

Belonging in Australian Democracy:

A Multicultural Perspective



UNIVERSITY OF
CANBERRA

CENTRE FOR
DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY

Adele Webb
Friedel Marquardt

= Our Sense of Belonging in Australia =

THESE OBJECTS GIVE ME A SENSE OF BELONGING

UDIWO CLAY POT

THE KITCHEN IS A SPECIAL GATHERING SPACE

THEY ARE PART OF SHARING MEALS and BEING TOGETHER

THEY SYMBOLISE SECURITY, SUPPORT, COMMUNITY and FOOD

INCEBETUU BOWL OR BASKET and FOOD COVERING

SHARING WISDOM and STORIES

MY PARENTS are from ZIMBABWE

THIS IS A PHOTO of MY BA NGOAI (MATERNAL GRANDMOTHER) and MY DZIADEK (PATERNAL GRANDFATHER) MEETING FOR THE FIRST TIME

I FEEL SO LUCKY TO BE BORN HERE

THIS GUMNUT SYMBOLISES BELONGING and FEELING GROUNDED

THE PHOTO REMINDS ME HOW FRAGILE LIFE IS

THEY BOTH HAD A TRAUMATIC TIME GETTING HERE TO AUSTRALIA

BOTH DIED SHORTLY after ARRIVING HERE

MY PARENTS CAME FROM VIETNAM and POLAND

FEELING at HOME here in CANBERRA

I AM HERE and I BELONG

MY OBJECT IS THIS PHOTO of ME in A TRADITIONAL CHINESE TOP OUTSIDE ACCESS CANBERRA with MY NEW ID CARD

I CAN CELEBRATE MY CHINESE CULTURE HERE

PRIDE in WHERE I'M FROM and WHERE I AM NOW

BELONGING IS SOMETHING YOU GROW INTO

I'M DUTCH and INTEGRATION HAS BEEN A BIG FOCUS

PROUD TO BE FRISIAN, DUTCH and AUSTRALIAN

I NOW FEEL MORE AUSTRALIAN

THIS IS A PHOTO of MY GRAND PARENTS HERE IN AUSTRALIA

MY GRAND FATHER PASSED AWAY at 94!

MY FAMILY CONNECTION HELPED ME TO SETTLE in

I LIKE A LOT of DUTCH and FRISIAN TRADITIONS

AUSTRALIANS TAKE A LOT of PRIDE in COFFEE

MEETING PEOPLE for COFFEE

COFFEE FUELS CULTURE

STARBUCKS COULDN'T COMPETE WITH THE LOCAL COFFEE SCENE

HELPS ME feel BELONGING in AUSTRALIA

EACH PERSON HAS THEIR COFFEE PREFERENCE, MINE is KOPPIO

IT MAKES ME THINK of FAMILY

MY PARENTS ARE MALAYSIAN and NIGERIAN

THE PATTERNS TELL WHERE IT IS FROM

PAPUA NEW GUINEA and AUSTRALIA ARE DEEPLY CONNECTED

THIS PIECE SHOWS THE VALUE of PLACE, STORY TELLING and HISTORY

THESE SHELLS ARE A FORM of CURRENCY

MY OBJECT is A BILUM IT CAN BE WORN ON THE CHEST and USED AS A BAG

GIFTED from MY WAWO (MATERNAL UNCLE)

WHEN I FELT HOME SICK I PRINTED OUT ALL THESE IMAGES

COLOUR

RUGBY

BEAUTIFUL BEACHES

WATER is SO IMPORTANT TO ME!

PHOTOS of FAMILY in NZ

I KNOW THEY are PROUD of ME BEING HERE and THAT HELPS ME TO FEEL SAFE

MY FAMILY is from TOKELAU and AOTEAROA

I MADE FRIENDS THROUGH THE ANU MOUNTAINEERING and CLIMBING CLUB

CLIMBING CONNECTS ME TO AUSTRALIA and COMMUNITY

THE SHOES are SO UNCOMFORTABLE BUT HELP YOU CLIMB

SUCH A PERSONAL ITEM for ME

THERE ARE BOOT BANANAS INSIDE SO THEY DON'T STINK!

I MOVED TO AUSTRALIA 2 YEARS AGO FROM THE PHILIPPINES

THEY feel LIKE CHANDELIERS!

THESE are EVERYDAY TRADITIONAL EARRINGS from BANGLADESH

WEARING THEM MAKES me feel LIKE MYSELF

THEY START CONVERSATIONS

JHUMKA

THEY REMIND ME OF WHERE I am FROM

I HAVE COMPLEX feelings ABOUT HOW PEOPLE CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE JHUMKA

I WEAR THESE SHIRTS TO MULTICULTURAL SUNDAY at CHURCH

THESE SHIRTS are FROM THE CONGO

THE CONGO is VERY CATHOLIC

THEY ARE A STATEMENT of CONGOLESE CULTURE

I HAVEN'T HAD MUCH CULTURAL TRANSFER FROM MY PARENTS

WE DON'T REALLY EAT CONGOLESE FOOD at HOME, MUM SAYS it's TOO OILY!

MY OBJECT IS THIS PHOTO of ME AND MY MUM on the DAY I GOT my CITIZENSHIP

THIS PHOTO GIVES ME A SENSE of SECURITY and BELONGING

I'M FROM SCOTLAND

KARMA: YOU REAP WHAT YOU SOW

THE VALUE of SPIRITUAL WISDOM, FREEDOM and KNOWLEDGE

MY GRAND FATHER ALWAYS SAID TO READ THE BHAGAVAD GITA

REMINDS me of my LATE GRANDFATHER and MY FAMILY in INDIA

THE TRUTH IS ONE, BUT PATHS ARE MANY, ON HOW TO LIVE A RIGHTEOUS LIFE

MY DAILY PRAYER ITEMS:

- VIBHUTI - WHITE ASH SYMBOLISES PURITY, DEVOTION and THE IMPERMANENCE of LIFE
- KUMKUM - RED POWDER REPRESENTS SHAKTI ENERGY, USED TO DOT/MARK the SPIRITUAL CENTRE
- CHANDAN - SANDALWOOD USED TO ENVOKE DIVINE PRESENCE and PEACE

I LOVE MY MUM and SHE'S A NURSE TOO

SHE'S MY BEST FRIEND and SHE BROUGHT me HERE

REMINDS me of my LATE GRANDFATHER and MY FAMILY in INDIA

THE TRUTH IS ONE, BUT PATHS ARE MANY, ON HOW TO LIVE A RIGHTEOUS LIFE

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We extend our deepest thanks to the thirteen workshop participants, who so generously shared their time, stories, and insights with courage, openness, and care for one another. Their willingness to reflect on personal experiences and engage in thoughtful dialogue lies at the heart of this report. We are also grateful to the Museum of Australian Democracy for their partnership and for hosting the workshop in a space rich with historical and symbolic significance, which helped to inspire and shape the conversations throughout the day.

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= Executive Summary =



Belonging is not only a fundamental human need. It is a foundation for building social cohesion. Policies and practices that advance belonging are key for building a successful multicultural democracy.

In recent decades, trust in democratic institutions has declined across many liberal democracies, including Australia, contributing to feelings of detachment from political life. For Australians from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, these challenges are compounded by cultural, emotional, and institutional barriers to inclusion and representation.

While Australia marked 50 years of official multicultural policy in 2023, everyday racism, under-representation of culturally diverse individuals and groups in political institutions, and uneven experiences of belonging persist. An absence of belonging, particularly when experienced as marginalisation or exclusion, can have serious consequences for civic trust, political engagement, and social cohesion.

This report presents the key findings of a deliberative workshop designed to examine how multicultural Australians understand and experience belonging, held at the Museum of Australian Democracy (MoAD) at Old Parliament House in July 2025. Thirteen young Canberrans from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds participated in this full-day workshop and shared their experiences and insights. The workshop drew on deliberation both as a research method to conduct interviews and as a guiding ethos, ensuring inclusive participation, active listening, and mutual respect.

Unlike traditional interview methods, the workshop invited participants to bring an object symbolising their sense of belonging in Australian democracy, enabling a deeper, more emotionally

resonant exploration of belonging. It also included a reflective walk through the museum's collection of significant objects related to Australian democracy, providing space for participants to consider and discuss what they had seen and experienced. Together, these innovative methods helped generate rich insights into how belonging and democracy are understood and negotiated.

The evidence detailed in this report emphasises the need to reframe belonging, not as something granted by institutions through citizenship or formal procedures, nor as the sole responsibility of migrants. Belonging is a shared, ongoing process, cultivated through everyday encounters, the assurance of cultural safety, and the building of mutual respect.

The findings suggest several ways to strengthen a sense of belonging while underscoring its importance for social cohesion and democratic engagement.

- First, strengthening belonging requires going beyond formal processes of inclusion, to acknowledge the lived realities of exclusion. It requires affirmative communication that people from different social groups are not simply tolerated and respected, but are seen, welcome, and valued.
- Second, belonging depends on connection. At present, Australian multiculturalism tends to emphasise peaceful co-existence among communities rather than meaningful interaction between them. Advancing belonging requires the creation of opportunities for people from diverse cultural backgrounds to come together and share experiences. By recognising the value of informal spaces for cultural expression and intercultural exchange, policymakers can shift from passive tolerance toward active engagement, thereby supporting a more inclusive democracy.
- Third, cultural institutions such as museums play a pivotal role in advancing conversations on democracy and belonging. By facilitating conversations and treating representation not as fixed but as an evolving practice, they can help embed diversity in our democracy and create a stronger collective sense of belonging.

= Introduction =

In many liberal democracies, including Australia, the relationship between ordinary people and elected representatives has weakened in recent decades. This disconnection is reflected in declining levels of satisfaction and trust, and in feelings of detachment and alienation from political life. Such alienation can manifest in non-participation, political apathy, and in some cases, outright rejection of state authority.

In Australia, this challenge is especially acute for people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, for whom the barriers to inclusion and participation are not only procedural but also emotional and cultural. Recent findings from the University of Canberra underscore that a genuine sense of belonging is central to meaningful civic and political inclusion. Those who report “feeling at home” in Australia are twice as likely to stay informed about political issues and to engage in public discussions that affect their lives.⁴

In 2023, Australia marked the 50th anniversary of its multicultural framework. Yet the 2024 Australian Multiculturalism Survey revealed persistent concerns: everyday racism and discrimination continue to undermine social cohesion, and most respondents reported feeling underrepresented by both state and federal political institutions.⁵ These findings suggest that belonging, in its structural, institutional and affective dimensions, remains unevenly distributed across the population.

Belonging is not merely a private sentiment. It is a fundamental human need that plays a crucial role in shaping our society.⁶ In liberal democracies, formal citizenship may confer legal rights, but the lived experience of belonging determines whether individuals feel recognised, valued, and empowered to participate meaningfully in public life. Without such a sense of belonging, democratic ideals such as representation, participation, and inclusion risk becoming hollow.

In a multicultural society, the narratives, memories, and identities that people carry are not simply background features; they actively shape how individuals experience, claim and contribute to democratic life.⁷ Understanding belonging in this context requires more than recognising cultural difference and facilitating peaceful co-existence of culturally and linguistically diverse communities, as is often the case in Australia.⁸ It calls for attention to the layered, evolving and emotionally negotiated processes and interactions through which people connect with each other, with institutions, and with the nation.

The 2024 Australian Multiculturalism Survey acknowledged this complexity, noting that while national-scale surveys are essential for tracking general trends, they must be complemented by qualitative approaches that capture the nuances and complexities of lived experience of individuals and communities involved.⁹

This project responds directly to that call. By centering the voices of multicultural Australians and exploring how they understand, negotiate, and reshape their place in democratic life, it aims to generate insights that can help policymakers strengthen trust, cultivate cultural safety, and build a democracy that is both procedurally fair and leaves no one behind.



⁴S. Park, J. Y. Lee, and K. McGuinness, “Fair Representation in News Makes Multicultural Australians Feel More at Home: New Research,” *The Conversation*, May 1, 2023, <https://theconversation.com/fair-representation-in-news-makes-multicultural-australians-feel-more-at-home-new-research-204104>. ⁵E. Boyle, *FECCA Australian Multiculturalism Survey-Findings Report* (2024), <https://fecca.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Australian-Multiculturalism-Survey-Findings-Report.pdf>. ⁶J.A. Powell, J. A., and S. Menendian (2024). *Belonging without othering: How we save ourselves and the world*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

⁷Commonwealth of Australia, *Towards Fairness: A Multicultural Australia for All* (Canberra: Department of Home Affairs, 2024), 38, <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/multicultural-framework-review/Documents/report-summary/multicultural-framework-review-report-english.pdf>. ⁸F. Mansouri and T. Modood, “The Complementarity of Multiculturalism and Interculturalism: Theory Backed by Australian Evidence,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 44, no. 16 (2021): 1–20. ⁹Boyle. *FECCA Australian Multiculturalism Survey*. 6.

A Deliberative Approach



An Immersive Workshop at the Museum of Australian Democracy (MoAD) at Old Parliament House

In July 2025, we convened a full-day deliberative workshop at the Museum of Australian Democracy (MoAD) at Old Parliament House in Canberra.¹⁰ The purpose was to explore how young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds experience belonging and perceive their place in Australian democracy.

The workshop brought together thirteen participants aged between 18 and 30 who reside in Canberra, ACT. While not representative, the sample reflected a diversity of cultural backgrounds, identities and experience. Each participant had either a first- or second-generation migrant background, from South Africa, Congo, Nigeria, Poland, Netherlands, Scotland, Bangladesh, Vietnam, China, Sri Lanka, India, the Philippines, Papua New Guinea, and Aotearoa New Zealand.

The site of the workshop played a role in shaping the day's conversations. A place of national political significance, MoAD became more than a venue: it served as a

catalyst for reflection on belonging in the context of Australia's national political narrative. Heritage spaces can actively shape the way people imagine their social and political surroundings.¹¹

The setting allowed us to explore how culturally and linguistically diverse communities experience the 'sense of place' at MoAD, and how the museum's architecture, material, and symbolic features relate to participants' existing democratic imaginaries. Through a reflective walk through the museum, participants were prompted to consider how the symbolic and material dimensions of Australia's democratic institutions align with their own lived experiences of belonging and democratic inclusion.

“We live in a period of history where institutions are under attack and distrusted. We need a new set of institutions, narratives, and stories about ourselves that are strong enough to weave our peoples together and create belonging.”¹²

¹⁰University of Canberra human ethics approval number 14539. ¹¹G. Campbell, L. Smith, C. Whitehead, and G. Bozoğlu, *The Routledge International Handbook of Heritage and Politics*, 1st ed. (Oxford: Routledge, 2024); D. Thwaites, B. Turner, and T. Ireland, *Alternative Economies of Heritage: Sustainable, Anti-Colonial and Creative Approaches to Cultural Inheritance*, 1st ed. (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2025); D. A. Kopec and A. Bliss, eds., *Place Meaning and Attachment: Authenticity, Heritage and Preservation*, 1st ed. (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2020), 4.

¹²Powell and Menendian. *Belonging without othering*. 156.



WHAT DID YOU NOTICE ABOUT THE BUILDING WHEN YOU ARRIVED?



THE BUILDING IS INWARD LOOKING, SECRET and CLOSED

WHAT ARE YOUR FIRST IMPRESSIONS?



STRIKING and ANGULAR



ARCHITECTURE EVOKES COLONIAL NOSTALGIA

FEELS LIKE A MUSEUM

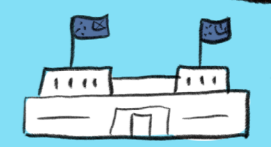


FEELS SMALL TO SOME BIG TO OTHERS



TENSION... SHOULD it BE HERE? HISTORIC VALUE but ALSO HARM

FEELS OLD, GRAND and IMPRESSIVE



SENSE of PRESENCE and HISTORY



CLEAN and FORMAL

HOW DID IT MAKE YOU FEEL?



I FEEL PAIN about THE BUILDING!



LACK of COLOUR

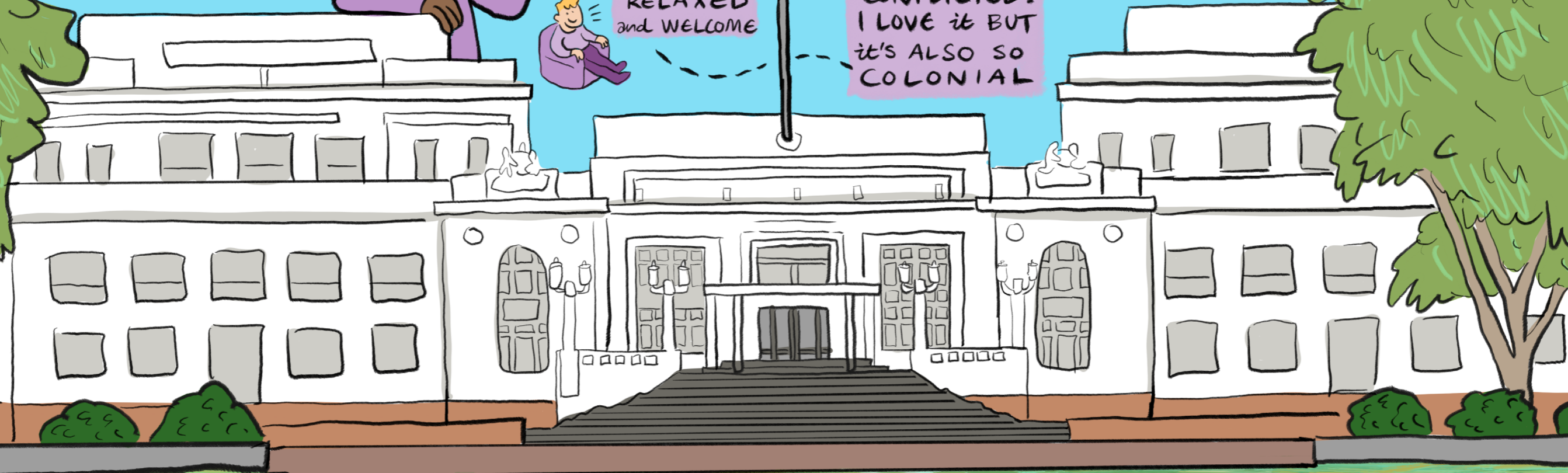
I FELT RELAXED and WELCOME



I FEEL CONFLICTED! I LOVE it BUT it's ALSO SO COLONIAL



WELCOME to MOAD





Deliberation as Method and Ethos

Deliberation is a process of mutual communication, where individuals come together to reflect on and weigh up preferences, values and interests of common concern. It requires a setting where equal recognition, respect and reciprocity are ensured.¹³

In the context of this project, deliberation was not only a research method but a normative commitment to inclusiveness, active listening, and mutual respect. Each participant was given ample time and space to express their views and engage meaningfully

with others, regardless of their confidence or prior experience in formal political discussions.¹⁴ A trained facilitator guided the participants through the day's activities, while members of the research team observed and supported the dialogue to ensure that the process remained respectful, thoughtful, and open-ended.

The day began with participants seated in a circle, guided by a professional facilitator. Each person introduced themselves and reflected on a personal object they had brought in response to the question, "What image or object represents your sense of belonging in Australia?"

Photo credit: Selen Ercan

Storytelling through 'treasures'

At the heart of the workshop was a focus on personal storytelling, including sharing through objects or images. Participants were invited to bring a photo or physical object that represented their sense of belonging in Australia, drawing on the research method of photo elicitation that uses images or material items to prompt deeper reflection and communication.¹⁵

To enrich this approach, we drew inspiration from the Māori concept of "taonga", a term that refers not only to treasured objects but also to spiritual connections, ancestral ties, and relationships with nature and the cycle of life.¹⁶ Participants' 'treasures' included physical artefacts, family heirlooms, symbolic objects, or even stories tied to pieces of clothing and jewellery. Each person was invited to share the meaning of their taonga and how it related to their sense of identity and belonging in Australia.

By creating space for participants to share their treasures and the stories behind them, the workshop enabled a deeper, more emotionally resonant exploration of belonging: one that goes beyond legal status or surface-level diversity, to touch on the affective realities of life in multicultural Australia.

After sharing their reflections on their image or object, participants were invited to place it on a decorated table marked with labels such as *school*, *nature*, *market*, *home*, and *Parliament*. In response to the question, "Where in Australia does your object feel a sense of belonging?" participants mapped their objects within these various spheres of life, visually representing the diverse contexts in which belonging is experienced.

Photo credit: Denise Thwaites



¹³A. Bächtiger, J. S. Dryzek, J. Mansbridge, and M. E. Warren, *The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 2. ¹⁴N. Curato, D. M. Farrell, B. Geissel, K. Grönlund, P. Mockler, J. Pilet, A. Renwick, J. R. Rose, M. Setälä, and J. Suiter, *Deliberative Mini-Publics: Core Design Features* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2021), 49–53.

¹⁵D. Harper, "Talking about Pictures: A Case for Photo Elicitation," *Visual Studies* 17, no. 1 (2002): 13–26. ¹⁶Waitangi Tribunal, *The Te Roroa Report* (Wai 38) (Wellington: Brooker & Friend Ltd., 1992), 210, https://forms.justice.govt.nz/search/Documents/WT/wt_DOC_68462675/Te%20Roroa%201992.compressed.pdf.

SECTION 1

Belonging in
Australia



A key condition for
social cohesion

“Belonging doesn't happen all at once. It's not something that is handed to me. It's something I grow into through shared experiences, mutual respect, and emotional connection.”

Shuchang, workshop participant

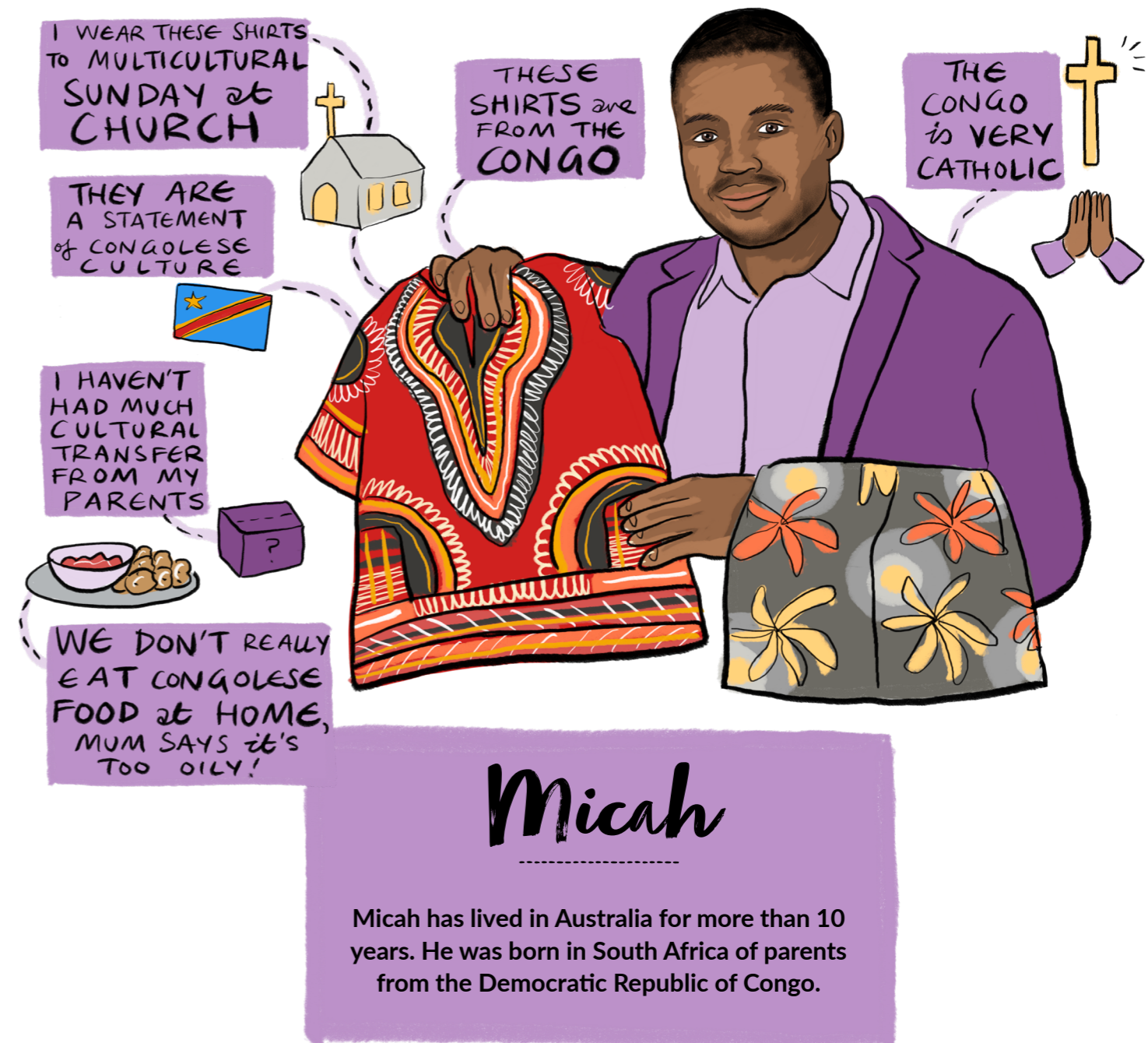
Belonging is a complex and multifaceted concept. While often framed as a formal entitlement to political membership, bestowed by institutions of the state, such as citizenship, belonging also refers to a sense of feeling ‘at home’ and of feeling secure in daily life.¹⁷ Though commonly overlooked in policy discourse, the latter affective aspects of belonging are central to how people perceive their place in our democratic society and to the aspirations they hold for their future within it.¹⁸

Belonging is also fundamentally relational. It is a form of social positioning that emerges from reciprocal social relations, shared experiences, and material and symbolic attachments.¹⁹ It is not a fixed state, but always in motion, evolving through situated and temporal processes.²⁰ Nor is belonging one-dimensional.

Young people in multicultural Australia navigate and situate themselves within overlapping and sometimes competing spaces of belonging.²¹

Drawing on these insights, the deliberative workshop at MoAD invited participants to bring a personal object or photograph that represented their sense of belonging in Australia. These personal ‘treasures’ served as anchors for storytelling and emotional expression. Everyday objects became conduits for complex narratives of identity, migration, memory, and place. Such objects reveal the layered and evolving nature of belonging, and facilitate emotional grounding, and the articulation of multifaceted identities.²²

¹⁷Australian anthropologist Ghassan Hage differentiates between two modalities of belonging: “governmental belonging” which refers to formal membership, and “homely belonging” which refers to the affective dimensions of feeling ‘at home’. See Hage, Ghassan. *White nation: Fantasies of white supremacy in a multicultural society* (New York: Routledge, 2012). ¹⁸John A. Powell and Stephen Menendian, *Belonging without Othering: How We Save Ourselves and the World*, 1st ed. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781503640092>. ¹⁹J. Pfaff-Czarnecka, “From identity to belonging in Social Research: Plurality, Social Boundaries, and the Politics of the self.” In *Ethnicity, Citizenship and Belonging: Practices, Theory and Spatial Dimensions*, vol. 1 of *Ethnicity, Citizenship and Belonging in Latin America*, ed. S. Albiez, N. Castrol, L. Jüssen, and E. Youkhana (Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2011), 199–219. ²⁰N. Yuval-Davis, “Belonging and the Politics of Belonging,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 40, no. 3 (2006): 197–214. ²¹I. Ang, J. Brand, G. Noble, and J. Sternberg, *Connecting Diversity: Paradoxes of Multicultural Australia* (Sydney, NSW: SBS, 2006); A. Harris, “At Home/Out of Place: Young People’s Multicultural Belongings,” in *Cultural, Religious and Political Contestations: The Multicultural Challenge*, ed. F. Mansouri (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2015), 155–67. ²²S. Bonfanti, “(Im)materiality,” in *Ethnographies of Home and Mobility: Shifting Roofs*, ed. A. Miranda Nieto, A. Massa, and S. Bonfanti (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2020), 39–65.



The Lived Experience of Belonging: Key Insights from Participants

Belonging in Australia can co-exist with belonging elsewhere

Belonging in Australia does not require replacing the deep-rooted sense of connection individuals may feel toward their place(s) of origin. For many migrants and refugees, the experience of belonging in a new country involves ongoing negotiation between cultural identities, values, and memories of home. This layered sense of belonging reflects both adaption to life in Australia and the enduring emotional ties to one's country of origin. It highlights how national identity, community inclusion, and personal history interact in shaping one's sense of place and acceptance.

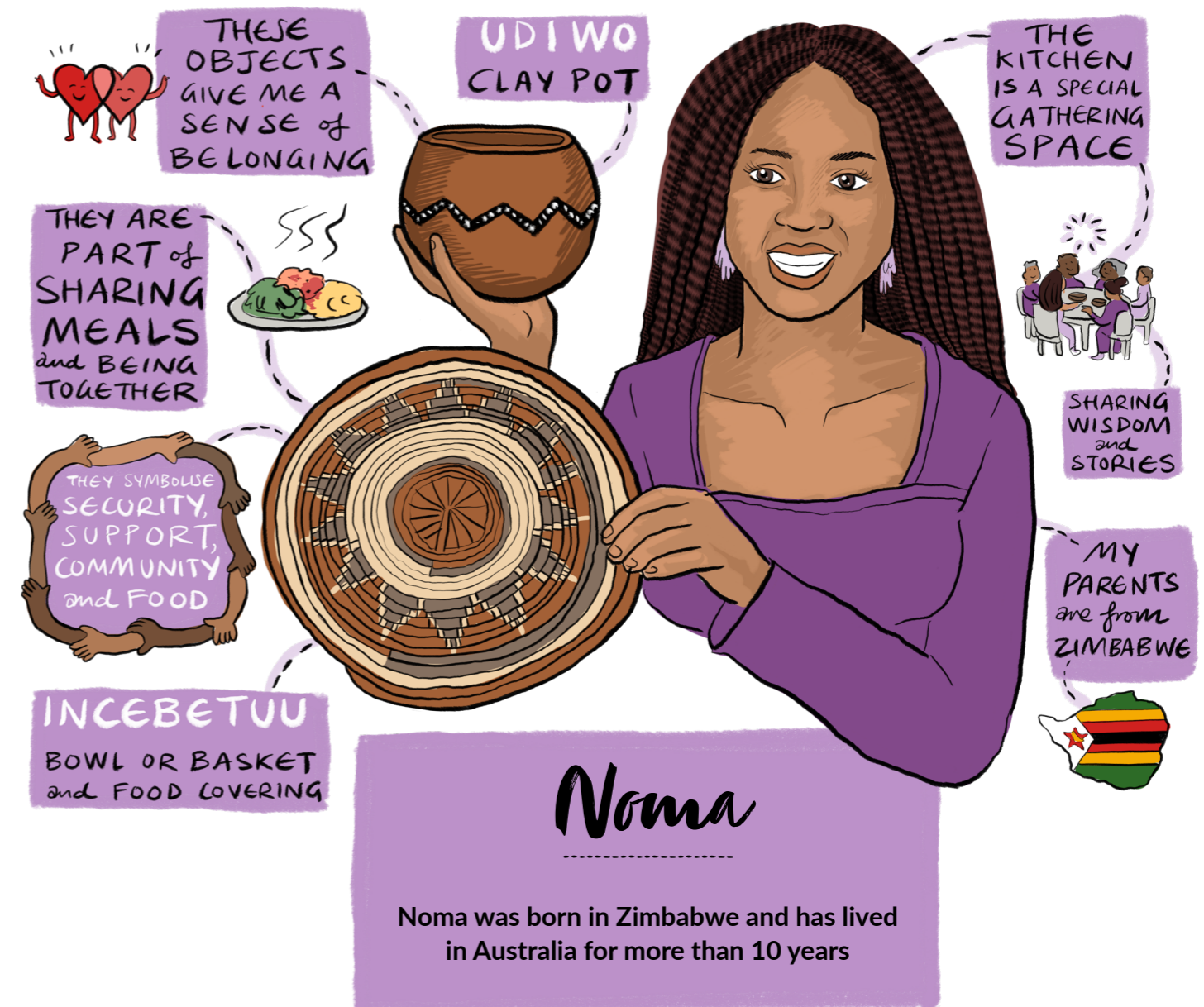
Noma talked of the kitchen not just as a place for food preparation, but as a sacred site of transmission, where wisdom, culture, and identity are passed down—particularly to girls and women.

Despite living in Australia, Noma describes a consistent continuation of eating together as a family, maintaining kitchen rituals, and

honouring Zulu and Ndebele practices. The kitchen is not only a cultural centre but a site of comfort and protection, especially in a new country. The maintenance of these practices becomes a stabilising force. “The kitchen table, for us, is a place of sharing, a place of security, a place of home.” Noma’s story vividly demonstrates how cultural belonging can be enacted in intimate, everyday spaces, especially when those spaces are filled with memory, ritual, and care.

“The kitchen space is a place where your mum can teach you about your culture. Your grandma can gather with you... a place of sharing, a place of security, a place of home... It’s not about gender stereotypes... it has a wider significance... passing on wisdom... support.”

Noma, workshop participant



2. Belonging is an emotionally negotiated process

Recognising the emotional legacies of migration, including intergenerational trauma, cultural loss, and identity fragmentation, is essential. Individuals often navigate the complex task of building a sense of home in a new country while simultaneously holding onto, or mourning, aspects of their former identities, cultures, and personal histories. This process can evoke feelings of loss, displacement, and resilience, as people strive to reconcile their past with their present.

The emotional weight of belonging underscores that it is not merely about physical settlement. Agnieszka spoke of her parents' traumatic migration experiences, marked by war, displacement, and bereavement, which shaped her own feelings of isolation and disconnection from heritage.

Agnieszka's family story, of a Polish father and Vietnamese mother meeting in Canberra, captures the unpredictable outcomes of global

migration. Yet, she frames this connection as fragile, especially with the premature deaths of both grandparents soon after arriving in Australia. "This just really represents the kind of... the fragility of it all." Her account encapsulates the deep tensions and emotional work involved in making a home in Australia while holding onto, and sometimes grieving, other identities and histories.

"Many of [my parents'] siblings died in war... we didn't speak much at all... it was just really, really isolating."

Agnieszka, workshop participant

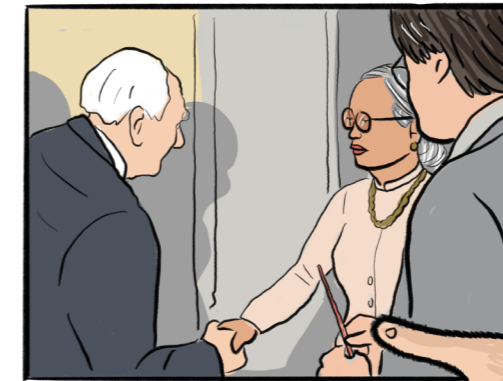
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THIS GUMNUT SYMBOLISES BELONGING and FEELING GROUNDED

THEY BOTH HAD A TRAUMATIC TIME GETTING HERE TO AUSTRALIA



THE PHOTO REMINDS ME HOW FRAGILE LIFE IS

BOTH DIED SHORTLY after ARRIVING HERE



MY PARENTS CAME FROM VIETNAM and POLAND



Agnieszka

Agnieszka was born in Australia to parents who migrated from Poland and Vietnam.

3. Belonging requires emotional safety

While being seen or acknowledged is important, a genuine sense of belonging arises when individuals feel secure, accepted, and able to express themselves without fear of judgment or exclusion. Emotional safety is thus a crucial foundation for fostering meaningful inclusion.

This reflects a broader truth: that belonging doesn't require sameness, but rather space to stand in difference, and still be welcomed.

Clothing and accessories can become portable vessels of belonging. Farizma's jhumkas act as a portable connection to home, allowing her to express her Bangladeshi identity even in spaces where traditional clothing might feel inappropriate or marginalised. "I can't go to the office wearing my traditional clothes... but I could wear earrings."

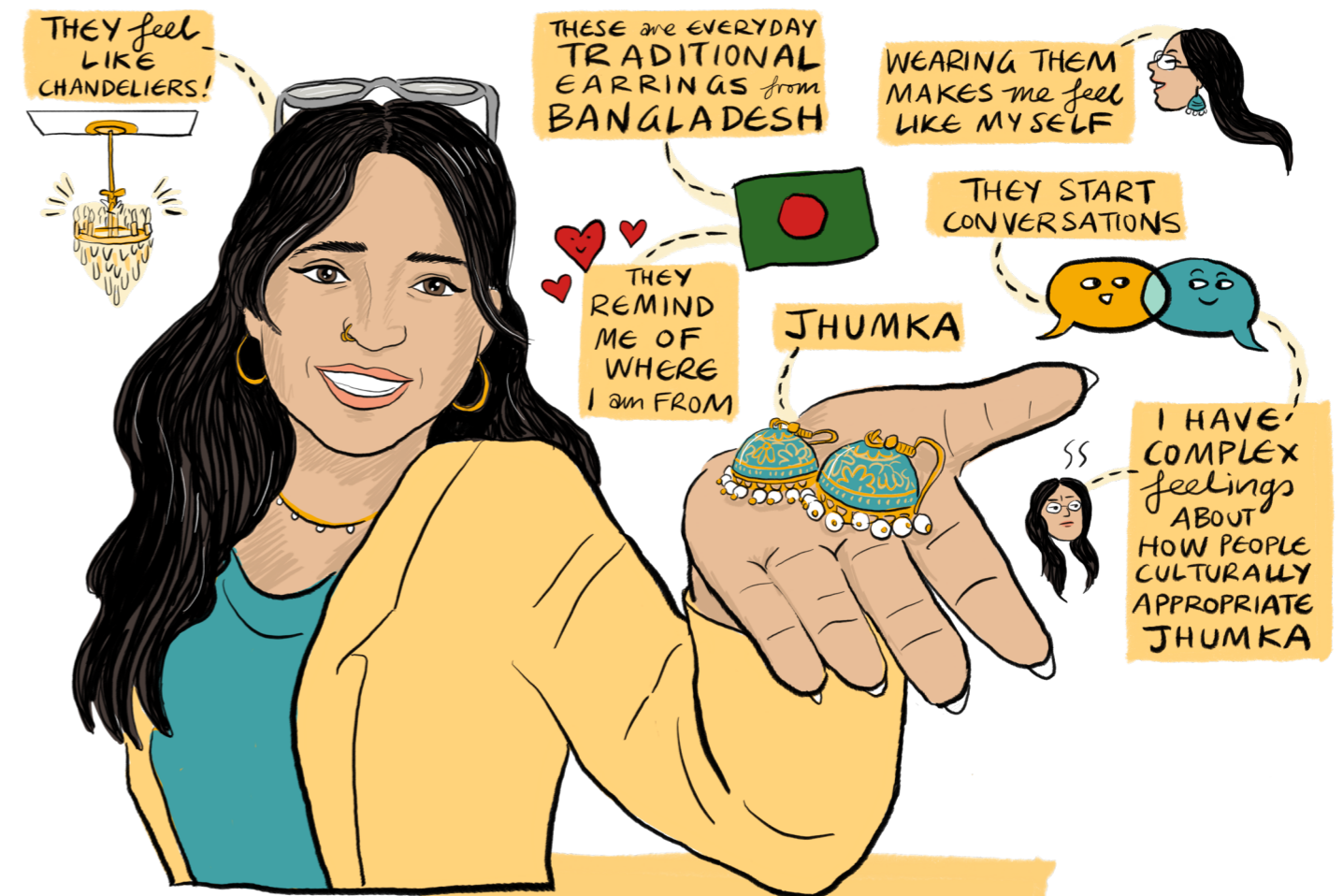
Farizma wears these earrings to feel grounded in her culture but is also aware of the risks of being "too visible" or misinterpreted.

The earrings are both a symbol of empowerment and a form of cautious cultural expression.

Farizma's story powerfully illustrates how belonging in Australia is not only about inclusion, but about navigating the right to be seen, heard, and respected on one's own terms. Her jhumkas are not just decorative; they are emblems of survival, resistance, and connection, in a landscape where cultural identity often must fight for space.

"It's so easy to forget where I'm from... I needed something to remind [me]... But I think I wear it because I need it... Wearing jewellery and having something that's from where I'm from made me feel myself complete."

Farizma, workshop participant



Farizma

Farizma was born in Bangladesh and has been in Australia for 5 years.

4. Belonging grows through everyday multiculturalism

Belonging is often enacted within intimate, everyday spaces, where routine interactions and shared experiences foster a sense of connection. These settings, such as homes, neighbourhoods, workplaces, or community gatherings, provide the context for individuals to feel recognised and affirmed in their identities. Such everyday enactments of belonging are crucial in shaping inclusive environments at a local and personal level.

Simple daily practices, like drinking coffee, can help to anchor people in new environments.

Samuel, for example, frames coffee not just as a beverage but as a symbol of cultural integration. His engagement with Australian coffee culture helps him feel part of the broader social fabric.

The coffee he brought as his personal object is manufactured in Malaysia, representing his background. Yet he also connects it to Australian café culture, noting

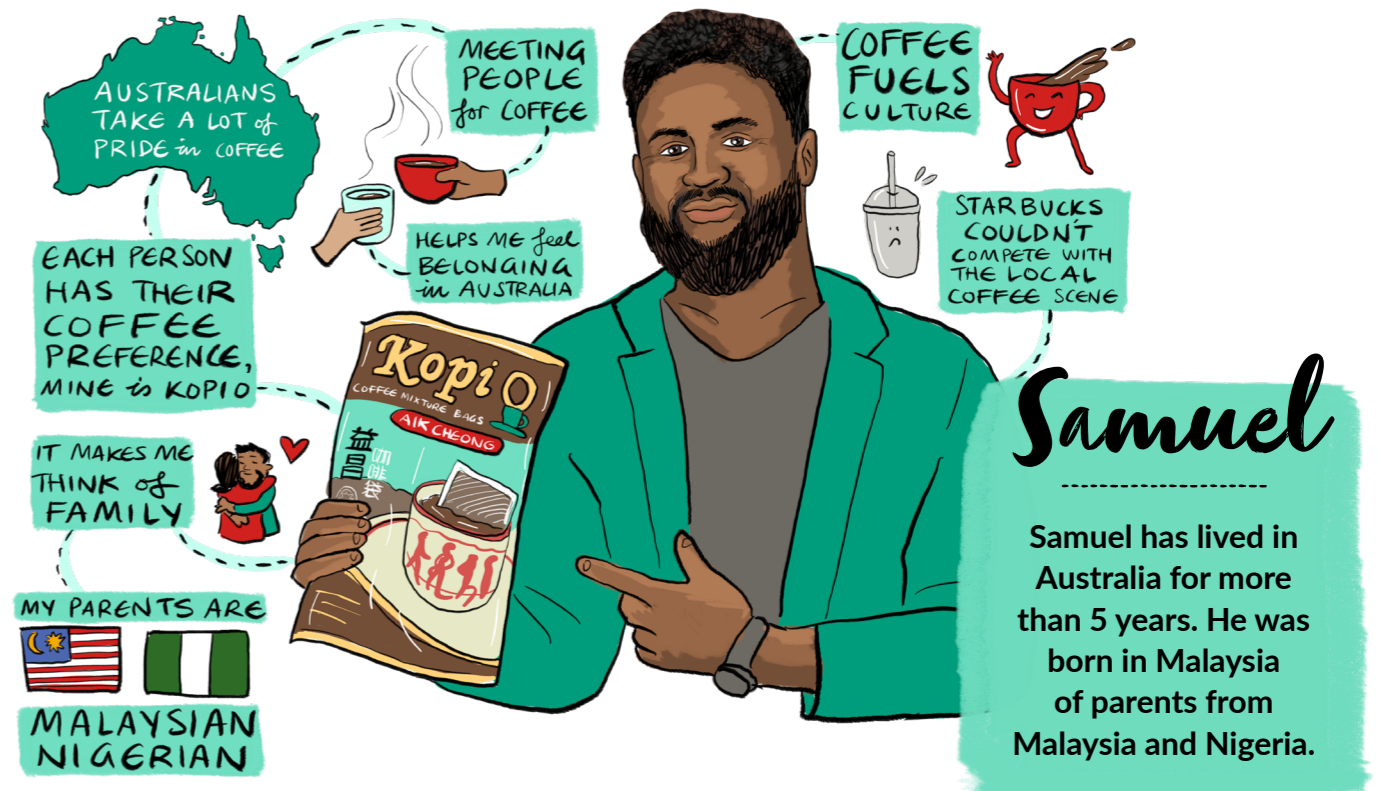
how locals take pride in their independent coffee scene.

Coffee evokes powerful memories for him, especially of childhood mornings in Malaysia, his mother, and local community life. These sensory cues provide emotional continuity across time and space. "It just takes me back to those moments... see all the uncles and aunties just sitting around a table, drinking their coffee, talking."

His story illustrates how everyday multiculturalism functions in practice, creating bonds between individual memory and public culture in subtle but powerful ways.

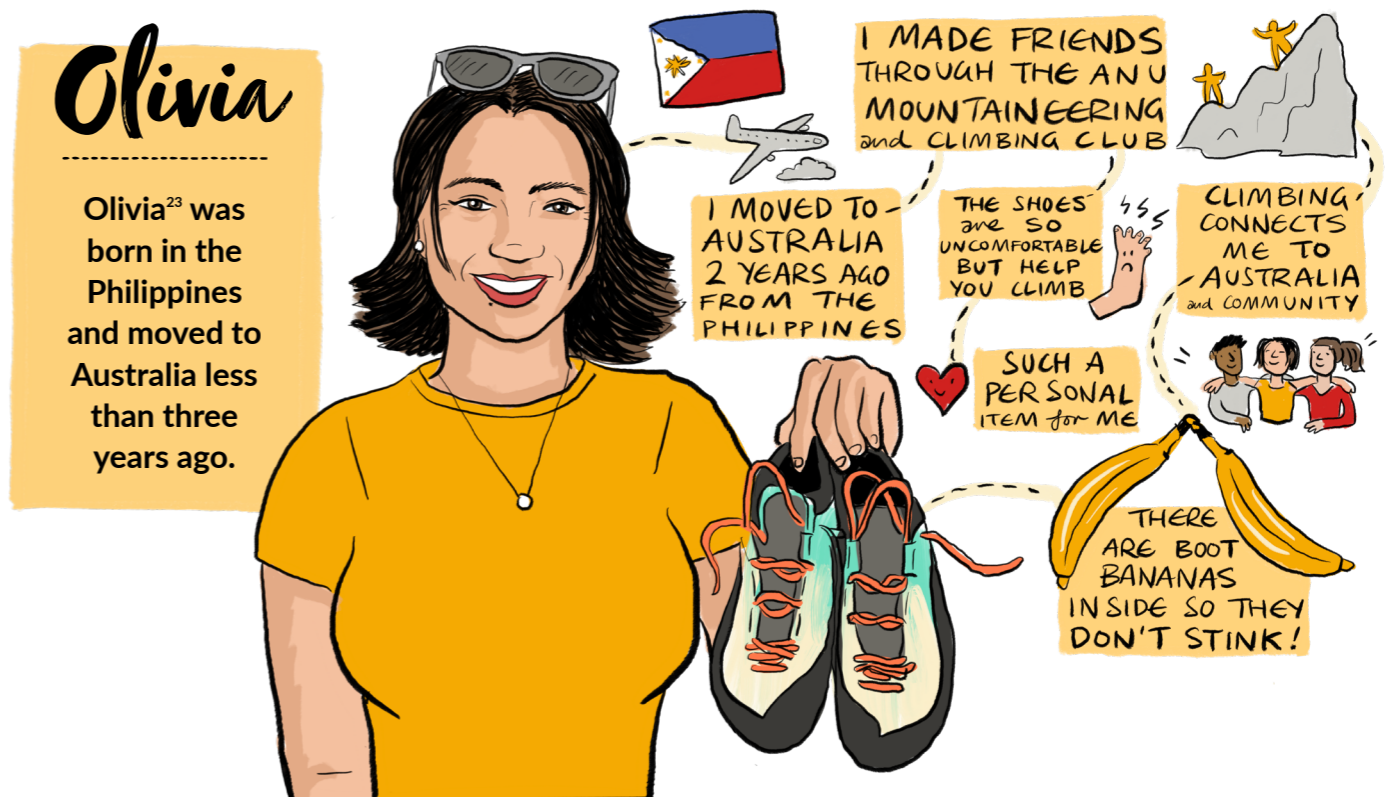
Olivia²³ also reflects on how her sense of belonging developed organically through common interests and shared environments, rather than through formal ethnic or cultural alignments. Her participation in climbing culture created a strong and supportive social network that enabled her to feel "at home" in Australia.

²³Pseudonym. Participant wishes to remain anonymous.



"Coffee fuels the culture... it's what fuels us... I can integrate into the culture with that but also have my personal preference of coffee."

Samuel, workshop participant



5. Belonging is rooted in Place and Land

Belonging is deeply rooted in relationships with place and land, particularly for communities whose identities are intertwined with specific geographies. These connections are not merely physical but encompass cultural, historical, and spiritual dimensions. For many, belonging emerges through a sense of stewardship, memory, and attachment to the land, highlighting the importance of place-based experiences in the formation of identity and community.

Though born in Canberra, Mijica grew up in Papua New Guinea and now lives in Australia. Her narrative reflects a dual sense of home, with identity constantly shaped by the pull of both places.

“When I go to Papua New Guinea, I think about Australia. When I’m here in Australia, I think about Papua New Guinea.”

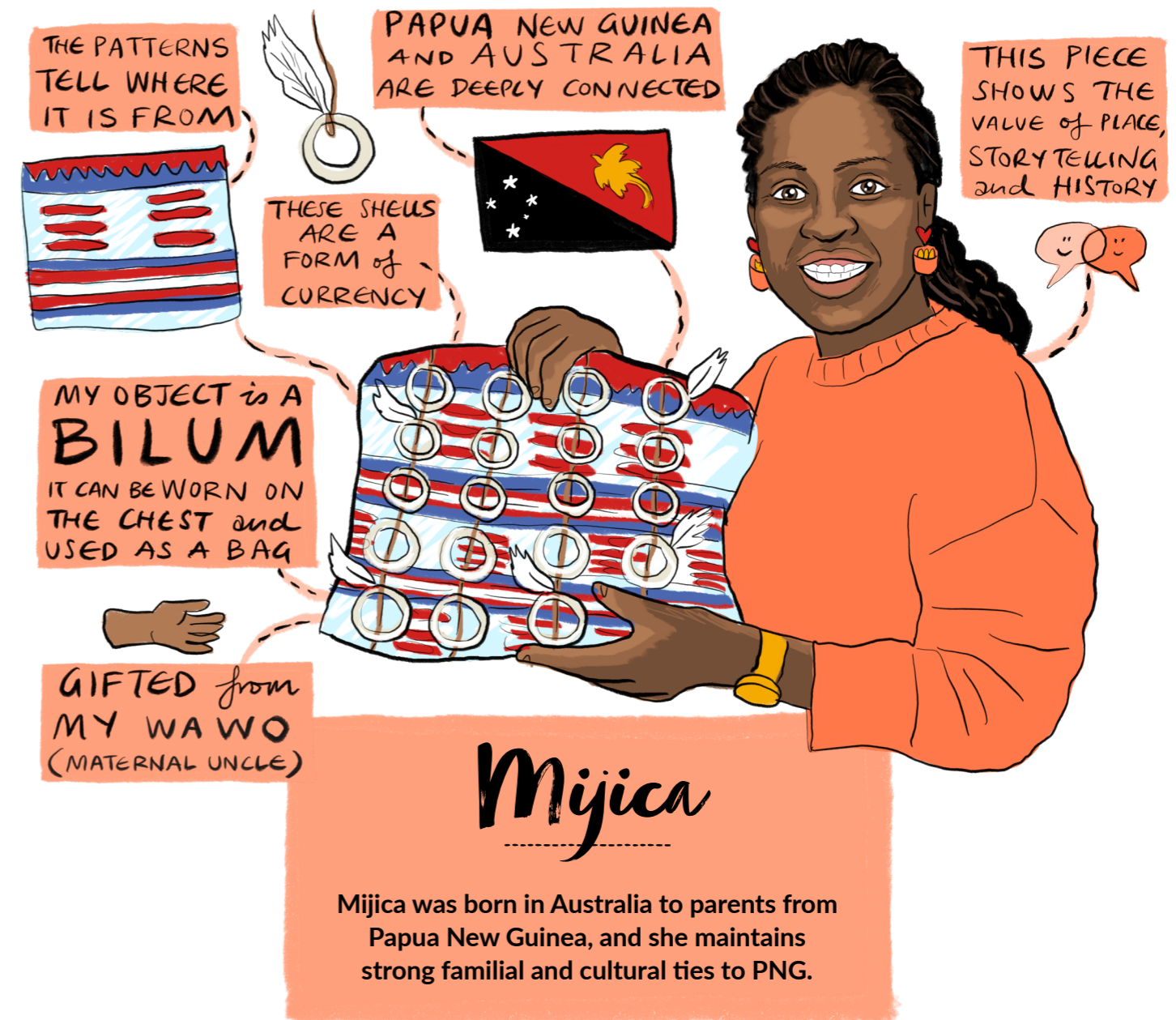
Mijica, workshop participant

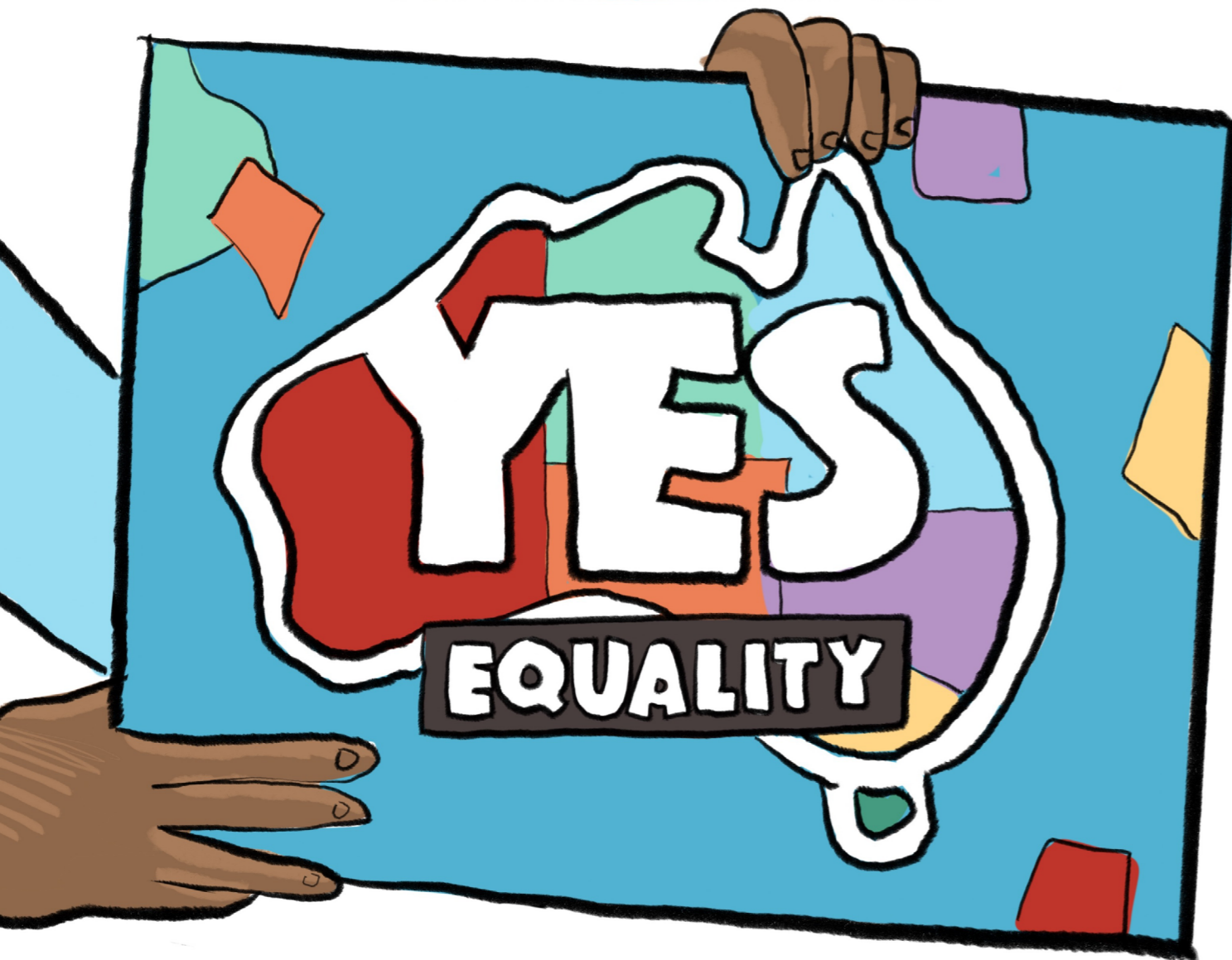
This echoes the idea that belonging is not confined to national borders but is stretched across familial, emotional, and cultural geographies.

Place-based experiences can also shape affective connections to new homelands. Despite cultural dislocation, Agnieszka describes a powerful, visceral moment of feeling grounded while walking in Tidbinbilla, a site of Indigenous significance near Canberra.

“I remember going for a walk down in Tidbinbilla and just feeling grounded, rooted, and I’ve never felt that before.”

Agnieszka, workshop participant





6. Belonging is forged through collective struggles

Public gatherings and public spaces can nurture feelings of 'being at home'. They can serve as sites where alternative narratives and archives of national identity are produced and performed. Through celebrations or protests, marginalised communities can assert their place within the nation. In doing so, they forge bonds of belonging grounded in shared experience and mutual affirmation.

For example, the 2017 Yes vote in the Australian Government's national postal survey designed to gauge support for legalising same-sex marriage is central to one participant's sense of belonging. The public validation of queer relationships marked a turning point, allowing them to feel truly part of Australian society for the first time. Unlike other participants

who emphasize heritage, Nalin²⁴ foregrounded queerness as the primary lens through which belonging is negotiated.

"No matter where you're from, it was a basic human right that has been granted for the community members... that's where the belonging part started for me."

Nalin, workshop participant

²⁴Pseudonym.
Participant wishes to remain anonymous.

7. Belonging is not about assimilation

Belonging, when understood as a process of integration, often involves a complex interplay of emotional and cultural ambivalence. While individuals may experience a sense of pride and achievement in adapting to and being accepted within a dominant cultural framework, this inclusion can simultaneously evoke feelings of loss and dislocation. The process of fitting in may require the downplaying or abandonment of certain cultural practices, languages, or identities, resulting in a melancholic awareness of what has been sacrificed in exchange for acceptance.

Mark²⁵ reflected on his firsthand experience of the integration norms of the Dutch community, framing the 'assimilative tendencies' as both a strength and a loss. His story is a reminder that even well-integrated migrants carry layered identities that require active, reflective care to sustain.

"I feel it's important to distinguish differences and understand that we're not the same, but we bring a unique value and unique picture to an environment."

Mark, workshop participant

²⁵Pseudonym. Participant wishes to remain anonymous.

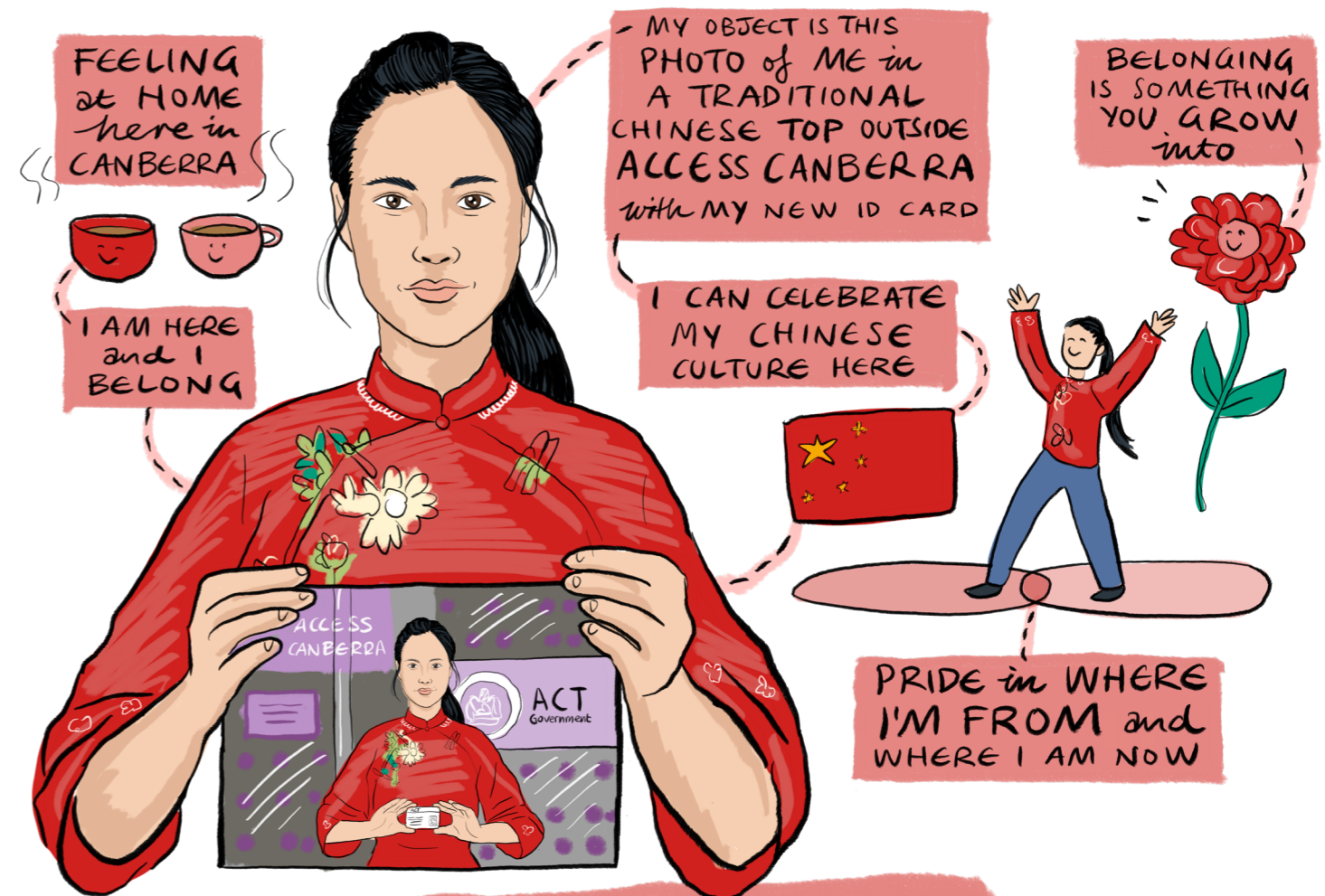


8. Belonging is an enriching, dynamic and relational practice

Belonging is cultivated when individuals not only tolerate but also interact with each other, and seek to understand one another's perspectives, histories, and experiences. This process involves reciprocal learning, where all parties are both teachers and learners in an ongoing exchange that fosters deeper connection and empathy. Shuchang beautifully reframes multiculturalism not as mere coexistence but as active listening and reciprocal learning.

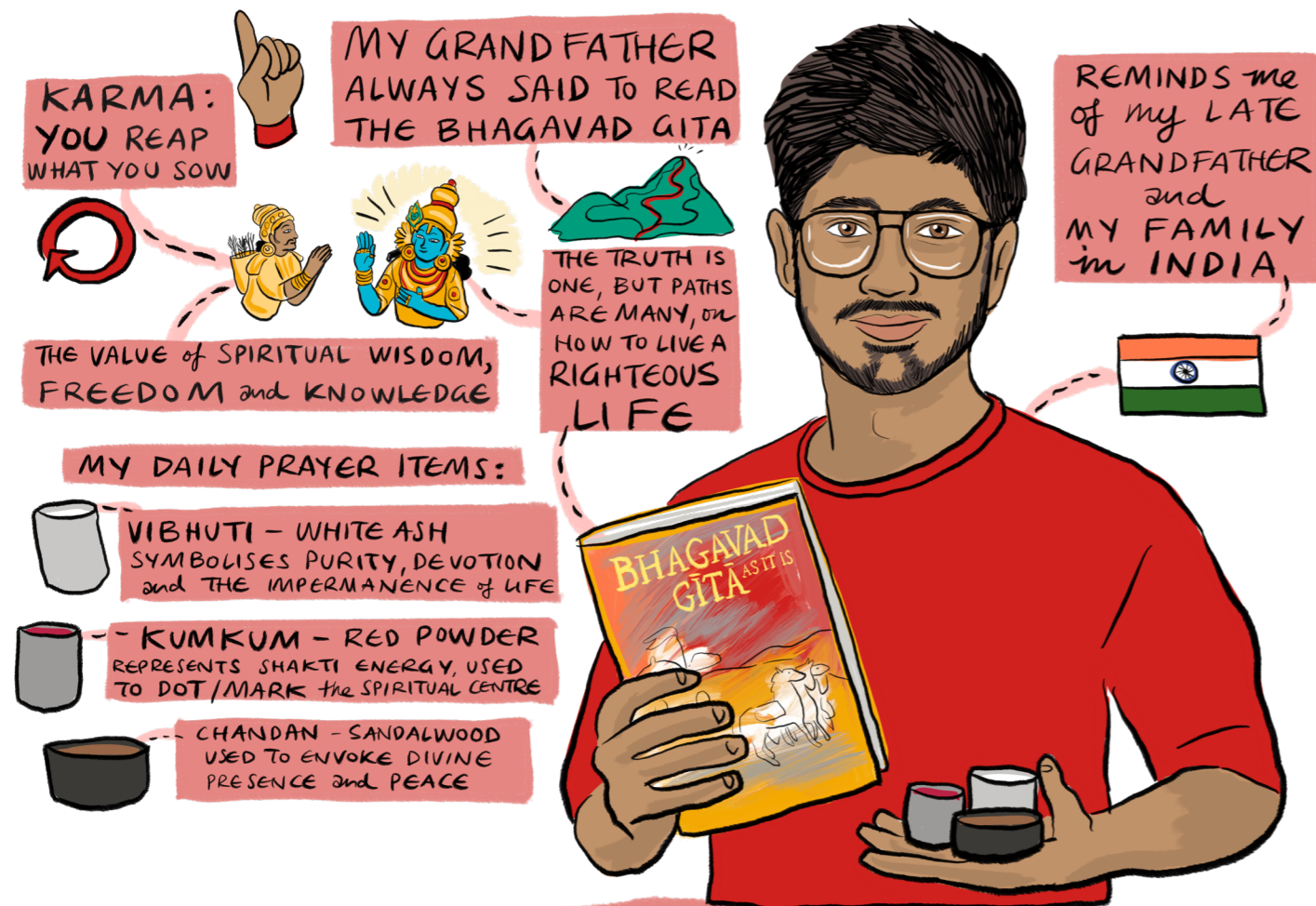
“That, to me, is where multiculturalism begins, in listening... I don't have to shed my culture to be part of this one... I can carry it proudly as part of the mosaic that makes up multicultural Australia.”

Shuchang, workshop participant



Shuchang

Shuchang was born in China and has been in Australia for less than one year.



Harshith

Harshith was born in India and has been in Australia for less than three years.

Summary

The workshop discussions underscored that belonging is a lived, relational and evolving experience, that is embedded in everyday environments and practices. When distilled, participants' reflections point to several key dimensions of belonging in multicultural Australia:

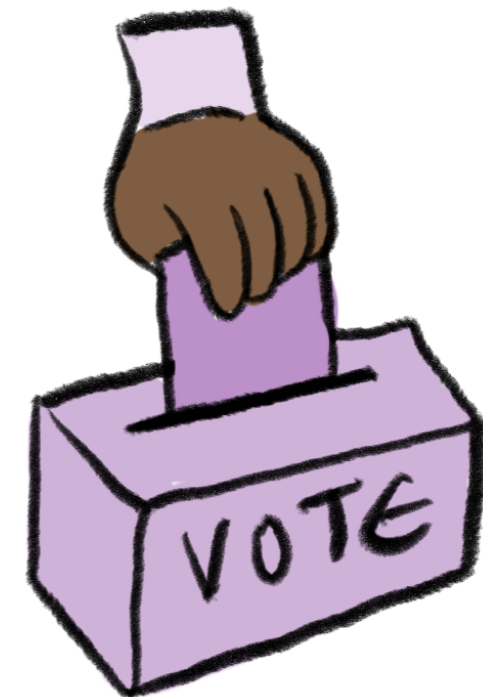
- Belonging in Australia can co-exist with belonging elsewhere
- Belonging is an emotionally negotiated process
- Belonging requires emotional safety
- Belonging grows through everyday multiculturalism
- Belonging is rooted in place and land
- Belonging is forged through collective struggles
- Belonging is not about assimilation
- Belonging is an enriching, dynamic and relational practice



Understanding that belonging is experienced in this way stresses the need for our democratic institutions and policies to move beyond procedural inclusion and tolerance of difference, to enabling conditions of trust, safety, and recognition.

SECTION 2

Implications for Democracy





Belonging, Democracy and the Affective Dimensions of Political Inclusion

During the afternoon of the workshop, participants took part in small group dialogues about the meaning of democracy and their experiences of inclusion and connection. These conversations revealed that democracy is not only about institutions and rights, but also about how people feel, how they are recognised, and whether they experience genuine belonging.

For participants, democracy is an arena where belonging is constantly negotiated. While democracy is often equated with formal procedures such as the right to vote, participants stressed that it is equally about being respected across differences, feeling culturally safe, and sharing responsibility for the well-being of others.

For multicultural Australians, there is broad confidence in Australia's democratic structures, but also a clear awareness that these structures do not always translate into genuine inclusion. This signals a gap between formal ideals of equality and procedural

participation on the one hand, and substantive practices of recognition, respect and felt inclusion on the other.

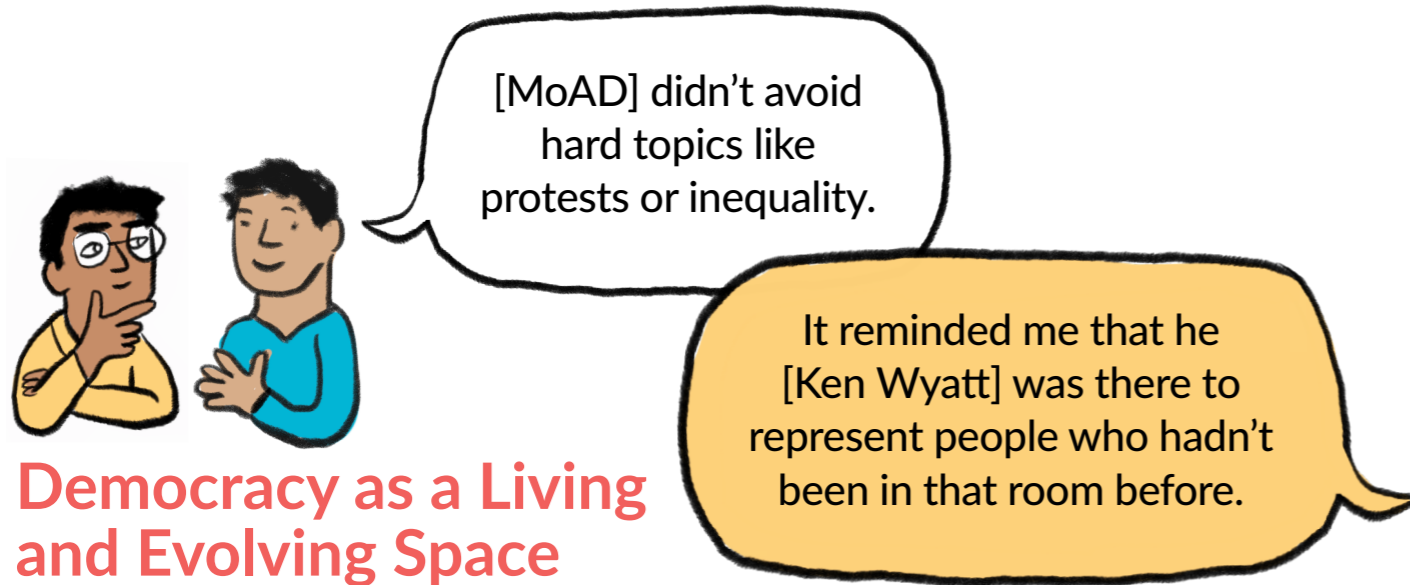
Feeling 'safe' to be fully oneself was not described as a secondary or 'soft' concern, but as a precondition for meaningful political and social inclusion. Subtle and overt forms of exclusion were experienced as limiting both participants' sense of belonging and their connection to democracy itself.

Democracy doesn't automatically include everyone – you have to find a way in.

We say we're multicultural, but some groups are still invisible.

We've become more multicultural much faster than our policies have.

We have rights on paper, but in practice, we're still not accepted.



Democracy as a Living and Evolving Space

The workshop discussions confirmed that, for young multicultural Australians, democracy is not understood solely as a system of government or a set of institutions but as a lived and evolving social project. Participants saw democracy as both precious and precarious – something to be valued, defended, and continually reshaped. Rather than a procedural ideal, democracy emerged as deeply personal, emotional, historical, and cultural. It was framed as a space for voice and agency, and as a network of relationships that demand mutual recognition.

Reflecting on their guided walk through MoAD, participants observed how the exhibitions presented democracy not just as a structure of government, but as a contested, ongoing project shaped by struggles for inclusion.

The Booka Cloak worn by Ken Wyatt during his first speech to Parliament in 2010, for example, was frequently referenced as a symbol of inclusion, identity,

and cultural representation in Parliament. By making marginal voices visible, it reinforced the idea that democracy is a process shaped by the persistent struggles of women, migrants, queer and Indigenous Australians for recognition and equality.

As one participant reflected, “Democracy itself doesn't create space, but in a democracy, you can create the space. That's what makes it powerful – and scary”.

Freedom of expression... but you have to express yourself in a certain way.

Democracy should be about being seen, not just being allowed to exist.



Democracy demands more than tolerance of diversity

Participants described Australia as having a ‘tolerance culture’ rather than a culture of full acceptance of cultural diversity. “On paper, we have democracy”, reflected one participant. “However, as a society, I think we've got a ‘tolerance’ culture...not really accepting”. This again highlights the gap between procedural inclusion and meaningful cultural legitimacy. Participants spoke of the limits imposed on self-expression, and of the sense that they were only partly recognised.

Moving from tolerance to genuine inclusion, they argued, requires recognising diverse ways of being, knowing and participating. “Democracy should be about being seen, not just being allowed to exist.”

Summary

The workshop findings make clear that if democracy is to remain a shared project, it must attend not only to its formal structures but also to the affective dimensions that sustain belonging: the feelings, relationships and cultural narratives that make people feel that they have a place within it.

Strengthening democracy requires moving beyond a procedural focus on rights and participation, toward nurturing a deeper sense of belonging. Policies should prioritise cultural safety and cultural expression, ensuring that diverse communities feel not only formally included but substantively valued. In practice, this means:

- Creating institutional spaces where multicultural Australians can see themselves represented and feel safe and welcome to contribute their voices and agency and express their identities.
- Designing public messaging that affirms cultural diversity as integral to Australia, rather than something to be accommodated.
- Strengthening civic education to teach democracy not simply as a system of rules and procedures but as an evolving space for inclusion, shared responsibility and mutual respect.

SECTION 3

Recommendations



The insights presented in this report arise from the lived experiences, reflections, and aspirations of young multicultural Australians. Their brave and thoughtful contributions highlight both the promise of democracy and the barriers that limit genuine belonging. While participants expressed confidence in the value of Australia's democratic institutions, they also underscored the need for these institutions to respond more deeply to the realities of cultural diversity, emotional safety, and social recognition.

The recommendations below translate these insights into practical directions for policy, practice, and civic culture. They are aimed not simply at improving participation of people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, but to strengthen democracy as a lived, inclusive, and evolving project – one that affirms diversity as central to Australia's democratic story and ensures that all Australians can feel at home within it.

Recommendation 1

Address the affective dimensions of belonging in Australian democracy

Policies and programs must move beyond procedural fairness to acknowledge the emotional, cultural, and relational dimensions of democratic life. Belonging cannot be reduced to formal rights of participation; it is experienced through recognition, safety, and respect across difference. Workshop participants emphasised that cultural safety and the ability to be 'fully oneself' are not secondary concerns, but preconditions for democratic participation. Recognising these affective dimensions as core democratic values, and embedding them in education, community engagement, and policymaking, would ensure that democracy is experienced as an inclusive and responsive social project.

Recommendation 2

Make intercultural dialogue a core democratic practice

Strengthening belonging requires opportunities for meaningful exchange across cultural boundaries. Australia's multiculturalism has tended to focus on peaceful coexistence, rather than supporting meaningful interaction and ongoing dialogue where diverse voices are seen, heard and valued. Governments and community organisations should invest in institutional and community spaces that enable sustained intercultural dialogue, including the sharing of stories, collective problem-solving, and constructive acknowledgement of differences. Designing such spaces for ongoing intercultural dialogue and democratic participation, rather than relying on multicultural 'showcase' events, will help to move democracy beyond tolerance toward genuine inclusion and mutual recognition, building the trust and respect that underpin social cohesion.

Recommendation 3

Empower cultural institutions as sites of democratic renewal

Cultural institutions, including museums, libraries, and galleries, play a critical role in cultivating belonging by creating inclusive narratives of national identity and democratic struggle. Enabling institutions to reflect dynamic, evolving understandings of culture and inclusion is critical to advancing belonging. Workshop reflections on MoAD highlighted how the visibility of contested histories can bring ongoing political struggles for recognition, by women, migrants, and Indigenous Australians, to the fore. By facilitating dialogue on contested histories, migration legacies, and cultural memory, cultural institutions can act as bridges between communities and democracy, helping Australians to see themselves as part of a shared yet diverse and evolving democratic project.

MY OBJECT IS THIS PHOTO of ME AND MY MUM ON the DAY I GOT my CITIZENSHIP

THIS PHOTO GIVES ME A SENSE of SECURITY and BELONGING

I'M FROM SCOTLAND

I LOVE MY MUM and SHE'S A NURSE TOO

SHE'S MY BEST FRIEND and SHE BROUGHT ME HERE

COLOUR

Anne

Anne²⁶ was born in Scotland and has lived in Australia since she was a young child.

²⁶Pseudonym. Participant wishes to remain anonymous.

WHEN I FELT HOME SICK I PRINTED OUT ALL THESE IMAGES

MY FAMILY is from TOKELAU and AOTEAROA

BEAUTIFUL BEACHES

WATER is SO IMPORTANT TO ME

PHOTOS of FAMILY in NZ

I KNOW THEY are PROUD of ME BEING HERE and THAT HELPS ME TO FEEL SAFE

RUGBY

COLOUR

Imogen

Imogen²⁷ was born in Aotearoa New Zealand, of parents from Aotearoa New Zealand and Tokelau. She moved to Australia to study less than three years ago.

²⁷Pseudonym. Participant wishes to remain anonymous.



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