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REFEREED PAPER

## 'I'm a Local...': Negotiating Belonging with Former Refugees in Regional Australia through Inclusive Partnerships

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### Abstract

This article discusses the impact and implications of 'I'm a Local...', an initiative developed in partnership between a regional university, a refugee resettlement community organisation and former refugees from African nations in a regional Australian community. The initiative sought to improve understandings about refugees, acknowledge their contributions to Australian society and support local, inclusive cultures. It included the development of public resources exploring the process of former refugees in establishing a sense of belonging and becoming 'locals'. Racialised 'Others' continue to be excluded from 'belonging' within Australian communities at a wide range of practical and symbolic levels, so it remains an ongoing challenge to broaden the experience of belonging, challenge the borders erected around 'local' identities, and work to transform Australia's post-colonial paradigm. 'I'm a Local...' provides an instructive example of how change agents from different sectors working collaboratively can dismantle prevailing discourses and affirm more inclusive and hopeful futures.

### Keywords

belonging; identity; refugee resettlement; regional resettlement; Australian localism; race and racism

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## Introduction

Resettlement in non-metropolitan areas is a relatively recent but growing phenomenon in refugee destination countries like Australia. As such, understanding of how refugees in regional areas develop and express a sense of belonging and local identity in the longer term is a critical research gap. This paper is an exploration of the impact of ‘*I’m a Local...*’, an initiative developed in partnership between a regional Australian university, a refugee resettlement organisation and former refugees in a regional town in northern New South Wales, Australia. Most former refugees in the region were directly resettled from African nations, and have been in residence for several years. The initiative primarily sought to enable former refugees to publicly express their sense of having become ‘locals’ within this regional community. It also sought to improve knowledge about refugees, acknowledge their contributions to their community and promote a culture of respect and inclusion.

This article was jointly written by an academic who participated in the later stages of the initiative (Leticia Anderson), an Equity and Diversity Officer who co-coordinated the initiative (Rob Cumings), and an independent academic from the same institution (Kathomi Gatwiri). The paper encompasses a review of academic literature, a survey of publicly available information about the initiative, critical reflections upon the initiative, and draws upon resources about the initiative that were collaboratively produced by a participant and the some of the authors of this article (Anderson, Cumings, Mendes & Mapatano, 2018; Anderson, Brine & Bell-Todd, 2019). It does not, however, include qualitative research directly with participants or community members. We begin by briefly outlining the socio-historical context which impacts upon effective resettlement of refugees within regional communities in Australia, and highlight the challenges that particularly face refugees from African nations in establishing a sense of belonging in Australia.

In evaluating the initiative, we provide an outline of its genesis, the contributions of different partners, and consider some of its successes and limitations. We provide a descriptive account of the development of different sets of resources through the initiative, as well as the reception of these resources within the local community and consideration of the extent to which the claims to ‘being local’ asserted by former refugees were accepted and celebrated within the wider community. Finally, using Spaaij’s (2015) ‘process of belonging’ framework, we consider ‘*I’m a Local...*’ as an instructive example of how change agents from different sectors working collaboratively can challenge the borders erected around ‘local’ identities, broaden the experience of belonging in Australia, and affirm more inclusive and hopeful futures.

## Regional Resettlement of Refugees in Australia

Refugee resettlement refers to ‘the selection, transfer, and permanent settlement of refugees’ into a refugee destination country. In their new countries, resettled refugees must be protected against *refoulement* and be provided ‘with access to equivalent civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights available to nationals’ (Gilhooly & Lee 2017, pp. 37-8). However, the primary objective of permanent refugee resettlement is often interpreted as extending beyond the initial protection and reception of refugees, to include the facilitation of positive

long term outcomes for the refugees and for the receiving country (McDonald-Wilmsen et al. 2009, p. 98). In recent years, European and Anglophone refugee destination countries have turned greater attention to the potential for nonmetropolitan resettlement. The reasons for this shift include desires to improve resettlement experiences and outcomes, geographically disperse minorities, reduce urban population pressures and revitalise declining regional communities. These objectives are not always achieved and may at times be mutually incompatible (Gilhooly & Lee 2017; Bose 2018; Schiff & Clavé-Mercier 2019; McDonald-Wilmsen et al. 2009; Glorius 2017). In Australia, the 'regional resettlement' approach has been heavily promoted by successive governments (see McDonald-Wilmsen et al. 2009), and is likely to become one of the dominant ways that future refugee resettlement takes place (Grattan 2019).

International studies have pointed out the potential pitfalls of nonmetropolitan refugee resettlement, particularly when the 'local' communities refugees are settled within are culturally and racially homogenous (e.g. Glorius 2017; Bose 2018). In Australia, there are context-specific challenges for refugees with non-European heritage in successfully settling and developing a sense of belonging if resettled in regional areas. Some regional communities, for example, have rejected proposals for refugee resettlement by the Australian government (Kivunja et al. 2014), although other communities have expressed more enthusiastic support for regional resettlement (Curry et al. 2018).

Research findings regarding regional resettlement in Australia are mixed. In some studies, social exclusion has been found to be higher for those resettled in regional than urban areas (e.g. Correa-Velez et al. 2013). However, further research suggests that successful integration is better supported in *some* regional areas, under *some* circumstances, than in urban areas (Collins & Reid 2018). The support of local institutions is vital to successful resettlement, yet regional areas often lack infrastructure and resources to support refugees from diverse cultural backgrounds (Curry et al. 2018; Kivunja et al. 2014; Morris and O'Shea 2015; Piper 2017). This paper focuses on the experiences of 'localism' by Black African refugees who have been resettled in a regional town in Australia that is predominantly white and culturally homogenous. This may pose contextual and cultural challenges for resettlement. In their research on skilled African migrants, Kwansah-Aidoo and Mapedzahama (2018) theorised how blackness can be carried as a burden in white spaces by highlighting how 'experiences of racism and racialisation interfere with the processes of "being local" and the resulting effect is a sense of non-belonging' (p. 106). Their analysis emphasises that within the Australian context, Black Africans are constructed as racialised 'others' who are positioned as 'a perpetual stranger who does not belong', a finding which has implications for resettled refugees as well as migrants from African nations (p. 115).

Upon the establishment of the federate state in 1901, Australia employed racially exclusive policies (known collectively as the 'White Australia policy') that aimed to create a homogenous white population. These policies were progressively dismantled from 1958, and discrimination on the basis of race in immigration policy and legislation was prohibited in 1973 (Elder 2007; Lake 2013). The effective end of the 'White Australia Policy' by the mid 1970s led to an increase in diversity of migrants, and almost a quarter of Australians now

have non-European heritage (AHRC 2018). Despite the increasing racial and cultural diversity of contemporary Australian society, dominant narratives of ‘Australianness’ and belongingness continue to revolve around the centrality of whiteness and ‘Anglo-Celtic’ heritage to Australian identity (Elder 2007; Walton et al. 2018). It is worth noting that Australia’s colonial history significantly informs and locates meanings of ‘Australian identity’ and drives the constant undercurrents of racism and prejudice that challenge many people’s sense of belonging. Anglo-Celtic institutions, individuals and iconography continue to occupy hegemonic positions within Australian society and culture (AHRC 2018), with periodic ‘moral panics’ around ‘invasion’ by immigrants and refugees, demographic change and perceived threats to ‘border-control’. Such developments can be seen reflected in increasingly harsh rhetoric and policies directed towards asylum-seekers and refugees (Anderson 2015; Glynn 2016; Killedar and Harris 2017). This context contributes to the creation of particular challenges for refugees from African nations resettled in Australia.

### **Challenges of Resettlement for African Refugees**

During the 1990s and 2000s, the number of refugees from African nations resettled in Australia increased, but in recent years, intake of refugees from Africa has been reduced, even though the number of refugees requiring resettlement from this region has risen (Refugee Council of Australia 2017; Morris & O’Shea 2015). Refugees face significant challenges in resettlement, including difficulties in securing appropriate housing and employment (Morris & O’Shea 2015), yet resettlement support has also been significantly reduced (Curry et al. 2018). The challenges of ‘settling in’ can be heightened for refugees who are ‘visibly different’ within the Australian context. Markers of ‘visible difference’ such as race contribute to various challenges in refugee settlement in their new environment (Colic-Peisker 2005; Colic-Peisker & Tilbury 2007). Colic-Peisker and Tilbury (2007) define ‘visibly different’ as:

Recognizable as different from the white, Western-clad, and English-speaking Australian majority in various ways: by their non-English speaking background and therefore ‘accent’ when they speak English; by skin colour and bodily and facial features; by dress and attire, often connotative of religious denomination; or by a combination of these ‘visibilities’ (p. 61).

Most refugees resettled in Australia from African nations self-identify or are perceived as Black, and in combination with other markers of ‘difference’, therefore, tend to be marked as ‘visibly different’ in the Australian society. Given the historic centering of whiteness as the primary identifier of Australian-ness, racial difference impacts greatly on Black African refugees. In recent years, for example, there have been a series of waves of heavily racialised ‘moral panics’ regarding the supposed criminality of migrants and particularly refugees of Black African heritage (MacDonald 2017; Windle 2008). The racialised undertones underpinning the rhetoric of ‘securing our borders’ by increasing barriers to entry and resettlement for Black African refugees was underscored by the proposal by senior Australian government officials in 2017 to create a special refugee intake solely for *white* South African farmers (Baskin 2018).

Research shows that immigrants and refugees from Africa frequently report higher levels of discrimination and prejudice than other groups in Australian society. In the Scanlon Foundation's 2015 national survey of immigrant communities in Australia, for example, 80% of respondents born in South Sudan reported discrimination in police contact in the previous 12 months, and 17% reported experiencing racially-motivated physical attacks in the same period (Markus 2016, p. 4). In another large research project commissioned by a public broadcaster, 21% of total participants reported agreement with the claim that 'African refugees' increased crime in Australia (Blair et al. 2017, p. 8), and 16% of respondents self-reported negative feelings towards 'African Australians' (p. 5). Writing of her experiences as a Black African immigrant, Gatwiri (2019) states that 'in Australia I must manage racialised consciousness and the racial micro-aggressions when met with surprise by Euro-centric others who question who I am, where I came from (where I am really from), why I am here, if I intend "to go back home"' (p. 7). Considering this context, among the 'complex challenges' Black African refugees may face in resettlement, the interplay between interpersonal, systemic and institutional racism can be significant (Marlowe et al. 2013, p. 2).

Inclusive and welcoming reception of migrants and refugees needs to be conceptualised as a process of equal participation rather than an assimilatory process. However, there are complex factors at play which lead to 'successful' experiences of regional resettlement for refugees *and* host communities, a detailed analysis of which is beyond the scope of this paper (see rather Curry et al. 2018). A key finding emerging from the growing body of research on regional resettlement, however, is that 'communities that have made the decision that they want to welcome refugees and have actively sought to attract them to their city or town are by far the most advanced when it comes to offering a welcoming community' which leads to inclusion and integration (Piper 2017, p. 6).

### **Welcoming Communities: Boundaries of Belonging and Localism**

We understand belonging as signifying 'some form of emotional attachment that relates individuals to other people, places or modes of being', and the 'personal, intimate feeling of becoming "at home" in a place', or having 'a sense of being part of the social fabric' (Spaaij 2015, p. 304). Spaaij's conceptualisation of the experience of belonging is best understood 'as a process (i.e. becoming) rather than a state (i.e. being)' (p. 305). As Yuval-Davis (2006) also posits, belonging can be conceptualised on different levels, but it is particularly important to distinguish between belonging in the sense of emotional attachment, and belonging in a *political* sense. She argues that an affective sense of belonging can be 'an act of self-identification or identification by others', and is 'always a dynamic process, not a reified fixity' (p. 199). This process of constructing a sense of belonging for resettled refugees is not just about the formation of 'individual and collective identities and attachments but also about the ways these are valued and judged' (p. 203). When there is contestation around the boundaries of belonging within socio-political communities, Yuval-Davis argues that experiences of belonging shift 'from the realm of [emotional] belonging into that of the politics of belonging' (p. 204). This encompasses 'struggles around the determination of what is involved in belonging, in being a member of a community, and of what roles specific social locations and specific narratives of identity play in this' (Yuval-Davis 2006, p. 205).

As Spaaij (2015) has contended, if we follow Yuval-Davis (2006) in conceptualising belonging as a ‘dialectic of “seeking” and “granting”’, we must recognise that the politics of negotiating the boundaries of belonging between ‘us’ and ‘them’ in particular social locations involves a range of complex factors which are never fully within the control of individuals (Spaaij, 2015, p. 305). Instead, they depend upon ‘a dynamic interplay between the side that claims belonging and the side that has the power of “granting” belonging’ (p. 305). For refugees in regional communities then, belonging must be considered not only in terms of individual or collective narratives of ‘belonging’, but also in terms of the extent to which claims to belonging can be considered to have been accepted by ‘host’ communities, which may be represented by indications of an increased permeability of the boundaries of belonging within that context.

In the context which we are considering, the ‘locals’ with whom the powers of ‘granting’ belonging are vested are the long-term white residents of the area. The area includes a regional centre in a predominantly rural district in the hinterland of northern New South Wales, that is generally typical of Australian regional communities and is characterised by lower tertiary qualification levels, lower employment, and lower cultural heterogeneity than national averages (Anderson, Cumings, Mendes, Mapatano, 2018). In his analysis of local identity within this region, Garbutt (2009) noted that the title of ‘local’ was usually reserved for those who had not only resided within the area for many years, but could also claim an intergenerational connection with white settler families of the region. Local boundaries of belonging therefore worked to effectively exclude not only Indigenous peoples, but also ‘new settlers’, who might be white but were not considered ‘locals’ (p. 97):

Becoming local takes time: routine, everyday time spent on the ground. There is a notion here of connection between identity and a ‘patch of dirt’, of authenticity through autochthony, of being a child of the soil, of coming from a womb and from a place, of being born and bred. Being local weaves identity and place together in this most intimate fashion (Garbutt 2009, p. 92).

For an outsider, ‘asserting one’s own local status ignores the protocols of *becoming* a local: the patronage and acceptance of the established locals is the test’ (p. 94, our emphasis).

Such boundaries on local identity could be considered a form of what Ghassan Hage termed as ‘governmental belonging’ (Hage 2000, p. 60). This means that within Australian communities, the greatest national capital, or claim to be able to ‘spatially manage’ and accept or deny the claims of belonging of others, is possessed by those with longstanding residence, cultural congruence, *and* localised white settler ancestry. As Offord et al. (2015) have similarly demonstrated, Australian localism is expressed through ‘proprietary’ attitudes towards identity and belonging:

Complex cultural and legal-rational buttresses...support Anglo-Celtic settlers’ localisation on the Australian land mass. The result is the locals’ sense of possession of the settled places of Australia, which justifies the morality of speaking and acting for places, whether at the national or the local level (p. 93).

Australians of white settler-colonial heritage are therefore uniquely articulated as ‘locals’ within national and localised spaces, enabling them to simultaneously reject the prior claims of possession by Indigenous Australians *and* any subsequent claims to belonging. In expressions of Australian localism, not only are the boundaries of belonging implicitly maintained, but there can be an active assertion over ‘governmental’ rights towards ‘granting’ or denying claims for belonging ‘which is claimed by those who are in a dominant position and can lead to individuals or groups being silenced and positioned as ‘other’” (Spaaij 2015, p. 305).

The fragility of proprietary belonging is reflected in the traditional vigilance and policing of boundaries between ‘locals’ and ‘Others’ within social circles in this region as documented by Garbutt (2009). Yet, successive waves of ‘new settlers’ arriving since the 1970s have had significant impacts upon the region’s culture. Garbutt (2014) has argued that the legacy of this history means that ‘the entwining of technologies of care, care for self and environment, have become part of cultural practice and awareness’ (p. 3). The history of accommodation to sociocultural change and valuation of caring means this region may be better positioned for the reception of refugees of different cultural backgrounds than other regional centres, despite the relative demographic homogeneity.

The total number of refugees who have been resettled in the region from African nations is small. Most were settled directly in the community through the auspices of Sanctuary Northern Rivers, a local Non-Government charitable organisation. Sanctuary has provided support for over 200 refugees from African nations to come to Australia under the offshore Humanitarian Settlement program (Kivunja et al. 2014; Sanctuary Northern Rivers 2018; Piper 2017). In addition to the cultural characteristics of the region outlined above, the support of local community organisations such as Sanctuary, as well as government-funded NGOs such as North Coast Settlement Services (St Vincent de Paul Society 2018) has probably been critical to the ‘successful’ resettlement of refugees from African nations in this regional community<sup>1</sup>.

Other organisations and institutions within the region have also provided ongoing support for refugee resettlement in the area. Local media regularly report positively on events such as Refugee Week commemorations (see for example Jdell 2012; Johnson 2013, Paterson 2017). The multi-campus university based in the region also contributes to efforts to support regional resettlement (SCU 2017). This regional centre therefore displays many of the characteristics of a ‘welcoming community’ within which regional resettlement is likely to be successful. As outlined by Piper (2017), these include supportive local government and non-governmental organisations; local ‘champions’ of resettlement and ‘sympathetic local media’; and established volunteering networks, especially in regards to support for diversity and social justice in the community (p. 12). The gradual resettlement of families and individuals over some years also echoes findings from the international literature regarding

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<sup>1</sup> The process can be considered successful due to the sustained nature of settlement for many former refugees, the ability to obtain at least some employment, and high levels of engagement with local educational, sporting and other community organisations (see Curry, Smedley, & Lenette 2018 for a more extended examination of defining success for regional resettlement).

factors which may lead to more successful outcomes for regional resettlement (Gilhooly & Lee 2017; Schiff & Clavé-Mercier 2019).

### **‘I’m a Local...’: A Collaborative, Community-based Initiative**

In 2016, the regional university and a resettlement agency hosted a welcome event for people from refugee backgrounds who were commencing a tertiary course at the university. Some participants from refugee backgrounds at the event emphasised that they had been part of the local community for some time and no longer identified as refugees. Instead, they self-identified as ‘locals’, and wished this to be acknowledged, rather than continuing to be labelled as ‘refugees’. This emphasis resurfaced during community consultations regarding the commemoration of Refugee Week the following year. Through collaborative dialogues between former refugees and representatives of the resettlement agency and the local university, the idea for the ‘I’m a Local...’ initiative emerged. These dialogues culminated in a facilitated workshop with project partners and participants in early 2017 that provided the participants with an opportunity to reflect on their sense of belonging, celebrate their achievements, and contribute to conversations that could inspire community connections. Following this workshop, a set of posters about former refugees living in this region was produced and was publicly displayed during Refugee Week 2017 at various locations in the region. Consent was received from seven former refugees who participated in the ‘I’m a Local...’ workshop for their statements and their real names to be utilised in the production of posters and for promotion of the initiative. Each poster contained a photographic portrait, selected details about each person’s countries of origin and refugee journey, and a brief narrative statement outlining what made them feel like a ‘local’ in the region.

The launch of the ‘I’m a Local...’ initiative was picked up by local, state-wide and interstate media and thus achieved considerable ‘reach’ (see for example EchoNetDaily 2017; Burke 2017; Shoebridge 2017; Grant 2017). Through social media and media coverage, awareness and impact of this initiative spread through and beyond the local community. Public comments on partner organisation’s social media sites reflected the positive reception of and engagement with the initiative. The benefits to the community were also identifiable by the willingness of businesses, organisations and schools to give their support and the positive feedback they subsequently provided to partner organisations through formal and informal mechanisms. These various forms of feedback provided indications that the ‘I’m a Local...’ initiative was achieving the aim of helping the local community to better understand the lived experiences of and contributions of former refugees from African nations living in the region. In creating a highly public local platform for former refugees to tell their stories, the initiative appeared to be successful in challenging negative narratives about refugees which have become dominant in Australian mediated discourses about inclusion and belonging in recent years. It highlighted the diversity of origins and complexity of the participants’ refugee journeys, with the intention of countering the problematic and monolithic grouping together of people of diverse national and ethnic origins with the label of an ‘African refugee community’.

As was highlighted in this initiative, some participants who had been resettled locally as refugees no longer identified as refugees and instead considered themselves 'locals'. This demonstrates that at some point in the settlement process, the 'refugee label' can play a less salient role in defining the personal identity of former refugees. This process was articulated clearly by one participant who said:

I'm proud to be part of this community, because... People love each other, we support each other and it builds a strong community. And I feel like I need to move on. I don't want to look back as a refugee anymore. I want to be an Australian and build a new life that will shape my future (John, cited in Shoebridge 2017).

This experience of localism indicates the depth of engagement and belonging achieved by people who had come to the region as refugees, and affirmed that regional areas could be communities that welcomed, supported and were strengthened by diversity. It also indicated that refugees settling in a supportive regional context could maintain salient aspects of their pre-existing identity whilst having their contributions to their local community acknowledged and celebrated.

Statements which were printed on the posters with the consent of participants highlighted a wide range of experiences that defined their sense of 'belonging' as a 'local'. Cassie, for example, was born in Kenya and arrived in Australia in 2005. She highlighted the ability to easily access childcare services in her local area and her work as a qualified nursing assistant as contributing to why she felt she was a 'local'. Her daughter (born in Australia) was the youngest participant represented in the poster series, and her mother, Mary (born in South Sudan), the oldest, representing three generations of one family participating in the initiative. Mary's sense of belonging was similarly focused upon everyday experiences of connection and belonging within the community. She loved her local community, she stated 'because it has very good people and everything is so close'. Participation in local organisations was highlighted by other participants, including John, who was born in the Democratic Republic of Congo and arrived in Australia in 2015. John noted his membership in a local Choir and his local church as being spaces that created positive opportunities for 'working with people...being connected to each other and supportive of each other'. Anthony, who was born in South Sudan and arrived in Australia in 2008, also signalled the importance of being part of a supportive church congregation (SCU 2017).

Some themes which emerged consistently for participants as forging a sense of belonging were the value of participation in local employment and activities, and above all, positive educational experiences. Cassie, John and Anthony all singled out their enrolment at university as crucial to their experience of 'localism'. Notably, all three were studying in order to qualify for work in care industries such as nursing and social welfare, signalling their desire to contribute to their community<sup>2</sup>. Anthony's brothers, who were also featured in the poster series, reflected that their positive school experiences and the impact of having 'nice

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<sup>2</sup> Although it should also be noted that recent migrants to Australia, especially those who entered on humanitarian grounds, often find barriers to employment in sectors outside of caring and service industries (Curry, Smedley, & Lenette 2018; Morris & O'Shea, 2015b).

warm arms that welcomed [their] family' had made it possible for the community to become their 'home'. Cassie noted that she was a member of a local basketball team while Anthony located his membership of the local soccer club as a key tool for fostering belonging. These themes echo key findings from the academic literature on successful resettlement for refugees in Australia, which highlight the value of inclusive sporting, education and employment opportunities in building a sense of belonging, connection to community, and social capital (Curry et al. 2018; Kivunja et al. 2014; Major et al. 2013; Spaaij 2015).

### **Discussion: The 'Double Impact' of Becoming a Local**

A key insight that emerged from 'I'm a Local...' was the sense in which broadcasting the self-identification of former refugees as 'locals' disrupted conventional narratives and definitions of 'being a refugee'. It is increasingly recognised that policy and research regarding refugee resettlement in Australia, as well as elsewhere, has been implicitly characterised by a deficit approach which discounts the resilience and agency of former refugees. The 'over-researching' of refugees is now a recognised issue, as is the concern that a preponderance of research is 'about refugees' rather than 'with and for' refugees and their concerns (Curry et al. 2018; Major et al. 2013). It is for these reasons that we have focused on the evaluation of this project via personal reflections about participation in the initiative, analysis of material about the project which was already in the public domain, and on documentation of the project's impact, rather than taking the more traditional approach of academics producing research through interviews or focus groups with 'subjects'. Among the outcomes of this initiative were a community development practice paper (Anderson, Cumings, Mendes & Mapatano, 2018), this journal article and a short documentary film (Anderson, Brine & Bell-Todd, 2019) that were co-developed with academics, organisers and participants. This highlights the importance of more inclusive research engagement with refugees (see Fleay et al. 2019).

The forthright claim of former refugees in stating so openly within so many public spaces that they considered themselves to be locals may have been interpreted as a challenge or as presumptuous by some. In taking agency and asserting their *own* local status, the 'I'm a Local...' participants can be considered to have violated the presumed right of (white) locals to be spatial managers within the town, to determine and police 'the protocols of becoming a local' (Garbutt 2009, p. 94). Employing Hage's (1998) concept of governmental belonging, Abdel-Fattah (2016) and Spaaij (2015) argue that migratory tensions in the Australian society are often summoned by white Australians who claim exclusive rights to deny or grant 'belonging' to culturalised and racialised Others. Given the charged and contested nature of Australian localism, to proclaim one's 'localness' in this fashion can be considered a provocative and radical *detournement*, utilising the iconography and valourisation of 'the local' in regional Australia to erode rather than reinforce boundaries of belonging. The enthusiastic participation in the initiative by a wide range of local businesses and organisations in particular signalled that there were many sectors of the community willing to publicly endorse the claims to local belonging of former refugees, and the affirmation that they were now considered and valued as locals.

John, a participant in the initiative, subsequently described 'I am a Local...' as having a 'double-impact', because it worked to raise awareness among the broader community about the stories of former refugees in the region, but also increased the 'self-recognition of belonging' for former refugees in the community. In a short documentary that John collaborated on with some of the authors of this paper, he related how participating in the initiative assisted him to connect with new people in the community, and facilitated the process 'for finding certain type of work, because I became famous! (because the [poster] project was everywhere)'. The significance of these experiences of recognition and welcome had a strong impact on John. He said 'when I feel like I'm belonging...I don't need to hold on [to] my previous label as a refugee – and [I] move on to the next step of citizenship' (Anderson, Brine & Bell-Todd, 2019). John's narrative demonstrates the tendency of dominant discourses to inadvertently 'fix' or freeze the refugee subject within a static 'refugee identity'. Instead, as an emerging conceptual framework of 'refugeity' suggests, being a refugee may be better understood as a process, a fluid and temporary state, which many former refugees may seek to disengage from as they develop a keener sense of belonging within their new communities (Marlowe et al. 2013; Harris 2010).

Staking a claim to this more fluid sense of 'refugeity', as a state which settled refugees *can* leave behind, was intrinsic to 'I'm a Local...'. Identifying as a local, as indicated by participants, was intimately connected with establishing a sense of belonging. It involved asserting a positive self-identity reflecting the participant's origins and current location, through identification of the multitude of daily encounters and interactions which created a sense of local belonging. Belonging was therefore highlighted as 'the product of everyday practices that connect individuals and groups to the social and civic fabric of a place' (Garbutt 2009, p. 99). Once a former refugee begins to develop a self-identity as 'settled' – as a 'local' – as *belonging* – then the task to question the continued external identification by others can commence, which can then lead to public affirmation of new identities. This is an additional challenge in 'successful resettlement': the ability to transcend the label of 'refugee' if and when this is desired, and to forge a sense of identity and belonging as 'locals' in new locations. This is what John refers to in his description of the process of moving from refugeeship to citizenship (Anderson, Brine & Bell-Todd, 2019).

Finally, not only did the initiative have an impact on resettled refugees in the region, and broader community awareness of their journeys, it also helped to establish transformational, collaborative relationships and partnerships among the organising agencies 'based upon genuine engagement and a focus on common goals and mutual benefits' (Butcher et al. 2011, p. 29). The importance of the connections between different agencies was crucial to the success of the initiative. Without trusting relationships between the initiative's participants, co-coordinators, representatives of other partner organisations, volunteers who contributed to the production of the posters, and businesses or organisations that agreed to display the posters, the initiative would not have had the impact that it did.

On reflection, a significant potential limitation of this initiative was that the focus on 'local' belonging in this initiative potentially risked going too far in the other direction – of determining 'successful' resettlement as somehow constituted by a process of 'full

assimilation...and gradual alienation from the society of origin' (Glorius 2017, p. 115). The inclusion in the statements of participants' countries of origin, and sometimes other significant locations in their refugee journey, go some way to mitigate this perspective, but this is a potentially a stereotyping approach that deserves further consideration. Recent approaches to integration research, for example, increasingly focus on the possibilities in successful resettlement for 'simultaneous integration in societies of origin and arrival and the development of transnational identities' (Glorius 2017, p. 115). Whether 'I'm a Local...' provided enough space for this more expansive sense of belonging to be expressed can be questioned, and is a possible limitation of the initiative. In reflection on other possible limitations of this project, we note further in-depth research with a wider range of community members would be required to more systematically evaluate the degree to which this positive reception was distributed throughout the whole community, or to understand how extensive the experience of belonging as a local is for former refugees resettled in this region.

### Conclusion

This paper evaluated the 'I'm a Local...' initiative which challenged the broader regional community to *see* and engage with former refugees as *people* without 'the refugee badge attached' (SCU 2017) and as such enabled 'bridges of belonging to be built across existing boundaries' (Garbutt 2009, p. 104). It highlighted the various challenges of resettlement for Black African refugees in regional Australia and the extent to which the positive experiences of refugees can be contextualised within particular characteristics of space and place. However, further research would clarify the particular characteristics of this region which may contribute to making it a 'welcoming community' for refugees, and to systematically evaluate wider community attitudes towards and support for regional resettlement.

The strong endorsement of 'I'm a Local...' by some former refugees in this region from African backgrounds may also be considered to subtly reflect precarity in the sense of belonging they *have* been able to generate: as Abdel-Fattah (2016) observed, 'to enjoy unconditional belonging means never feeling the need to assert it' (p. 33). Although the focus and scope of the initiative and composition of poster statements was directed principally by participants in collaborative dialogue with project partners, it can be questioned to what extent the core of 'I'm a Local...' rested upon participants' willingness to publicly perform belonging and 'successful' integration. Extensive training and provision of program guidelines for regional resettlement service providers, and potential program partners such as regional universities, will therefore be an important consideration to support future ethical community development initiatives if regional resettlement efforts continue to expand.

Refugees enter new communities with unique stories, and overcome the challenges of resettlement with patience, self-discipline and resilience. The regional resettlement process can be 'a double-edged sword', with benefits *and* challenges for host communities and for those engaged in the settlement process (Major et al. 2013, p. 101). This paper has demonstrated how local initiatives and research that privilege refugee perspectives 'champions their resilience...[and] the agency to promote their own successful resettlement' (Curry et al. 2018, p. 432) and can provide transformational impetus to the challenging of

boundaries of belonging within regional centres of resettlement. In this sense, ‘I’m a Local...’ reflects the current potential for positive change within contemporary Australian culture, in a moment of time when the politics of borders are so reactive and exclusionary. As Offord (2014) argues, because Australia is ‘racially imagined as white’, when the nation is ‘experienced through colour and cultural diversity’ it can lead to ‘intense conversations and dialogue that are cosmopolitan and potentially decolonising’ (p. 59). Experiencing diversity through the perspectives of refugees means privileging more fluid conceptions of refugeeity and re-examining the boundaries of identity within regional sites of Australian culture.

Our work in the higher education sector particularly recognises the significance and value of creating positive educative pathways for former refugees. Students from refugee backgrounds are an emerging equity group in the higher education sector as well as within other educational contexts in Australia, and there is a dire need for educational institutions to increase their support for refugees and other new Australians. It is particularly in this respect that the transformational nature of the partnerships underpinning this initiative show leadership. Through collaboration they ‘create the possibility of generative growth and change through mutual interaction’, for the participants in the initiative, and for the wider community (Butcher et al. 2011, p. 31). ‘I’m a Local...’ may have ended now, yet its impact remains relevant to the community at large and to the participants of the project. Among the outcomes has been integration of resources about the initiative into curricula at the local university and local commemoration of Refugee Week 2019. The legacy of ‘I’m a Local...’ has been enduring because it effectively harnessed partnerships in supporting local cultures of respect and inclusion, and affirms a hopeful and resilient vision for future relations and wellbeing within an increasingly diverse community. In attempting to draw attention to the benefits of ‘welcoming communities’ while utilising one regional community in Australia as a case example, we hope to contribute to broader national and international conversations about the positive impacts of ‘localising’ new migrants and refugees in the community.

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