

## **'WHO ARE STRANGERS?': 'ABSORBING' SUDANESE REFUGEES INTO A WHITE AUSTRALIA**

CLEMENCE DUE

### **Abstract**

This paper analyses several newspaper articles which appeared in the media following the murder of teenager Liep Gony who had come to Australia as a refugee from Sudan, and the subsequent restriction on the African refugee intake made by the former immigration minister Kevin Andrews. The paper considers several discourses which appeared in these articles, and which were indicative of the wider press coverage following these events. These discourses centered on whiteness as the normative mode of belonging in Australia (as a result of the ongoing denial of Indigenous sovereignty over the land), and the desired absorption of any non-white refugees into the dominant white culture. The paper concludes that such constructions of white belonging in Australia further deny Indigenous ownership of the land, and attempt to override any perceived differences in non-white immigrants and refugees, whilst at the same time constructing the nation as generous and free of racism.

### **Introduction**

In recent years, issues such as increasing levels of border control, increasingly restricted immigration (especially concerning asylum seekers), and rising concern around national security issues stemming from the so-called 'War on Terror', have all contributed to discussions surrounding the concept of belonging in Australia, and who is considered to be 'Australian'. Such discussions were seen recently in relation

to the former Minister for Immigration, Kevin Andrews', restriction on refugees from Africa on the basis of claims of 'African gangs' and a supposed failure by refugees from Africa to integrate. This was exemplified when he stated that; "Australia has the right to ensure those who come here are integrating into a socially cohesive community" (cited in Farouque and Cooke 2007), echoing Howard's famous 2001 election campaign statement; "We will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come" (cited in Marr and Wilkinson 2003: 245).

Andrews' comments regarding integration came soon after the bashing murder of teenager Liep Gony, who came to Australia eight years ago from Sudan. The comments were made despite the fact that Gony's attackers were in fact neither Sudanese nor refugees, and also despite the fact that, as Gony's mother stated, it was incorrect to label Liep as a refugee or as Sudanese since he was an Australian citizen (Dubecki 2007). The media quickly picked up on the story of Andrews' restriction on the African refugee quota and his subsequent comments about the integration (or implied lack of) of African refugees. Whilst some of these articles focused on the personal stories of African refugees, or reported on the response given from African people or refugee advocates, the majority focused on issues such as integration (or perceived lack of integration) or economic concerns such as refugee funding, whilst at the same time laying claims to Australia's generosity and tolerance towards asylum seekers. Almost all the articles

contained ideologies which centered around a normative white mode of belonging in which those located as racial Others – such as the Sudanese people – have to conform to a dominant white perception of the Australian ‘way of life’.

As such, these articles were reflective of similar sentiments as those predominately seen in the mainstream press surrounding Indigenous Australians, whom the media has frequently vilified as ‘criminal’ (Cowlshaw 2004; Cuneen 2001), representing Indigenous men as sexual predators, and Indigenous women and children as passive, vulnerable, and in need of white society to save them. These stereotypes were frequently seen in the mainstream newspapers printed around the same time, which regularly depicted Indigenous communities as dysfunctional and violent, and frequently produced graphic descriptions of child sexual abuse in Indigenous communities. It was on the basis of such stereotypes that the Howard government was able to advocate paternalistic approaches to Indigenous peoples such as Shared Responsibility Agreements which forced Indigenous peoples into ‘reciprocal’ agreements with the government in return for basic services which the government has a responsibility to provide for all people (see McCausland 2005). It was this approach to Indigenous peoples which culminated in the Northern Territory Intervention. As discussed later in this paper, the relationship between such attitudes towards Indigenous peoples and the treatment of refugees was intimately bound together with the ‘imagining’ of Australia as normatively home to white people.

There has been much research conducted on belonging within the field

of critical race and whiteness studies in Australia (for a sample of this see Hage 1998; Imtoul 2007; Osuri and Banerjee 2004; Perera 2005). Such research has highlighted how those identified as ‘white’ in Australia are *a priori* taken as belonging within the Australian nation, the corollary being that those who are not identified as such must prove their suitability in order to belong. The depiction of the Australian nation as normatively white serves also to deny the histories of colonisation and dispossession that lie at the very heart of the nation, and in so doing refute ongoing claims to Indigenous sovereignty. As such, hegemonic, racialized power relations are reinforced and maintained. Such depictions of Australia as a ‘white nation’ hold considerable import for the ways in which non-white immigrants and refugees are represented in Australia, and the nation’s representations of such people are intimately related to its desire to deny or refuse Indigenous sovereignty.

The relationship between Indigenous sovereignty, white Australia and refugees is summarized well by Katrina Schlunke (2002), who writes that “...the indigenous person, the refugee and the new and old ‘settler’ sit in an awkward arrangement of relationship which is radically exposed through the reality of indigenous sovereignty. Indigenous sovereignty insists the question is asked: Who are strangers? The situation of the refugee insists the question is asked: Who is able to practice hospitality?” (Schlunke 2002).

These questions are particularly relevant in the face of claims of *terra nullius*, or of Australia being a land free of inhabitants prior to colonisation, and the corresponding denial of Indigenous Australians as occupiers of Australia. These claims were one of the main

methods by which colonial settlers claimed an identity as other than migrants in Australia, and such issues "...went to the heart of the manner in which the continent was settled. The myth of *terra nullius* was dependent upon the non-recognition of the local population and the 'indigenisation' of their white conquerors" (Ahluwalia 2001: 65). Such a method of being seen to be native to Australia, which relied so strongly on denying the belonging of Indigenous Australians, meant that for British settlers Australia could be seen as a legitimately *white* country. As such, belonging in Australia came to be seen via a "racially coded model of citizenship" (Perera 2007: 6) in which the people who were considered to be legitimate Australians were white.

Therefore, as a result of acts such as dispossession and genocide forced on the Indigenous people, it is largely assumed that Australia is in fact a 'white' country rather than an Aboriginal one, and consequently in order to be seen to belong in Australia in such a way as to be best able to access resources, education, health care and so on, people have to either have enough cultural capital in terms of 'identifiers' of whiteness (such as having 'white' skin, speaking English, having an Australian accent and so on) to be seen to be white, or be seen to be adhering to the rules and values laid out by the white nation (Hage 1998).

The questions raised surrounding white Australia's legitimacy to accept or not accept refugees in the face of Indigenous sovereignty means that there is an urgent need to maintain a white Australia, and in many cases non-white refugees "disturb the coloniser's sense of self" (Perera 2002: 4). In other words, given that white Australia needs to maintain a perception of the country as normatively white (as opposed to

legitimately belonging to Indigenous Australians), immigration by people who are not perceived to be white threatens such ideologies, and by implication also becomes threatening to the white nation. This is also the case with regards to Indigenous Australians whose status as First Nations peoples also threatens normative conceptions of Australia as legitimately white. This is especially so since, as Jon Stratton (2007) argues, "Australians who claim whiteness distinguish themselves from those they identify as non-white and as not properly Australian. White Australians understand themselves as always already here, in Australia. Of course, this raises a huge question about the status of Aborigines and marks the paradoxical anxieties... of settler Australians" (Stratton 2007: 173).

Following from these issues of white belonging, is the question of how non-white people exist within Australia. In many cases, non-white migrants and refugees are only accepted if they are seen to be behaving in a way deemed acceptable to white Australia, and are therefore able to be absorbed easily into the country without being threatening to the country's status as legitimately white. Hage argues that this perception of a dominant white culture within Australia is "maintained through a process of incorporating Australia's multicultural reality by constructing it as a reality of tamed ethnicities located around a primary white culture" (Hage 1998: 209). In other words, as previously mentioned, if Australia is seen to remain firmly as a white country then any other people living within the country are seen to exist *in addition to* the white majority, and they also have to be seen to be acting in a way which conforms to white conceptions of living.

This means that, to draw on Hage once more, non-white people are generally constructed as being *tolerated* by the

white majority rather than as belonging in Australia in their own right. However, as Hage (1998) argues, the notion of 'tolerance' is problematic because of the unequal power relations which are embedded in the term. The ability to be tolerant implies an equal ability to be intolerant should one choose to do so, which therefore, as Hage argues, "leaves the power of the racist unchallenged" (1998, p. 95). In other words, the power to be intolerant is not taken away just by asking people to be tolerant. Thus there is an imbalance of power that is implicit in discourses around tolerance, in that it is only those who are in positions of power (white Australians in this case) who have the ability to 'tolerate'. To illustrate this, Hage points out that it doesn't make sense to consider a newly arrived migrant being 'tolerant' of a white Australian, because they neither have the power to do so, nor the power to make such decisions about the Australian national space (Hage, 1998). Discourses of 'tolerance' therefore position one group of people (white Australians) as managers of another group (minority racial groups) within the national space.

Osuri and Banerjee (2004) extend this argument of white people as national managers when they argue that "it is through the logic of... white teleologies that the Australian government has been able to continue its detention of asylum seekers, perform a racialised border protection, and continue its ongoing targeting of Muslims and Arab Australians" (Osuri and Banerjee 2004: 169). In other words, such conceptions of whiteness as the norm in Australia (as opposed to, say, Indigenous populations) allow for issues such as border protection from predominately non-white 'illegal immigrants', and conceptions of minority racial groups to be seen to be potentially threatening to the country, as opposed to simply

presenting a different reality in which "white people are not the main occupiers of the centre of the national space" (Hage 1998: 19).

In other words, and following from Hage, there are normative conceptions in place within Australia regarding what it means to be 'Australian' and to have an 'Australian way of life' and, as previously discussed in the literature regarding Indigenous sovereignty, these normative conceptions primarily revolve around traditional 'Anglo' values. This is discussed by Imtoul (2007) who argues that there are normative conceptions of 'Australian-ness' in place, writing that "the majority group in society ('guardians of the nation') believe that you can neither *feel* nor *be* Australian if you do not conform to particular normative conceptualisations of what it means to *feel* or *be* Australian" (Imtoul 2007: 5). Such normative conceptions revolve primarily around Australia being conceived as a 'white' country, and this is reflected in the ways in which, for example, the Howard government in particular attempted to coerce Indigenous Australians into assimilating into white culture. This was seen in attempts to create 'nuclear families' and promote home ownership (Dillion 2007); values and aspirations considered to be typically 'Western', and therefore typically 'Australian'.

Another technique used to maintain a perception of Australia as a normatively white country is that of the denial of the existence of any of the systemic racist behaviours which are seen as a result of the aforementioned normative white modes of belonging in Australia. Such denials in turn lead to positive self-presentations of the country and the way in which white Australia 'deals' with 'issues' such as refugees and Indigenous affairs. So, whilst racism is widely recognized by many scholars as

fundamental to colonial nations such as Australia (e.g., Moreton-Robinson 2004; Nicolacopoulos & Vassilacopolous 2004), the existence of racism is still widely denied. Such denials of racism serve not only to justify any sort of racist behaviours or opinions which may be exhibited, but also to position the white nation of white people as not racist, and thus to deny the existence of racist behaviours at all. One outcome of this is that racism is not considered to have any relation to the overall attitudes or behaviours of dominant group members (Van Dijk 1993). This is reflected in the press, where the strategy of denying the existence of racism in a country "reinterprets, marginalises and integrates evidence of racism" (Szuchewycz 2000: 497), thus reinforcing a dominant and positive view of the country as being tolerant and welcoming, and at the same time legitimizing white group dominance and asserting white values and white ownership of the national space.

Such techniques mean that, whilst it could be considered to be a racist act to cut the intake of a specific group of refugees (especially a group so in need), instead Australia's policies regarding refugees are presented as leading the world and generous beyond necessity. This construction of the nation as 'generous' is also reflected in Indigenous affairs where the government is often constructed as generous due to the amounts of money spent on Indigenous peoples, despite the fact that much of this is spent on administration costs and very little is spent on programmes which are owned and operated by Indigenous peoples on Indigenous terms. Therefore decisions which result in the reduction of the African refugee intake or in the erosion of Indigenous rights and self-determination as was the case in the Northern Territory Intervention, are portrayed as existing within a dominant

framework of a tolerant and generous country. Thus it is made easier for the public to be uncritical of such decisions because they believe that Australia is fundamentally a good nation.

As will be highlighted throughout the remainder of this paper, all of these discourses were frequently seen throughout the media and the press in response to the then Immigration Minister's comments regarding integration, and his decision not to accept any more African refugees.

### **Methodology**

Since the media is one of the primary sites through which most people living in Australia gain their knowledge of minority groups, especially refugees, this paper will consider extracts from three articles which were considered representative of much of the press surrounding this issue. These articles were; 'Big hearted' by Andrew Bolt which appeared in *The Herald Sun* on the 5<sup>th</sup> October 2007, 'In time of strain, Minister failing test of leadership' by Farah Farouque published in *The Age* on October 11 2007, and an editorial from *The Herald Sun* on the 12<sup>th</sup> October 2007.

Before speaking about the analysis of these articles, I would like to briefly acknowledge that terms such as 'race', 'whiteness', 'minority groups', 'Indigenous Australians' and so on are problematic and complicated terms to use, not self-explanatory ones. Such terms take a wide range of differing experiences and combine them into one category. As such, these terms are used mindfully, and reference the fact that it is as a result of such stereotypes of exclusive racial identification and belonging, (and through the existence of binaries between 'self' and 'other', or

'us' and 'them') that racial inequality and privilege is able to continue to exist in Australian society today. This means that whilst this paper acknowledges that such terms are the result of social constructions which prioritise racial differences as a mode of categorizing people in the social world, the terms here are used as they appear in the media and, since this paper focuses on the differences between people classified as 'white' or 'black' the usage of these terms, whilst problematic, is unavoidable.

### Analysis

The analysis of these articles revealed three main themes of belonging within Australia. Specifically, these were; who it is who gets to belong, (or more specifically who is tolerated) by the dominant white group, the assumption that whiteness is the normative mode of belonging within Australia (which is primarily constructed in opposition to Indigenous belonging), and finally a denial of the existence of racism within Australia.

Many of the articles in the broader corpus of articles examined for this paper contained themes of belonging which centered upon marginalized racial groups being *tolerated* by white Australia as discussed earlier. One of the striking things about this was that in many cases, and in all 3 articles I am analyzing here, this theme of tolerance was exemplified by a discourse of *absorption*.

An example of this is Bolt's article, in which he states;

...you'd think from the hate-dancing party on Andrews' head that never before have we set quotas on refugees from any one area and only now will we act in this "racist" way.

False. Governments from both sides have for many years set such quotas, and have no option, given that there are more than 20 million refugees looking for homes.

Limits must be set, as must quotas for refugees from any particular area – not just to spread our help but to quietly ensure we don't take in so many from one particular group so as to overwhelm our ability to absorb them

In this extract, Bolt defends Andrews' decision to reduce the intake of African refugees on the basis that 'limits must be set' because of the huge numbers of refugees looking for a place to find refuge, and because of a need to 'quietly ensure we don't take in so many from one particular group so as to overwhelm our ability to absorb them'. What this line of argument appears to be stating is that there is a finite number of people from 'particular groups' (in this instance, Sudanese people) who will be able to be 'absorbed' by the white nation. The use of the word 'absorbed' seems to imply that the limits set around refugees from certain areas ensure that they can be 'swallowed' as it were by a white Australia so that their 'difference' to the white majority is as least noticeable as possible, and therefore makes as little difference to white Australia as possible. The word also seems to be an example of the fear held by white Australia that it could be changed by non-white people or 'invaded' by non-white Others. It could be suggested that such fears contain the denied knowledge of colonization in Australia, where it has been white people who have invaded and refused to be absorbed.

The word racist, placed in inverted commas, serves to deny and undermine claims of racist behaviour, or even that Andrews' decision was made on the basis of race (despite the fact that this is

explicitly what he stated). Such denials of racism will be discussed later.

This theme of absorption and integration is also demonstrated in another excerpt from Bolt's article in which he states;

These are not people like my parents and so many other post-war immigrants from Europe... Those migrants knew many of our codes to getting on. They didn't need the kind of help that governments now must offer the Sudanese, including even teaching them to treat our road rules as, well, rules and our police as public servants not public enemies.

It is for reasons like this that sensible governments make sure they bring in only as many refugees from any one area that they can hope to integrate.

Again, this extract focuses on the 'integration' of refugees, and implies that there are a certain number of people from any particular area who will be able to be successfully 'integrated'. Once again, this implies that white Australia will only be able to manage a limited number of non-white 'others' who are not familiar with 'our codes to getting on'. The implication of this is that these 'codes to getting on' are white codes which are closer to those of Europe, and this serves to place Australia within a Western and white world and again denies Indigenous sovereignty over the land.

The justification Bolt supplies for Andrews' decision, that a 'sensible government will make sure they bring in only as many refugees from one area as they can hope to integrate' also provides legitimacy for reduced intake, and presents it as the common-sense approach. However, the extract does not consider that, rather than simply being about 'absorption' by white Australia, 'integration' of refugees will in large part depend upon the number of

resources available to newly arrived refugees, for example, how many hours of English lessons they receive (this is currently just 610 hours for those over 25 with low levels of education, and only 510 hours for most refugees). Clearly, knowledge of Australia (such as 'road rules') is important for refugees, and therefore perhaps the billions of dollars invested in Australia's detention centers and border control would be better spent on helping refugees learn skills that would provide them with opportunities for employment and community-building.

This theme of 'absorption' is also illustrated in the next extract taken from the article by Farah Farouque;

One of the great contradictions, however, is that some people in this diverse country continue to express fear of new waves of migration. Yet while fear might be a hallmark of the nation's migration story.... We have shown a great ability to absorb and integrate new peoples.

Whilst the extract begins by stating that it is a contradiction that people in Australia fear migration (presumably because all non-indigenous Australian people are migrants), the extract continues to state that this is unfounded because 'we have shown a great ability to absorb and integrate new people'. As such, the 'fear of new waves of migration' is not unfounded simply because refugees are in themselves not threatening; it is because we can 'absorb' them, and presumably any differences they bring which we do not like.

The use of the word 'we' is also interesting. It occurs many times throughout articles such as this which speak of a minority group ostensibly in comparison to the rest of Australia. However, it is useful to question who is

included in this 'we'. As Katrina Schlunke (2002) questions, "how does the omnipotent 'we' hold for the most recent new-comers?" In a similar way, it could also be asked how the 'we' holds for people who have just become Australian citizens, or how it holds for people from other minority racial groups who may have been in Australia for generations, yet still are considered 'different'? For example, in the above usage, 'we' clearly does not hold for Sudanese Australians. The usage also excludes Indigenous Australians who did not make a choice to absorb or integrate white Australians.

It is arguable that this 'we' refers to the dominant (white) group in Australia, thus rendering visible the assumptions and ideologies regarding white Australia's authority to decide who it is who gets to live within the country. The use of this word serves to reinforce perceptions of Australia as a dominant white country by excluding other, non-white people, and therefore by constructing white people as the norm. Clearly such assumptions are threatened by Indigenous Australians' prior claim on the land, yet issues of sovereignty are neatly overwritten when the 'we' of white Australia is constructed as all-encompassing.

This theme of an underlying assumption about whiteness as being the legitimately dominant mode of belonging within Australia, with white laws and white customs being the measuring stick against which all other groups of people are judged was also common throughout the articles. This is exemplified in another extract from Bolt's article, where he states;

...no one can deny that bringing in refugees is a more costly and risky game than bringing in educated and skilled professionals from countries much like ours.

Refugees rarely pay their own way, to be frank. Take the Sudanese. Many had their schooling disrupted by genocide and come from a very poor and tribal culture a world away from ours. Add to that the fact that they look different and no wonder it's a challenge for some to get going. No wonder the young men in particular hang out with each other for support, and show attitude rather than defeat.

There are several instances in this extract in which we see whiteness being constructed as the norm in Australia. Firstly, we see a denial of an Indigenous people in the term 'countries much like ours', since by this he presumably means Western countries. Secondly, whiteness is portrayed as the norm where Bolt states that 'they look different'. The question has to be asked here, different from whom? Different from other Sudanese or African Australians? Clearly not. Is it a 'problem' that they look different from Asian Australians or Indigenous Australians? This is unlikely too. Presumably what Bolt refers to here is that they look different from *white* Australians, thereby once again constructing whiteness as the 'norm'.

Whiteness and typical 'Australian-ness' was also a feature of the article by Farouque, who writes;

The story of Ajang Gor is a personal testament: When the teenager was attacked, he was returning from a true-blue youthful pursuit – working a shift in a fast-food store for pocket money. How typically Australian.

Seventeen year old Ajang Gor had also come to Australia from Sudan, and was attacked with bottles by a group of men shouting racial abuse shortly after Liep Gony was murdered.

In this extract we see again the construction of belonging in Australia as a white belonging. For example, it is

considered to be 'Australian' to be working a shift in a fast-food store, but is it considered equally 'Australian' to be brought up in an Indigenous community? Or to work in an African restaurant? Or live in a Sudanese-Australian community? Perhaps the author here does not mean 'Australian' but 'Western', or 'white' which is the identity that the government and many people within Australia are continually trying to reinforce and retain.

And what if Ajang Gor had not been working a shift in a fast food store for pocket money? What if he had been doing something which is *not* considered to be 'typically Australian', would he then have 'deserved' his attack? Would it have been more justified if he hadn't been acting in an 'Australian' way?

The editorial also contains themes of a normative white mode of belonging, as well as a denial of the existence of racism in Australia. For example, one extract stated;

Last week Immigration minister Kevin Andrews said that because Australia had filled the already reduced African refugee quota, we would take no more before next July.

The minister said he is concerned about their ability to integrate.

Inevitably the minister has been vilified as racist by those whose preconceptions lead them to believe that whenever there is racial tension it is the fault of the rest of us.

As in the previous extracts, the use of the inclusive pronoun 'us' works to exclude Sudanese people, thereby constructing their form of belonging in Australia as being something other than the norm – they are not included in 'us'. This works on the assumption that 'the rest of us'

are the people in Australia who are not Sudanese, and therefore also constructs a divide between 'us' (the Australian people) and 'them' (the Sudanese people). Such black-and-white, all-or-nothing constructions were common throughout the articles, and leave little room for understanding differences in the ways in which people may perceive their belonging and existence within Australia.

The extract also denies the existence of a racial element to the Ministers comments and decision by stating that he has been 'vilified', and by placing anybody doing this 'vilification' in a negative light. The sarcastic tone of the last sentence implies that any racial tension cannot be the fault of 'us' who are not Sudanese, and therefore by implication must be a result of the behaviour of Sudanese Australians. Again, such black-or-white constructions leave no room for considering that in fact racial tension might, at least in part, the fault of 'us'.

The technique of denying racism was commonly seen throughout the articles reviewed, as was the technique of the positive presentation of Australia. These methods were frequently used to either defend Andrews' comments, or, if the author was critical of the Minister's comments, at least to defend the Australian community as not racist.

So, for example, Bolt quotes Australia's African refugee intake as 30 per cent of the 13,000 people accepted per year, and then argues that;

That's a lot of refugees, actually, and not what you'd expect from a country rotten with racism. We're a generous people, really, which some seem terribly determined not to believe

Clearly this passage performs several functions. Firstly, it attempts to present

Australia in a positive way by arguing that Australia is taking in a lot of refugees. However, in many contexts, that is not the case. Firstly, Australia will accept over 150,000 immigrants in the 2007-2008 migration programme (DIAC 2007). Thirteen thousand refugees is not 'a lot' compared to that. Neither is the initial 3,900 African refugees 'a lot' in the context of the 200,000 people killed and 2.5 million people displaced by fighting in Western Darfur (Costello 2007). It is also not 'a lot' in the context of other countries and the number of refugees they take in. According to Mares (2001), Australia ranked number 33 on the UNHCR list of total refugee population and did not even make the list of the top forty countries for the number of refugees per capita. According to the UNHCR, Australia hosts 3 refugees per 1000 inhabitants, compared to Armenia which hosts 80 per 1000. And according to the United States Committee for Refugees which includes Palestinians in the equation (not done by the UNHCR), the ratio of refugees to the total population in Australia is 1:1145 compared to Jordan 1:3, Thailand 1:285 or Canada 1:566. Bolt however conveniently ignores these statistics, presumably assuming that 13,000 will seem like a lot at face value.

Secondly, the passage (based on the assumption of the large refugee intake) portrays Australia as a 'generous' people, 'which some seem terribly determined not to believe'. This passage serves two functions. Firstly, it presents Australia positively, as generous. And secondly, it presents people who do not accept that Australia is generous, who are presumably the same people who disagree with Andrews' decision to reduce the African refugee intake, in a negative light.

Whilst critical of Andrews' comments regarding the inability of African people

to integrate into Australian culture, Farouque's article also denies racism within Australia;

It would be a great mistake, however, to condemn Australia as a racist society and Australians collectively as racist. The days of institutional racism have long gone with the dismantling of the White Australia policy and Aborigines obtaining the vote.

The author provides evidence for her claim that 'the days of institutionalized racism have long gone' in the form of the 'dismantling of the White Australia policy and Aborigines obtaining the vote'. There are several issues with this statement. Firstly, these two events in themselves do not mean that there is no longer any racism or that racist practices no longer exist. As previously discussed, it is clear that white privilege is still very much institutionalized within Australia.

Secondly, as has been argued many times before in relation to Indigenous people, just because a form of institutionalized racism is formally brought to an end does not mean that racial equality suddenly occurs, nor that everyday racism no longer exists. To use the example given in the extract, the fact that Indigenous people now vote does not mean that racism no longer exists and instead it is the case that, as is evident in social indicators such health outcomes, equality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Australia is still far from being reached.

The editorial also speaks proudly of Australia's record with refugees thereby presenting Australia in a positive light, stating;

Australia's record in giving sanctuary to refugees from a multitude of ethnic and religious background leads the world.

We can also be proud of our success in absorbing them with minimal difficulty.

Again Australia is represented in a positive way here, despite the fact that many people would argue (and in many cases the figures suggest) that Australia does not lead the world, either in terms of the number of refugees it accepts or the way in which people who come to seek asylum in the country are treated. It could also be argued that, given the need white Australia feels to maintain its power and the fact that people from minority racial groups are only accepted on certain terms, there is not quite so much success to be proud of as is suggested.

The extract also employs the discourse of 'absorption' as was outlined earlier, which again reinforces the fear of difference portrayed by the white nation, and the desire to hold onto white belonging as the normative mode of belonging in Australia, a theme which has been seen throughout this paper.

### **Conclusion**

As can be seen from the above analyses, issues of belonging were at the centre of much of the discussion in the media following the murder of Liep Gony and former Immigration Minister Andrews' decision to reduce the African refugee intake. This discussion was often constructed specifically in terms of the absorption of non-white Others in a country in which whiteness is the normative mode of belonging, and also consisted of denials of racism in, or positive self presentation of, the white nation.

In many cases, Sudanese and other African refugees were constructed as unable to be as easily integrated or 'absorbed' as other immigrants, primarily because of how different their

appearance and culture is to white Australia. Such constructions overlooked the many differing cultures that exist within Australia already and instead located belonging in Australia specifically around whiteness and white culture. It was also frequently portrayed by the media that people who are considered different to the white majority will only be accepted if they can be 'absorbed', and if their differences can be minimalised so that they are not as confronting. However, national belonging on the terms of whiteness can never be as easy as that, considering the ongoing fact of Indigenous sovereignty. As Katrina Schlunke states; "Decisions about who belongs and who doesn't are very complicated ones to make in a settler nation whose non-Aboriginal population has no treaty with the owners of the land...." (Schlunke 2002). Yet decisions about who does and does not belong have been made, and made to the detriment of African people waiting in refugee camps for somewhere to live.

Even articles which were more sympathetic to African refugees still operated within a framework of maintaining white hegemony and 'absorbing' African people so that their difference to the white majority becomes unnoticeable. Many of these articles seemed to gloss over why Australia is meant to be offering refuge in the first place, and placed the need of Australia to remain white above the obligation to provide asylum for people who are displaced from their home countries. As Allon (2002) states; "In the context of the changing world order, there is a need to recognize that a community's obligations extend beyond itself" (Allon 2002). However, as seen in these articles, it was the need to maintain a perception of whiteness as the main mode of belonging which was the central concern in the reporting of

this issue. As such, the mainstream media simultaneously overlooked the needs of refugees and denied Australia's Indigenous heritage and the rights of Indigenous people to their land by constructing Australia as normatively 'white'.

Despite the racist element of the restriction on African refugees, the press generally denied the existence of racism and presented Australia in a positive light. It was maintained frequently that Australia was in fact a tolerant country, and a country free of racism. Such constructions allowed for Australia's refugee policies to be considered generous, despite evidence to the contrary, and therefore any restrictions on the intake of refugees was able to be legitimized.

Such constructions of generosity and tolerance mean that it is extremely difficult for non-white minority groups' claims of racism to be heard and listened to. The constructions also make it difficult for any acknowledgement of the existence of white privilege in Australia or of the corresponding subordination of Indigenous Australians and many refugees. As long as such an acknowledgment is lacking, white hegemony will continue in Australia, and restrictions on refugees desperately in need of somewhere to live will continue to be able to be made on the basis of the claim that some groups of refugees are not integrating. Yet such restrictions may in fact also be to the detriment of white Australia since, as Schlunke states;

... it is only within the figure of the refugee that the hope of an Australia with integrity can come into play. Only through a constant openness and expressed hospitality to the stranger who is also ourself can we simultaneously decentre the racist imagining of the anglo-Australian and transform our relationship with

indigenous Australia. There is no resolution in this. Only a constant negotiation between welcoming strangers, farewelling ourselves and discovering the possibility of integrity within our shores (Schlunke 2002).

### Author Note

Clemence Due is a postgraduate student in the School of Psychology at the University of Adelaide. Her research is concerned with representations of belonging within Australia, and her current project examines such representations as they appear in the media with regards to marginalized racial groups living in Australia. Email: clemence.due@adelaide.edu.au

### Acknowledgments

I acknowledge the Kurna people as the traditional owners of the land I live upon in Adelaide, South Australia, and in doing so I also wish to acknowledge the privilege I experience as a result of the dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their lands during the colonization of Australia. I would like to thank Damien Riggs for his support and advice with this paper, the two anonymous referees for their comments and suggestions which made this paper much stronger, and Braden for his ongoing support and for reading it with me so many times.

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