

# Blackness as a Defining Identity

Runyararo Sihle Chivaura

# Blackness as a Defining Identity

Mediated Representations and the Lived  
Experiences of African Immigrants  
in Australia

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*If you are the big tree,  
Let me tell you that: we are the small axe  
Sharpened ready, ready to cut you down*  
—Bob Marley (1973)

# Preface

This book explores the gap between—how African immigrants living in Australia are represented in the media when contrasted to their lived experiences. African immigrants are currently considered by the Australian government to be a statistically significant population, yet very little research has been conducted into how they regard their social placing in Australian society. The challenge associated with academic research in Australia that has investigated African immigrants and the media is threefold. First, almost all research tends to be conducted through a content analysis of media sources. This presents numerous problems. Deploying content analysis does not provide the original data. Instead, it (re)organises texts crafted for a particular audience and for a specific purpose. Second, in conducting the content analysis, the main focus of all the studies conducted in Australia emphasised the Sudanese population. This displaces 99% of the African population. Third, there is a lack of critical investigation through the use of contemporary theory to better understand the consequences of the negative representations.

My original contribution to knowledge is to capture the media-related experiences of the wider African population as a frame to understand a racial, ethnic and cultural group. In delving into the group's everyday lives, I seek to investigate the roles the media and social perceptions play on how the group produces and regulates diasporic identities. In previous Australian research, Africans tend to predominately feature as objects of mediated representations. As objects, they occupy the part of the observed, in which they are positioned in social and political discourse that is bound in a particular ideological and social construction. They are written about and not for, thus removing them as participants of the discourse. Giving African immigrants in Australia an empowered position of a subject within discourse would allow the opportunity for the group to have a say in how they think they are positioned in society, what space they are offered and how this bears on their lives.

This study is situated in Cultural Studies, a paradigm that analyses how discourse and social contexts have an impact on the lived experience of an individual or group. This book engages with the theories of one of the pioneers of the field, the late Prof. Stuart Hall. The field of Cultural Studies allows for the use of varied

theories and methodologies to capture the experience of a social phenomenon. In this book, I have used three varied approaches to best conceptualise the African experience. The first of these was discourse analysis, I criticised the use of content analysis in the academic study of Africans. However, in this instance, I conducted a media analysis of how print media over a 12-month period represented African populations. This was marshalled to establish the social position Africans occupied and how language was used to achieve this aim. Stuart Hall (1987, 1990, 1996b, 1997c, 2000, 2013) maintained that language has the power to fix meanings that become associated with particular groups. Language is formed within a culture; therefore, it is imperative to look at language in its originating context as well as a tool of empowerment and subjugation.

The second study investigated how African immigrants in Australia used the media and the social consequences that the representations had on their social lives. I employed the use of a cross-sectional survey to cast a wide net on a range of respondents. This was in order to understand the individuals sharing their experiences, how they believed they were understood in society and how this impacted their lives. This was a novel research approach in the study of African immigrants in Australia. It provided a dataset of 101 unique responses that allowed some power to African immigrants; to share their experiences and become active participants in the discourse. This study also sought to recruit 10 interview participants for the following study.

The final study was based on the Oral History Methodology. This methodology was selected because I wanted to transform and agitate the power relations around African migrants. I wanted them to share their stories of their lives in Australia, their pasts, present and futures based on what meanings they derived from their everyday social interactions and media consumption. Again, this was another novel study method used for this particular group. It was imperative for me to give the participants the space to articulate their experiences, in their own words and create their own perspectives. They have long been a silenced group in Australian society and were not afforded the same space as other migrant groups.

Through this research, I found that there was resentment amongst Africans in how the group was represented in Australian media. The participants unanimously agreed that they were not treated the same as their peers in professional, casual or legislative capacities. What it means to be African within the media seemed to be lodged in colonial discourse. In this study, the participants showed that they were a contemporary, dynamic and intelligent group. They felt that they had the right to be perceived as any other ethnic group, however their skin colour carried a currency as to how much they were valued in society.

The pinnacle of this research is to track a shift in the dominating discourse surrounding Africans. Research into the African population in Australia seems to be based on trying to contain the group as primitive and inept. This type of research does not allow for the thorough investigation of the social and economic value that

this group brings. By engaging in Critical Theory, it is possible to uncover how African immigrants negotiate mediated discourse, the social context in which it is received and the lived experiences the group derives from it.

Adelaide, Australia

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