‘finally’ made her comfortable in her Black identity, after many years of ‘self-loathing’ that led to her bleaching her Black skin in an effort to appear less Black.

The cultivation of Black spaces was something participants actively searched for in digital spaces, given that such spaces were lacking in their physical everyday lives. Belonging in these spaces meant participants engaged with representations of blackness that were ‘positive’ and ‘optimistic’, something so glaringly lacking in white Australian media. As Amy (19, Zimbabwean Australian) reflected:

I try to filter through the more like positive, optimistic sides and how like, um, for example, African beauty is being more like recognised and appreciated. I definitely do try and engage myself with more of that cause I guess it's good for the self-esteem and you know, just being in a positive mindset and a positive light.

Participants spoke about the ease of becoming part of these Black spaces citing algorithmic features such as Instagram’s ‘discovery page’ as useful



in finding more Black spaces that they could follow and engage in. These Black digital spaces were considered particularly important amongst the young women in this study, in relation to the feelings of validation and empowerment that stemmed from belonging to these Black digital communities and the connections that they built with other Black women through solidarity, support and a (re)writing of contemporary Black womanhood (see Moran & Mapedzahama, 2022, for a detailed discussion).

Significant amongst the dataset was the importance of the digitally mediated friendships that participants made with other Black people in these spaces. Participants such as Nya who lacked close contact with Black people in her physical, everyday settings, established meaningful relationships with other Black people – particularly women – in digital spaces. Nya explained how she met her best-friend - a Nigerian living in America - on Instagram:

I've known her since I was 12. She found me, she commented, I commented, we started talking and now we've been friends for 6 years.

Nya spoke about the use of Instagram, particularly amongst young Black African women to build these meaningful connections with each other. She explained:

pages like 'Sudoshoutouts' may post something like 'What do you think of arranged marriages?' and then a bunch of people would comment in the comment section. And then you'd have a conversation about it, and maybe add each other, stuff like that.

Nya referred to her cultivation of her Black spaces and Black communities as 'communities of sustenance'. She explained that even though she didn't feel like she belonged in Australia, these communities had given her a sense of belonging that was 'sufficient', adding 'It's adequate enough'. We theorise here that digital spaces can be enough to cultivate belonging for youth who are marginalised in physical spaces. Certainly, for the participants in our study who are deeply connected to digital spaces, there was the sense that they could easily 'escape' into them at any moment during their day, suggesting that belonging for African young people is not solely dependent on their local, offline, 'physical' spaces.



2. Evoking boundaries

African youth employ a variety of strategies on social media to control who has access to their digital content and what types of content they encounter in digital spaces. We argue that the ‘controls’ help participants to feel racially safe, which has a significant impact on their experiences of belonging.

While much of the literature that examines the digital lives of non-white users cite racism as a key experience (see for example Carlson & Frazer, 2018; Kennedy, 2021), surprisingly participants in this study perceived their platforms as racially safe spaces. This was because participants had curated their social media spaces carefully, utilising a number of social media controls to evoke boundaries around their content to self-protect and self-preserve. This meant that they rarely encountered racist posts and comments. Only a few participants mentioned that they would occasionally encounter content that was racially unsafe.

Prince (18, Rwandese-Congolese) reflected on the presence of racism in her life stating, ‘It is hard in real life, but not on social media, you don’t get that on social media’. Similarly, Zuberi reflected on the African Gangs narrative that had been rampant on both mainstream Australian media and on social media saying ‘I don’t even bother reading the news or reading the comments because the comments people make are ridiculous’. Zuberi’s avoidance of news platforms and in particular, the comments section, meant that he rarely encountered racist commentary. Further, Zuberi said that on Facebook ‘generally I don’t get anything bad on my news-feed. Maybe the people that I follow are basic, but I just don’t see it’. Zuberi’s choice to follow specific people and accept friends with whom he felt racially safe had resulted in his news-feed being free from ‘anything bad’.

Participants employed a number of different digital strategies to evoke boundaries that made them feel racially safe. For example, Nya, used the ‘close friends’ feature on Instagram to have ‘Black friends only’ conversations. Participant AM (20, South Sudanese) explained how she used the ‘block’ and ‘unfriend’ button to curate a space where she felt comfortable sharing content about the hardships Sudanese young people in Australia experience. She only felt comfortable sharing this content in digital spaces, explaining that ‘offline’ spaces ‘weren’t safe’ for her. She referenced her fear that people ‘on the street’ might ‘attack’ her, for sharing her views.



Participants emphasised that an important part of belonging was feeling ‘ safe ’ (Rosalina, 18, South-Sudanese) and ‘ comfortable ’ (Jasmine, 17, Kenyan-Sudanese) - ‘ where you ’re not constantly looking over your shoulder or worrying what other people think ’ (Zuberi, 25, Somalian). We therefore propose that social media allows Black African young people the ability to facilitate these aspects of belonging because of the controls they can employ to curate racially safe spaces. In cultivating their social media spaces to be racially safe, participants were able to foster a sense of belonging as they are able to express themselves and build digitally mediated communities of support, safety, and sustenance. Participants emphasised that these ‘ controls ’ were notably missing in their ‘ offline ’ spaces, resulting in everyday experiences of racism and discrimination that were impossible to avoid. As Nya states, ‘ You can’t choose who to follow or not follow in real life ’’.

3. Forging digital/physical connections

Many of the digitally mediated connections that participants established on social media were the starting point for relationships that developed in offline or ‘ physical ’ settings. Lance (25, Zimbabwean) explained how he had used social media to pursue his interests in soccer and fantasy football. He joined a number of local soccer-groups on Facebook, meeting young people online who then organised to meet-up and play at a local park together. Lance emphasised the significance of this, as he explained how, prior to this, he hadn’t established many friendships outside the African community due his many negative experiences of racism. Social media had been essential for helping him to build these new connections which had then translated into meaningful friendships in physical settings.

Participants also spoke about how social media itself was a point of commonality to establish friendships with other young people in Australia. Obama (17, Rwandese) had recently arrived in Australia and had found social media essential in establishing new friendships. Friending and following her classmates on social media was an important part of facilitating her belonging to her new peer group. For Obama it was also essential to staying ‘ in the know ’ with what was going on amongst her friendship group. She explained:



Social media is my way of getting information, so without it I would be absolutely clueless. It's the one thing that I have in common with other people. Like if we don't know what to talk about that could be the first thing we say.

In this way social media is also used to extend friendships and social interactions, helping participants to continually facilitate their belonging to groups that they have established in physical settings.

There is also emerging evidence in this study that suggests social media plays an important role in helping newly arrived African migrants settle into Australia. Some participants spoke about Facebook community groups, such as the Zimbabwe Association of Western Australia being used to facilitate connections to the Australian-based Zimbabwe community and offer new migrants support in adapting to their new country. Participant Sarah (19, Zimbabwean Australian) explained:

It makes everyone feel like even though they've come here (to Australia), there's still a community that's willing to look after them and help them out with whatever they need because it is a new place, you don't know anyone and what's really going on. The community definitely helps with that.

Lance (25, Zimbabwean) also emphasised the important role that these groups play in helping newly arrived African migrants meet Australian-based Africans, stating 'maybe a young person who comes and doesn't have any friends. It could be a good space for them to interact and meet other people'. Future research could further explore the significance of these localised, migrant-run community groups on social media.

Black digital belonging as conditional

While social media is an essential part of African young people's experiences of belonging as discussed throughout this paper, we argue that this belonging is 'conditional' because whiteness plays a significant role in the way these digital spaces are structured and subsequently experienced by Black African young people in Australia. Several scholars (Matamoro-Fernandez & Farkas, 2021; Daniels, 2013; Brock 2020) have criticised social media studies for under-theorising and under-representing



the role of whiteness in digital spaces. As such, we locate whiteness as integral to the practices that our participants engage in as it shapes, and shades how Black African youth experience and navigate belonging in digital spaces.

The white gaze continues to create the rules that non-white users must abide by in digital spaces. As the ‘neutral’, ‘default’ position in digital and physical spaces, whiteness continues to be the measure (and default) for digital identities. Participants identified the many ways whiteness structured their digital experiences, and the ‘work’ they had to do to manage experiences of racism, racialisation, and racial safety. As Lance (25, Zimbabwean) explained:

As soon as that profile picture is up, you know, they can see that you are African. You are already saying your identity. And once you do that whenever anything happens, your responses are then washed because you identify as being part of that group. Whereas if my profile photo was white, you wouldn't feel pressure to take a stand. It's easier to do nothing than to do something.

Lance's comments make it clear how Black digital identities are constructed online vis-à-vis white identities. The careful consideration that our participants give to whiteness and the ‘work’ that they do to manage it, is often in an effort to avoid the possible consequences that could occur (such as social exclusion or desertion) if they upset white racial comfort in digital spaces. For example, Jasmine (17, Sudanese-Kenyan), reflected on a photo she posted on social media of her and her Black friends, stating:

I captioned it "Its really great to know that there's people out there who are care about me". But then, I felt like that was not OK because I worry that my white group of friends, they'll think that I don't fit in with them compared to what I fit in with my Black friends. I feel like it was just the way I stated it, it was targeting my white friends, so I deleted it.

Jasmine's prioritisation of her white friends comfort was a strategy she employed to avoid the possible consequences of white punishment, explaining ‘if it makes them uncomfortable, then it would make me uncomfortable’. Jasmine arrived in Australia four years prior to her



participation in this study and detailed extensively during her interview the many difficulties that she had overcome in building her social networks in Australia – of which social media played an essential role. She was intensely aware of what she stood to lose if she was excluded from the social networks that she had worked so hard to build.

Conclusion

Given the challenges of belonging for African young people in physical white dominated spaces in Australia, belonging is increasingly taking on digital meanings, as African young people actively search for and cultivate digital identities, communities and spaces that sustain and fulfill them.

The typology of Afrocentric Digital Belonging that we propose in this paper is grounded in the digital practices and experiences of Black African young people in Australia. However, we hope that the findings demonstrate how these digital experiences of belonging also interweave and intersect into the physical realities of participants' life worlds. We have provided numerous examples of this throughout this paper. So, whilst this typology - Afrocentric Digital Belonging – is grounded in the digital practices of our participants, we emphasise the importance of these findings for their offline realities as well.

Afrocentric Digital Belonging is characterised by agency – in that the African young people in our study emphasised digital spaces as giving them the 'freedom' and the 'choice' to negotiate when, how and where they belong. We hope that the findings of this research contribute to the growing body of literature that documents the potential of social media to visibilise minority youth and to create space for alternative identities and discourses to emerge. The aim here is not to provide a utopian view of social media – as we have highlighted a number of the difficulties our participants have in digital spaces – but rather to explore social media as a space that can be agentially employed by young people to achieve their hopes and aspirations that may otherwise be unachievable in physical, majority white settings in Australia.



Acknowledgements

We would like to express our thanks to the fifteen African young people whose stories and social media data are at the centre of this paper.

References

- Abidin, C. (2018) Layers of identity: How to be “real” when everyone is watching. *Real Life*. <http://reallifemag.com/layers-of-identity/> (accessed 3 May 2018).
- Anderson, L. Cumings, R. & Gatwiri, K (2019) ‘I’m a Local...’: Negotiating Belonging with Former Refugees in Regional Australia through Inclusive Partnerships, *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies: an Interdisciplinary Journal*, 11(2), 21-36
- Andreasson, T.M. (2016) Belonging in a contested national space: Men from refugee backgrounds and their experiences in Australia, Thesis, Western Sydney University, Australia.
- Asante, G. (2018). “Where is home?” Negotiating Community and Un/Belonging Among Queer African Migrants on Facebook, *Borderlands e-journal*, 17(1), 1-20
- Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2016). Migration Australia, Catalogue No. 3412.0
- Baak, M. (2019). Racism and Othering for South Sudanese heritage students in Australian schools: is inclusion possible? *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 23(2), 125-141
- Back, L., Sinha, S., & Bryan, W.C. (2012). New hierarchies of belonging. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 15(2), 139-154
- Benier, K. Blaustein, J. Johns, D. & Maher, S. (2018). 'Don't drag me into this': Growing up South Sudanese in Victoria after the 2016 Moomba 'riot'. Melbourne: Monash University/Melbourne University/Centre for Multicultural Youth
- Benier, K. Wickes, R. & Moran, C. (2021). ‘African gangs’ in Australia: Perceptions of race and crime in urban neighbourhoods. *Journal of Criminology*, 54(20), 220-238
- Bryman, A. (2012). *Social research methods* (4th ed.). Melbourne: Oxford University Press



- Carlson, B. & Frazer, R. (2015). It's like Going to the Cemetery and Lighting a Candle: Aboriginal Australians, Sorry Business and social media, *International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 11 (3), 211-224
- Carlson, B. & Frazer, R. (2018). Social Media Mob: Being Indigenous Online, Macquarie University, Sydney
- Carney, N. (2016). All Lives Matter but so Does Race: Black Lives Matter and the Evolving Role of Social Media, *Humanity and Society*, 40(2), 180-199
- Case K.A. (2012) Discovering the privilege of whiteness: White women's reflections on anti-racist identity and ally behavior. *Journal of Social Issues* 68: 78–96
- Daniels, J. (2012). Race and racism in Internet studies: A review and critique. *New Media & Society*, 15(5), 695-719.
- Davis, R. (2021) The 'bad' and exceptionally 'good': Constructing the African refugee. *Media International Australia*, 17(1), 113-126
- Essed, P. (1991). *Understanding everyday racism: An interdisciplinary theory*. New York, NY: Sage
- Fanon, F. (2008). *Black skin, White masks*. London, England: Pluto Press
- Foley, G. (1999). Whiteness and Blackness in the Koori Struggle for Self-Determination, *Just Policy: A Journal of Australian Social Policy*, 19–20, 74–88.
- Frazer, R. & Carlson, B. (2017) Indigenous Memes and the Invention of a People, *Social Media + Society*, October-December, 1-12
- Fu, J. & Cook, J. (2020). Everyday social media use of young Australian adults, *Journal of Youth Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/13676261.2020.1828843
- Gatwiri, K. & Anderson, L. (2021). Boundaries of Belonging: Theorizing Black African Migrant Experiences in Australia. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(3), 1-13
- Gebrekidan, A. (2018). 'African-Australian' Identity in the Making: Analysing its Imagery and Explanatory Power in View of Young Africans in Australia. *Australasian Review of African Studies*, 39(1), 110-129
- Goffman, E. (1959) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Harmondsworth: Penguin
- Hage, G. (1997). At Home in the Entrails of the West: Multiculturalism, "Ethnic Food" and Migrant Home Building. In H. Grace, G. Hage, L. Johnson, J. Langsworth & M. Symonds (Eds.), *Home/World Space*,



- Community and Marginality in Sydney's West, 99-153. Sydney: Pluto Press
- Hage, G. (1998). *White nation: Fantasies of white supremacy in a multicultural society*. Sydney. Pluto Press/Comerford and Miller
- Han, G.S. & Budarick, J. (2018). Overcoming the new kids on the block syndrome: the media 'endorsement' on discrimination against African-Australians. *Continuum*, 32(2), 213–223
- Hardy, K. V. (2013). Healing the hidden wounds of racial trauma. *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, 22(1), 24–28. Retrieved from <http://www.minneapolismn.gov/www/groups/public/@citycoordinator/documents/webcontent/wcmssp-206708.pdf> (Accessed 4 March 2020)
- Harwood, G. Heesch, K.C. Sendall, M.C. & Brough, M (2021) The Basketball Boys: young men from refugee backgrounds and the symbolic value of swagger in an Australian state high school, *International Journal of Inclusive Education*
- Hugo, G. (2009). "Migration between Africa and Australia: a demographic perspective". Australian Human Rights Commission Report
- Ignatieff, M. (1995). *Blood and belonging: journeys into the new nationalism*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux
- Jakubowicz, A. (2010). Australia's migration policies : African dimensions, Background paper for African Australians: A review of human rights and social inclusion issues, Australian Human Rights Commission.
- Jurgenson, N. (2011). Digital Dualism and the Fallacy of Web Objectivity, *Cyborgology, The Society Pages*, 13 September 2011, visited 22 January 2019, viewed via <https://thesocietypages.org/cyborgology/2011/02/24/digital-dualism-versus-augmented-reality/>
- Kamalani, S. (2019). *Understanding Racism in a Post- Racial World Visible Invisibilities*, Palgrave Macmillan
- Kennedy, T. (2020). Indigenous Peoples' Experiences of Harmful Content on Social Media, Macquarie University, Sydney
- Kwansah-Aidoo, K. & Mapedzahama, V. (2018). Black bodies in/out of place?: Afrocentric perspectives and/on racialised belonging in Australia, *Australasian Review of African Studies*, 39(2), 95-121.
- Kwansah-Aidoo, K. & Mapedzahama, V. (2018a). Towards Afrocentric counter-narratives of race and racism in Australia, *Australasian Review of African Studies*, 39(2), 6-18.



- Lincoln, S. & Robards, B. (2016) Being strategic and taking control: Bedrooms, social networks sites and the narratives of growing up, *New Media & Society*, 18(6), 927-943
- Love, B.J. (2004). Brown Plus 50 Counter-Storytelling: A Critical Race Theory Analysis of the “Majoritarian Achievement Gap” Story, *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 37(3), 227-246
- Macaulay, L. & Deppeler, J. (2020). Perspectives on Negative Media Representations of Sudanese and South Sudanese Youths in Australia, *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 41, 2, 213-230
- Mahali, A. (2017). Without community, there is no liberation: on #BlackGirlMagic and the rise of Black woman-centred collectives in South Africa. *Agenda*, 31(1), 28-41
- Majavu, M. (2017). *Uncommodified Blackness: The African Male Experience in Australia and New Zealand*, Palgrave MacMillan.
- Majavu, M. (2018). The Whiteness Regimes of Multiculturalism: The African Male Experience in Australia’, *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 53(2), 187 –20.
- Majavu, M. (2020). The ‘African gangs’ narrative: associating Blackness with criminality and other anti-Black racist tropes in Australia. *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal*, 13(1), 27-39
- Matamoros-Fernandez, A & Farkas, J. (2021) Racism, Hate Speech, and Social Media: A Sytematic Review and Critique, *Television & New Media*, 22(2), 205-224
- Mapedzahama, V., & Kwansah-Aidoo, K. (2010, December). “Where are you from?” The Paradox of African Identity and Belonging in Australia. In TASA (The Australian Sociological Association) 2010 conference proceedings: Social causes, private lives. Hawthorn: The Australian Sociological Association.
- Mapedzahama, V. & Kwansah-Aidoo, K. (2013). Negotiating diasporic Black African existence in Australia: A reflective analysis. *Australasian Review of African Studies*, 34(1), 61-81
- Mapedzahama, V. & Kwansah-Aidoo, K. (2017). *Blackness as Burden? The Lived Experience of Black Africans in Australia*. SAGE Open, 7(3), 1–13.
- Moran, C (2022). ‘African Kids Can’: Challenging the African Gangs narrative on social media, forthcoming
- Moran, C & Gatwiri, K. (2022) #BlackLivesMatter: Exploring the digital practices of African Australian youth on social media, forthcoming



- Moran, C & Mapedzahama, V (2022) Black Bodies, Black Queens and the Black Sisterhood on Social Media: Perspectives from young African women in Australia, forthcoming.
- Moran, C & Robards, B (2020) Researching Connected African youth in Australia through a social media ethnography and scroll back interviews, *African Journalism Studies*, 41(4), 83-102.
- Moreton-Robinson, A. (2015) *The White Possessive, Property, Power and Indigenous Sovereignty*, University of Minnesota Press
- Ndhlovu, F. (2013). Too tall, too dark to be Australian: Racial perceptions of post-refugee Africans. *Critical Race and Whiteness Studies*, 9(2), 1 –17
- Ndhlovu, F. (2014). *Becoming an African diaspora in Australia: Language, culture, identity*. Palgrave Macmillan UK
- Nolan, D. Farquharson, K. & Marjoribanks, T. (2018). *Australian Media and the Politics of Belonging*. London: Anthem Press
- Nunn, C. (2017) Negotiating national (non)belongings: Vietnamese Australians in ethno/multicultural Australia, *Identities*, 24(2), 216-235
- Nunn, C. Spaaij, R. & Luguetti C (2021). Beyond integration: football as a mobile, transnational sphere of belonging for refugee-background young people, *Leisure Studies*, 41:1, 42-55, DOI: 10.1080/02614367.2021.1962393
- Paradies, Y.C. (2006) Beyond Black and White, Essentialism, hybridity and Indigeneity, *Journal of Sociology*, 42(4), 355–367
- Petray, T.L. (2013) Self-writing a movement and contesting indigeneity: Being an Aboriginal activist on social media, *Global Media Journal Australian Edition*, 7(1)
- Robards, B. & Lincoln, S. (2017). Uncovering longitudinal life narratives: Scrolling back on Facebook. *Qualitative Research*, 17(6), 715-730.
- Shipley, B. & Walker, I. (2019). ‘What Gen Z Actually Do Online - Social & Digital Media Trends 2019’, Year13 and YouthSense, Australia.
- Smith, W.A. (2008). Higher education: Racial Battle Fatigue. *Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity and Society*, 615 – 618. Schaefer, R.T eds (2008) SAGE, USA
- Turnbull, M. (2017). Remarks at the release of the Multicultural Statement 2017, <https://www.malcolmtturnbull.com.au/media/remarks-at-the-release-of-the-multicultural-statement-2017> (accessed 6 August 2020)



- Udah, H & Singh, P. (2019). Identity, Othering and belonging: toward an understanding of difference and the experiences of African immigrants to Australia, *Social Identities*, 25(6), 843-859
- Walsh, M.J. & Baker, S.A. (2017) The selfie and the transformation of the public–private distinction, *Information, Communication & Society*, 20(8), 1185-1203
- Weber, L. (2020). ‘My kids won’t grow up here’: Policing, Bordering and Belonging. *Theoretical Criminology*, 24(1), 71-89
- Windle, J. (2008). The racialisation of African youth in Australia, *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture*, 14(5), 553–66.
- Wright, L. (2007). ‘Lock out these refugee thugs.’ *Sunday Herald Sun*, February 4. Retrieved from: <https://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/victoria/lock-out-these-refugee-thugs/news-story/f3b4ecd7456cd582ce42d20b78a4e591> (Accessed 26 September 2018)
- Yancy, G. (2008). *Black bodies, white gazes: The continuing significance of race*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Young, C (2020). Interlocking systems of oppression and privilege impact African Australian health and well-being in greater Melbourne: A qualitative intersectional analysis, *Journal of Social Issues*, 76, 880–898.
- Yussuf, A (2020) Did you know there were Africans on the First Fleet?, SBS The Feed, 28 April 2020, <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/the-feed/did-you-know-there-were-12-africans-on-the-first-fleet>
- Yuval-Davis, N. (2006). Belonging and the politics of belonging. *Patterns of Prejudice*, 40(3), 197-214
- Yuval-Davis, N. (2011). *The Politics of Belonging: Intersectional Contestations*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications
- Zwangobani, K. (2011). African Australian Youth: Homogenisation and the Dynamics of Identity. Online Proceedings, Young Lives Changing Times: perspectives on social production, University of Sydney, 8-9 June 2011.



Studying Africa in the Australian Capital Territory: Bureaucratisation, Disciplinisation and Projectisation

Ibrahim Abraham

Australian National University, Canberra
ibrahim.abraham@anu.edu.au

Rocco Weglarz

Independent Scholar, Canberra
roccoweglarz@gmail.com

Abstract

This article analyses the experiences of scholars of Africa in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), advancing upon critical research on African Studies and contemporary academia. Drawing upon interviews with researchers, this article makes three arguments about the study of Africa in the ACT and Australia. Firstly, that universities have undergone bureaucratisation, altering the way researchers organise their working lives. Secondly, that the study of Africa in the ACT's universities demonstrates disciplinisation such that researchers' methodologies are more important to their identities and career trajectories than their regions of research. Finally, that research practices have undergone projectisation, with scholars increasingly employed on precarious contracts and periodically shifting their focus to or from Africa. It is argued that the African Studies paradigm and Africanist identity are inoperative in the ACT.

Keywords

African Studies, area studies, Australian universities, precarity

Introduction

Emerging from research designed to document and develop Africa-related research in the universities of the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), this article draws upon interviews with researchers engaging with Africa through different disciplines and methodologies to understand contemporary changes and challenges affecting the study of



Africa in Australia. Whereas American and British scholars have focused on the decline of area studies since the 1990s, and some Australian scholars have looked towards the Australian government to fund an African Studies Centre following that precise paradigm, this article argues the area studies approach is inoperative and inappropriate in Australia. Rather, scholars of Africa in the ACT come from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, are spread out across universities and faculties, experience very different employment situations, and tend to identify with their discipline, methodology or topical interests. They are also reticent about claiming broad expertise over a historically misrepresented continent.

Building upon histories and critiques of the study of Africa in Australia and the Anglophone Global North, including the invaluable work of Tanya Lyons, this article situates the current experiences of ACT-based researchers within broader changes impacting academia locally and globally. After explaining the research methodology and critically outlining recent developments in the study of Africa, this article will draw upon interview data to advance three key arguments about the study of Africa in the ACT. Doing so, the article will move from more general changes to the university, to more specific changes to the study of Africa and finally to changes in the professional lives of individual scholars.

Firstly, this article argues the ACT's universities have undergone significant bureaucratisation, altering working patterns and power relations, with the demands of universities as employers overshadowing broader obligations to one's discipline and profession. Secondly, this article argues the study of Africa in the ACT's universities demonstrates longstanding disciplinisation such that scholars' research methodologies are generally more important to their identities and career trajectories than regional expertise. Finally, this article argues research practices in the ACT's universities have undergone projectisation, with many scholars periodically shifting their focus to-and-from Africa, as policies and opportunities direct. Further, that project-based employment is increasingly precarious, perhaps even "proletarian."

Methodology

This article reports on "real world" research, following Robson's (2011) definition of small-scale projects evaluating institutions or policies. Real world research is less concerned with impacting academia than



impacting communities or organisations. However, since academia is our community and organisation, we position this research within a critical overview of African Studies, as well as drawing upon critical literature on the changing nature of academia. Data are drawn from three sources. Firstly, from policy documents, inquiries, and critical secondary scholarly literature. Secondly, an attempted census of Africa-related researchers in the ACT initiated in August 2020 and periodically updated. Thirdly, from interviews with academics and other interested parties in the ACT conducted between May and August 2021.

Our census is inspired by Lyons' (2012, 2013, 2017) earlier Australia-wide surveys. Similarly relying on public online records, we identified 40 salaried academics who have published research on Africa in the last decade, as well as 21 PhD students and adjuncts also disseminating Africa-related research. The social sciences dominate, specifically political science and demography, but health sciences and environmental sciences are also well represented. We do not claim all 61 researchers are primarily focused on Africa, and this evidence of disciplinisation constitutes a key research finding. Nevertheless, we have excluded scholars we judge to have only engaged with Africa in an isolated and incidental way, making use of a secondary dataset with some African cases, for example, or deep historical geological data.

This attempted census was not an exact process, therefore, being shaped by the question of the area studies paradigm as well as practical challenges. As we argue below, projectisation leads to fluctuating faculty, and several scholars departed during the term of the project. Rothengatter and Hil (2013, p. 52) observe casually employed academics "can rapidly, and often without explanation, be granted no further contracts and, therefore, are dispatched from the workplace, never to be seen again." Online listings for non-salaried adjunct faculty are also uncertain, and PhD students' online presence varies as students may be active on social media but unlisted on their university's website.

Interviews were conducted between May and August 2021, under the ethical oversight of the ANU as protocol 2019/740. For practical reasons, we excluded PhD students, whose participation presented additional administrative hurdles. While most informants are ANU faculty, we also contacted and interviewed faculty from the University of Canberra and UNSW Canberra. We could not identify anyone studying Africa at the



Australian Catholic University or Charles Sturt University's small Canberra campuses. Although we are not primarily concerned with the generalisability of our findings, our data appears robust insofar as experiences generally hold up across the sample. We approached saturation point after 16 interviews as we were consistently—but not exclusively—encountering identification with disciplines and topical specialisations, rather than area studies.

Most of our informants were happy to be named in research output, although five chose pseudonyms, borrowed from South African writers (André, Antjie, Athol, Damon and Nadine). We cannot detect any pattern in the preference for pseudonyms. Two interviews were conducted with academics who wished to invoke the Chatham House Rule in which information is used but the source is not identified, however, these numbered among the five interviews discarded as informants did not return completed consent forms for use of the interview material in output, although consent was offered for the interview itself. In total, 30 academics were approached, 16 interviews were conducted, and permission was received to make use of 13 interviews.

Background

As this article offers local, critical insights into longstanding international questions about the organisation of the study of Africa, the following sections offers a (very) short overview of the history of African Studies in Australia and sister societies, the United Kingdom and the United States. Recognising the rise and decline of the area studies paradigm, the section also outlines key political issues informing the study of Africa. Finally, the section notes the potted history of the study of Africa in Australia, noting internationally significant scholars at the ANU.

African Studies emerged in a coherent way in in the Anglophone world in British universities following WWI, with the gravitational centre shifting to the US following decolonisation as US government funding established area studies programs amid the Cold War rush for regional expertise (West and Martin, 1997). There has never been a similar African Studies initiative in Australia (Lyons and Dimock, 2007, p. 315), and no university has ever had a School or Department of African Studies. The end of the Cold War saw a reduction in US interest in Africa, with the end of apartheid having a similar effect in Australia (Pijović, 2019, p. 53),



and scholarly focus shifted from area studies to globalisation, the logic being “the apparently new world order of enhanced transnational economic, cultural, information, and demographic flows rendered the old structures of organising and producing knowledge in bounded regions increasingly obsolete” (Zezeza, 2007, p. 7). While some Africa experts argued increased foreign engagement with the Middle East and Africa post-9/11 demonstrates the continued relevance of area studies programs, others have sought to “embrace change and turn it to our advantage” by working within globalisation paradigms in universities increasingly committed to discipline-based education (Hanson, 2016, p. 100).

The definition of African Studies is not a simple as one might assume. American scholars debated whether “Africa” includes the Mediterranean north, and at times even the settler south, and whether African Studies includes the African diaspora (Alpers and Roberts, 2002, p. 11). As Professor Karima Laachir, Director of the ANU’s Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies (CAIS), observed “in African studies, there’s always an attempt to exclude North Africa, because we are perceived as ‘white Africa.’” Debate has also occurred over African “Studies” with Bryceson’s (2012, pp. 298-299) critical history recognising its “avowedly multidisciplinary” nature, albeit manifested in “serial disciplinary dominance,” with liberal political science recently ruling. One of our informants, Dr Richard Frank, a political scientist at the ANU educated in the US, referred in his interview to the “methodology wars” which complicated the social sciences in the late 20th century, pitting quantitative research against qualitative and humanist research. Hyden (2006, p. 238) similarly refers to the “balkanised” nature of political studies on Africa, as the discipline has experienced “disaggregation” into numerous subfields. Bryceson (2012, p. 299) favours a more familiar geopolitical metaphor, likening “the politics of disciplinary identity within African Studies ... to the politics of tribal and ethnic identity to which African Studies has given so much attention.”

As we will illustrate, in the ACT the study of Africa is the study of the whole continent in its complexity and diversity, including its diasporas. The study of Africa incorporates the environment, prominent in studies in the ACT. Accordingly, the study of Africa is not limited the study of African persons and cultures, seen by several informants to be central to African Studies, and implicit in Bryceson’s emphasis on African Studies



researching “human agency encompassing actions, attitudes, events, and institutions” (ibid., p. 284).

We will also show the study of Africa in the ACT is impacted by the politicisation of the field. With its origins in the “colonial project,” Lyons, Marlowe and Thornton (2015, p. 11) explain, “African Studies has since gone through a myriad of changes and transformations, including receiving insights from postcolonial, feminist and postmodern theories, and more recently from the ‘decolonial’ perspective.” The representation of Africa became especially fraught in the 1990s, with Herbst (2000, pp. 5-6) observing the “unwillingness of many Africanists to generalise,” increasingly emphasising differences, “in the face of racist perceptions that Africa is a homogenous region.” This became part of African Studies’ “epistemological angst,” a consequence of the methodology wars and wider crisis of knowledge and representation in the 1970s, prompting the question, “Who constructs knowledge of Africa, and upon what terms?” (Bundy, 2002, p. 65).

While relevant, the geographical and conceptual breadth of African Studies is less significant in this article than the depth of African Studies. In her Australian surveys, Lyons (2012, p. 2; Lyons and Dimock, 2007, p. 322) painted a picture of a small core of largely overseas-educated “Africanists” keeping the study of Africa alive at Australian universities, working in the humanities and social sciences, disproportionately history. As indebted as we are to Lyons’ accountancy and advocacy, identifying Africanists may not be the best way to approach the study of Africa in Australia in the absence of African Studies programs. There have, however, been two African Studies institutes in Australia, focused on networking scholars. La Trobe University’s African Research Institute operated from 1985 to 2006 and the University of Western Australia established the Africa Research and Engagement Centre (AfREC) in 2018, collaborating with other bodies, notably the Australia Africa Universities Network (AAUN), established in 2009. The AAUN is the most significant Australian government-funded initiative in this field, promoting collaboration between Australian and African researchers, focusing on food security, mining, health and education (AAUN, 2012). Except for UNSW, which has a Canberra campus, no ACT university is a member. While Lyons (2012, p. 2) acknowledges the AAUN is not focused on “African Studies



per se,” this could suggest the African Studies paradigm is misaligned with researchers, or at least research funders.

Three federal parliamentary committees have recommended the establishment of a more comprehensive African Studies Centre. The Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade (1996, pp. 151-152) recommended the federal government consider any proposal from Western Australian universities to establish a Centre. The Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade (2011, p. 107) similarly recommended the Department of Education invite tenders for a university-based government-funded Centre. The report’s recommendations are sometimes repeated among ACT-based scholars, less so the Australian Government’s (2012, p. 5) response that it was “unable to fund the establishment of a Centre of Africa Studies at this time.” Nevertheless, the Senate’s Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee (2018, pp. 84-85) expressed concern that the “lack of understanding or awareness of Africa and its many cultures, business environments and economic landscapes could restrict Australia’s trade and investment relationship with Africa.” The Committee expanded the idea of a Centre beyond academia, focusing on broader public awareness of Africa. The Australian Government (2019, pp. 8) supported the recommendation “in principle,” indicating it will continue to support various conferences and advisory groups, but in arguing AfREC “will make a significant contribution to Africa literacy, building on the collaborative work of the Australia-Africa Universities Network,” suggested the matter of a government-funded Centre is settled.

Focusing again on the ACT, the ANU’s (2020, p. 1) recent “Regional Plan: Africa and Middle East” discussion paper treats the university’s engagement with Africa as “a metaphor for the difficult and patchy history of African Studies (or indeed Africa awareness) in Australia generally,” noting past and present expertise on Africa, without co-ordination. Although the ANU’s achievements in the study of Africa occurred by accident, not design, the university counts at least four highly distinguished scholars of Africa among its former senior faculty: Jack Caldwell, Keith Hancock, Anthony Low and Deryck Schreuder. Each published on Africa and the wider Commonwealth—an approach evident in the careers of other Australian scholars (Lyons and Dimock, 2007, p. 316)—and each was hired as a disciplinary expert rather than an Africa expert.



The situation remains the same today; few of our contemporary informants focus exclusively on Africa. The ACT is therefore not living in a “Post-Africanist era,” as West and Martin (1997) theorised for the US, noting the impact of globalisation, for Australia never had an “Africanist era” to begin with. The study of Africa is more often undertaken by scholars making use of African contexts and cases, without identifying Africa as their sole research focus or academic identity. We illustrate this most clearly in discussions of disciplinisation and projectisation, below, but first we turn our attention to a more basic recent change in academic life—bureaucratisation.

Bureaucratisation

Previous attempts to develop African Studies at the ANU revealingly focused on lobbying influential individuals with past engagement with Africa, on the assumption they would recognise the importance of Africa and have the power to shift institutional priorities. This sounds like the neo-patrimonial political system often ascribed to Africa, but such universities, with powerful individuals and a weak administration, are better understood as “feudal” universities. As Harvie (2000, p. 104) argues, changes “somewhat akin to the transition from feudalism to capitalism” have occurred in universities, dissolving individual power to committees tasked with implementing formal policies, including quantifying “value.” No one decrees university Centres or Schools into being, therefore; they commonly emerge from networks of ordinary faculty but require formalisation and funding by internal or external committees, according to policy. This “bureaucratisation” has led to the relative disempowerment of individual academics, undermining one’s specific research or expertise as the central aspect of one’s academic identity, and the relative strengthening of the university as a source of identity and obligation.

Wolfe (1996, p. 58) described the “feudal” university system—at the precise time it was collapsing in the Anglophone world—as consisting of “linked fiefdoms” without a “system-defining core.” The university made few claims upon the affective affinities of faculty, compared to their disciplines or departments. As Marginson and Considine (2009, p. 108) describe the operation of this feudal-style university in Australia, “[p]rofessors were subject only to peer validation, and they had few peers. ... Administrators and junior teachers were the servants, ‘managers’



were unknown,” and central intervention was rare. André (pseudonym) described the ANU as a formerly “feudal” institution of this type, introducing us to the term “god professor” along the way; “the head of the Research School was all powerful. [...] Anthony Low—who was an Africanist and the Vice Chancellor—once told me how little power he had.”

This feudal university lacked the kind of modern bureaucracy Weber (1956) described, in which individuals become willing cogs in a machine, stripped of personal peculiarities and attachments in their professional lives. What generations of student activists perceived as repressive bureaucracy was therefore nothing of the sort, Wolfe (1996) argues; it was zombie feudalism protecting academics from a marketplace in which one accepts direction from above, as in the genuinely bureaucratic public service, or one accepts the consequences of unpopularity or poor performance, as in the private sector. Following Weber, one way to understand academic bureaucratisation is as the subjective shift from professionals controlling their working lives, towards the subjectivity of organisational employees, clearly illustrated through the “onboarding” ritual new employees undertake, explaining the minutiae of everyday practices, and their indexation to university policies.

Power that was once placed in the hands of academics is increasingly concentrated in executive committees (Connell, 2019, pp. 125-126), which at the highest level contain many non-academics (Pelizzon, et al., 2021). Rather than being powerful rulers of interlinked fiefs, departmental heads are now tasked with implementing committees’ policies. Academics are therefore increasingly subject to continual monitoring and evaluation in accordance with these policies, fundamentally reshaping academic life (Connell, 2019, pp. 130-132). This practice of evaluation leads to a culture of “busyness” in which academics have many tasks without time limits, only deadlines (Hil, 2012, pp. 71-100).

The consequences of bureaucratisation and busyness for the study of Africa at Australian universities are twofold. Firstly, increasing administrative burdens reduce the value of professional service, including initiatives for promoting the study of Africa, and engagement with professional associations. As Athol (pseudonym) replied, when asked about promoting the study of Africa at his university:



I haven't really seen much in the way of active agendas to boost the study of Africa. I think most everyone who has admin[istrative] responsibilities written into their contract has those responsibilities assigned to them already. You look after the HDRs [higher degree by research students] or the Honours program, or you miss a staff meeting and find yourself assigned to another committee.

Ironically, the increased administrative expectations placed upon faculty discourage new organisational activities within the university, and professional activities beyond the university, especially if such activities fall outside policy priorities. It is not surprising that much of the work of organising and promoting the study of Africa in Australia is undertaken by adjunct and emeritus faculty and students.

Secondly and relatedly, while this process of bureaucratisation undermines the importance of one's discipline as the central subjective aspect of academic identity and life, it nevertheless exacerbates the "disciplinisation" of the study of Africa in a different sense. As we demonstrate below, in the absence of established African Studies programs or recognition of the value of Africa in university policies, scholars of Africa usually explicitly identify with their methodological discipline, or their technical area of specialisation, to make their research valuable and evaluable. As Connell (2019, p. 129) similarly observes, "the specialised, the critical and the unfamiliar" in university teaching is increasingly being replaced by broad professional skills, "broken down into specific competencies" to be objectively evaluated. We turn now to this methodological or generic skills-based disciplinisation, in research and teaching.

Disciplinisation

Although our online census of academics researching Africa in the ACT revealed a significant number of scholars engaged with Africa, it did not reveal those scholars' academic identities. Reporting on earlier audits of African Studies in Australia, Lyons (2012, pp. 5-6) recognised that "many of the academics captured in the two audits ... do not identify as Africanists, nor are they members of AFSAAP," but have "hidden links" with the continent, broadly defined as 'people to people links.'" We identified these links in several cases, such as economist Dr Yonatan



Dinku of the ANU's Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, whose PhD research was on microeconomics in Ethiopia. Research on Africa will remain a "marginal" concern for Yonatan, as he continues to collaborate with colleagues in Ethiopia, even though his research is now focused on Australia. Rather than focusing on Lyons' notion of "hidden links" among Australian scholars, however, we identify a broader phenomenon of disciplinisation underpinning the phenomenon of disconnected scholars of Africa in Australia, wherein one's research methodology and broad field of teaching is more important than one's region of expertise.

Like bureaucratisation and projectisation, disciplinisation is exacerbated by broader policy trends. Firstly, the emergence of centralised university bureaucracy with policymaking and monitoring powers that undermine the autonomy of research. Secondly, the shift towards vocational-style university education, emphasising generic, employable skills. However, we noted above the ANU's four most distinguished scholars of Africa—Caldwell, Hancock, Low and Schreuder—was each employed as a disciplinary expert in their time, suggesting disciplinisation has been the norm for scholars of Africa in Australia, at least at the ANU, even if it now takes different forms.

When asked to identify with academic fields and labels, informants primarily identified as disciplinary experts, in sometimes nuanced ways. Richard Frank told us, "I don't see myself as an area specialist," referring to African Studies, rather, "I consider myself a conflict scholar and a comparative institutionalist." We encountered similar sentiments from most informants, with Khwezi Nkwanyana from the Canberra-based Australian Strategic Policy Institute similarly rejecting the label "Africanist," to identify as an expert on security "focussing on Africa." Associate Professor Martine Mariotti, of the ANU's College of Business and Economics identified as "an economic historian specialising in Africa." She explained:

The reason I wouldn't say "Africanist" is because I've got this very narrow geographical focus, just South Africa and now extended to Malawi. The focus is on economic issues, so I wouldn't put myself out there as an Africanist as I feel that's much broader. I primarily publish in economics journals. [...] My work is, in a sense, using Africa to



answer a more broadly international question. So I'm not working on Africa for Africa's sake, although I'd like to, it's just an extension of the route I've been on through an economics PhD and my audience being broadly economic historians who would use a specific case study to understand a problem more broadly.

However, four informants expressed guarded identification with African Studies. Dr Karo Moret Miranda, an ANU historian, identified with "African & Afro-descendant studies," while CAIS director Karima Laachir, Yonatan Dinku, and Nadine (pseudonym) qualified their identification and discussed the problematics of the term. Nadine explained:

I do identify with African Studies, but I find it challenging in the Australian context, because people use the term Africa and African in very generalist ways, whereas I'm used to referring more specifically to the regions or countries I'm working in. Those general comments I find problematic, but because there isn't much knowledge of the continent, it's tricky to describe the work I do [in a way] that isn't so general.

Such concerns are understandable given the lack of nuance in historical representations of the diverse continent, noted above.

Karima Laachir made similar observations about African studies in Australia:

In the UK, I do identify as a North Africanist; my field is North African studies which includes the Maghreb and Egypt, as well as Sudan and Mauritania. Here it's a different story, it's included in Middle Eastern studies in Australia. I've noticed there isn't any work on the Maghreb region, a bit on Egypt but not on the countries of the Maghreb. It always goes under Middle Eastern studies.

While emphasising "the Maghreb region is part and parcel of Africa," Karima acknowledged "it does have particular historical resonance itself." As Director of CAIS, Karima is closest to the established area studies paradigm, however, her regional expertise is repositioned and reinterpreted



in Australia as Middle Eastern regional expertise, so while area studies abides at the ANU, African Studies as area studies does not.

Whereas African Studies can be too geographically imprecise to be a comfortable scholarly identity—whether too inclusive or too exclusive—it can also be thematically and methodologically uncomfortable. Yonatan Dinku was concerned that African Studies is too thematically broad, as he could not engage with work on “politics or foreign relations.” Although he can identify with studies of African societies and cultures, these aspects of African studies alienate Martine Mariotti, also an ANU economist, who described African Studies as “something quite cultural and I don’t see myself there.” We agree with her observation that for most academics, “the discipline itself is their primary home.”

Only one informant, André, who holds an emeritus position, identified as an Africanist, using the term in an ecumenical manner, referring to “accidental Africanists” whose research wanders onto the continent. Although much of André’s research focused on the Pacific, for funding reasons, he maintained the Africanist identification, unlike other informants whose research has focused on Africa more consistently. In addition to representational concerns over overstating regional expertise, (dis)identification with the Africanist label likely reflects generational and geographical difference, rather than different career trajectories, for like other scholars, André was hired for his disciplinary “skillset.”

The approach of most of our informants is expressed in Robert H. Bates’ (1997, pp. 123-124) heuristic comparison of area studies experts and disciplinary experts in the social sciences:

Rather than seeking a deep understanding of a particular area, the social scientist strives to develop general theories and to identify and test hypotheses derived from them. The social scientist will attack with confidence political data extracted from any region of the world. She will approach electoral data from South Africa in the same manner as that from the United States and eagerly address cross-national data sets, thereby manifesting her rejection of the presumption that political regularities are area-bound. Those who approach the study of foreign areas as a social science do not seek to master the literature on a region but rather to master the literature of a discipline.



Most academics we interviewed use African examples in this way to explore globally relevant topics. Damon (pseudonym) explained that he engages with Africa by “dipping in and out of specific case studies within Africa,” while Associate Professor Patrick L’Espoir Decosta uses “Mauritius and other African countries as examples” when teaching tourism at the ANU.

Such an approach to the study of Africa overlaps with the emphasis on globalisation in debates over African Studies, and some disciplines strongly represented in ACT are innately global, particularly environmental science. When asked how she identifies as a scholar, Dr Florence Awino, a graduate of the University of Canberra whose PhD research focused on agriculture and waste management in Uganda, immediately answered, “an environmental scientist.” She explained:

I remember looking for a place to publish a paper and I was asked, since this is African research, why not publish in an African Studies journal? But the issue is we’re living in what we call a global village, so if food is grown in a specific part of Asia or Africa or Latin America, this food may end up in Australia. Or, if you visit these countries it will be served to you at your restaurant. If we think of this as just a Ugandan problem, or just a Chinese problem, or Latin American problem, we will not be able to sort out the problem.

Although Florence is open to continuing research in Africa, she recognises the advantages of continuing her research elsewhere.

Another likely reason why most of our informants do not identify with the African studies field is that, from André onwards, none were hired because of their African expertise. As Damon explained, reflecting on his job interview: “I suspect the word ‘Africa’ was not mentioned in the interview once. It is really globally focused work on global policy and ethics; that’s what they were looking for.” Richard Frank recounted the same experience, discussing his hiring process:

I don’t think geography came into it at all in terms of what I was expected to do research on or what I was expected to teach, it was just international relations and comparative politics. The cases could be



from the Philippines, from El Salvador or from the DRC, that was less important than speaking to the big debates on how states interact with each other and how they affect political stability. [...] In my area of research being able to use cutting edge methods is more relevant than the region you study.

Antjie (pseudonym) had the same experience as a scholar of the African diaspora, hired “on the strength of my quantitative research,” even though “there was no one working on the subject matter or the topic I was doing.” To be blunt, there is little academic capital in identifying as an expert on Africa in Australia. However, Yonatan Dinku suggested that his work in developmental microeconomics in Ethiopia was an advantage for research in the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research. He explained that “my experience is working with cultural contexts, not just purely numbers.”

The same process of disciplinisation is locatable in teaching on Africa. We have identified five Africa-focused courses on the books of the ACT’s universities, although these are not taught each year, as well as fourteen courses that include African examples and contexts. UNSW’s Canberra campus at the Australian Defence Force Academy offers the undergraduate elective “Contemporary African History” and the postgraduate elective “History of Post-colonial Warfare in Africa.” The ANU offers the undergraduate politics course “Conflict and Change in sub-Saharan Africa” and “Environment, Human Security and Conflict,” both taught by Richard Frank, and the postgraduate law course “Business, Human Rights and Corporate Responsibility,” taught by Professor Jolyon Ford who previously taught the postgraduate course “Law and Governance in Sub-Saharan Africa.” ANU also offers the undergraduate history course “Africans and Afro-descendants,” and CAIS offers “Egypt: Social and Political Dynamics in a Changing Middle East.” A dozen courses offered by CAIS have newly incorporated material on North Africa, including courses such as “Issues of Development in the Middle East.”

With the exception of these CAIS courses, which conform to a (Middle Eastern) area studies paradigm, the generally discipline-based norms of research on Africa in the ACT carry across to teaching. When asked about his current research, Richard Frank made an immediate



connection with his teaching, in which he similarly uses African examples within a broader, globally applicable theoretical framework:

I approach it from a general perspective that's not unique to Africa, but a lot of the case studies in my other class on environmental security and conflict ["Environment, Human Security and Conflict"] are from sub-Saharan Africa which are the ones I'm most familiar with because of my training. I did my Masters with Bob Bates who is a political economist on African countries and markets and I TAed [worked as a teaching assistant] for Ali Mazrui at Binghamton who is a big thinker of the African experience. A lot of examples that I think of are from the African continent, but the conflict literature that I focus on, and the political institutions literature, is more broad and comparative.

Just as Richard's approach reflects the disciplinisation of the study of Africa, Jolyon Ford's course "Business, Human Rights and Corporate Responsibility" reflects the role of globalisation in undermining the area studies paradigm:

Africa's a very big part of the course, but only indirectly and incidentally. You couldn't teach a course on business and human rights without talking about diamonds, cocoa and metals, and the countries they're sourced from. [...] I don't do anything that you could call a case study on Africa, and yet I'm talking about Africa 60 to 70 percent of the time.

His specific, Africa-focused course, "Law and Governance in Sub-Saharan Africa," which was only taught once, in 2016, was similarly concerned with placing Africa within complex contexts. One of the aims of the course, he explained, was to provide "Masters-level awareness of legal pluralism, that there are lots of legal systems that govern how people behave."

However, in the absence of more comprehensive Africa-focused courses, compounded by the lack of material on Africa in Australian schools (Lyons, 2012, p. 7), there are limitations on teaching Africa in the ACT's universities. Discussing his approach in the course "Business, Human Rights and Corporate Responsibility," Jolyon explained:



With my students, I could do case studies on some things that they would understand straight away. If I said, “forced labour on tuna fishing boats in the Gulf of Thailand,” they can just instantly, mentally pick that up; but if I said, “eastern Congo,” they just don’t have that cultural and geographical orientation.

This is not only the case for students, however, as Damon explained:

I tend to think of myself as someone who researches on long sweeps of history, but doing that I get to know certain things, and moments and people quite well, while remaining ignorant of a whole lot of others. I feel there’s no base level of knowledge on African issues that underpins what I do; each time I’m starting from scratch.

Damon illustrates Lyons and Saba’s (2014, p. 8) argument that the absence of university courses on Africa “has left a huge gap of knowledge in the educated elite of Australasia.”

This precise gap in knowledge has inspired some students to take Richard’s class, “Conflict and Change in sub-Saharan Africa.” As he explained:

I know in the Australian context there really hasn’t been a demand for these kinds of classes, from my experience in the political science framework, but then in preparing this class, in the first week, I present on why we should care about the African continent and a lot of my students are motivated by a big hole in their knowledge and they’re interested in trying to fill it while they’re at the ANU.

Revealingly, the only background knowledge required for taking the course is a foundation of international relations theories, and a map quiz orientates students to the continent.

Richard’s “Conflict and Change” course is built upon a foundation of broad theoretical knowledge with African examples, in keeping again with Bates’ (1997) theorisation of a discipline-based approach:



I'm introducing them to the basics of pre-colonial and colonial issues in the first few weeks of the class, then a couple of weeks on the post-colonial experience, broadly, then a few weeks on political conflict and institutions. It seems to be pretty similar to what's being taught elsewhere. The workshop approach is to give them some information they haven't received before, get them to link it to some larger issues that they've covered in political science classes, and then do a case study to see how it will play out in one particular country.

Jolyon took the same approach in his course "Law and Governance in sub-Saharan Africa," recognising that broader disciplinary knowledge could be the way to make a course accessible for students whom he could not assume were familiar with Africa:

The course was very thematic, very high-level and conceptual. I didn't know the depth of knowledge of students or their familiarity with even the geography of where we were talking about. We had some students with a great deal of knowledge either about one particular part of sub-Saharan Africa, or good general knowledge, and others with none at all but with a great deal of development knowledge in Asia. [...] What we were focusing on was this golden thread of how law is implicated as a tool of power.

These courses inform students about Africa and prepare them for more engagement with the region, while strengthening and applying their disciplinary and theoretical expertise, which can then be applied to other regions. Reminiscent of the careers of the ANU's prominent past scholars of Africa, researching across the Commonwealth, courses on Africa at the ANU demonstrate the ongoing absence of the African Studies paradigm in Australia.

Projectisation

The final phenomenon we identify in our research is "projectisation," which emerges in three interrelated forms. Firstly, disciplinised projectisation: researchers moving between topics and regions. Secondly, grant-based projectisation: the proliferation of competitive, fixed-term contracts focused on specific research projects with little possibility of



extension. Thirdly, precarious projectisation: the proliferation of casual contracts for specific tasks, reflecting the “proletarianisation” of academia.

As Honadle and Rosengard (1983, p. 300) explain, writing from the neighbouring Development Studies discipline, “‘Projects’ are discrete activities, aimed at specific objectives with earmarked budgets and limited time frames. This is in contrast with ‘programmes’, which have more nebulous objectives and occupy a more permanent status in an institutional setting.” Whereas project-based aid emerged from the confluence of political uncertainty and bureaucratic unreliability (*ibid.*, p. 304), academic projectisation emerges from the unreliability of funding. This is most apparent in competitive grant schemes, with the Australian Research Council (ARC) the most prominent Australian provider. More basically, academic projectisation is a consequence of policy changes, leading to close monitoring of university costs, breaking the professional lives of academics down to their constitutive parts and parcelling them out on a specific basis. Even academics on permanent contracts tend to work on their research project-to-project as grants are sought to temporarily “buy out” teaching responsibilities, handing them to casual employees.

Whereas Lyons and Dimock (2007, p. 322) identified “natural attrition” as the key employment-related threat to “Africanists” in Australian universities through retirement or death—or worse, promotion into management—we identify precarious projectisation as the principal employment-related problem. The two phenomena are not entirely unrelated, for the expanding higher education sector recruited large numbers of faculty for new universities who retired in significant numbers in the 1990s and 2000s, part of the natural attrition Lyons and Dimock identified. However, as Connell (2019, p. 69) observes, contemporary universities are not exactly faced with scarcity since demand for higher education has never been higher; the shift to precarious, project-based employment reflects an ideological choice to atomize academic work into elementary tasks. There is nothing inevitable about replacing one retired professor with four part-time casual employees (Rothengatter and Hil, 2013, pp. 53-54). We observe, moreover, many retired academics remain active in African Studies—including some of those Lyons likely had in mind in her articles from the 2000s—continuing their research activities and professional service as “devotional leisure,” common among retired professionals (Stebbins, 2009).



The three forms of projectisation outlined above—disciplinised, grant-based and precarious projectisation—are revealed through our interviews. Damon discussed various examples of disciplinised projectisation involving “dipping in and out of specific case studies within Africa—Libya, Darfur and Rwanda—and focussing on the international response to what’s going on.” His focus is on global political and ethical discourse, which African case studies can illuminate; “I see myself working on refugee issues over the coming years, and climate change issues in relation to the movement of people. I suspect it will take the form of a similar approach.” Florence Awino was unsure whether she would continue with environment research in Africa, or elsewhere, noting her focus previously shifted to Uganda from Portugal.

Examples of grant-based projectisation also emerged in our interviews, overlapping with other forms of projectisation, reflecting increasingly bureaucratised institutions. Universities and national funding bodies such as the ARC overwhelmingly prioritise research on Australia and the Asia-Pacific region, and as Nadine explained, “it’s hard to get ARC support for research on Africa because of the way regional and national priorities and national benefits are understood.” On the other hand, she observed that research on the African diaspora in Australia was more likely to attract funding; “if I can’t get over there, there’s interesting work to be done here.”

As Athol argued in explaining his recent decision not to submit an ARC grant application, grant-writing can be a gamble:

I would need to produce and revise a lot of drafts, which means undermining my current research which already I don’t really have enough time for. One of my first jobs in academia was actually being hired as a postgrad[uate student] to work on someone else’s ARC application, which tells you how much time these things take. [...] ARC grant applications have low success rates in my area, I think only about one in seven applications are successful, and even that’s assuming I get through the university’s own selection processes.

Specialised university administrators oversee the grant process, with committees vetting aspiring applicants partly according to the university’s strategic policies.



The final overlapping example of projectisation, precarious projectisation, also emerged in our interviews. Some of our informants have been employed on a succession of fixed-term contracts. Antjie explained that over a seven-year period, “I had a three-year postdoc[toral fellowship], then it was extended for a year, then I was casual and sessional, now I’m back [fulltime] for another year.” Others are employed on “contingent” contracts linked to specific pools of external funding. Such contracts are not new; André discussed being on a succession of fixed-term contracts decades ago, but what was scandalous then is unremarkable now.

As abidingly disciplinary experts, our informants have also drifted between Africa-related and non-Africa related projects, as employment opportunities dictated. This includes André’s funded work on the Pacific and Antjie’s work “bringing methodological expertise” to other colleagues’ research projects. Harvie (2000) provocatively suggests these practices raise the spectre of academic proletarianisation; academic “capitalists” utilising research funding to employ academic “proletarians” to carry out “alienated” activities. Such an approach is more apparent in the experiences of casual staff brought in by grant-holders who have “bought out” their teaching duties for a semester or two, who are usually excluded from career development opportunities and institutional support (Rothengatter and Hil, 2013, p. 53; Connell, 2019, pp. 67-68). On the other hand, Bone (2021, p. 276) notes that precarity is not necessarily unwelcome, some academics, including Antjie, appreciate the “flexible or casual” nature of the work depending on their individual “needs and desires.” This remains true even though precarious projectisation is built upon the “needs and desires” of business models valuing economy over stability, with any similarities to real human needs and desires purely coincidental.

Conclusion

Engaging with critical studies on the study of Africa in Australia and overseas, and critical literature on ongoing changes to academia, this article has made use of interviews with academics in the ACT to describe the bureaucratisation of universities, the disciplinisation of the study of Africa, and the projectisation of the careers of scholars of Africa. A consistent argument has been the inappropriateness and the inoperability of an area studies approach to the study of Africa in Australia, to say nothing



of Africanist identities. Each of the key themes in the article—bureaucratisation, disciplinisation and projectisation—has illustrated this in interrelated ways.

The bureaucratisation of universities has undermined academic autonomy, indexing research and teaching to centralised policies. Given the absence of African Studies departments and programs in Australia, and the absence of reference to the value of Africa in the ACT's universities' policies, bureaucratisation is reshaping the way Africa is studied. Further, insofar as bureaucratisation prioritises obligations to the university, not the discipline or the profession, the value of service to a professional organisation such as AFSAAP is also diminished as academic administrative labour is internally (re)directed.

The disciplinisation of the study of Africa in the ACT can be seen as an emergent consequence of bureaucratisation, the shape scholars and scholarship take after the administrative reshaping of academic life. While we encountered one Africanist and several scholars with critical affinity with African Studies, most of our informants identify with their discipline or specialisation—security, economics, etcetera. This was perhaps most evident in teaching, where the application and development of disciplinary knowledge and methods to African examples is common even in courses ostensibly focused on Africa. Noting that the ANU's leading scholars of Africa—Caldwell, Hancock, Low and Schreuder—were hired for their disciplinary skills, rather than lamenting the absence of Africa Studies as area studies in Australia, we must acknowledge this is simply how Africa has been studied in this country and make this the basis for organisation.

In contrast to Lyons and Dimock (2007, p. 322) who earlier identified “natural attrition” of scholars as the key employment-related challenge to the study of Africa in Australia, this article has argued projectisation—especially precarious projectisation—is the key employment challenge. Whereas project-based research reflects the disciplinised nature of the study of Africa, with scholars disengaging from Africa at times, this reflects longstanding practices in Australia. Precarisation, on the other hand, undermines personal stability and professional community, and insofar as it is linked to bureaucratisation, can discourage precariously employed scholars from researching Africa and other topics beyond universities' policy priorities.



Acknowledgements:

This article emerges from a project to “increase awareness of Africa and African-based studies in ANU and Canberra more broadly via a website and assess the viability of a virtual institute,” funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade of the Commonwealth of Australia. This article does not represent the views of the funding body.

References

- Alpers, Edward A. and Allen F. Roberts (2002). What is African studies? Some reflections. *African Issues*, 30(2), 11-18.
- Australia Africa Universities Network (2012). Our research. <http://aaun.edu.au/our-research/>
- Australian Government (2012). Australian government response to the report of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade inquiry into Australia's relationship with the countries of Africa. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.
- Australian Government (2019). Australian government response to the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee report: Australia's trade and investment relationships with the countries of Africa. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.
- Australian National University (2020). Regional plan: Africa and Middle East (discussion paper). Canberra: Australian National University.
- Bates, Robert H. (1997). Area studies and political science: Rupture and possible synthesis. *Africa Today*, 44(2), 123-131.
- Bone, Kate Daisy (2021). Cruel optimism and precarious employment: The crisis ordinariness of academic work. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 174, 275–290.
- Bryceson, Deborah Fahy (2012). Discovery and denial: Social science theory and interdisciplinarity in African studies. *African Affairs*, 111, 281–302.
- Bundy, Colin (2002). Continuing a conversation: Prospects for African studies in the 21st century. *African Affairs*, 101, 61-73.
- Connell, Raewyn (2019). *The good university: What universities actually do and why it's time for radical change*. London: Zed.



- Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee (2018). Australia's trade and investment relationships with the countries of Africa. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.
- Hanson, John H. (2016). African studies and the global: A commentary. *Africa Today*, 63(2), 97-100.
- Harvie, David (2000). Alienation, class and enclosure in UK universities. *Capital & Class*, 24(2), 103–132.
- Herbst, Jeffrey (2000). *States and power in Africa*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Honadle, George H. and Jay K. Rosengard (1983). Putting 'projectized' development in perspective. *Public Administration & Development*, 3(4), 299-305.
- Hyden, Goran (2006). *African politics in comparative perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade (1996). Australia's relations with southern Africa. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.
- Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade (2011). Inquiry into Australia's relationship with the countries of Africa. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.
- Lyons, Tanya (2012). The hidden links with Africa: Australian universities in African studies. 35th AFSAAP annual conference proceedings, 1-23. <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.688.9487&rep=rep1&type=pdf>
- Lyons, Tanya (2013). Education in Australia's relationship with Africa. In David Mickler and Tanya Lyons (Eds), *New engagement: Contemporary Australian foreign policy toward Africa*, 193-223. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.
- Lyons, Tanya (2017). Trends in African studies in Australia and New Zealand. 39th AFSAAP annual conference proceedings, 1-12. <http://afsaap.org.au/assets/tanya-lyons.pdf>
- Lyons, Tanya and Elizabeth Dimock (2007). The state of African studies in Australia. In Paul Tiyambe Zeleza (Ed.), *The study of Africa*, Volume 2: Global and transnational engagements, 315-332. Dakar: CODESRIA.



- Lyons, Tanya, Jay Marlowe and Alec Thornton (2015). Reflections on Africa and African studies: In memory of Cherry Gertzel. *Australasian Review of African Studies*, 35(2), 8-14.
- Lyons, Tanya and Aime Saba (2015). African studies in Australia and New Zealand: Prospects for knowledge and informed engagement with Africa. 37th AFSAAP annual conference proceedings, 1-9.
<https://afsaap.org.au/assets/Lyons-Tanya-Aime-Saba.pdf>
- Marginson, Simon and Mark Considine (2000). *The enterprise university: Power, governance and reinvention in Australia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pelizzon, Alessandro, et al. (2021). Two out of three members of university governing bodies have no professional expertise in the sector. *The Conversation*, November 30.
<https://theconversation.com/2-out-of-3-members-of-university-governing-bodies-have-no-professional-expertise-in-the-sector-theres-the-making-of-a-crisis-171952>
- Pijović, Nikola (2019). *Australia and Africa: A new friend from the south?* Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Robson, Colin (2011). *Real world research*. 3rd Ed. Chichester: Wiley.
- Rothengatter, Maarten and Richard Hil (2013). A precarious presence: Some realities and challenges of academic casualisation in Australian universities. *Australian Universities Review*, 55(2), 51-59.
- Stebbins, Robert A. (2009). Serious leisure and work. *Sociology Compass*, 3(5), 764-774.
- Weber, Max (1956 [1978]). *Economy and society: An outline of interpretive sociology*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- West, Michael O. and William G. Martin (1997). A future with a past: Resurrecting the study of Africa in the post-Africanist era. *Africa Today*, 44(3), 309-326.
- Wolfe, Alan (1996). The feudal culture of the postmodern university. *The Wilson Quarterly*, 20(1), 54-66.
- Zezeza, Paul Tiyambe (2007). Introduction: The internationalisation of African knowledges. In Paul Tiyambe Zezeza (Ed.) *The study of Africa*, Volume 2: Global and transnational engagements, 1-24. Dakar: CODESRIA.



BOOK REVIEWS

Finex Ndhlovu and Leketi Makalela, *Decolonising Multilingualism in Africa: Recentering Silenced Voices from the Global South*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2021. Critical Language and Literacy Studies: 26; xv + 189 pp. ISBN: 9781788923347.

This book is a welcome addition of the invisible Global South and in particular African voices to the current scholastic discussions on decolonial projects. The authors provide fresh insights and arguments for the importance of including Global South thought in the rethinking of familiar concepts, ideologies and research practices that frame and shape Global World knowledge. From debunking myths and firmly established beliefs about language and multilingualism, Ndhlovu and Makalela present a cogent review of the literature and build on key critiques with concepts including the ‘coloniality of language’. They highlight the persistence of the colonial within the concepts of language and multilingualism in postcolonial societies. They also foreground often overlooked Global South, and in particular African, ways of knowing by providing examples from continental and diasporic African experiences to enable more realistic accounts of postcolonial linguistic practices to be viewed.

In the introduction chapter, Ndhlovu and Makalela start by debunking long held myths about lingual and multilingualism. They go on to highlight some flaws and inconsistencies that follow when a ‘mono-epistemic paradigm’ with its focus on ‘standard countable language-things’ is adopted over multiple legitimate ways of viewing diversity, language, literacy and communicative practices. Then they build on key critiques including Piller’s (2016) notion of the three aspects that perpetuate ‘monolingual ways of seeing’ the world. Firstly, perception of multilingualism as generic and context free; secondly, perception of an ahistorical view that is locked into the 19th and 20th centuries or the ‘perpetual present’ ignoring normative diversity and ‘multilingual practices already noted by the ancients’; and thirdly a focus on ‘product’ whereby translations of languages other than English end up translated into English thus denying readers the multilingual feel of these texts, (Piller, 2016, p.



28). Grounded in these aspects that underpin ‘monolingual ways of seeing’, the authors argue that notions of multilingualism are not depictive of real societal language practices.

Ndhlovu and Makalela shed light on the rootedness of colonialism in multilingualism, antecedent European conceptualisations of multilingualism on the continent, how these continue to underpin current notions of African multilingualism, and the ensuing loss of African languages and identities. To unsettle the status quo, they introduce and explain how the indigenous knowledge framework they have named ‘ubuntu research methodology’ (URM) with its four tenets allows the capture and study of complex multilingualism in subjects. We learn that the URM follows an ontological and epistemological shift that reflects competencies of speakers of indigenous African languages and ways of receiving and knowing information. The book is loaded with examples of the usefulness of URM when employed across various social spaces within and outside of the African continent.

Among the examples presented to show how URM unsettles the normative restrictive view of language as ‘static entities’ is Makalela’s translanguaging study with students in a higher education space in South Africa. In the study, where linguistic profiles of students included almost all nine official African languages (isiZulu, isiXhosa, isiNdebele, Siswati, Sesotho, Sepedi, Setswana, Xitsonga, Tshivenda), with some students speaking almost all of these languages, students were encouraged to use their languages and English fluidly in their writing. Also, students who were learning African languages were allowed to draw from any of the languages they already knew to understand concepts, cultural nuances and pragmatics surrounding the languages. Makalela’s analysis of the students’ reflections and writings on their experiences nicely demonstrate the workings of ubuntu translanguaging. The findings reveal a ‘disruption of language boundaries’ and a departure from the normative monolingual code-switching approach to showcase complex African multilingual practices. Also, the findings are highly suggestive of the URM approach being worthy of consideration for various other academic literacy spaces, and for consideration in decolonial agenda discussions.



Another of the key areas that the authors challenge is that of national language policies being deeply entrenched in the colonial ideologies where discussions of ‘diversity – multilingualism, multilingual education, multilingual language policy, additive bilingual education ... still reverberate colonial ideologies’. The two main aspects they find missing in language policy formulation on the continent are a lack of a critical look at how ‘coloniality’ informs multilingual policies, and the ‘uncritical embrace of colonial ideologies’. Throughout the book the authors challenge the persistence of uncritical hierarchisation processes in the perception of language whereby change to dismantle the status quo results in ‘change without difference’. Indeed, they show also how the Global North migration contexts and the postcolonial world is replete with language policies which albeit well-meaning affirm a colonial ideological take on multilingual practices.

In sum, as most research in the social sciences continues to be informed by Global North ways of viewing the world, *Decolonising Multilingualism in Africa* offers a refreshing insight from Global South experiences and more nuanced ways of viewing the world. Ndhlovu and Makalela ground the reader in their take of a decolonial agenda informed by African indigenous ways of knowing including theirs and their own parents’ multilingual language practices, ways of knowing that are free from normative approaches to numeracy and literacy. The examples and data sets used in the book come from continental and diasporic African communities to challenge monolingual ways of researching multilingualism and to push for a rethink of sociolinguistic methods. This is a thoroughly enjoyable read that contributes fresh ways of seeing multilingual practices at the margins.

Reference

Piller, I (2016) Monolingual ways of seeing multilingualism. *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, 11 (1), 25-33.

Vera Williams Tetteh
Macquarie University
vera.williamstetteh@mq.edu.au



Dike Okoro. *Lupenga Mphande: Eco-critical Poet and Political Activist*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021; 244 pp. ISBN 9781793637512.

Dike Okoro offers a plethora of socio-economic, environmental, and political problems faced by Malawians and Africans in this insightful book of penetrating essays and interviews. His chapters address historical events and contemporary literary movements in Malawi that connect creative writing to witness literature. The book investigates the poetry of Lupenga Mphande, arguably Malawi and Africa's finest eco-poet, recognized for capturing the natural environment of his country and the plight of migrant workers to give an account of the origins of the struggles faced by his country's disenfranchised population dating back to the regime of erstwhile president Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda. Okoro's primary purpose is not necessarily to reflect on history, but to identify and discuss the many events, past and current, that shape the concerns of the multifaceted voices represented in Mphande's work. In addition, he articulates the various ways socio-economic struggles, environmental degradation, and political history shaped and continue to shape the lives of Malawians and Sub-Saharan Africans.

The book is both a testament to the past and a meditation on the present. Mphande's poetry is autobiographical and Okoro's chapters take seriously the notion of literature as an artform that is used expedite national restoration and human development. The voices of women and villagers reveling in the peaceful world of agrarian society are examined to provide a context that is reminiscent of how organized and purposeful life used to be in Malawi before the arrival of foreign companies engaged in activities such as mining and the search for niobium in mountains that leave villagers and the ecosystem exposed to pollution.

What I found in these chapters is not just a recording or analysis of Mphande's poems but an attempt to wade through the poetics of a poet who is seldom discussed in contemporary Africa, but whose works interrogate critical issues that affect the lives of Africans. In this way,



Okoro's book possesses a web of ideas and complex interactions that address twentieth and twenty first century issues that are of relevance to African society.

Okoro weaves historiography in each chapter to situate Mphande's artistic commitment within the discourse of contemporary African creative writers who function both as activist and the psyche of their people. Besides the focus on exploring nature and social structure of the poet's homeland, I found the chapters covering Mphande's contacts with Nelson Mandela significant. Few African poets have had the privilege of connecting with powerful leaders from Africa to address issues such as the plight of the poor and misrule. Mphande, as I have discovered through Okoro's point of view, might not be far from a modern-day revolutionary. Okoro's book makes known this fact and locates the poet as the conscience of his people. Mphande is a Malawian but his heart beats for Africa. I note this in the numerous ways. Okoro explores his work to articulate the mistreatment of prisoners/academics killed by corrupt wardens during Banda's regime, his protest at the hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa by Nigeria's dictator, General Sani Abacha, his romance with the past as he reflects on Thozza, his place of birth in Malawi, and his laments for the flora and fauna (including insects and animals) destroyed by modernity.

Above all, I have nothing but praise for this book and respect for the author's attempt to explore the work of a poet who is arguably one of Africa's finest eco-poets writing today. In fact, this book locates experiences pertinent to Malawian, South African, and African history in a manner that makes poetry accessible not because of the poet's name, but because of the poet's gift for painting images and narrating events of ethical and moral bent in a memorable way.

Benjamin Kwakye
bnjmnkwky@yahoo.com