

GROWING UP AFRICAN IN AUSTRALIA

EDITED BY
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WITH AHMED YUSSUF AND MAGAN MAGAN



TEACHING NOTES BY ERNEST PRICE

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Themes: Identity, belonging, culture, migration, refugees, racism

Year levels: 9–12

Teacher professional development

Synopsis

Growing Up African in Australia is a collection with rich possibilities for the classroom. The stories span the breadth of the country and speak to the diverse experiences of people of African descent in Australia. The tales are held together by formative encounters with racism and systemic isolation from a mainstream Australian identity. The collection also speaks to heterogeneous nature of the experiences of Australians of African descent, dependent on the same myriad factors that shape the lives of all Australians. The stories reflect the nuanced lives that the writers lead, with complex and unique family histories that have created vibrant narratives teeming with life.

Maxine Beneba Clarke is a widely published Australian writer of Afro-Caribbean descent. She is the author of the multi-award-winning story collection *Foreign Soil*, which has been set on high-school curriculums; the memoir *The Hate Race*, which won the NSW Premier's Literary Award – Multicultural; the poetry collection *Carrying the World*, which won the 2017 Victorian Premier's Award for Poetry; and the children's book *The Patchwork Bike*, a 2017 CBCA Honour Book.

Ahmed Yussuf is a writer and journalist who's worked with ABC Radio National's RN Drive program and international broadcaster TRT World. He co-founded race and culture podcast *Race Card*.

Magan Magan is a writer and poet who has read work at the National Gallery of Victoria, the National Young Writers Festival, the Emerging Writers Festival and Melbourne Writers Festival. His work has been published in *Cordite Poetry Review* and the anthologies *Shots from the Chamber*, *Australian Poetry* and *Contemporary Australian Feminist Poetry*. Magan's latest book is *From Grains to Gold* (2018).

Themes

Discussion questions for before reading

- What are the connotations of the book's title, *Growing Up African in Australia*?
- Create a timeline of the arrival of African immigrants in Australia.
- What aspects of history and contemporary politics may shape a reader's understanding of *Growing Up African in Australia*?

Consider:

- the White Australia policy
- Australia's changing approach to refugees
- patterns of immigration since British colonisation
- the *Racial Discrimination Act*
- Modern anti-African racism

Questions for Reading

'Power' by Hope Mathumbu

- What contrast does Mathumbu make between the experience of religion in Africa and in Australia?
- What does Mathumbu learn through her friendships in Australia?
- What role does hair play in the construction of identity for Mathumbu?
- How did the separation of the family impact on Mathumbu's father?
- What relationship does Mathumbu have with the Pastor and God?
- How do the gaps in understanding develop between Mathumbu and her mother?

'Her Mother's Daughter' by Nyadol Nyuon

- What does Nyuon see as the impact of war on families?
- How does Nyuon see the effect of her father's political involvement on her family?
- What impact did seeing her grandmother have on Nyuon's sense of identity?
- How did Nyuon's mother's trauma affect their relationship?

- How does Nyuon view her mother's relationship to Australia?
- What are some of the obstacles for Nyuon in feeling at home in Australia?

'All the Same' by Sophia Kiogora

- How did Kiogora experience her grandparents' home?
- What societal prejudices shaped Kiogora's parents' relationship?
- How did Kiogora relate to the idea of being African as a child?
- How did the representation of people of colour impact on Kiogora's childhood?
- How did Kiogora navigate the absence of her father as a child?
- What did Kiogora's trip to Kenya bring her?
- 'Potato Country' by Kirsty Marillier
- What role does the setting of Pemberton play in the text?
- What impact does the move to Australia have on the dynamics of the family?
- What is the gap between the ideal and the reality of the family's migration?
- How does the family respond to the climate?
- How did Marillier and her sister adapt to the move?
- What reaction did the family face in their small town?

'Ant Bush' by Sefakor Aku Zikpi

- Why does Zikpi contend that many African women have a 'love-hate relationship' with their hair?
- What is the concept of 'natural hair care'?
- What did the 'big black comb' represent to Zikpi?
- What is the significance of Zikpi wanting to be 'like all the other girls, just for one day'?
- What does the ant bush symbolise to Zikpi?
- Why did Zikpi think that having her hair out was worse than having her hair in plaits?

‘Benched’ by Santilla Chingapie

- What role do Chingapie’s parents feel that sport can play in creating a sense of belonging for Chingapie?
- What are the effects of having ‘the only [name] that was different’?
- How did being a girl influence Chingapie’s experience of playing AFL?
- Why did Chingapie’s dad watch AFL with her prior to her first game?
- How did popular culture shape Chingapie’s view of her experience in playing AFL?
- What did Chingapie learn from her stint playing AFL?

‘New Life’ by Iman Sissay

- What is the significance of the title of the story?
- Why did Sissay’s family leave Sudan?
- Did Sissay feel welcomed upon her arrival in Australia?
- What was the biggest challenge for Sissay in settling in to a new society?
- What does it symbolise when Sissay overcomes her fear of sea monsters?
- How is the motif of birth used in the story?

‘Ashy Knees’ by Manal Younus

- What associations is the poem’s narrator taught to make with the colour of her skin?
- What did the poem’s narrator wish that she looked like?
- What impact does the rhyme scheme have on your understanding of the poem?
- How does the poem reflect the impact of history and culture on beauty standards?
- What effect does the use of dialogue have on your understanding of the poem?
- How does the narrator of the poem reconcile her appearance?

‘Complex Colour’ by Carly Findlay

- Why did Findlay’s peers believe that her skin would be white if it wasn’t red?
- What does Findlay observe about the notion of ‘feeling’ white or black?
- Why does Findlay ‘feel like a fraud’?
- How does Findlay feel about Rachel Dolezal?
- Why does Findlay feel that ‘whiteness and blackness are more than skin colour’?
- How has Findlay’s sense of identity evolved?

‘Trauma is a Time Traveller’ by Ahmed Yussuf

- Why is Junot Diaz now considered ‘contentious’?
- What is the significance of Yussuf using Diaz’s phrase ‘trauma is a time traveller’ as a motif?
- In what ways is Yussuf taught ‘to be a good Muslim boy’?
- How does Yussuf escape pain and suffering?
- Why does Yussuf ‘search for survival’?
- How does Yussuf come to understand that ‘[his] story is [his] story’?

‘Dear Australia, I Love You But ...’ by Candy Bowers

- How does Bowers use the metaphor of family in this poem?
- What impact does representation on television have on the poem’s narrator?
- How does Bowers see racism intersecting with sexism?
- How did the poem’s narrator ‘re-parent’ herself?
- How does Bowers view the establishment of identity?
- What message does Bowers have for ‘little brown girls’?

‘Profiled’ by Daniel Haile-Michael

- What is the significance of the title of the story?
- What assumptions did police make about Haile-Michael and his friends?
- What are the personal costs of the legal action to Haile-Michael?
- How has Haile-Michael’s life changed as a result of his experiences?
- Does Haile-Michael see racism as limiting the opportunities available to African Australians?
- Does Haile-Michael feel positive about the future of relations between Victoria Police

and African Australians?

‘The Dangers of a Single Story’ by Tairo Mavondo

- What experience did Mavondo have as ‘the only black kid in [her] neighbourhood’?
- What does Mavondo feel shaped Stephanie Mboto’s character arc on Home and Away?
- How does Mavondo see Australian racism shaping the roles available to her as an actor?
- What does Wahibe Moussa see as the role of artists?
- How does Mavondo see her ‘dual identities’?
- What stories does Mavondo want to see reflected in Australian television shows?

‘Dhaqan Celis’ by Magan Magan

- Why does Magan carry a ‘heavy load of life’?
- Why does Magan struggle to feel settled in Australia?
- What does the apple symbolise to Magan?
- What does Magan’s mother observe about the relationship between parents and their children in Australia?
- What is the concept of ‘dhaqan celis’?
- How does Magan feel about ‘growing up African in Australia’?

‘Sam’ by Faustina Agolley

- What are the effects of Sam’s absence in Agolley’s life?
- How does Agolley respond to questions about her relationship with her mother?
- How does Agolley respond to her mother’s trauma?
- What role did television play in shaping Agolley’s sense of identity?
- What does Agolley gain from her time in Ghana?
- How does Agolley feel about her career?

‘Diasporan Processing’ by Effie Nkrumah

- What does Nkrumah believe that she should have known about ‘where [she] really [was]’?

- What experiences shape Nkrumah's early schooling?
- Why couldn't Nkrumah 'locate the way through to [her] dream' of becoming an actress?
- What understanding does Nkrumah come to about her neighbours?
- How did Nkrumah relate to other students of African descent at school? What shaped these relationships?
- How does Nkrumah differentiate the experience of growing up 'African' in Australia and growing up Ghanaian in Australia? Why is this distinction important?

'Home' by Suban Nur Cooley

- What is a diaspora?
- How do photos and videos symbolise Cooley's childhood memories?
- How did Cooley begin to 'understand what racism was'?
- What adaptations did Cooley's family make in living in Australia?
- What was the significance of communities being 'too small to self-segregate'? What impact did this have on Cooley's sense of identity?
- What did it mean to Cooley 'to be Australian and Somali at the same time'?

'Four Stages' by Rafeif Ismail

- Why does Ismail believe that the 'worst thing about grief is the forgetting'?
- What are some of the 'indignities adults will inflict on a black girl child'? Why do the adults do this?
- What is survivor's guilt? How does it impact on Ismail?
- What does Ismail see as the impact of migration on children?
- Why is Ismail 'still trying to figure out what Australia is'?
- How does the separation of Ismail's piece into four parts influence your understanding of it?

LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Themes

The impacts of racism

Institutional racism

Growing Up African in Australia explores the institutional nature of racism. The stories in the collection reflect the experience of being isolated from or actively harmed by places that are supposed to be safe, such as schools and workplaces.

- ‘Ashy Knees’ and ‘Complex Colour’ depict the corrosive impacts of normative, white ideals of beauty for young people of African descent.
- ‘Sam’ explores the importance of the representation of ‘black collective experience’ in popular media. ‘The Dangers of a Single Story’ and ‘Dear Australia, I love you but’ further explore the harsh realities of the limited representation of people of African descent in Australia’s entertainment industries, including the lack of identifiable role models for young people.
- ‘The Dangers of a Single Story’ reflects the way that racist norms can limit the prospects for ‘racial and cultural diversity on television’.
- ‘Ant Bush’ looks at the impacts of the lack of appropriate services for people of African descent in Australia, and the resulting effects on the author’s sense of identity.
- ‘Trauma is a Time Traveller’ reflects the corrosive impact of racist stereotypes on an individual’s self-confidence.
- ‘All the Same’ looks at the historic legal barriers to relationships between black and white people.
- ‘Profiled’ examines the experience and consequences of racial profiling.

Interpersonal racism

The text also explores the interpersonal experience of racism, as individuals wrestle with the impacts of racism on their sense of self and their identities as members of families, communities and the Australian nation.

- ‘Potato Country’ explores the notion of distrust as a weapon of racist isolation.
- ‘Benched’ reflects the importance of names to our sense of identity and belonging, and the reluctance of parts of Australian society to

provide the respect afforded to addressing people by the names.

- ‘Dhaqan Celis’ chronicles repeated and formative experiences with racist insults. It reflects the way that the author’s peers mirror and repurpose the racism that their own families propagate.

The gaps between generations

Growing Up African in Australia reflects the gaps that can form between generations of families due to shifting geography and social norms.

- ‘Potato Country’ reflects the difficulty that children may have in understanding the grief their parents face upon arriving in Australia ‘without culture and community’.
- ‘Sam’ explores the isolation that a child may feel when separated from a parent and ‘knowing [their] absence, instead of [their] stories’.
- ‘Power’ reveals African parents’ inability to understand their children’s priorities in Australia.
- ‘Dhaqan Celis’ shows the difficulty that some families face in negotiating and understanding their children’s relationship to their cultural heritage.
- ‘Complex Colour’ reflects some of the challenges children face in negotiating families that have a range of cultural backgrounds.
- ‘Trauma is a Time Traveller’ depicts the deep and complex impact that a parent’s trauma can have on a child.
- ‘Diasporan Belonging’ explores the difficult relationships that young people can have with the connections their parents make with other members of the diaspora.
- ‘All the Same’ shows some of the difficulties faced by parents and children who have different cultural backgrounds.

Identity and belonging

The writers in *Growing Up African in Australia* are struggling with developing their sense of identity and the layers of their belonging in Australia.

- ‘Potato Country’ explores the disconnect between the idealised version of Australia held by many migrants and the often fraught reality they experience upon settling in the country.
- ‘Sam’ reveals the difficulty in developing a sense of identity when it is connected to the trauma that other family members have faced.
- ‘Ashy Knees’ and ‘Ant Bush’ reflect the way that beauty norms can

act as barriers to developing a clear sense of identity and belonging.

- ‘Benched’ shows the way that the author’s family sought to interact with Australian sporting culture in an effort to ‘fit in’.
- ‘The Dangers of a Single Story’ argues that nuanced representation in popular culture can help the consolidation and development of a sense of belonging.
- ‘Dhaqan Celis’ and ‘Home’ chronicle the ongoing evolution of a sense of an individual’s sense of identity.
- ‘Complex Colour’ reminds us of the nuances that exist within communities that are often stereotyped by external powers.
- ‘Dear Australia, I Love You’ shows the strength that is required to develop a clear sense of identity and belonging in the face of racism.
- ‘Diasporan Processing’ reflects the role that the diaspora can have in developing an individual’s sense of belonging.
- ‘All the Same’ suggests the difficulty that can come from having an identity that sits at odds with one’s parents.
- ‘Her Mother’s Daughter’ explores the depth of understanding that can come from reconnecting with family.
- ‘Four Stages’ shows the hurt that can come from separation from one’s family.

Extended analytical responses

Students may be asked to respond analytically to the work in *Growing Up African in Australian*. Here are some possible essay questions.

- 1 ‘*Growing Up African in Australia* reflects the ongoing struggles with racism in modern Australia.’ Discuss.
- 2 “We had ... no sense of the big grief they were feeling without culture and community.” (‘Potato Farmer’)
‘*Growing Up African in Australia* shows the gaps between immigrants and their children.’ Do you agree?
- 3 “I grow up knowing his absence, instead of his stories.” (‘Sam’)
How does *Growing Up African in Australia* show the pain of dislocated grief?
- 4 ‘*Growing Up African in Australia* reveals the dangers of normative beauty standards.’ Discuss.
- 5 ‘*Growing Up African in Australia* explores the lengths that people had to go to in order to “fit in”.’ Discuss.

- 6 “... I was forced to undergo a gruelling initiation into life in contemporary suburbia.” (‘The Dangers of a Single Story’)
‘*Growing Up African in Australia* reveals the racism experienced by people of African descent in Australia.’ Discuss.
- 7 “*Growing up African in Australia* has always felt like a giant negotiation.” (‘Dhaqan Celis’)
‘*Growing Up African in Australia* reveals the difficulty of existing as a person of African descent in Australia.’ Discuss.
- 8 “... I should call out racism no matter what colour I am.” (‘Complex Colour’)
‘*Growing Up African in Australia* reflects the difficulty of challenging racism in Australia.’ Do you agree?
- 9 “My triumph will change you.” (‘Dear Australia, I Love You But ...’)
‘*Growing Up African in Australia* suggests the gains that people of African descent have made for future generations.’ Discuss.
- 10 “Being African in Australia, in its essence, is a journey unusual.” (‘Home’)
‘*Growing Up African in Australia* suggests that there is no end point to establishing a sense of identity and belonging.’ Do you agree?
- 11 “... trauma is a time traveller.” (‘Trauma is a Time Traveller’)
‘*Growing Up African in Australia* reveals the complex impacts of intergenerational trauma.’ Discuss.
- 12 “Knowing that people around you sacrificed and were prepared to sacrifice their lives, their world, for your survival is a heavy burden.” (‘Four Stages’)
To what extent are the writers in *Growing Up African in Australia* impacted by the sacrifices of their forbearers?

FURTHER RESOURCES

Racism no way – anti-racism education for Australian schools
<http://www.racismnoway.com.au/>

Respect, Relationships and Reconciliation
<http://rrr.edu.au/>

AustLit and Black Words
www.austlit.edu.au
www.austlit.edu.au/BlackWords

ERNEST PRICE is an English and humanities teacher at Richmond High School in Victoria. He has worked at government secondary schools across Victoria, leading instruction in English, literacy and the humanities.

'I was born in Harare, the capital of Zimbabwe.'

'My dad was a freedom fighter, waging war for an independent state: South Sudan.'

'We lived in a small country town, in the deep south of Western Australia.'

'I never knew black people could be Muslim until I met my North African friends.'

'My mum and my dad courted illegally under the Apartheid regime.'

'My first impression of Australia was a housing commission in the north of Tasmania.'

'Somalis use this term, "Dhaqan Celis". "Dhaqan" means culture and "Celis" means return.'

Learning to kick a football in a suburban schoolyard. Finding your feet as a young black dancer. Discovering your grandfather's poetry. Meeting Nelson Mandela at your local church. Facing racism from those who should protect you. Dreading a visit to the hairdresser. House-hopping across the suburbs. Being too black. Not being black enough. Singing to find your soul, and then losing yourself.

Welcome to African Australia.

Compiled by award-winning author Maxine Beneba Clarke, with curatorial assistance from writers Ahmed Yussuf and Magan Magan, this anthology brings together the regions of Africa, and the African diaspora, from the Caribbean to the Americas. Told with passion, power, and poise, these are the stories of African-diaspora Australians: diverse, engaging, hopeful and heartfelt.

Contributors include Faustina Agolley, Santilla Chingaape, Carly Findlay, Khalid Warsame, Nyadol Nyuon, Tariro Mavondo and many, many more.

Recommended for middle and senior secondary

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