Belonging and Becoming in a Multicultural World

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One night during the early stages of my ethnographic research, I stood outside a school auditorium before an African dance performance. Tino playfully accused Samah of “freestylin’ it,” in reference to her speaking Dinka and Swahili dialects merged with English. Samah was wearing what she described as “traditional African clothing” and listening to American hip hop music. A different day, same school, Vic teased Elijah that she would “hit him up African style” if he didn’t get out of her seat. Elijah responded by pointing out how “annoying” it is when Vic speaks in her “West African language mixed with English.” “I understand her, but it’s annoying,” he said, “she doesn’t even know the history of her own people.” Vic looked down. “If you’re from different countries you’re still African. That’s OK, right?” she said.

In another part of town, while I sat with them in the waiting room of their doctor’s office, three siblings of Karen descent discussed how best to characterize their own sense of national and cultural belonging. The eldest, Catalina, explained, “I just call myself Karen. I am not white people.” Her younger brother, Thakin, answered, “I’m Australian. I wanna be Aussie!” And Jessica, the youngest, offered, “I have both. We like both foods now, we like Aussie food too, don’t we?” They went back and forth in this way for some time. Each sibling was challenging one another’s perspective on what establishes belonging—what elements of a person’s experience or background constitute a sense of identity.

The subtle complexity expressed in these exchanges presented itself again and again throughout the course of my research among young people from refugee backgrounds in Brisbane, Australia. It was certainly apparent that a range of cultural, ethnic, and racial influences coalesced in the formulations of these young people’s sense of themselves. However, they oscillated in their expressions of identity between emphasizing their ability to pick and choose from such influences—to “freestyle,” as some of them described it—and downplaying this...
flexibility in favor of presenting their racial and ethnic identity as fixed and binding. The contradiction this represented, whereby young people demonstrated both reluctance and enthusiasm in their acknowledgment of certain aspects of their background, surprised me.

I’ll confess that I came to my research not devoid of the naive assumption that young people, and particularly young people of migrant and refugee backgrounds, were somehow color-blind and without national and cultural bias or allegiance. That with the frequency and intensity of their “multicultural” encounters and with the broad range of cultural influences that may be present in their peer groups alone, I mistakenly believed, racial, ethnic and national background would become increasingly less significant. It’s not that I thought, exactly, that these young people were just too hip and broad-minded for race to achieve any level of significance in their mind-set, it’s just that I thought something else would dominate. Other things would matter more. A “culture” among them, less clearly divided along racial and ethnic lines, would reveal itself.

To a degree, this notion played out. Young people living in contexts of heightened diversity have been shown to “work the hyphens” of their identities (Fine 1994, quoted in Harris 2013). Strict parameters around racial and ethnic lines appear to have dissipated and been redrawn as young people create networks across division and through overlapping connections to class, culture, gender, language, religion, sexuality, interests, and the list goes on (Harris 2013, 4). My informants were no exception. They identified as African-Australian, Australian-Sudanese, Karen-Australian, Karen-Karen, and a number of other ever-evolving combinations, though perhaps the most pointed example was the young Sudanese man who identified himself as “Blackanese.”

As the term “Blackanese” suggests, and as I also came to understand in the time I spent with them, despite the sophistication of their refusal to fit neatly within ethnic and racial categories, “race” for these young people, was a big deal. They talked about race; they talked about skin color; they engaged with and made fun of racism; they critiqued one another’s representations of racialized selves—and they did so, on a near constant basis, with humor in playful exchanges between one another. As the course of my research unfolded it became harder and harder to deny that, indeed, to these young people it kind of was about race—at least in large part.

The nature of my inquiry began to shift—if race is a dominant theme among these young people, why? And what do I do with this understanding? How does it fit within the current body of youth scholarship which seeks to demonstrate young people at the forefront of multicultural success in forging connections across ethnic and racial divides? And more critically, what does a preoccupation with race and ethnicity say about the ideas this most recent scholarship drives toward countering—ideas that posit the multicultural project is doomed to
failure as evidenced by racial conflict and violence erupting the world over and often with young people placed squarely in the crux of the crisis (Thomas 2011)?

As I muddled through these questions, and in describing my research to others, people would sometimes fixate on the degree to which these young people were “integrating” into what was broadly conceived as Australian culture, or instead, preserving and honoring their ethnic heritage. I began to see how my research informants encountered this fixation, or variations of it, in small but incessant ways in their everyday environments. Also, I saw how, imbedded in this preoccupation with integration versus preservation, young people were implicitly framed by their racial and ethnic background. What I found was that not only did skin color and ethnic background matter to these young people, but that it mattered in part because they encountered it so frequently in the framing of “multiculturalism” that loomed large in the terrain of their daily lives. In their foregrounding and alternate denial of race and ethnicity as central to their own sense of identity, these refugee youths were demonstrating a degree of sociopolitical savvy. Their identity work demonstrates what I describe as a dynamic responsiveness to social context, through which they reformulate the expectations of those aspects of the broader culture that intimately affect their daily lives.

In the social landscape of Australian multiculturalism, young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds are exposed to a range of competing messages and expectations. On one hand, there are ongoing pressures to rapidly absorb and integrate into Australian society, and at the same time, young people perceive and experience a sometimes celebratory and overt racialization of their identities in accordance with an ethic of tolerance (Garner 2010). In response, young people’s representations of identity surfaced in relationship to these messages of integration and tolerance which underlie the broad moral agenda of Australian multiculturalism. Young people from refugee backgrounds, living in the nitty-gritty of multicultural context, perceive the management of their diversity in a way that infiltrates their identity making practices. They absorb, reframe, work within, and reach beyond the sometimes binding framework of the Australian multicultural message as they forge a sense of themselves. And they do it together by bouncing off one another in exchanges, sometimes playful and teasing, and sometimes tense and heated.

Moments such as those described in the opening vignettes emerged as central, in my observations, to young people’s self-representations through which a sense of cultural location and social belonging was approached. Tino and Samah, Vic and Santino, Catalina, Thakin and Jessica, through their friendly jabs, casual observations, and varied references to symbolic cultural resources and influences, revealed much about the wide-ranging social contexts in which their lives unfolded and their sense of their own place within those contexts. One of
the primary aims of this book is to understand the significance of such formulations and examine how they relate to the making of identities and the broader social environments in which they transpire.

**Youth in the World**

This book is a youth-centered ethnography. It’s about young people. It’s about multiculturalism and the refugee experience. It’s about race and ethnicity. But at its core, this book is about identity. Over the course of my research, it became apparent that in their framing of how they see and represent themselves, young people were in part responding to the messages with which they were most regularly confronted in their social environments. With this observation, I acknowledge also that this is what we all do. We formulate opinions, ideas, and a sense of ourselves against the backdrop of the sociopolitical context of our lives and the issues and questions that frame them.

In other words, our sense of ourselves in not formulated exclusively by our experiences, but also by our interpretation of the way those experiences are framed by others. As we filter and interpret the various ways in which our lives are framed, our sense of identity—how we conceive of and portray ourselves—ultimately allows us to cultivate and foster a sense of belonging. And not only does a particular social and political landscape impact upon the varied ways in which we develop a sense of identity, but the reciprocal effect—how our sense of who we are can affect the nature of that landscape—is also revealing. At its ultimate extension, exploring the identity-making practices of a group of people helps us to understand what is experienced as significant, prominent, or pervasive in social context. The identity-making practices of refugee youth in Australia have an important story to tell. They shed light upon barriers to inclusion in multicultural context, the impact of race and nationalism, and the significance of both the refugee experience and global networks in young people’s lives.

These are inarguably issues worthy of our critical consideration in the current Western social and political landscape. With numbers of refugees and asylum seekers in the world surpassing 65 million, 28 million of whom are young people (UNHCR 2012), and a post-Trump, post-Brexit sociopolitical landscape to which issues of migration and race are central, the refugee crisis is one of grave and global consequence. We need not look far on our news and social media feeds—which abound with gut-wrenching images and audio soundtracks of children being torn from their parents at the U.S. border; children, usually boys, held in grim jail-like detention facilities; and young Syrian refuges crossing the desert alone or left dust and blood covered on an ambulance chair—to see how central and how profoundly politicized children are to this crisis (Kelly 2018; Sherwood and Malik 2014; Tharoor 2016; Whyte 2018).
Moreover, the notion of youth agency, the circumstances in which this agency emerges, and the ways in which it is enacted, most recently highlighted in the uprising and political mobilization of youth in response to gun violence in the United States, is a demonstrated barometer of the culturally significant moments and vital social issues with which we are faced (Heim, Truong and St. George 2018). The book speaks to these two increasingly important global debates; the upswing of youth as social actors and the mass migration and resettlement of refugees.

**Book Overview**

In this book, I explore the everyday lives of young refugees, predominantly from North East Africa and South East Asia. I present material exploring their daily interactions in the locations where they most regularly hung out, such as at school, home, shopping centers, bus and train stops, and parties. I explore young people’s exchanges with one another, as well as a range of interactions and experiences that unfolded within their broader social environments. This exploration of the dynamics of their identity making process is set against an analysis of the Australian multicultural agenda and its increasingly contested political and broad moral framework.

My ethnographic research was collected over a four-year period, during which I lived and conducted fieldwork in the metropolitan area of the northern and central suburbs of Brisbane, Australia. I first met a number of the young people with whom I conducted research through my employment as an after-school program coordinator at a nonprofit community center in the northern suburbs of Brisbane. Through this role, I gained access to a number of schools and met the core group of young people whose opinions and experiences provide the material for this book.

The observations I collected focused on the dynamics and tensions of belonging that were evident in how young people defined themselves and their sense of social place in the context of living with diversity. In particular, I explore young people’s racialized and ethnic self-representations and how they are both emphasized and denied as young people seek belonging within friendship groups, through wider networks, and against the background of the pushes and pulls of Australian multiculturalism.

My principal aim in presenting this material is twofold. First, I hope to shed light upon the complex dynamics through which young people of refugee and migrant backgrounds cultivate a sense of self and belonging. I am interested in how they engage and respond to the treatment of their racial, ethnic, and cultural difference through dynamic responsiveness to a multicultural framework that purports to foster their inclusion. Second, I examine young people’s
identity-making practices and the tensions that emerge in their pursuit of belonging in terms of how such dynamics speak to and reflect upon cultural pluralism in the Australian context. What does it mean for the potential of inclusion in the Australian national space? And beyond this, what might such dynamics mean for the future lives of these young people, or others who must similarly build lives out of uncertainty and displacement in the context of articulations of national belonging?

The theoretical thrust of the book focuses on the ways in which youth identity is formulated through dynamic responsiveness to sociopolitical context. I demonstrate this dynamic in the ethnographic chapters of the book, which detail what I’ll describe as young people’s hybridized and essentialized representations of identity. Those representations emerge as a form of “symbolic capital” (Bourdieu 1986) in dialogue with the messages of integration and tolerance inherent to multicultural discourse. In particular, I explore how race and ethnicity might be mobilized by research participants in their alignments with and against one another as they seek belonging to both national and diasporic contexts.

In chapter 1 I will further detail the ethnographic context and methods that led to the book and introduce the theoretical foundations through which I interpret and analyze the research. Chapter 2 approaches the Australian context in greater depth. Here I detail Australian immigration policy and its culmination in today’s modern, multicultural framework and speak to the particulars of Australian multiculturalism in comparison to other relatively new, settler societies. It is here that I locate the ethnographic setting and the Australian multicultural agenda, within the context of critical debates around immigration, race, and resettlement throughout the Western world. Through this discussion, I will detail what I refer to as key discourses of Australian multiculturalism—integration and tolerance—and how young people encounter these discourses in their everyday lives. I go on to look at the backgrounds of the majority of participants and what it might mean for them to be of refugee backgrounds in Australia. In chapter 3 I provide the theoretical framework of the book and engage with the relevant literature on youth and identity to which the analysis of my ethnographic material responds. I argue that through their engagement with the central multicultural ideals of integration and tolerance, young people draw upon their racial and ethnic identity to articulate a sense of themselves that responds to the discourses of multiculturalism they encounter in social context.

These foundational chapters provide the background to make meaning out of my research participants’ everyday practices and the negotiations of belonging in which they engage. Throughout the ensuing ethnographic chapters of the book, I demonstrate how young people answer the competing calls to both integrate with the white Australian population and to enshrine their ethnic and racial heritage, through what I describe as their hybridized and essentialized
representations of identity. Chapter 4 considers young people’s identity work in multicultural context through their everyday practices of making and describing their social relationships. I explore the role of choice in friendship making and choosing romantic partners as a process by which young people emphasize and downplay a sense of racialized, ethnic identity in engagement with the discourses of multiculturalism they encounter in their everyday lives.

In chapter 5 I depart from the everyday practices of identity making and explore the more exceptional and explicitly self-conscious practice of performing identity. I examine how young people adapt various cultural resources, concepts, and associations, both locally and globally, in ways that are not obvious or straightforward for cultivating ethnic and racial affiliations and engaging with the complexity of multiculturalism in their own lives. Chapter 6 takes a broad view of these young people’s identity practices in the political realm of national context as they engage with issues of race and citizenship. In this chapter I explore the complexities of young people’s negotiation, interpretation, and adaptation of experiences with race and racism, as well as the flexibility they demonstrated and allowed one another in their engagement with citizenship. In chapter 7 I conclude by presenting the major themes of the book and their implications for both deepening our understanding of identity formation among transnational diasporas and refugee youth, and for the potential of inclusion in the context of modern, multicultural societies. My focus on what I describe as dynamic responsiveness allows for a wider lens that considers, not only what these young people are doing as they cultivate a sense of identity and belonging, but also the often overlooked reasons as to why.

If we push beyond identity, we garner understanding about both the experience of racial, ethnic and national belonging and inclusion among young people of minority backgrounds, and about the social and political backdrop of the places from which such experiences emerge. In all, and through a broader lens, I seek to explore and illuminate the varied and complex ways people, and young people especially, may engage with and respond to the contemporary world in pursuit of social belonging. This book offers one depiction of how that happens among a community of refugee young people in Brisbane, Australia.

Layered with complexity, this a story about how young refugees define themselves within their new lives in Australia. Australia endorses multiculturalism—a multiculturalism that contains a central and complex paradox. It promotes integration on one hand, while simultaneously celebrating tolerance for difference on the other. This book takes up the practices of identity making with a new theoretical emphasis on young people’s dynamic responsiveness to that multicultural context, as they alternatively emphasize their fluid, open or hybridized qualities, and their fixed or essentialized ones. Dynamic responsiveness
builds upon current research on young people’s everyday processes of making and unmaking identities by establishing, not only that such processes occur, but how lived context and youth engagement with sociopolitical messages motivates those processes. In doing so, it helps us to understand how the mechanisms designed to foster inclusion can work in unanticipated ways as young people forge their own pathways to belonging and becoming.