Blackness as Burden? The Lived Experience of Black Africans in Australia

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Abstract

Skin color is broadly accepted as a conspicuous marker of difference and racial belonging. Yet while the body is understood as a given, it is also socially inscribed: heavily sexualized, gendered, and even "colored." This article is about African bodies that are colored Black. It critically discusses the experiences of black embodiment for African diaspora bodies that are coded "black" and inscribed with blackness in Australia. The article is written from a black African experience perspective to call into question current distorted and problem-centered narratives of African Blackness in Australia. Adopting standpoint theory and critical race theory's unique voice of color thesis as conceptual framework for making sense of focus group data with black African migrants living in New South Wales and Victoria, the article's main contention is that black African embodiment is experienced as a (symbolic and material) burden; what we call the "the burden of Blackness." We discuss four dimensions of this burden: problematic stereotypes and social constructions, the paradox of in/visibility, burden of racial "two-ness," and burden of minimization.

But in his mind, it wasn't lost, the one undeniable fact

That in a land of justice for all, he always would be black

This vivid truth held him inside his self-inflicted prison

Afraid to peep out of his cave, afraid to share his vision . . .

—Author Unknown

Introduction

The black body in white space has always been constructed as a problematic difference to whiteness: an inferiority and an "other." Blackness is thus not merely about skin color, but rather it is a social construct persistently conceived of as an opposition to whiteness: It is not only that which defines whiteness but is also inferiorized by it. The critical works of black scholars such as Frantz Fanon (2008) and George Yancy (2008a), which explore the signification of blackness in white contexts, have highlighted the objectification of the black body in white spaces (see also Austin, 2004; hooks, 1990). Yancy (2008a), for example, notes that

> . . . current and historical epistemic and habituated embodied orders . . . function to objectify the Black body as an entity that is to be feared, disciplined and relegated to those marginalised, imprisoned and segregated spaces that restrict Black bodies

from "disturbing" the tranquillity of white life, white comfort, white embodiment and white being. (p. 3)

Such critical interrogations of blackness center the black experience in ways that demonstrate that it is far from being "concrete gut level experience [that should be] conceived either as opposing or having no connection to abstract thinking and the production of critical theory" (hooks, 1990, para. 1). Rather, they are critical analyses of white culture and how it constructs blackness.

This article is written in the same vein as these critical works. More than that, it is about the *consequences* of multiple layers of racialized meanings inscribed onto African bodies constructed as black in a predominantly white space (Australia) for those "living black." By centering discussions of the black African experience in Australia, the article addresses a topic seldom focused on in sociological and migration research in the Australian context where association of black African subjectivities with racial discrimination means that discussions of race, racism, and racialization

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remain contentious. The literature suggests that there are two dominant sets of discourses around the subject of racism in Australia. The first set of discourses focus on and often seek to silence racism or diminish its occurrence in the society (see, for example, Augoustinos & Every, 2007, 2010; Babacan, 2008; Dunn, Pelleri, & Maeder-Han, 2011). This excerpt from a newspaper article by academic researcher, Anthony Dillon (The Australian, March 2014), exemplifies the silencing nature of contemporary racism discourse in Australia:

> Yes, racism exists in this country. But we are not a racist country. There is an enormous amount of goodwill towards Aboriginal Australians and other ethnic groups. **Claims of racism where it does not exist are more damaging to reconciliation and the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people than real racism. . . . If we are to get tough on racism, shouldn't we also get tough on people who promote it where it does not exist and accuse others of being racist simply because they have a message that may not be popular with a few?** (Emphasis added)

The second set of discourses seek to draw attention to the fact that Australia is racialized space, which is troubled by a past etched in colonization and white racist colonial policies (the White Australia Policy). Such discourses assert that Australia is viewed as white space, and therefore despite efforts to see racism as an anomaly and something out of the ordinary it is actually something that is inherent in the regular functioning of a system built on racism (see, for example, Hage, 1998; Mapedzahama & Kwansah-Aidoo, 2014; Stratton, 2006). Of the two streams, the silencing discourses tend to dominate, and hence it is not surprising that within such a context, writing about blackness itself, particularly African blackness, is silenced.

Furthermore, this article differs from other critical interrogations of blackness in that it takes as its central concern, theorizations of black African embodiment as a burden. As Yancy (2008a) argues,

> The meaning of my blackness is not intrinsic to my natural pigment, but has *become* a value-laden "given," an object presumed untouched and unmediated by various contingent discursive practices, history, time and context. (p. 3)

In this way, the article seeks to depart from the predominantly deficit discourse—that always problematizes Africans racialized as black, as lacking in something—which have dominated discussions of (black) Africans in Australia. It is our attempt at writing *about* and (re)presenting African blackness in the white-dominated Australian context. In many ways, this article is informed by the question, "What is the meaning of blackness for Africans racialized as black in Australia?" To address this question, we draw on the everyday racialized experiences of black African diaspora in Australia to theorize how black African subjectivities are constituted. Our concern is not only to shift ways we think

about African blackness in Australia but also to unpack the complexities and even contradictions that black African embodiment entails. To do this, we propose a main line of argument, or framework for thinking and understanding the nature of that blackness in this race-centered white context: blackness as burden. Our principal contention that black embodiment imposes a burden that those with black phenotype cannot escape is informed by Austin's (2004) view that there is a "burden of being black." The findings we discuss here will highlight African blackness as operating through discursive spaces and hegemonic discourses which inscribe blackness in contradiction to whiteness (Wright, 2004), and one which associates black Africans with, and assigns them to the margins of society within the context of power relations inherent in white-dominated Western Societies, including Australia (see Fanon, 2008; Ibrahim, 2004). Needless to say, our reference to blackness here is not limited to blackness as only a visible marker or blackness in relation to ancestry but also blackness as a sociopolitical relationship and political ontology.

In making the claim that we are writing about blackness in Australia, we remain aware of the challenges and criticisms that such an assertion may attract. To begin with, bodies racialized as black are not "new" in Australia. Indeed, Australia has a long (albeit troubled) history with bodies racialized as black. Indigenous Australians who are considered the original inhabitants or owners of the land are people racialized as black, and so are the people of Torres Strait Island who come under Australian rule. We acknowledge that Australia's First Nations people who have historically been part of the Australian sociocultural landscape for a longtime have been identified with (or assigned) and claimed blackness (see, for example, Anderson, 2003; Foley, 1999, 2001; Peters, 2017; Shoemaker, 1989).

Research on Indigenous identities in Australia has highlighted the general prevalence, acceptance, and use of the descriptor "black" and/or "blackness" in reference to indigenous Australians. Historically, some writers have freely used the expression "Black Power/Black Power Movements" to describe the various types of resistance put up by organized indigenous groups against colonization (see, for example, Foley, 1999, 2001; Robinson & York, 1977; Sykes & Bonner, 1975). Many such authors use the descriptor, usually in opposition or contrast to whiteness, to (re)present the existence of a racial divide between indigenous people (usually, with some form of black phenotypical features) as original owners of the land, and later settlers/colonizers (with Caucasian phenotypical features; see, for example, Anderson, 2003; Foley, 1999, 2001; Franklin, 1976; Peters, 2017; Shoemaker, 1989). We also note here that there are significantly documented instances of intertwined history in the experience of blackness as a constituted identity between indigenous people of Australia and other black subjects. Notable among these connections is the rise of black power movements in Australia during the 1960s and 1970s, epitomized by a particular event:

the invitation of Bruce McGuinness, a Caribbean political activist, by the Aborigines Advancement League (AAL) to a conference at the League in March 1969. A clash between the invited guest and one of the AAL's important personalities made this invitation even more significant, as it provided "the Press with the fuel for an hysterical outburst on the dangers of Black Power . . . (which) was interpreted by the Press to be the equivalent to violent revolution and the establishment of black dictatorships" (Foley, 1999, p. 8). Thus, we acknowledge here that there is not just an intertwined history between indigenous people of Australia and other black subjects, but also that there is a complexity in theoretical understandings of blackness within an Australian context that has indigenous people who are sometimes referred to as "Blacks" and other black subjects, including African blacks. More recent references include its free use by the media as in "Black deaths in custody," which can be found as a search topic on Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) online in the same category as "Aboriginal deaths in custody."

It is worth pointing out that, despite the prevalence and general acceptance, there are others who do not agree to indigenous people being described as "black," particularly in official communication. The following extract from a publication by Crikey.com in the midst of a 2012 uproar over the use of the descriptor "blacks" in a headline by the *Australian Financial Review*, in reference to indigenous people, is illustrative:

> But to many indigenous Australians the "blacks" descriptor is offensive. So says Jeanie Bell, a community linguist specialising in Australian Aboriginal languages. "I believe that most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people would find the use of the word 'blacks' in this context on the front page of such a prestigious paper like the *Financial Review* quite insulting, and somewhat derogatory," Bell told *Crikey*. It's not just about the word itself, it's the history behind it, according to Bell: "In my mind when you hear someone using the work 'blacks,' I, as an Aboriginal person, associate it with colonial language generally spoken in harsh tones with a sense of utter dismissal and bordering on hatred or strong resentment, such as 'the dirty blacks' or 'drunken or lazy blacks,' etc. All of which I find extremely offensive and know many others who would also."

Being aware of the different articulations of blackness in Australia, it is not our intention in this article to make generalized arguments about blackness in its totality within the Australian context, but rather we focus on interrogating blackness as it pertains to Africans and their experiences. By so doing, we are not in any way denying the reality of the everyday racialized experiences of non-African blacks in Australia. Undeniably, Australia's First Nations people and black African migrants in Australia would share similar racialized realities such as negative experiences of their blackness; similar phenotypic cues, and perhaps even a distant ancestry. Nevertheless, we also contend that there are significant experiential and historical variations between them that warrant the specific focus on African blackness in this article. The continental black African body is both culturally and physically distinct from the aforementioned groups. Most importantly, the "migrant" status of the "new" black (African) body adds a layer of complexity in terms of belonging, which has implications for their experiences and which might mean that in some subtle ways their experiences of blackness and of race and racialization differ from the groups or black bodies that have been part of Australia for over a century. Colic-Peisker and Tilbury (2008), for example, have observed that, as "new" bodies in Australia, the black African body is subjected to heightened hostilities and suspicion directed at "newcomers."

Even so, the black African diaspora is itself a heterogeneous category of people, many of whom do not necessarily share similar histories, apart from their blackness, and a (perhaps) distant ancestry. While some writers have argued a case for the consideration of all "blacks" outside Africa as diasporic Africans on the grounds that they can at some point trace their ancestry to Africa, we are still cautious not to homogenize the category "black" or "black" experiences. We concur with Alabi (2005) that

> black people can on the first level relate to one another in terms of their experiences in racialized societies, a situation which Achebe describes as an understanding of the concept of Blackness and how Black people fare in the world relative to other groups. Moreover, such identification enables them to question their disenfranchisement collectively. (p. 17)

It could therefore be argued that the ability of the term "blackness" to describe meaningfully, a category of people (even those assigned blackness due to their phenotype and due to their connections with Africa), is questionable because black people are not all the same and they do not all experience their blackness in the same way. In other words, there is a multiplicity of "blacknesses" and a diversity of black experiences and black subjectivities. As such, we do not advocate some uncomplicated notion of "blackness." However, just as we have done elsewhere (see, for example, Mapedzahama & Kwansah-Aidoo, 2013, 2014), we use the term "blackness" and the associated term—"black"—in this article, specifically in reference to a collective group of people with the same phenotypic cues (including most significantly: dark skin color), who though, of diverse sociocultural and political backgrounds, come originally from continental Africa and have migrated to Australia over the past five decades or so; as well as their descendants. For simplicity, the term blackness is used in this article as a metonymic stand-in for the "'new' black African diaspora" in Australia.

It is also worth mentioning here that our interest in the "new" African diaspora in Australia has a personal genesis: We are a part of this group ourselves; we are African migrants. Our choice of research and analytic concern therefore does not arise out of naïve curiosity. We acknowledge

that our choice of the research topic and research methodology, while having a sociological rationale, is not by itself neutral. Rather, it is rooted in our own experiences as black bodies in the predominantly white Australian space: It is situated in hybrid identity; our social location as black continental African researchers reading, researching, and writing in the West. We bear both similarities and differences to the participants in our research. We have a personal relationship to the experiences of blackness that our participants talk about, and as such we declare our autobiographical investment (Young, 2010) and use our own experiences as black migrant bodies as part of the tool kit and skillset to make sense of and interpret the data. In this sense, we claim ourselves as situated rather than detached researchers while arguing that rather than being a liability, our situatedness helps us to bring a certain depth of understanding to the analysis and interpretation process (Mapedzahama & Kwansah-Aidoo, 2014) that ultimately refines and throws more light (Denzin, 1994) on the narratives of our participants.

Conceptual Parameters

Black(s) and Blackness

> Just as we were called colored, but were not that, and then Negro, but not that, to be called black is just as baseless . . . (Rev Jesse Jackson, cited in Njeri, 1989)

The terms "Black" and "Blackness" are contested terms, historically grounded in the social construction of race, and their use, appropriateness, offensiveness, and consequences in contemporary society continue to be debated. As Gabriel (2007) notes, "blackness carries with it history, representation, culture, identity and spirituality" (p. 85). Hence, before exploring our theorization of the burden of blackness, as well as its manifestations in the everyday realities of the new African diaspora in Australia, it is important to give an overview of the debate relating to these terms and their usage. Our concern here, though, is with the etymology of the terms and not with them as social categories.

Broadly speaking, the term "black" has in contemporary everyday usage come to be accepted as a reference term for people "with African ancestral origins" (Agyemang, Bhopal, & Bruijnzeels, 2005, p. 1016). Alabi (2005) goes as far as claiming, "The word *Black* **can** replace African" (p. 17; emphasis added). While we acknowledge that these claims need to be applied with care in the context of Australia, we also note that what links the African diaspora or people of African descent is their "dark skin" phenotype, relative to other racial groups.

Yet as Alabi (2005) also points out, the "category 'black' is racialized [and] . . . when it functions as a racial category vis-à-vis other racial categories like *White and Asian . . .*" (p. 17; emphasis in the original), the meanings attached to it are negative. The problem, as Austin (2004) notes, "is not with being

of African descent or of having a certain skin color and hair texture, but being [socially constructed as] black" (p. 10). He elaborates thus:

> The word black is synonymous with negative things in our culture, from death to dirty, from foul to unholy. This word, which is basically a curse, is then placed upon a whole group of people. Each time the negative associations are presented, we, the culture and society, become more and more "conditioned" to prejudice. Each time, we begin to subconsciously transfer the "evils" of blackness to the person and the group. (p. 12)

Associating a whole category of people with a color constructed and defined in this way then, Austin (2004) argues further, "affect[s] the well being of the person who happens to be [coded] black, and affect[s] the society that sees the person through [this] tainted vision" (p. 11). Herein lies the beginnings of the burden. Black is seen as negative ("a curse" according to Austin) as a result, being coded or labeled black can be likened to being cursed, particularly within contexts where the term is used in opposition to whiteness. And being cursed or living with a curse within any context and under any circumstances can be and should be considered a veritable burden.

Not surprisingly therefore, many commentators have argued that blackness is borne out of white people's fantasies about "black skin." Alabi (2005), for example, contends that "the meaning of Blackness is partly conceived as a reaction to colonial images of Black people" (p. 17). He writes that

> *Black* as what Carole Boyce Davies calls "a descriptive adjective" (5) for people of African descent became popular as a result of the Black Power Movements of the 1960s and 1970s in the United States, the Caribbean, Britain, and South Africa. It is a resistance term functioning in oppositional relationship to racist naming such as *nigger*, White naming such as *Negro*, or other descriptive terms such as *White*. (p. 16)

Whatever the contestations and arguments are, what is certain from these discussions is that in spite of the efforts of Black Power movements to claim blackness as a positive identity marker, black or blackness defined and applied as a social category, particularly within Western white-dominated contexts, is never for the benefit of or beneficial to those coded as black. In many ways, it is to their detriment and leads to "a superfluous self surveillance and self interrogation" (Yancy, 2008a, p. 68).

Theorizing Blackness as Symbolic and Material Burden

> Burden (noun): 1. that which is carried; load: [e.g.] a horse's burden of rider and pack. 2. that which is borne with difficulty; obligation; onus: [e.g.] the burden of leadership. (Online dictionary.com, 2015)

Given that this article is premised on the assertion by Austin (2004) that there is a "burden of being black," it is important to theorize our understanding of the "burden" of blackness. Our theorization of blackness as a burden is premised on three postulations:

1. There is a varying range of negative situations experienced by people with dark skin color and of African descent as a result of the color of their skin and on such a regular basis that it can be seen as constituting a burden. Blackness is a burden because it is constructed negatively (see preceding discussion) and thus experienced negatively by those racialized as black. More than that, it is ever present; it cannot be jettisoned. It constitutes a load because it imposes a task upon those who bear the color and weighs them down in ways that they otherwise would not experience. The very color of their skin (the blackness) which follows them everywhere causes them to be seen and treated in negative ways that often causes them discomfort, as our discussion of findings shows.

2. The ongoing and constant experience of discrimination, marginalization, and disempowerment by those racialized as "black" imposes on them a unique kind of burden which is both "symbolic" and "material," derived from the notion of black or blackness as "a cultural trope and a set of subject positions" (Farrugia, 2010, p. 72). Borrowing from Farrugia (2010), we explain this burden of blackness as a fully embodied and affective experience which is represented by negative experiential and intersubjective processes, and which is negotiated by drawing on a variety of symbolic, material, and discursive resources to live a life that challenges the definitional markers of negativity enshrined in and attached to the word black. The symbolic burden arises out of the abstract pain and difficulty of dealing with the unseen messages and connotations attached to the color of their skin.

3. Blackness is often represented by an imposed black identity that reduces global, regional, and structural inequalities to static characteristics of individuals (Farrugia, 2010) and/or a race in ways that constitute a burden for them. In Australia, for example, popular and media representations construct black Africans using a deficit discourse (i.e., emphasis on what they "lack": skills, education, English language proficiency, etc.); trauma infested; and as morally suspect, and easily falling foul of the law (Kwansah-Aidoo & Mapedzahama, 2015; Mapedzahama & Kwansah-Aidoo, 2013). Such constructs manifest as "burden" for black Africans in Australia not only because they experience racism and other forms of marginalization as a result but also because they are deeply aware of these constructs and how they are often positioned as inferior in their daily interactions within the society and have to navigate these in their daily lives (Fanon, 2008; Ibrahim, 2004; Yancy, 2008a, 2008b).

On the basis of these three postulations, we argue that black Africans living in Australia are aware of the symbolic burden that their black bodies carry, and that coming to terms with the connotations of what it is to be black in a white-dominated Australian society is something they consistently struggle with. For our respondents, their blackness represents a particularly poignant example of the kinds of encumbrances those racialized as black experience in a society that finds convenience in "creating hierarchies among humans, with attendant power imbalances" (Tettey & Puplampu, 2005, p. 11).

A Distinctive Standpoint and a Unique Voice

To make sense of the qualitative data from the study, our conceptual framework is informed by understandings from standpoint theory and critical race theory's "unique voice of color" thesis. Specifically, standpoint theory helps us center the black African migrant's voice and experience. The unique voice of color thesis, however, illuminates how we come to interpret the data the way we do, and argue that the experiences of our participants represent a veritable burden.

According to Wylie (2003), standpoint theory argues that people who are dominated, marginalized, and oppressed may know some things better as a result of their experiences and how they understand those experiences. The theory's main purpose was to gain an understanding of the world from the standpoint of women and also other groups that are marginalized in society. It seeks to provide a unique epistemological perspective into specific situations or circumstances that only members of a certain collective standpoint are privy to (see Buzzanell, 2003; Collins, 1990; Edmonds-Cady, 2009; Harding, 1987). The critical elements of this approach are as follows:

-   A standpoint is a place from which human beings view the world.
-   A standpoint influences how the people adopting it socially construct the world.
-   A standpoint is a mental position from which things are viewed.
-   A standpoint is a position from which objects or principles are viewed and according to which they are compared and judged.
-   The inequalities of different social groups create differences in their standpoints.
-   All standpoints are partial and coexist with other standpoints.

Considering the above, standpoint theory enables us to see the responses of our participants as providing deeper and more meaningful insights into the inner workings of their

everyday realities as a subjugated group that experiences citizenship and/or the Australian space from the margins or edges of a racialized society. It also helps us accept and explicate these experiences as being on the basis of unique insights that can only be provided from them as persons occupying that standpoint.

Furthermore, we contend that our argument for a burden of blackness also partially stems from our own standpoint as black African migrants researching other black African migrants: as insiders who share the same standpoint, we have the capacity to know things that others who do not have a similar standpoint "typically do not know or are invested in not knowing (or, indeed, are invested in systematically ignoring and denying)" (Wylie, 2003, p. 32).

Like all subjugated people of a particular standpoint, our experience fosters in us a sharpness and awareness of conditions and interpretation regarding the dynamics of living black in Australia. Drawing from Collins (1991), Wylie (2003) makes a forceful argument for the value of insider epistemic privilege by noting that

> insider-outsiders are alert to all the details of the ways in which their oppression . . . affects the major and minor details of their social and psychic lives; they grasp the subtle manifestations of power dynamics and they make connections between the contexts in which these operate that the privileged have no reason to notice, or indeed, have good reason not to notice. (p. 37)

To understand our own position in relation to our participants, our analytic process is informed by critical race theory's "unique voice of color thesis" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The voice of color thesis holds that

> . . . because of their different histories and experiences with oppression, black, Am Indian, Asian, Latina/o writers and thinkers may be able to communicate to their white counterparts matters that the whites are unlikely to know. Minority status in other words brings with it a presumed competence to speak about race and racism. (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 9)

We research and write as the "different voice of color," with "experiential expertise" in blackness and racism (like our participants), and therefore whose "message" (unlike that of racial outsiders) "is [not] easy to reject" (see McCorkell & Myers, 2003, p. 225). As racial minority researchers, we "bear a 'presumed competence' to discuss matters of race and racism" (Horsford & McKenzie, 2008, p. 445) and of blackness. Our findings are unavoidably located in a shared standpoint with our research participants and a "social landscape and research motivations" (McCorkell & Myers, 2003, p. 220). Ultimately, we argue that our insider positionality (resulting from sharing a similar standpoint with our participants) and the nonneutrality that comes with it, substantially improve the quality of our research (Collins, 1991).

Method

Data for the study were collected through eight focus group discussions. For us, the utility of focus group discussions over other qualitative data collection methods, such as interviews, was twofold: First, as Kitzinger (1995) argues, focus group discussions are "particularly sensitive to cultural variables—which is why it is so often used in cross cultural research and work with ethnic minorities" (p. 300). The topic of race and racism is a sensitive one within the Australian context, and it required participants to reflect on, engage with, and talk about issues not usually considered topics of polite conversation, or as some of the participants pointed out: topics which are only "whispered" in the presence of close kin and friends. As such, focus group discussions provided private, yet comfortable, space where engaging in the topic of conversation with fellow black Africans, albeit at times from different cultural backgrounds, was not only allowed but was also "safe." Second, is how focus groups, as Morgan (1996) notes, "locate the interaction in a group discussion as the source of the data" (p. 130). That is, the ability of focus group participants to engage in interactive discussions with each other and lead the discussion (among) themselves. As Kitzinger (1995) notes, focus groups

> [C]apitalize on communication between research participants in order to generate data . . . The idea behind the focus group method is that group processes can help people to explore and clarify their views in ways that would be less easily accessible in a one to one interview . . . [Focus group discussions] also helps researchers tap into the many different forms of communication that people use in day to day interaction, including jokes, anecdotes, teasing, and arguing. (p. 299)

Study Design

This project adopted a qualitative design. Data collection occurred between September and December 2013 in three regional locations and two metropolitan areas in two Australian states (New South Wales and Victoria). The focus groups took from 2½ hrs to just over 3 hrs each to complete and explore a broad range of issues, including

- current racial issues among the new and visible African diaspora
- significance of race and racism in the life of participants
- situations where participants believed that they had experienced racism or racial discrimination
- skin color and whether it made any difference in these encounters (of racism)
- ways in which participants experienced issues of race and racism, how often these occurred, and how often they responded.

Data Analysis

We adopted a consistent system of analysis in dealing with the data: First, participants' accounts (data) were searched to

identify recurring regularities on the basis of keywords, phrases, and sentences within the context of the study's objectives. The regularities were then checked over again to identify emerging patterns. A further rigorous check was made of the patterns which then revealed different categories within patterns on the basis of the frequency of mention. All of this was done and guided by our situated knowledge and experience as indicated earlier, while staying close to the data (Patton, 1990) and "staying true to the participants' voices" (Mapedzahama & Kwansah-Aidoo, 2014, p. 180). Accordingly, while some comments may seem grammatically incorrect or disjointed, they have been presented in their originality to maintain authenticity.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited via personal and professional networks, leveraging on prior rapport established during previous research into skilled African migrant subjectivities. Contacts were provided with information regarding the project, and encouraged to spread the word about the project and our need for volunteers. Potential participants were encouraged to review the information and to seek further information at their convenience. A recruitment advertisement was also circulated through professional networks such as African Studies Association of Australasia and the Pacific (AFSAAP); African Women Australia, Inc. (AWAU); and African Professionals Australia, Inc. (APA). We also used the "snowballing" method through our personal and professional contacts as well as participants recruited through the advertisement.

Sample

Recruitment resulted in a sample of 63 participants; 21 women and 42 men, across a total of eight focus groups. These were conducted in metropolitan and regional Victoria (two each), and metropolitan and regional News South Wales (two each). Participants ranged between the ages of 26 and 55, and were a mix of professionals (such as academics, medical doctors, and nurses) and nonprofessionals (such as taxi drivers and factory workers), and with different emigration pathways. Most participants were tertiary educated irrespective of their location and the type of employment they were engaged in, and had come into Australia through different pathways. Some had entered Australia under the humanitarian visa arrangement, while others had come in on either skilled migrant visas themselves or as spouses of people on skilled migrant visas.

Results: The Burden of Blackness

Our analysis of how the participants talked about being black in Australia from their standpoint highlighted several facets of what we have categorized as the burdensome nature of their black embodiment. In this section, we present data which highlight the various dimensions of what we conceptualize as the "burden" of blackness.

The Burden of Stereotypes and Social Constructions

Focus group data revealed a consistently strong conviction by the participants that there are certain perceptions, stereotypes, interpretations, and identity markers, exclusively reserved for "black African skin" in Australia. These (oftentimes negative) constructions are multifaceted as we discuss below:

1. As the unknowing, uneducated, inarticulate, oppressed, and displaced, for example,

V3: For instance, we are like he [another focus group participant] said, because of our educational background some of them are even surprised that you have that capability to get to PhD level or be a professor teaching them. But at least they will be forced to respect [you].
(Focus Group 7—Rural NSW)

In another group, another participant commented,

V1: Once you are black or you are of a different skin not the European skin or Australian skin, British skin, or American skin; you are judged already on not performing, or not able to perform. And those things are there—stereotype, and once you are stereotyped it doesn't matter who you are, it will take time for the person to know "Oh you are a principal researcher from so and so." But how can someone know of your title when your skin alone has been stopping [them]; you get what I mean? (Focus Group 8—Rural NSW)

From the standpoint of the participants above, while unspoken, it is obvious that they believe that in the context of their social and even workplace interactions within Australia, what informs conceptions of knowledge, knower, and intellect is white and/or white skin. And so, by virtue of embodying dark skin it is assumed that as black Africans they cannot truly be part of or possess any worthwhile intellect. The burden of blackness in this context then entails black people having to consistently and persistently navigate images of blackness imposed by a non-black majority: Black people must constantly contest the implications oftentimes associated with their black bodies. This is captured succinctly by Fanon (2008) when he notes that black Africans in the West are made to contend with things in their past and the inauthentic ways in which these have been presented—"ethnic characteristics . . . tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave ships . . ." (pp. 84-85). So, black African migrants are forced to endure what Ibrahim (2004) calls a *social imaginary* (beyond their control) which has been created and circulated within a discursive space where they are imagined, constructed, and treated as "black." In other words, their blackness acquires "new" meanings in the West/Australian context; processes we have called

elsewhere "becoming black" (see, for example, Mapedzahama & Kwansah-Aidoo, 2013).

2.   As a homogeneous category: "blacks" from Africa, for example,

V2: They have that stereotype about black people, that blacks are you know that's how they are. They are all violent. They are all this . . . I mean I used to drive a taxi. They ask me these questions all the time and I always try and tell them look; I've been here almost 20 years; I've never been involved in a crime. Most of the people I know they were never involved in crimes and were never seen on news or anything like that. You know sometimes they ask: "Are there any of you guys in Australia?" I go "Yeah there are heaps of us, but you never hear anything about us." When they know something about one particular black, they think they know you all from Africa, so Africa is one country and they just put us in one stereotypical group. (Focus Group 5, Metropolitan NSW)

As the above quote shows, the burden of blackness is also the burden of navigating what from most participants' standpoint was interpreted as "ignorance" which leads to uncritical stereotyping of Africans based on very limited knowledge of the continent. The burden also entails the loss of individuality and the strain of resisting the homogenizing denouement that results from such stereotyping; stereotyping that strips those categorized as black of any semblance of being apart or different from the group.

The Paradox of In/Visibility

The focus group discussions also highlight the ubiquity of skin color for black African migrants in ways that exposed what we argue is a paradox of the burden of blackness: simultaneous hypervisibility and invisibility, as the excerpts in this section show:

V1: It actually makes a whole lot of difference, this black skin here. You see; it cannot be hidden at the end of the day

V2: [talking in the back ground] and it's not black skin anyway, I don't know where people get this; I don't know where it came from;

[all laugh]

V2: If anything, I always say to people get a chocolate bar; get a milk chocolate bar and hold it against my skin;

V1: It's the same.

V2: Yeah; and if you are colour blind then tell me. But [it] does make a difference . . .

(Focus Group 6—Metropolitan NSW)

While the discussion above shows how in a context where the deeply entrenched norm of whiteness in Australia ensures that African migrants' blackness never fades into the background: (*their blackness cannot be hidden*) It is therefore hypervisible, the one below shows that this hypervisible black body is simultaneously invisibilized:

V4: [F]or example if you walk into a shop and you are standing there looking for somebody to attend to you for 15 minutes and everybody seems to be busy and then somebody, white person comes in and then suddenly a worker is available because they probably they think this black person is not going to buy anything, he is just going to waste our time. You could also be standing there at the bar and somebody decides not to see you at all they ask somebody behind you if they have been served. . . .

V3: Like the instance you were talking about; like you are standing in queues. I was in a store, I was buying meat, and I stood there for a long time. People come in they serve them; people come in and they sell to them and I just stood there quiet I never reacted until they were fed up.

Moderator: And then they came to you?

V3: And then they came to serve me . . .

(Focus Group 7—Rural NSW)

The excerpts above are important for our conceptualization of "burden" in this article because they not only highlight how as a raced body the "black [African] body comes into view" in Australia (Mowatt, French, & Malebranche, 2013, p. 645) but also how it comes into view in problematized ways. As Ryland (2013) notes,

When you become overly visible, you're often constantly under the gaze of others. You are being looked at, sure, but you are being watched and judged, so it's not the kind of visibility that people tend to seek if given a choice. (n.p.)

The burden of hypervisibility then is not only that the hypervisible black body becomes the site of surveillance and scrutiny but also that it is "supersaturated with meaning" (Yancy, 2008b, p. 846), brought into being through what Yancy (2008b) calls a "white racist narrative." This narrative, as Yancy contends, constructs an "essence [Blackness] that precedes [black African migrants'] existence" (p. 844), and they are forced "into a normative space, a historically structured and structuring space through which they are seen and judged guilty a priori" (Yancy, 2008a, p. 2). In this way, black African migrants in Australia are made responsible for things that they have no control over—their (black) bodies, their race, and their ancestors. They are judged on the basis of how their ancestors have historically been (mis/re)presented in the Western world (Fanon, 2008).

The Burden of Racial "Two-Ness"

Participants' discussion of black embodiment in Australia also revealed how from their standpoint, their social realities involved navigating a "feeling of two-ness" (Upegui-Hernandez, 2009, p. 138) when it came to racial matters. This feeling, as Upegui-Hernandez further explains, arises from black people's "understanding of the so-called incompatibility between themselves and the world of white[s]" (p. 138) in racial matters. The excerpt below is an example:

> V5: But you know what; I mean most of us who have applied for jobs here and there, each time you get knocked back what comes to your mind is that I'm black. At a meeting if you suggest something and nobody is listening to you, you feel, oh because I'm black. So, you got to be conscious that is it because I'm black really or it's because . . . (Focus group 2, Victoria rural)

Another focus group discussion:

> V2: At [*Victorian school name*], they still do **slave trade!** (Emphasis in original). But I couldn't complain about it . . .
> V3: Slave trade as a subject or . . .
> V2: An activity . . .
> V8: What do they do?
> V2: They bring slaves, they dress as slaves in chains and bad clothes and what a view! It is a whole school activity . . . the slaves are brought to the front and people "auction" those slaves! Yet, I remember in an American school a teacher was taken to court for . . .
> V8: Doing something like that.
> V3: What's the point [of the activity]?
> V2: It's to raise funds, it's to raise funds.
> V8: And it's called slave trade?
> V2: Yes! . . . I thought "God! If I complain," because I'm the only black person there I knew they were going to know it was me.
> V3: Are they still doing it?
> V2: Yes, they did it again this year . . .
> (Focus group 8, Rural New South Wales)

The second excerpt also highlights how a heightened sense of racial awareness sometimes also necessarily coexists with the burden of self-censorship when it comes to matters of race and racism. In a society where denial discourses dominate when it comes to racism, this self-censorship is not surprising. Hence, in spite of being highly racially aware (being able to see the inappropriateness of "slave day" as a fund-raising activity), the participant exercises self-censorship fueled by the perception that their position will at best not be supported, and at worst be seen as an attack on the system or as a way of trying to "cause problems." We argue that this self-censorship paradoxically works together to

sustain racism. First, because it entails the subversion of a person's ability to speak out against racism, it works as a hindrance to the fight against racism. Second, to the extent that it results in a situation where one does not speak out against blatantly racist acts or activities, it invariably leads to or supports the social reproduction of racism.

The Burden of Minimization

An unexpected finding of our study was a conscious effort by black Africans to minimize racism so as to lessen its effects on them:

> V5: You have to [minimise racism] because for your own piece of mind, for our own emotional wellbeing, because if you keep on, I am the only African, I am the only black in my place of work where we have like 2000 people, we have regional meetings all the time we have all these meetings and I'm always the only black you know no other aboriginal no Indian person, only black person. So you see people misbehaving so much, you see people saying things, I tend not to look at it, I tend not to listen to it. I have got to protect myself, it's my way of coping because I am here and I have made this place my home and I am going nowhere, so it's either you accept me for who I am or you get out of my face. I don't give a damn that's just me. (Focus group 2, Rural Victoria)

The difference between the minimization of racism as articulated by this participant and the denial of racism by those who do not experience it (see, for example, Augoustinos & Every, 2010; van Dijk, 1992) is that minimization is mobilized as a coping mechanism; a self-preservation strategy. As a cognitive process for coping with racism, minimization is not only about finding ways to persevere in an anti-black racist context but also an agentic and politicized way of rendering racism and its consequences powerless as those who experience it go about their everyday lives. In this way then, the burden of embodying "difference" arises out of always being aware of one's difference and yet simultaneously downplaying the consequences of that difference.

Like non-black denial of racism, this black minimization has several dimensions, including, ignoring acts and discourses of racism, minimizing and persistently questioning (whether an encounter is informed by racialized thinking or not). For us as researchers who share the same standpoint as our participants and who possess a "unique voice of color" therefore, what makes black minimization of racism a burden is that it is not an outcome of a deliberate disavowal but rather part of a social process that pulls the black subject in seemingly opposite ends: One that through heightened levels of racial literacy can identify racism when it happens and the other that consciously seeks to undermine that literacy.

Discussion: The "Troublesome" and Burdensome Nature of Black Embodiment

> And then the occasion arose when I had to meet the white man's eyes. **An unfamiliar weight burdened me. . . . In the white world, the man [*sic*] of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity.** It is a third person consciousness. The body is surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty. (Fanon, 2008, p. 83, emphasis added)

The quote above, from Fanon who by virtue of his skin color, shares the same standpoint as our participants, is on its own indicative of the observed difficulty and burdensome nature of living black in a predominantly white context where blackness is inferiorized and treated as such. However, the data we have presented here also provide empirical evidence which shows that from their standpoint, our participants experience their blackness as a constriction; that as blacks they feel their color more acutely than does any other, thereby making it burdensome. On the basis of the data we have presented above, when we point to a "burden" of blackness, we mean the consequences for those constructed and identified as "black" in a white-dominated society, of their blackness or black embodiment and the challenges involved in negotiating those consequences. In other words, our concern is also with how navigating the consequences of black embodiment places an undeserved burden on black African bodies. We refer here to consequences that involve having to defy the fixed fantasies and distorted images projected on them through the white gaze (Yancy, 2008a).

Moreover, from our distinctive standpoint and applying the critical lenses of our unique voice, the data from our research frame for us the dilemma of black embodiment in white-dominated spaces where blackness is seen and constructed in opposition to whiteness (Austin, 2004). In such spaces, the black body is a paradox which at once signifies black Africans, but which they must also subvert (Ibrahim, 2004) if they are to confront distorted interpretations that seek to identify and categorize their very existence in terms of the blackness of their bodies and whatever "performative category" (Ibrahim, 2004) that they are supposed to do. We argue that in the Australian context, black African bodies are constantly being defined in opposition to whiteness as the norm; being identified as the "unfamiliar other," the problematic *black* other, and that is burdensome from the standpoint of those defined in that way.

We contend then that the white racist narrative has become the "burden" of blackness: that which constructs black embodiment as troublesome. The black bodies of African migrants are "troublesome" because they are relegated to particular unspoken standards and expectations, simply by being "dark" skinned. Regardless of their own self-perception and self-identity, from the standpoint of the African migrants interviewed for this study, "black"—as Lewis (2003) would argue, has become their "imposed identity" (p. 287), their main descriptor, complete with the implications and stereotypes. They cannot escape the burden and the repercussions of "being black" in a white-dominated society. In effect, they are presumed guilty, condemned by an ideological frame of reference that problematizes them and reduces their very existence to the ontological and epistemological disturbance of white space (Yancy, 2008a).

The data presented in this article show that for the African migrants interviewed, their blackness "follows" them everywhere and the first thing that (white) people see in a black person is their color. As Fanon (2008) aptly points out, "The black man [*sic*] has no ontological resistance to the eyes of the white man," and "he [*sic*] does not know at what moment his [*sic*] inferiority comes into being through the other" (p. 83). Color or blackness more often than not frames their interactions with white people, making it burdensome. The burden arises from the fact that they have no control over the negativity that is attached to their bodies (blackness). Ibrahim (2004) eloquently captures this situation thus: "Our bodies cheat us all the time, what they 'say' is almost always unknown since they 'say' things that they do not intend" (p. 84). That makes black bodies in a white environment burdensome and problematic—at once enabling, in terms of embodiment and allowing bodily experience; yet constraining, by way of placing limitations on the nature and definition of bodily experiences that can be had. Hence, their dailiness involves contesting the implications oftentimes associated with their black bodies; a burden that they must constantly negotiate and contend with.

We would argue then, that, the "burden" of black embodiment lies in the fact that by virtue of being black bodies in Australia, our participants automatically share in some sort of "collective dis-eminence" (Carbado, 2007, p. 2). However, we also propose that the burden of blackness is more than just the repercussions of *black/ness*. We note that the participants can "experience the world through many other facets of [their] identity that [they] adopt and/or that are ascribed to [them] by others" (Paradies, 2006, p. 356), yet they are constantly forced to look at events and incidents through racial eyes, always wondering whether an incident or occurrence has racial overtones. This is a burden because it forces them to make race-induced value judgments on a more regular basis than perhaps they would ordinarily like to. It also means that to be fair to themselves and those of a different race that they encounter regularly, they must learn to not only constantly question their interpretations of events but also engage with these people wearing both their racial and nonracial lenses. So, as Carbado (2007) puts it, they have become "more racially aware and less racially intact" (p. 5).

Conclusion

In this article, we have argued that black embodiment in white space has always been "othered" and constructed in juxtaposition to, and as an ontological and epistemological disturbance

to whiteness: "Not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man" (Fanon, 2008, pp. 82-83). Using data from our focus group discussions analyzed through the conceptual lenses of standpoint theory and critical race theory's unique voice of color thesis, we have argued that from the standpoint of our participants (which we share) blackness as experienced in the predominantly white Australian context is burdensome. The discussion has shown that for black Africans living in a race-centered society like Australia, it is not the "difference" of their (dark) skin color or Africanness per se that is the problem; rather, it is how that difference is perceived, interpreted, and acted upon.

Based on sharing the same standpoint as our participants and the "unique voice of color" that we bring to the research, we conclude by arguing that the "burden" these African migrants carry as black bodies in Australia is that they are now quick to think about race; race is no longer an insignificant marker. Carrying the burden of blackness, they must question if each negative (and on the rare occasion, positive) encounter or experience carries racial overtones. They are (now) color conscious and cannot afford to ignore, or take the color of their skin for granted anymore, because their skin color distinguishes them and in many cases places them at an unearned, undeserved disadvantage. It determines and even, to a large extent, defines their everyday lived experiences; their encounters and interactions.

In making the claims that we have made in this article about the burdensome nature of blackness in Australia, we have acknowledged our insider positionality as a result of sharing the same distinctive standpoint with our participants, and argued that notwithstanding, our insiderness and unique voices of colour enable us to have unique forms of knowledge that we construe as constituting "considerable epistemic advantage" (Wylie, 2003, p. 33) which greatly improves the quality of our research and the knowledge that we produce (Collins, 1991) rather than detracting from it. Ultimately, our argument for the valorization of the knowledge we produce from sharing a similar standpoint with our participants comes from our efforts at remaining true and answerable to both our research participants and members of the academy, as we seek to unravel the dynamics of living as black African diaspora in Australia.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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