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Being black in Australia: a case study of intergroup relations

VAL COLIC-PEISKER and FARIDA TILBURY

Abstract: This article presents a case study in Australia's race relations, focusing on tensions between urban Aborigines and recently resettled African refugees, particularly among young people. Both of these groups are of low socio-economic status and are highly visible in the context of a predominantly white Australia. The relationship between them, it is argued, reflects the history of strained race relations in modern Australia and a growing antipathy to multiculturalism. Specific reasons for the tensions between the two populations are suggested, in particular, perceptions of competition for material (housing, welfare, education) and symbolic (position in a racial hierarchy) resources. Finally, it is argued that the phenomenon is deeply embedded in class and race issues, rather than simply in youth violence.

Keywords: African refugees, Aborigines, multiculturalism, youth violence

Val Colic-Peisker is a senior research fellow at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. She has previously taught sociology, anthropology and history at Murdoch University, University of Western Australia, and Monash University. *Farida Tilbury* is a senior lecturer in sociology and community development at Murdoch University, Western Australia. She has published in the areas of migration, settlement, research methodology, discourse analysis, racism and anti-racism.

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On a hot Sunday afternoon in March 2005, a steady stream of Africans filled a large gymnasium in a suburban recreation centre in Mirrabooka, a north-eastern suburb of Perth, Western Australia.¹ In spite of the 35-degree heat, most men were in formal attire: long tailored pants, a tailored shirt and enclosed leather shoes. A few were wearing traditional African shirts. Women were more colourful, many in stunning African outfits and some looking as if they had just stepped down from a fashion catwalk. Both men and women appeared to have chosen their outfits with a level of care that was at odds with the Australian custom of dressing extremely casually, especially in the summer heat. Shorts, t-shirts and sandals would have been the typical look of a relaxed crowd of the Australian born-and-bred at such a community event. The Africans were recent arrivals, however, and followed their own custom of showing, as well as requiring, respect through grooming. A group of well-dressed children ran tirelessly around the large gymnasium. People greeted each other joyfully and the 200-odd crowd all seemed to know each other. There were members of a number of the different African communities present and the south Sudanese predominated.

A smaller group of Australian Aborigines was also at the event. In common with the African participants, there were more women than men, although it was the men who ultimately dominated the official proceedings. They were dressed in western attire, apart from the didgeridoo player and dancers. Most kept to the sidelines, talking with each other and looking slightly uncomfortable.

When proceedings began, a dozen dignitaries, among them representatives of local, state and federal government departments associated with immigration and indigenous affairs (including two state ministers), as well as representatives from local non-government organisations and the community, gave short speeches. A Sudanese community elder opened his speech with the following statement:

We would like to express our thankfulness to the Australian government and society and especially the natives of the land, the Aboriginal. They have given us shelter when we were displaced from our homes in Sudan. They have given us food when we were hungry. They have clothed us when we were naked. They have given us protection when we were under attack.

He went on to describe Sudan and the origins of the troubles there and asked for refuge: 'We would like to request from the original inhabitants of this land a friendly hospitality and we promise to be respectful guests.' In his conclusion, he acknowledged that there had been fighting between African and Aboriginal young people (the reason for the community event) which, he said, originated in them taunting each other. He argued that this was because they didn't know each other

and the day's events were an opportunity for them to get to know each other and 'establish friendship', just as, in the planning of the event, Aboriginal and African elders had 'established bridges of friendship'. He concluded with advice: to African young people to make the most of the opportunities available to them in this new land; and to settlement service providers to 'cooperate with Sudanese elders to bring up their children according to the best of Sudanese and Australian cultures and values'. Following this, a young man gave a speech about the experience of being a young refugee of African origin in Australia and the wonderful opportunities he felt he had been afforded here. He was undertaking a university degree in community development and also worked with migrant youth and, as such, was presented as a role model. The centrepiece of the interaction was a gift-giving ceremony, in which local elders from the Aboriginal community symbolically welcomed the African community and the Africans in turn presented a gift to the elders – a suit each of men's and women's African clothing.² Ironically, while there were a few young people inside the hall during the proceedings, the majority of the African and Aboriginal youths sat or stood in separate groups outside the building, making space for themselves on the lawns or on the kerb. They appeared to be enjoying the opportunity to 'hang' with each other and there was no animosity evident between the two groups, although there was also little interaction.

A follow-up community event was organised a year later due to ongoing tensions, despite the first being presented as a one-off 'welcome ceremony'. The 2006 event, funded by a grant from the Western Australia government's Office of Multicultural Interests, was entitled 'Kodi-ka Nyoongar Boodja' ('May I come into Nyoongar land?')³ and was promoted as a 'joint African and Aboriginal cultural event to promote harmony and mutual understanding between the African and Aboriginal communities in the northern suburbs'. The flyer announced that the event would feature 'top African and Aboriginal artists, families' and children's activities, games and plenty of fun'. The event focused on 'fun', compared to the first which was mainly an opportunity for speeches – although it also had a long string of speakers associated with it. Among the 400 attending were two inspectors from the local police force. In this year, the presence of the Aboriginal community was hardly noticeable. The opening line of the state daily newspaper report of the event clearly identified the theme of asking permission to be in someone else's land, stating:

'Hodi. Hodi, hodi', is a traditional African way of announcing one's presence and seeking permission to enter someone else's home, village or country. In Kiswahili language, widely used throughout Africa, it means: 'May I come in?'⁴

The article went on to explain the source of the hostility as perceived territorial infringement and that the organisers hoped to gain a shared sense of unity and understanding from the event.

The two groups who were meant to meet and mingle at these events are highly visible minorities: black people in the context of an overwhelmingly white Australia. Their visibility in terms of difference from the white, Anglo 'standard Australian' is a disadvantaging social fact and both groups are negatively stereotyped. The two populations are internally heterogeneous to different degrees but, on a group level, their commonality is their racialised 'blackness' and their class position. In this article, we use ethnographic data collected through observation at community events and interviews with key informants, including police, settlement workers and residents, as well as media coverage of tensions, to explore possible explanations for the phenomenon based on class and race. At the outset, we wish to emphasise that we make no assumptions about whether the tension originates from the African or Aboriginal side.

Black African settlement in Australia

Although black Africans are perceived to be one of the most recent groups of settlers in Australia, in fact some arrived in the late eighteenth century with the first wave of European colonisation. At least a dozen black convicts arrived with the First Fleet in January 1788 and thousands of people of African ancestry had settled in Australia by the late 1830s. The flow of black convicts slowed dramatically after 1838 as a result of a British judgment stating that they represent a 'population injurious to the best interests of those rising Settlement'.⁵

Between the early days of colonisation and the early 1990s, black African immigrants to Australia were few and far between. The recent wave of African immigration started in the early 1990s with the arrival of refugees escaping civil wars and 'ethnic cleansing' in their home countries. Since the late 1990s, the 13,000-strong Australian refugee intake has been about 70 per cent African.⁶ During the past fifteen years, the African refugee intake has come from Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sierra Leone, Liberia and several other countries. Over the past decade, about 1,500 refugees have been resettled annually in Western Australia. African refugees face a number of challenges in settling in Australia, particularly in the areas of employment and cultural adaptation.⁷ An estimated 6,000 recent refugees of African descent now live in Mirrabooka and nearby north-eastern suburbs of Perth (including Balga and Girrawheen) and numbers are growing.⁸ As in other large cities, they have settled in lower socio-economic suburbs with high levels of public housing and low property prices,

where services for migrants are also concentrated. These suburbs are also home to a significant proportion of the urban Aboriginal population of Perth, around 2,000 people, as well as other more or less visible minorities.

The recent African migrants add to the diversity of Australia's population, almost half of whom are either overseas-born or have overseas-born parents. Most of the overseas-born are from 'European' or 'white Anglo' backgrounds, although diversity is considerable and growing. Australia prides itself on having made a smooth transition from the policy of white-Anglo monoculturalism to the multicultural policies that, starting from the late 1970s, encourage immigration from all corners of the world and support settlement of diverse communities.⁹ However, as in other countries of immigration, levels of suspicion towards diversity have increased over the past decade, particularly in connection to the terrorism threat.¹⁰ The result has been a retreat from multiculturalism as both a policy and an ethical ideal.¹¹ The tension between increasingly diverse migrant intakes and the decreasing popularity of multiculturalism is noticeable in Australia and similar countries. Two factors seem to account for this. One is the assumption that immigrants, especially refugees, tend to be welfare-dependent and therefore in competition with the more 'legitimate/deserving' native-born. At the very least, multiculturalism is seen to divert limited resources into supporting communities of migrants and this is unpopular among the general population.¹² Secondly, multiculturalism has also been blamed for the crisis of 'national identity' in some countries (for example, Britain and Australia) resulting in a growing emphasis on homogeneity in terms of culture and values and, more surreptitiously, race and religion.¹³

While most of the growing hostility towards multiculturalism and visible immigrants in Australia is currently focused on those of Islamic background, there have also been overt examples of racism against Africans.¹⁴ In mid-2005, for example, a public debate was triggered when a Sydney academic warned that 'an expanding black [African] population' in the Australian suburbs was 'a sure-fire recipe for increases in crime, violence and a wide range of social problems'.¹⁵ In December 2006, Australian media (including national television's main evening news) reported that a number of African refugees arrived carrying communicable diseases such as tuberculosis, hepatitis C and AIDS, despite obligatory health checks in ports of departure. The warning about 'diseased Africans' was immediately picked up by right-wing politicians.¹⁶ African refugees have also been at the centre of a debate about settlement in rural Australia. In late 2006, the city council of Tamworth (a regional town in New South Wales) decided not to support a further settlement programme for Sudanese refugees,

citing local law-and-order and general settlement problems as justification. In the wake of the controversy this decision created, the Australia First Party, a small right-wing political party, distributed thousands of leaflets warning that new migrants would bring violence, crime and disease to the town.¹⁷ Although the council reviewed its decision, it is still the cause of dissension in the town.

On the other hand, positive representations of African refugees are also present in the media. Some news coverage reports the challenges which the refugees have faced and their successful resettlement.¹⁸ A recent current affairs programme reported the successful settlement of Sudanese refugees in Toowoomba (a regional town in Queensland), achieving success at school, university and in the job market, and being assisted in their settlement by government and non-government voluntary and religious agencies.¹⁹ Local community newspapers frequently feature African families making a success of life in Australia, focusing on them becoming citizens, getting jobs, attending schools or university or achieving family reunions. Such positive stories illustrate how Africans are successfully adapting to life in Australia, setting themselves up to make positive contributions to their adopted country. Both positive and negative representations most likely fuel the conflicted relations between Indigenous Australians and African settlers.

Australian Aborigines: dispossession and marginalisation

The events described in the introductory part of this article point to a discrepancy between the symbolic acknowledgment of Aboriginal land ownership ('May I come into Nyoongar land?') and the fact that becoming a well-adjusted Australian suburbanite actually requires integrating into the white, middle-class society from which Aboriginal Australians are largely excluded. It is worth providing a brief background account of this aspect of Australia's race relations.

Aboriginal dispossession from land through the process of European colonisation has resulted in the widespread cultural disintegration of many Aboriginal communities, particularly in metropolitan areas: the tribal way of life, customs and traditional social support were gradually lost without being replaced with acceptance into mainstream white society, thus leaving Aboriginal communities in a state of cultural anomie. Their marginality is reflected in their concentration in the lower strata of the class system: high unemployment rates and welfare dependence; lower educational achievement; poor health indicators; family breakdown; substance abuse; sexual abuse and domestic violence; delinquency and over-representation in prisons.²⁰ In terms of socio-economic indicators, the gap between white and black Australians has widened since the 1960s, despite various government programmes conducted to address the problem.²¹

The response of the Australian government to Aboriginal disadvantage has been varied, including the provision of targeted welfare and development interventions, attempts to provide more appropriate institutional frameworks, as well as more punitive measures, such as tying welfare payments to school attendance. However, the biggest issue over the last three decades has been land rights and the gradual recognition by increasing numbers of Australians that Aboriginal dispossession from the land and disadvantage are linked.

It is difficult for non-indigenous Australians to understand the importance of land to Aborigines – according to Hollinsworth, it was central to Aboriginal ‘cosmology and social organization’ as well as morality and law.²² Despite the history of dispossession, land continues to have symbolic significance for Aboriginal Australians and remains the basis of their identity claims. It is also important as an economic base for independent development; as a form of compensation for wrongs of the past; as a political resource enabling negotiation; and as a zone for self-determination and sovereignty – indeed it is the fundamental basis of claims to sovereignty and the rights which such sovereignty entails.²³

The growing sense of white guilt over the historical dispossession of the Indigenous people was finally translated into policy with the introduction of the 1976 Aboriginal Land Rights Act – what came to be known as the Native Title legislation was meant to redress historic injustices.²⁴ This trend peaked in 1992 with the historic Mabo Native Title case, which declared invalid the concept of *terra nullius* (the notion that Australia was not ‘owned’ prior to British ‘discovery’, which formed the basis of the Indigenous people’s dispossession). This case acknowledged the sovereignty of Aboriginal people and traditional ownership of the land. As a result of this political mood, and taking a cue from New Zealand where acknowledgements of the ‘people of the land’ are common, it became standard practice for many public events to open with a ritual acknowledgement of the ‘traditional owners of the land’.²⁵ Representatives of Aboriginal communities were commonly invited to open such events and welcome the people to ‘their’ land. A decade of ‘reconciliation’ designed to acknowledge the oppression of the Indigenous population raised awareness among the general population about Aboriginal issues but, under the conservative coalition government of 1996–2007, the tide started to turn.²⁶ Policies of Aboriginal reconciliation and Native Title gradually diminished or were altogether abandoned²⁷ and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Council was abolished in 2005.²⁸ This retreat from the reconciliation process, after hundreds of years of oppression and exploitation, has increased a sense of hurt, frustration and anger among the Aboriginal population.

Black versus black: competition for material and symbolic resources?

The sense of frustrated entitlement may be one of the reasons for the adverse reaction of some Aboriginal people to the arrival of black Africans. In this context, their arrival may be perceived as further dispossession, through competition from a 'rival black tribe' who may seem better off than the urban Indigenous population, at least judging by appearances – the positive media coverage and the access to a broad range of social services and material support. News coverage of the conciliation events described in the introduction took this interpretation of the tensions:

It is well known some Aboriginal people resent the territorial intrusion of Africans and believe most newcomers, of all sorts, have favoured access to government benefits and services.²⁹

Rising tensions between Aboriginal and African teenagers in Mirrabooka could have been the result of a misconception among the Aboriginal community that African refugees were receiving something for nothing, Multicultural Minister Margaret Quirk said yesterday . . . 'All of it seems to be senseless but it may be as simple as something like a misunderstanding that these people are getting special treatment and us poor original owners of the land are getting nothing.'³⁰

Our informants among Perth police and welfare workers told us about hostile and often violent incidents between Aboriginal and African youth in the north-eastern suburbs of Perth over the last few years, including fights at train stations and bus stops, name calling, being followed, having bricks thrown at houses and street fights. There is a general unwillingness among police to discuss or publicly comment on what they see as 'minor incidents' of anti-social behaviour rather than gang violence. Welfare workers tend to interpret the conflict as specific and general instances of the struggle over resources (for example, envy over a pair of Nike shoes) but also feel that a lack of mutual awareness and understanding of the historical and lived experiences of the two groups fuels the discord. Recent follow-up interviews with local police and welfare workers confirmed that the Mirrabooka bus station was still the 'epicentre' of the conflict – described as 'a war zone' where 'white people feel unsafe' – despite there being few actual incidents of violence reported. In 2006, when a 'turf war' threatened to break out, police had to instigate separate seating on local buses to keep Aboriginal and African youth apart. Welfare workers reported that, at secondary schools, there have been incidents of whipping with electrical cords and a screwdriver stabbing. Violence was not restricted to young men – girls were also participating, the most

often quoted incidents being one in which a 12-year-old Aboriginal girl attacked a Sudanese youth with a broken bottle and another in which a girl's nose was broken at a local school. Our police informants blamed unemployment and disadvantage, though they also noted that some of the violence may have been the result of past experiences of the African refugees: 'Somalis have been living off their wits for years in the civil war; they've had to defend themselves; some have been child soldiers.'

The Sudanese community, concerned about 'unruly behaviour' among their youth, organised meetings between community members and youth workers to discuss 'children/teenagers loitering in groups at night as well as anti-social behavior on public transport and places'.³¹ The result has been the setting up by the Metropolitan Migrant Resource Centre of a small working party of members of both communities, teachers and settlement service workers who meet monthly and are attempting to secure funding for a dedicated worker to focus on this problem. The group has also undertaken youth forums at the three high schools in the area and is trying to develop 'leadership groups' among the young people.

Community concerns have been downplayed by the Minister of Citizenship and Multicultural Interests³² and by the Mirrabooka police superintendent who suggested that these were 'merely a series of isolated incidents that had been blown out of proportion and the attacks were generally acts of random violence rather than race-based'.³³ Another respondent from the local police saw the tension as being about sexual jealousy between young men from the two groups 'mudpuddling in others' paddocks', rather than about religious, racial or political issues. However, the problem is obviously significant enough to have gained the interest of the police and the media and to have been perceived as 'racial' enough for the service providers to organise the reconciliation events and other activities described earlier.

Similar issues have arisen elsewhere in Australia.³⁴ As one report from Toowoomba states:

[A] potentially serious problem involves disaffected young Sudanese (mostly males) who fall between education and employment, leading to trouble with the law and other marginalised groups, such as young Aborigines. Thiik [a young Sudanese] says fights between Sudanese and Aboriginal youths are 'just kids mucking around', and are usually sparked by girls or soccer matches . . . But there is a group [the Australia First Party] exploiting this to try to inflame the situation . . . They go around falsely claiming the government is giving cars to Sudanese, and lots of money, while the Aborigines are left to suffer.³⁵

Clearly, there is a view that the conflict is linked to a misperception of competition between the two groups for scarce resources. The follow-

ing extract, from a speech by well-known Aboriginal poet Oodgeroo Noonuccal (aka Kath Walker) in 1988, Australia's bicentennial year, indicates the context for the high level of hostility which some Aborigines feel towards immigrants and the policies of multiculturalism which are invoked to support migrants:

Australia is still being used as a dumping ground for many other world cultures. Unfortunately, instead of providing a bridge between Aborigines and European Australians, it merely adds to the rift. It must be clearly understood that the Aboriginal nation, yet to be recognized, has little or no enthusiasm for the so-called multicultural society of Australia, for it is unbelievable and a great indictment of European Australians that the Aboriginal people still find themselves once again at the bottom of the Australian socio-economic scale with regard to multiculturalism.³⁶

It is worth exploring this argument in some detail. Noonuccal's use of the term 'dumping ground' implies that Australia is taking the world's rejects, referencing the original function of colonial Australia as a dumping ground for Britain's convicts and suggesting this is 'still' its function. While recognising the potential for bridging Aboriginal and white Australians through the inclusion of others, Noonuccal says immigration simply extends the fracture, widening the gap between the original inhabitants and the newcomers (white, black and other). There is unfinished business which white Australia must deal with, before letting others in or recognising them. The problem, she argues, is that multiculturalism has simply seen Aboriginal people slip further down the hierarchy of rights and achievement. This argument supports Hage's observation that Australia's migration policies ignore the interests of Aboriginal communities, producing an almost automatic situation of competition and tension between Indigenous people and migrants.³⁷

Of course, class and its relation to space is crucial here: competition and tension are likely to arise between the urban Aborigines and those arrivals whose low socio-economic position means that they share common spaces. Contact theory suggests that the closer the interaction between groups that see themselves as rivals for scarce resources, the less likely it is to result in reductions in stereotypical perceptions and the more likely it is to increase the perception of threat and negative appraisals.³⁸ Yet, ironically, it is neither the Indigenous population nor the new migrants but ultimately the white Australian majority who manage the national space, determining territorial rights including migration and land rights.³⁹ In his discussion of the geography of racism, Hollinsworth uses the term 'space invaders' to distinguish between the 'spatially empowered' and the 'spatially disempowered' (Hage has made a similar point about the 'spatially managed' and

the 'spatial managers').⁴⁰ Indigenous Australians generally feel spatially disempowered. The reaction of some Aboriginal people to the arrival of black African refugees may be seen in this context as an attempt by this oppressed minority to symbolically and physically assert their rights over the land by attempting to exclude the most recent and most visible arrivals, who are perceived not only as 'space invaders' but potentially more 'spatially empowered' than them. It is evidence of a strong sense of relative deprivation which predisposes minorities to perceive a new minority as a threat in a situation of inter-group contact – a threat in terms of housing, jobs and, more broadly, 'territory'.⁴¹

This sense of threat is played out in the arena of public housing. In Western Australia, around a quarter of the recent African settlers live in state-subsidised rental accommodation, while for the Aboriginal population the number is closer to a third and has been falling from over half since 1994.⁴² There is a perception among urban Aborigines that refugees are given priority access to scarce public housing. Our respondents from the local police confirmed that Aborigines felt Africans were 'being moved in' and are 'taking over' their territory. An African informant told us that Aborigines thought Africans were being given priority because they took better care of the homes and that some Aborigines felt they had been removed from public housing in order to be replaced by African refugees. She wondered whether this might actually be a strategy by the government welfare agency to produce division and competition between the groups. This was supported by accounts of welfare workers who told us that Aboriginal people in the area resented the fact that humanitarian entrants were entitled to immediate access to public housing, whereas many of their own people waited for months, even years, to be given suitable accommodation.

The Africans certainly appear to have acquired a 'competitive advantage' over the Indigenous population in the competition for cheap public and private rental housing.⁴³ It has been reported that initial suspicion from estate agents and property owners towards the newcomers was gradually dispelled through the intervention of local parish priests and refugee advocates and Africans are now considered 'excellent tenants who pay rent and care for their homes'.⁴⁴ This is hardly a reputation that the local Aboriginal population enjoys: overcrowding of houses, damage to property, disorderly behaviour and delinquent youth are some of the 'badges of dishonour' that the white mainstream attaches to urban Aborigines' uses of space. The housing issue illustrates in microcosm some of the themes behind the antipathy between the Aborigines and African refugees.

The newly arrived Africans publicly exhibit little sense of social, civic or material entitlement. Rather, their dominant public discourse is one

of gratitude: Africans are grateful to Australia for having received them and offered them a new life, ostensibly of peace and prosperity.⁴⁵ Of course, gratitude implies the acceptance of an unequal position, as guests accepting hospitality rather than claiming rights – the African elder's speech cited in the introduction, in which he promises Africans will be 'respectful guests', points clearly in this direction. The discourse of gratitude is a non-threatening and non-conflictual discourse, pleasing to the white majority, as it flatters the 'host' by portraying the Australian government and people as welcoming and compassionate. In an attempt to harness this sense of gratitude to resolve the conflict between African and Aboriginal youth, the white establishment appears to have attempted an ideological transfer of African gratitude from Australians in general to the traditional Aboriginal owners of the land. This action reflects a desire to put the Aboriginal population at ease regarding the presence of Africans, through an ostensible public display of Aboriginal custodianship, in which Africans ask for Aboriginal permission to settle in their land. This permission is highly symbolic and ritualistic: self-evidently, Africans applied to the mainstream government for permission to migrate to Australia with no involvement of the marginalised traditional owners.

Another question that arises in the context of Indigenous-African animosity is why the competition for urban space should play out most obviously in relation to young people from the two communities. A possible answer to this question might be that teenagers from both underprivileged groups are in contact with each other due to their way of using public spaces. For example, in the case of Lebanese 'gangs' in Sydney, the moral panic that was created around them partly resulted from the manner in which young people with low or no incomes – and therefore few 'legitimate' recreation opportunities – use urban public space.⁴⁶ African and Aboriginal young people are thrown together in competition for territory – shared public spaces – in a situation which does not offer many alternatives. In addition, young people are going through an intense identity formation process – a challenging time for young Australians who differ from the dominant white, middle-class self – and are provided with few positively valued role models and alternatives. It is likely that both groups do not wish to be confused for the other – the Aboriginal young people because of the reasons stated above and the African young people because of the negative stereotyping associated with Aborigines. Finally, it is likely that part of the concern about African and Aboriginal youth is related to the desire to control young people generally, stemming from a perception that youth, especially those from underprivileged backgrounds, are potentially delinquent.

Indigeneity and blackness

In addition to perceptions of competition based on shared class position, the issue of common blackness is relevant to the specifics of the current case study. One of our informants, a police inspector with many years of experience working with Indigenous people in Perth and in the 'outback' regions of Australia, and who now works with Africans in the Mirrabooka area, saw the blackness of both communities as the centrepiece of the tension and violence between them.

The Aboriginal people own this land and then we have these other black people similar to them coming into their land . . . and taking over, as it may be perceived . . . another tribe . . . And they are so visibly present . . . I think this is what creates a tension.

In this situation of the 'racing' of urban spaces, we suggest that the fundamental similarity of skin colour of African and Aboriginal people is overdetermined by perceived differences in histories of oppression. To consider the impact of race, it is worth considering other migrant groups who have competed for local resources with the Indigenous community – for example, Bosnian refugees utilising public housing in the area in the mid-1990s. No group-level tension resulted, perhaps because Bosnians were not as 'visible' as the Africans: on the level of appearances, they merged into the white majority and were therefore not identified by the public housing authority or estate agents (or indeed the Indigenous community) as a 'group' for the purpose of generalisation about 'tenant characteristics'.⁴⁷ The arrival of the visible black Africans in the neighbourhood is, on the other hand, perceived as producing competition for resources, while also triggering a sense of humiliation among local Aboriginal people at the fact that these black newcomers seemingly enjoy more sympathy and trust from mainstream white society.

The competition for material resources is intertwined with claiming symbolic resources and symbolic capital. The claiming of Aboriginal identity is contested and controversial and its desirability has changed over time and in different contexts. On the one hand, it is strongly associated with social disadvantage and marginality but, on the other, it secures access to rights through land claims and various positive discrimination mechanisms. The perception that claiming Aboriginal identity is linked to the chance to receive welfare or the benefits of the few positive land rights rulings is common among white Australians. Indigeneity is also desirable as an identity of right or legitimacy.⁴⁸ According to Hage, the first owners of the land enjoy some prestige associated with a sense of 'belonging' that white Australians, all migrants at some point, do not have.⁴⁹ Another parameter of Indigenous pride comes from cultural aspects, through the various

art forms and other positive aspects of collective culture.⁵⁰ Many would argue, however, that the stigma and poor socio-economic outcomes associated with Indigeneity provide little incentive to claim Aboriginal identity.

In everyday discourse, Aboriginal identity remains associated with blackness.⁵¹ Around the world, skin pigmentation, originally associated with racist constructions of biological inferiority, has come to be associated with legitimacy of original land ownership.⁵² Movements for Indigenous rights in many countries and states, including New Zealand, South Africa, Australia, Hawaii, Fiji, Canada, the US, Malaysia, India, Papua New Guinea and other Pacific nations, have often been supported through an identity politics which rests on the notion of a fundamental, extraordinary connection of the original, normally darker-skinned, population with the land. Ever since white Australia acknowledged that it had not been built on *terra nullius* but rather on unlawful dispossession of the Aboriginal people, custodianship of the land has been central to Aboriginal pride, rights and privileges – and blackness is the central symbol of these rights. In this context the arrival of a large group of *other* black people may be perceived as a threat to Indigenous status.

Some cases of mistaken identity which have recently come to light confirm the concern over identity confusion. There are stories of contemporary Australian writers, painters and diplomats who have discovered that, rather than having presumed Aboriginal roots, they were of African or other ‘black’ heritage. The complicated dynamics of blackness and Aboriginality can be illustrated by the controversial example of writer Mudrooroo Nyoongah (aka Colin Johnson), the son of a part-black-American, part-Irish father and a white (Irish-descendent) mother. His social experience growing up was that of an Aborigine – he had dark skin, grew up in a boys’ home and spent young adulthood in jail. Consequently, his identity was established as such and it is these experiences which form the basis of his literary success.⁵³ Another case in which blackness was identified with Aboriginality is that of Gordon Mathews, Australia’s first ‘Aboriginal’ diplomat, adopted as a child and presumed to be one of the ‘stolen generation’, whose progress through the diplomatic service was aided by formal and informal affirmative action processes for Aboriginal Australians but who eventually discovered he was of Sri Lankan ancestry.⁵⁴

The connection between race/phenotype, identity and rights provides the potential for confusion attendant upon there being two groups of ‘black’ people in the nation: there is a possibility that this situation could weaken the hard-earned linking of blackness with Indigeneity and therefore with the symbolic claim over the land, with resulting real-life material repercussions.

Conclusion

We have argued that a number of factors account for the animosity between African refugees and Aboriginal youth, and we wish to conclude by placing two issues – race and class – at the centre of our analysis. The important background fact in the reception of any immigrant group in Australia is that whiteness is still a key category in the construction of the Australian nation.⁵⁵ Therefore, in spite of the declarative Aboriginal ownership of the land, the ‘first-tier whites’ (those of Anglo-Celtic origin as opposed to ‘white ethnics’) are those who, in Ang’s words, have a ‘strident sense of entitlement’ – as opposed to what we have identified as the Aboriginal community’s frustrated sense of entitlement.⁵⁶ Their sense of exclusion, marginality and relative deprivation may have been exacerbated by the retreat from a process of reconciliation over the past decade. Therefore, although Aboriginal blackness symbolises the primordial ownership and custodianship of the land, it signifies, at the same time, dispossession and social disadvantage. The frustration caused by this situation is most easily directed towards the recently arrived, highly visible refugee population that, due to its low socio-economic position, shares the same neighbourhoods. Their shared blackness contributes to the tension in perhaps unexpected ways.

Race, however, cannot explain the tension without resort to its strong nexus with class. Class relations, which determine control over material and symbolic resources, significantly overlap with the racial hierarchy.⁵⁷ Both the Aborigines and recent African arrivals are at the bottom of the Australian ethnic, as well as class, pecking order as either welfare recipients or workers in low-paid, low-skilled jobs.⁵⁸ In this common socio-economic space, they compete for scarce resources, material as well as symbolic, such as public housing, jobs, extraordinary welfare support and ‘reputation’ among the dominant white majority. Therefore, in the given social context, it is not surprising that the blackness and socio-economic disadvantage of both groups, which sets them apart from the majority population, has not produced a shared sense of identity and solidarity in recognition of similar positioning within the white society, but instead created antipathy, competition and conflict.

This case study points to unresolved issues in the racially/ethnically based structures of social opportunity and disadvantage in Australia, which are generally swept under the carpet of multicultural harmony. We have attempted to identify some of these issues in the hope of supporting further debate and a more fine-grained analysis of inter-group relations.

References

- 1 Mirrabooka and surrounding suburbs are lower socio-economic areas of Perth, with cheaper housing and considerable public housing, where many refugee arrivals have settled over the past fifteen years. There is also a concentration of migrant services in these areas.
- 2 The ritual gift-giving which the Africans at the community events participated in may be seen as a sign of reciprocal hospitality, with the usual implication of mutual obligation.
- 3 Noongar (also spelt Nyoongar) is the Aboriginal tribal grouping of the south-west of Western Australia.
- 4 Norman Aisbett, 'African refugees in pact for unity', *The West Australian* (22 March 2006), p. 18.
- 5 Cassandra Pybus, 'A touch of the tar: African settlers in colonial Australia and the implications for issues of Aboriginality', *London Papers in Australian Studies No. 3* (London, Menzies Centre for Australian Studies, 2001).
- 6 The ethnic composition of the refugee intake has changed over the postwar decades, from the influx of eastern Europeans in the 1940s and 1950s, Chileans, Lebanese and Vietnamese in the 1970s and 1980s, to Iraqis and ex-Yugoslavs (mainly Bosnians) as the largest components of the 1990s intake. *Humanitarian Program 2006-7 - Discussion Paper* (Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, 2005).
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- 11 Bryan Turner, 'Citizenship and the crisis of multiculturalism', *Citizenship Studies* (Vol. 10, no. 5, 2006), pp. 607-18; Suvendrini Perera and Joseph Pugliese, "'Racial suicide": the re-licensing of racism in Australia', *Race & Class* (Vol. 1, no. 39, 1997), pp. 1-19.
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- 13 Hodge and O'Carroll, op. cit.; Malik, op. cit.; Ghassan Hage, *White Nation: fantasies of white supremacy in a multicultural society* (Sydney, Pluto Press, 1998); James Jupp, *From White Australia to Woomera: the story of Australian immigration* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002).
- 14 *Isma: Listen!*, op. cit.
- 15 Andrew Fraser, a law lecturer from Sydney's Macquarie University, warned against accepting black African refugees. His comments were published in dozens of newspapers and broadcast on radio and TV programmes throughout Australia in the second half of 2005. See, for example, 'Australia losing its identity: professor', *The West Australian* (16 July 2005), p. 10.
- 16 'Hanson slammed over the African disease claims', *The Australian* (7 December 2006), p. 5.
- 17 'Tamworth divided over rejection of refugee families', *The 7.30 Report* (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 15 January 2007), <<http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2007/s1827409.htm>>; 'HRC mulls legal action over Tamworth anti-refugee leaflets', *ABC News Online* (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 30 January 2007), <<http://www.abc.net.au/news/newstems/200701/s1836319.htm>>.
- 18 Frank Robson, 'Another Country', *The Age* (21 October 2006), p. 78.
- 19 'Refugee settlement program grows in Toowoomba', *The 7.30 Report* (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 16 January 2007), <<http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2007/s1828115.htm>>.
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- 23 Aileen Moreton-Robinson, 'Towards a new research agenda? Foucault, Whiteness and Indigenous sovereignty', *Journal of Sociology* (Vol. 42, no. 4, 2006), pp. 383–95.
- 24 Veronica Brady, *Can These Bones Live?* (Leichardt, Federation Press, 1996); D. Graham (ed.), *Being Whitefella* (South Fremantle, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1994).
- 25 When considering the question of spatial rights and their link to material and identity claims, the case of New Zealand is illustrative: there, assertions of biculturalism, rather than multiculturalism, have been maintained for many years by Indigenous Maori as part of their claim for special status in relation to white settlers and all other immigrants (known collectively as 'Tau Iwi' or 'foreigners').
- 26 Perera and Pugliese, op. cit.
- 27 Following the Wik decision in 1996, which allowed that Aboriginal people retained rights to land which co-existed with pastoral leases (although if there was a conflict of interests, the interests of the farmers were to prevail), the Howard government passed a set of amendments to the Native Title Act to reduce Aboriginal land rights. Another example of the retreat from support for land rights is found in the government's response to a West Australian land rights victory. In September 2006, the Noongar Aboriginal people won an important legal victory when their title was recognised to all vacant land in and around the capital city of Perth. The claimants proved to the satisfaction of the law that they had retained their law and customs since white colonisation (1829), in spite of having been subjected to 'pretty incredible interference and dislocation' (Fred Chaney, the governor of Western Australia, quoted in *The Australian*, 2006). This proof of cultural continuity is what sets the successful Noongar claim apart from its predecessors. However, the Western Australia state government (Labor) appealed against this decision, thus joining the federal Liberal government in its opposition to the Native Title claims.

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- 30 Ben Spencer, 'Race tension blamed on misconceptions', *The West Australian* (14 January 2006), p. 58.
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- 41 Pettigrew, op. cit.
- 42 *Western Australian Community Profiles, 2001 Census: Horn of Africa* (Office of Multicultural Interest, 2003), <http://www.omi.wa.gov.au/omi_profiles.asp> ; 'New Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander statistics for Western Australia' (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 23 June 2004), <<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/mediareleasesbyReleaseDate/F675D158DBFC61CCA256EBC0004F372?OpenDocument>> .
- 43 This parallels the US situation where recent non-white, mostly Latino, immigrants compete with African Americans for low-skilled jobs and cheap housing: Latino and Caribbean immigrants are seen as a more pliable workforce and American employers do not hide their preference to hire them rather than African Americans. See Joanna Shih, "'Yeah, I could hire this one, but I know it's gonna be a problem": how race, nativity and gender affect employers' perceptions of the manageability of job seekers', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (Vol. 25, no. 1, 2002), pp. 99–119.
- 44 Norman Aisbett, 'Out of Africa: from famine and massacres to milk and honey', *The West Australian Weekend Extra* (18 March 2006), pp. 4–5.
- 45 See Susan Horsburg, 'Finding freedom', *The Weekend Australian Magazine* (22–23 January 2005), pp. 12–16; Aisbett, 'African refugees in pact for unity', op. cit.
- 46 Jock Collins, Greg Noble, Scott Poynting and Paul Tabar, *Kebabs, Kids, Cops and Crime: youth, ethnicity and crime* (Annandale, Pluto Press, 2000). Categorising violence between young people from 'ethnic' backgrounds as 'ethnic gang violence', the Australian media regularly whip up 'moral panics' about the state of law and order, the legitimacy of culturally diverse immigration and the threat that the latter may represent to social cohesion. Groups of visible minority youth are then by implication seen as non-assimilated. See Chris Cunneen, 'Ethnic minority youth and juvenile justice: beyond the stereotype of ethnic gangs', in C. Guerra and R. White (eds), *Ethnic Minority Youth* (Hobart Tasmania, National Clearinghouse

- for Youth Studies, 1995). As discussed earlier, police have made efforts to downplay both the race and 'group' aspects of the Aboriginal/African conflict, due to awareness of the possible negative perceptions a focus on these might create and apparently to try to avoid another 'moral panic'. All concerned parties – the local African and Aboriginal communities, police, settlement and social services and most media – claim these hostile encounters have been isolated and opportunistic rather than the work of organised gangs.
- 47 V. Colic-Peisker, "'At least you're the right colour'": identity and social inclusion of Bosnian refugees in Australia', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* (Vol. 31, no. 4, 2005), pp. 616–38.
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- 53 Cassandra Pybus, *Black Founders: the unknown story of Australia's first black settlers* (Sydney, University of North South Wales Press, 2006); Manning Clark, 'Unmasking Mudrooroo', *Kunapipi: Journal of Postcolonial Writing* (Vol. XXIII, no. 2, 2001), pp. 48–62.
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- 57 Herbert Gans, 'Race as Class', *Contexts* (Vol. 4, no. 4, 2005), pp. 17–21.
- 58 See Colic-Peisker and Tilbury, 'Employment niches for recent refugees', op. cit., for a discussion of African refugees' position in the secondary labour market and Tan-Quigley, op. cit., for a discussion of issues for minority youth.