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Guarded: The African American experience of Blackness in Sydney

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Abstract

This paper draws on the experiences of a small group of African Americans in Sydney and scholarship on settler colonialism, Blackness and Indigeneity to explore various forms of political and affective solidarity between African Americans and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in Australia. African Americans who live in Sydney report a higher level of physical safety than they did in the United States, however they report psychological distress resultant from a high level of racial fetishisation and experiences of white possession by white Australian settlers. The research questions central to this work consider Black identity, the nuance of solidarities among groups with differing colonial histories, and the embodied experience of African American expats in Australia.

Keywords

Settler colonial violence, Black, African American, resistance, solidarity

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Introduction

I had been living in Sydney for four years when, sitting on my balcony one day, I overheard an African American accent call out in greeting. I watched from above as a young African American woman stopped to chat with an older Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander woman, whom she was meeting for the first time. They introduced themselves and I heard the older woman caution “you still need to be careful around here – you don’t know what they used to do to us, but I will tell you.” They briefly exchanged phone numbers, and, as they were parting, the young woman called out over her shoulder “I look forward to learning from you!” I have pondered about the knowledge they shared, the connection they made, ever since. As someone who has been living away from family for years, I know connections like this – rooted in Black solidarity – can be lifelines. What did they give each other? And what new illuminations did the younger woman take home with her, back to the States? I found myself asking, what is the experience of African Americans in Sydney? Is it an experience of political and affective Black solidarity with Indigenous Australians?

I am the granddaughter of Demekech Teferi, and the daughter of Alganesh Tessema, two proud Tigrayan women whose lands are near the border of Ethiopia and Eritrea. I was born in the 1980s on occupied Dakota land in the so-called United States. I was raised by my Black siblings and mother in Minneapolis, not far from where the police murdered George Floyd in 2020, instigating national and international protests associated with the Black Lives Matter movement. Ojibwe geographer Deondre Smiles documents the racial tensions and social segregation of the city we grew up in, noting “The Twin Cities have always been fraught space for people of color,” particularly Black and Native Americans (2021, p. 166). The urban experience of my Black family was juxtaposed with the country life of my white settler father and his conservative Christian family and as I singularly bounced back and forth between these two worlds, I codeswitched (Young, 2009) as a means of survival. I have lived abroad since 2007, and—similarly to my childhood—have observed intently as people navigate spaces. I have found that Black and white people have astonishingly different experiences, in the so-called United States and elsewhere, which has led me to this research.

Utilising an immigrant of colour decolonial autoethnography (Chandrashekar, 2018), in this article I build upon my own experiences as an Indigenous Tigrayan and African-American woman living on Gadigal land to examine the nuances of comparing Black experience. I attempt “an ethical centering of questions pertaining to Indigenous lands and lives in autoethnographic work with the ultimate political praxis being decolonization, which is understood as the repatriation of lands to Indigenous nations and the restoration of Native futures as a first step towards creating a just world” (Chandrashekar, 2018, p. 73). Although my goal of land repatriation is too ambitious to argue in this article, I highlight this here as a potential tension in this work, along with a cognisance that this work may constitute an “anti-colonial turn towards the transnational” which can “ambiguate First Nations with Third World migrants” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 29). I attempt to alleviate these tensions by centring Indigenous Australians in my ethnography, positioning myself and the five African American expats interviewed in relation to the peoples whose lands we occupy. Interview participants share their experiences of Blackness on Gadigal, Darug and Wangal land, describing an experience of white possession and racial fetishisation by white Australians, which they alleviate by creating solidarity with fellow racialized peoples. The research questions central to this work

consider the composition of Black identity, the nuance of comparing groups with differing colonial histories, and the embodied experience of African American expats in Australia.

Commonalities and Colonial Histories

I refer to Indigenous Australians and African Americans as Black throughout this work and acknowledge this as a simplification of the complex identity of Blackness, which is relevant to many different peoples (Crenshaw, 1988, p. 1332). My aim is not to exclude other Black diasporas, which also have a valued place in the coalition of Blackness in Australia. However, in this project I have focused on African Americans in the Sydney area and their interactions with Indigenous Australians. I also acknowledge the important political distinction of Indigenous Australians' use of the word Blak—spelled without the c—however for cohesion I will use Black monolithically moving forward (Munro, 2020).

While we do share some political and affective solidarities, it is important to note that Indigenous Australians and African Americans do not share precise historical-colonial experiences. As an African American, if I am to consider Black experience in so-called Australia, I must also consider its conflation with Indigenous identity here. The following overview is not meant to be an exhaustive account of the colonisation, history or transnational imperial relations of whiteness (Moreton-Robinson, 2015) of either peoples, and is limited to similarities and differences I personally have found relevant to African Americans and Indigenous Australians.

The United States colonial labour force consisted primarily of a racially identifiable—and therefore manageable—population of African slaves for labour, in contrast to Australia where this workforce was comprised of British convicts and later economic migrants (these are vast generalisations, as both colonies did participate in practices not limited to slavery and indentured servitude of various peoples) (Wolfe, 2016). Indigenous Australian and African American racialisations concerning Blackness served two different purposes within the settler nation state: that of acquiring land by negating Indigenous land rights and sourcing labour to cultivate the land. Settler-colonial strategies to build wealth through acquiring land (property) and labour (humans as property or humans who produce property) utilise divisive colonial strategies, such as blood quantum-based classifications, which are commonly rejected within contemporary African American and Indigenous Australian communities [see (McPherson & Shelby, 2004) and (Tuck & Yang, 2012)]. African Americans were historically subjected to an expansive colonial classification (for example, the one-drop rule, which increased the settler's property rights by having as many people classified as Black slaves as possible), whereas Indigenous Australians were subject to subtractive genocidal and assimilationist classification policies, which sought to eliminate them and thereby further the settler's claims to land (Wolfe, 2016). These classifications have catalysed differing forms of Black subjugation, resistance, and culture in both settler nations.

Although "there is nothing stable or essential about being Black, since Black people in Australia were targeted for biocultural elimination in a manner antithetical to the racial targeting of Black people in the USA" (Wolfe, 2016, p. 3), I embrace Black identity as political for both groups [see (McPherson & Shelby, 2004) and (Foley, 2001)] as African Americans and Indigenous Australians have connective marginalities (Osumare, 2001). These solidarities are encompassed by a wider set of Black solidarities not limited to

double consciousness (Du Bois, 1903), connections across the Black Atlantic (Gilroy, 1993), Black Pacific (Shilliam, 2015), and Global South (Aboagye, 2018).

Black people in both colonies were subject to colonial classifications that systematically advanced settler land rights and facilitated their "intention of making a new home on the land, a homemaking that insists on settler sovereignty over all things in their new domain" (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 5). I build on the concept of whiteness as a national governmental spatial norm explicated by Ghassan Hage (1998) to argue that white settlers in Australia engage in acts of white possession, a concept outlined by Goenpul Distinguished Professor Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2015). I argue that Black Americans and Black Australians engage in habitual shared resistance to acts of white possession inherent in the Australian settler nation state.

The Interviewees

I held a series of semi-structured interviews in October and November 2020 with five African Americans currently living in Sydney. A small sample size is a limitation of the generalisability of these research findings, as is the recruitment method, which limited my participants mostly to users of social media. I recruited four of my participants in the "African Americans in Sydney" and "Sistas in Australia and New Zealand" Facebook pages, and the fifth participant was a local connection that I made in my neighbourhood while walking down the street and mutually recognising ourselves as fellow African Americans. I acknowledge these findings cannot be an exhaustive reflection of a defined community in Sydney.

The interviews were conducted on Zoom video conferencing software and lasted from 38 to 90 minutes each. The interviewees were three women and two men who held prestigious employment and postgraduate-level credentials. Three of five participants cited moving to Australia for greater professional opportunities as well as better work-life balance. All interviewees shared the opinion that Australia provided a higher quality of life than the United States, based on readily available healthcare.

To elucidate the affective, geographical, and temporal setting for these interviews, the research topic and process were very entangled for us all. In the midst of the pandemic, we had open, familiar conversation laden with affective sentiment of struggle, loss, and helplessness about what was happening 'back home' with Black Lives Matter as many of our cities erupted in or recovered from protests and riots (Taylor, 2021). Due to spatial constraints, the Black Lives Matter movement will not be further addressed in this article. We laughed, we cried, and, sometimes, we openly wept. The level of disclosure and familiarity we displayed with one another highlights the tension of researching within one's own group and also the networks, intimacy, and solidarity this research relies upon.

The next section analyses the experiences of the interviewees living in Sydney during 2020, focusing on how they have been perceived and lived their lives as African Americans in Australia. A common theme that emerged in the interviews was a commodification of racial and national identity, which led them to perform their transnational identities in differing ways depending on their company.

Governmental Spatial Management and White Possession

In 1997, Richard Dyer argued that whiteness functions as invisible and normative, organising whites as the standard against which all races are judged (p. 2). If we accept that "white has become the ideal of being the bearer of 'Western' civilisation" (Hage, 1998, p. 58), we can identify the privilege of whiteness under the colonial regime of both the US and Australia in which Black people are subject to higher rates of state violence and incarceration. In Australia, Black criminalisation is demonstrated by higher incarceration rates for both adults (Visontay, 2021) and children (Cunneen, 2008). In the United States, "mass incarceration is understood as a system of social control - specifically, racial control" (Alexander, 2012, p. 237).

If "racialisation represents a response to the crisis occasioned when colonisers are threatened with the requirement to share social space with the colonised", then the utility of carceral systems in relation to Black people in both nations becomes evident (Wolfe, 2016, p. 9). Incarceration represents this white-settler dominance at a legislative level. However, I am interested in the ways more subtle forms of domination are experienced at the site of daily life for Black people sharing space with white settlers. To unpack the interviewees' everyday reflections regarding their experiences of white-settler dominance in Sydney, I turn to concepts from Ghassan Hage (1998) and Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2015).

In *White Nation*, Hage argues that "governmental belonging" (1998, p. 57) is afforded to whiteness and white citizens in Australia, who feel they have the authority to spatially and temporally manage the diversity of the nation to mimic their sentiment of "home" (Hage, 1998, p. 67). Governmental belonging functions as accrued capital that allows one to believe oneself entitled to a space that resembles one's conceptualisation of home, and the right to opine on the temporal geographies of others (for example, who should be "allowed" to be in what locations including in workplaces and neighbourhoods, or in debates on immigration) (Hage, 1998, p. 57).

In *The White Possessive*, Moreton-Robinson reveals how "the possessive logics of patriarchal white sovereignty and the disavowal of Indigenous sovereignty are inextricably linked, anchored, and regulated through race" (2015, p. 193). Moreton-Robinson argues that "Australian national identity is built on the disavowal of Indigenous sovereignty because the nation is socially and culturally constructed as a white possession" (2015, xxi). Moreton-Robinson links the United States and Australia in her transnational analysis of whiteness, arguing "the dehumanizing impulses of colonization are successfully acted upon because racisms in these countries are predicated on the logic of possession (2015, p. xiii)

Utilising "the concept 'possessive logics' to denote a mode of rationalization, rather than a set of positions that produce a more or less inevitable answer, that is underpinned by an excessive desire to invest in reproducing and reaffirming the nation-state's ownership, control, and domination" (2015, p. xii), Moreton-Robinson demonstrates "how white possession functions subjectively through the ascription of racial inferiority, exclusion, and collusion" and "that these daily intersubjective relations are the mechanisms by which Indigenous people experience white possession as racist acts" (2015, p. xxii).

Professor Bronwyn Carlson acknowledges that ideologies and words can be acts of possession, even in online spaces, as "there are myriad discursive practices through which the settler logic of elimination can be effected... this kind of violence is a continuity of the violence that informed many of the acts of attempted genocide" (2020, pp. 117-118). I argue that the African-American interviewees in Sydney demonstrated an understanding of these discursive practices of white possession, which they were able to recognise easily as both settler nation states allow whites to employ the fantasy of being able to manage the nation spatially (Hage, 1998, p. 68). This fantasy is experienced by Black and Indigenous peoples in their everyday lives as incidents of white possession.

Henceforth I will employ the concept of white possession to describe the white will to control environments, and specifically the racial composition of spaces, recalling Tuck and Yang's assertion that settler "homemaking... insists on settler sovereignty over all things in their new domain" (2012, p. 5). My use of white possession is concerned with the home the settler feels entitled to, the ongoing denial of Indigenous sovereignty (Moreton-Robinson, 2015), and the actions white settlers take to manage their environment so it is comfortable for them (Hage, 1998). One interviewee described an experience of white possession, saying:

There was a 'Biggie night' in Surry Hills, they were serving chicken wings and drinks but they had a quota of how many Black and Brown people they would let in. I was just like, what is that? Are you kidding me? But then I thought, that's Australia. [White Australian settlers are] just like 'we have all this stuff and we're chillin'... but oh, by the way, we don't want too many Blacks or too many Polynesians around - but we do want to enjoy [Black and Polynesian culture]'... They don't have a feeling of history and that's because they haven't come to terms with their own Black history and the old Black history which is right here. They just said, we don't want to deal with those people. So yeah, that's something that they have to deal with.

This description highlights white possession and spatial management as a type of white-settler violence, which affects First Nations peoples and all diasporas of colour in varied ways. The interviewee experiences the management of physical space by white settlers as an act of possession that demonstrates that a historical reckoning with Indigenous Australians must occur before white settlers can interact with people of colour in a non-violent way. The interviewee orates a direct link between white possession and the denial of Indigenous sovereignty in everyday experience.

Fetishisation and Representation

The concept of representation delineates the ways in which matters of difference are addressed and made visible. Stuart Hall describes this process of meaning making and display as "the spectacle of the other", which becomes twisted into a dehumanising attraction (1997). bell hooks describes this process as fetishistic consumption, "eating the other," or acquiring difference as a titillating collection (1992). For the purpose of my argument here, I define racially associated intrigue as fetishization that may objectify and psychologically harm the desired subject. Representation and fetishisation are important concepts for analysing Black romantic and/or intimate experience in the white settler nations of both Australia and the United States, where Black people are defaulted to a status of other.

Fetishisation is a consequence of poor representation and may also be present in platonic or professional interactions. One participant described a discrepancy in what seemed like a racially diverse society having very limited representation, saying "as multicultural as Australia and Sydney are on paper, it's really not - it's so segregated." Another participant felt the influence of the American entertainment industry in their professional interactions with white Australians, stating:

I also find in my experience that our Blackness, or African American experience, is very much fetishized. Our culture, our food, how you talk or how you interact or your overall experiences... It's almost like watching *Orange is the New Black* for a lot of my coworkers.

This comment elucidates how many white Australians already feel they "know" about Black Americans from US-based media sources and expect us to behave as tropes that validate their pre-existing knowledge. A deficiency in the ability of white settlers to discern between real life African Americans and fictional media tropes results in uneasy social interactions.

The fetishized and gendered experiences of the two African American men interviewed are particularly of note, as they were characterised by a physical sexual aggression not reported by female interviewees. One reported requesting security to be stationed at the DJ booth of one of his gigs to provide a physical barrier between him and white women who had "very grabby hands" as he was "getting tired of being groped". He also described a recent work Christmas party as "interesting" when the white women were "getting a little too friendly". When questioned if he has ever experienced a similar issue with women in the United States, he stated "No, I don't think it would be anywhere near as bad as this at home." The assertion that white women in the United States wouldn't be "as bad" as Australian white women may indicate the relationship to the American entertainment industry participants described earlier, where they found white Australians fetishized them and expected them to perform as a predictable trope. Alternatively, it may be that as white women in Australia have less proximity to African American men, they may view them as a commodity worth pursuing, or some combination of these hypotheses.

The second male interviewee also spoke of the non-consensual fondling he experienced from white Australian women in a comical and dismissive way. Nonetheless, he went on to convey that a long-term partnership with a white woman who had sexually fetishized him was not a tenable option for him:

If there was a 'me too' movement for guys, my junk has been touched more by white women in Australia than anywhere in the world. *Laughs*. I mean, I ain't gonna ring the alarm when a girl grabs my junk, like whatever. *Laughs*. When we go to a club African American men are [sought out]... The profile of African American men is that sexually you've got to perform. They eroticise us so much for the sexual stuff. And then also, the whole idea of what they call a brown baby, that's like a handbag. It seems like an accessory to me like... They want their Black kid, you know. So, it makes [marrying or dating a white Australian woman] very possible. But my preference overall has always been Black women.

Here the interviewee acknowledges that African American men and babies function as a type of cosmopolitan capital, and that he has sought a partnership outside of those terms. In *White Nation*, Ghassan Hage argued that the modern white Australian cosmopolite demonstrates "the capacity to appreciate and productively exploit diversity" as "an essentially 'mega-urban' figure: one detached from strong affiliations with roots and consequently open to all forms of otherness... a class figure and a White person, capable of appreciating and consuming 'high-quality' commodities and cultures, including 'ethnic' culture" (1998, p. 201).

I argue that white settlers in so-called Australia not only welcome but seek African Americans for the urban tokens of diversity that we represent. The brown baby as accessory and pursuit of African American lovers referenced above is demonstrative of this urban cosmopolitanism and desire to consume. However, this inclusion is on the basis that we, along with other racial minorities, are present in small manageable quantities and perform tokenism. Interviewees were under no illusion of their supplementary presence as African Americans, as the below quote demonstrates:

You know, like, it's capital. They're using us as capital. Like they've always done... I mean, that's all it is, they're, they're using us to be cool, for their clout. In most cases, it's not a real friendship, it's an exchange, you know. But they're the only one that's benefiting from it. Like, they're not slick about it.

When the interviewee says "they're not slick about it" she is highlighting that white Australians are either not aware that they make their African American friends and lovers feel like commodities, or they are aware of it and see no problem with it.

A female participant who identified as queer elaborated how the consistency of racial fetishisation she faced upon moving to Sydney temporarily eroded her sense of self. She had lived in many cities abroad to which she could compare her experience, and as a queer woman who has lived in various countries myself, I was intrigued by her assessment of Sydney's queer scene as palpable with incidents of white possession. Speaking of enjoying queer nightlife when she first arrived in Sydney, she said:

That's when I saw, Okay, you guys like Black culture, you like Black people. And I had two people walk up to me literally and say, "I love your skin and I love watching you dance." Like just really wildly inappropriate things, these people coming up to me ...these are highly intelligent well-to-do women and then they do this really inappropriate stuff. I remember telling my wife, 'I don't feel good. I should feel good, but I don't.' [I have been here many years] and I'm just starting to feel comfortable again... moving here made me uncomfortable in myself again, and I had to sort of rediscover myself and who I am.

This interviewee's experience of racial fetishisation was also intertwined with a commodification of African-American culture, similar to the men's experiences, wherein white settlers engaged in possession behaviours to demonstrate "the power to include and exclude within an environment where they dominate" (Moreton-Robinson, 2015, p. 102). These experiences resulted in a decrease in emotional and psychological safety for the interviewee, who realised that what she initially believed were friendly or genuine encounters were, in reality, acts of white possession.

Safety

Emotional Safety

The word "guarded" was used frequently to describe the psychological experience of living in Sydney as an African American. One interviewee used it to describe her experience of feeling less carefree since moving to Sydney, likely as a result of habitual incidences of white possession:

I have become a bit more guarded since I moved here. I think I was a lot more open when I moved here, I was like 'I'm up for everything!' And now I really think like, 'is this worth my time, am I going to enjoy it?', and I try to make wiser choices. And I don't know if that's good or bad, I don't know if that's just a coping mechanism.

Another interviewee stated:

I'm a little bit more guarded - well a lot more guarded - about what I will say... I guess I don't allow myself to be emotionally hurt by [racist words or] actions, because I just only let a certain segment close to me. Only for my protection I guess.

For the interviewees, achieving emotional safety or becoming guarded can be seen as a form of self-care that rejects white possession.

Physical Safety

All interviewees indicated they felt a higher level of physical safety in Australia than they did in the United States; however, they did not indicate a lessened degree of white possession or a higher level of psychological safety in Australia. One interviewee stated the absence of the avid United States gun culture contributed to an increased feeling of physical safety for him. Another specifically cited an increase in physical safety that was in opposition to regularly feeling physically threatened on the basis of his race in the United States. He explained the perceived threat of physical violence in Australia was "nowhere near the threat of death like back home."

Community

African Americans living in Sydney were affected by the racialized ideological violence of white possession and coped with the resultant distress by building community and alliance with other people of colour. Interviewees indicated they missed the African Americans communities they had in the United States, with one stating "you see the other immigrant communities, like the Italians, or the Maltese. You see how their communities are doing and I wish that was more our story, like we'd have a little Brooklyn here or something." The irony of longing for a home on the unceded land of Indigenous Australians was not lost on them.

Some interviewees managed to create an African American community for themselves by utilising social media groups, which resulted in occasional barbecues and other in-person events prior to the coronavirus pandemic. Others created community by introducing themselves to other African Americans they recognised out in public (in much the same way as one of the participants was recruited by myself), or through a Black mothers' group (which had many different Black-identified mothers, including other African Americans).

Interviewees also created community with other people of colour, most notably fellow Black people and Asians. One interviewee stated:

The people that I feel close closest to [at work] are Islanders... I do have a couple Islander co-workers and I find that with them my register switches [to Black English] and all of a sudden other people are [confused]. *Laughs*. Yes, I do talk like that sometimes, it's just not for you [white people at work]. I'm not going to speak to you [white Australians at work] the way I would, you know, hanging out with friends. You're not going to hear it because it's not for you. I guess I'm also very wary of allowing some of my guard to drop down, because people will take more than a mile.

It is of note that, for this participant, speaking in Black English is something he senses his prestigious white colleagues would enjoy but indulging them would come at some detriment to himself. This cost may be his professionalism or validating a trope he doesn't wish to participate in. Speaking in Black English would create a space of vulnerability that he is either not willing or does not feel safe to undertake. The findings demonstrate African Americans feel comfortable being themselves and speaking and moving through the world in an authentic way with fellow people of colour and outside of professional settings in Sydney. Speaking in an authentic way in close proximity to the white possessor constitutes a professional, psychological and/or emotional threat.

When interviewees spoke of community and solidarity with Asians, their stories often accompanied a professional or workplace dynamic (though many adults do have workplaces as their primary avenue for socialising). For example, one participant elaborated:

I didn't really find any other Black people [to socialise with] but I found people of Asian descent or Polynesian descent. I'm finding a lot of solace in the Asian community. It happens at work too, and we support each other automatically because we will focus on work, and we're not going to gossip that much, we're going to get things done. It was more like 'we work hard so we're going to party hard, and we're going to listen' and I find that really interesting, like there was so many shared mindsets and less judgment, and yes, they might crack a joke but that's because people are also racist to them on the job... There's more realness than I found with the other people, the people who are white or whatever.

These experiences elucidate a solidarity among "highly differentiated populations of African slaves and Asian migrants" who "represented alien rather than settler migrations" (Day, 2016, p. 33). While also embracing an expansive political definition of Blackness that includes Pacific Islanders (Shilliam, 2015), I argue that, even in Australia, African Americans and Asian migrants bond through their "historical relationship to... land, which was as exclusive and excludable alien labor forces" (Day, 2016, p. 33). The ability to focus on the work while feeling safe enough to share a joke without offence here illuminates this relationship, which extends into social interactions and community building.

Alien solidarity was regarded as important for expat African Americans in workplaces where they may see few fellow Black people. One interviewee reported "I've been

working at [redacted] for like three years and usually anybody of African descent is either a [redacted lower-level position] or a cleaner." Often the Black people in workplaces occupy less prestigious roles, thereby limiting physical proximity that would facilitate relationship building.

Solidarity with Indigenous Australians

All interviewees demonstrated initiative to educate themselves about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander political issues and could elaborate a personal understanding of Indigenous Australian sovereignty in a manner I personally found to be in contrast to the attitudes of possession and entitlement inherent in recently arrived white settlers. Contrary to an air of patrimony, the African American settlers demonstrated gratitude and astonishment for their opportunity to live on Aboriginal land, with one proclaiming, "We are here! We made it!"

Of the five interviewees, only two reported having found close personal solidarity with Indigenous Australians. One participant stated:

There's so many similarities [between African Americans and Indigenous Australians], but I don't feel like we gel automatically... I don't know what it is, in my personal experience, but it just takes more time.

I was surprised by this and expecting a result that aligned more to my own experience of finding solidarity rooted in Blackness with the Indigenous community. I recognise that my experience may have been due to my own status as a Black Indigenous person and our shared histories of colonisation. Physical proximity is likely also a factor, as I may not have developed relationships without intentionally relocating to a Black neighbourhood.

My experience of arriving on Gadigal land involved a series of criminalised interpellations in which I realised I was being perceived as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. I once heard racial slurs being used to describe me when I entered a room and noticed that in incidents like these, when I started talking in my American accent the tension would dissolve for the other person and they would become more comfortable around me. My experience of being African American abroad has accompanied a privilege of cultural capital sometimes balanced, or cancelled out completely, by assumptive knowledge about me gained from American entertainment-based imperialism. Sometimes interactions rooted in this recognition are a result of Black solidarity and I make a new friend or have a nourishing encounter. However, at other times, mostly with white settlers, the resultant relationship is contingent on my performance of a trope and my continued silence about colonial violence.

A specific neighbourhood became appealing to me based on the way white Australians spoke to me about it. They would lean in, over our beers on the table at the pub, and with a decreased volume and salacious hint in their eye say, "You know, that used to be a *really* bad area..." And when I would reply, "Oh, is that because Black people live there?" They would lean back and loudly protest, "No! No absolutely not because of *that*, just because of the *crime*!" I recognised this discourse and decided this was the neighbourhood for me. I elected to contribute to the gentrification of Black inner-city Redfern, which positioned me in close physical proximity to Indigenous Australians. It

was in this neighbourhood where I overheard the exchange referenced earlier and found a community of my own.

While only two interviewees reported recurring personal solidarity with Indigenous Australians, every participant shared incidences of feeling personally unsafe and offended by incidents of performed white possession towards Australia's First Nations peoples. One interviewee, who arrived in 1974, relayed that white people would approach her and say things like "wow I love your hair" or "oh wow you're Black, I love Black people", to which she would retort "You've got Black people here, why aren't you talking to them?" Another interviewee stated the following of her white Australian partner's parents:

they're in their mid-eighties. And they're not as bad as they could be, but I definitely check them, you know, I don't play. It's funny though because again it goes back to how they use Black Americans here, so in a lot of senses I get a pass because they're not talking about me. Their complaints and their biases are directed elsewhere [onto Indigenous Australians], you know, but I still have to check them on those because my kid is smart, and I don't want him internalizing their bullshit.

This quotation raises a specific and commonly referred to experience for African Americans in Sydney regarding the way in which African Americans are valued for the urban commodity they provide and may be momentarily held in a higher regard than Black Australians. Interviewees identified this as a symptom of fetishisation, and being "the right kind of Black" —as opposed to the wrong kind of Black (Keast, 2018) —was reported as an isolating experience. For this interviewee, ideological racism towards Indigenous Australians constitutes a safety risk for her and her child, as she politically and affectively identifies with them.

All interviewees shared the opinion that racism and discourses that deny the sovereignty of Indigenous Australians were a threat to them, regardless of whether they personally had close relationships or community established with Indigenous Australians. One interviewee attempted to describe the complexities of a relationship that nuances a solidarity rooted in political Black identity while maintaining differing colonial experiences, saying "I think we all have our own colonial stories that we have to deal with, our own colonial echoes... But we need to honour the first Australians here because this is their land. This is their story."

Conclusion

The initial findings of this comparative ethnographic analysis show that although African Americans who live in Sydney report a higher level of feeling physically safe, they find representation of Black people in Australia to be insufficient and attribute this to the settler nation state's disavowal of Indigenous sovereignty. Psychological distress resulting from a high level of racial fetishisation by white settlers is reported, in a dynamic I describe as white possession (Moreton-Robinson, 2015). African Americans in Sydney long for a community like the ones we left. We create community with other people of colour in Australia, most notably Black people (through a shared identity in Blackness) and Asians (with whom we share a colonial history of labour (Day, 2016)). This work has engaged with theory regarding who is Black, how colonial differences and histories agitate political and affective solidarities among Black people in Sydney,

and how non-white solidarities contribute as well. Future research may attend to the small sample size with wider recruitment strategies and greater generalisability or examine detail perceptions of the Black Lives Matter movement.

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