Belonging and Becoming in a Multicultural World

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Published by Rutgers University Press

Moran, Laura.  
Belonging and Becoming in a Multicultural World: Refugee Youth and the Pursuit of Identity.  
Project MUSE.  muse.jhu.edu/book/71749.

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Early in 2008, after having lived in Brisbane and volunteered extensively with the refugee community for approximately two years, I was hired to coordinate and run an after-school tutoring and mentoring service for high school–aged young people from refugee backgrounds. At approximately the same time I embarked on a doctoral program in which I planned to conduct research among young people from refugee backgrounds. In the not uncommonly serendipitous unfolding of ethnographic research, my work in the after-school program coincided with what were the early stages of my doctoral research. This allowed me to get to know a number of young people who would eventually act as key informants when I formally began my fieldwork one year later.

Over the course of my fieldwork, I conducted participant observation at this after-school program as well as at a local high school. After getting to know the young people in these formal settings, I began spending time with them in their homes and at the places where they regularly hung out, such as local shopping malls, the city center, parks, community halls, train and bus stations, family gatherings, and parties organized by and for young people. In Chapter 2 I detail the Australian context and its significance for conducting this research. Here, I introduce Brisbane, the key sites in which my research unfolded, and the young people I came to know in the process.

Research Setting and Methods

Brisbane, the capital city of Queensland, on the eastern coast of Australia, has a population of approximately 2 million. Like most of Australia’s urban centers, Brisbane can be described as a diverse multicultural hub (Brisbane City Council 2018). According to Brisbane City Council’s Multicultural Communities Program, approximately 2,000 people from refugee backgrounds arrive in Brisbane each
year; the number of people from refugee backgrounds residing in Brisbane at the time of writing the report was 30,000 (Community Life Program 2002). This included people from recently arrived refugee populations in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, as well as an aging population of people who arrived from Continental Europe as refugees following World War II and Vietnamese people who have continued to arrive in Brisbane as refugees since the Vietnam War (Community Life Program 2002). Approximately 23 percent of Brisbane’s population was born overseas, and 17 percent of households speak a language other than English (Brisbane City Council 2018). The number of people from refugee backgrounds settling in Brisbane continues to increase.

Despite its increasing diversity however, in comparison to Australia’s larger urban centers such as Melbourne and Sydney, Brisbane has a relatively small refugee population. For my purposes, this made Brisbane an optimal fieldwork context. Areas of lesser cultural diversity reveal the complexities of social cohesion that emerge less directly through national discourses, broad stereotypes, and media representations (Forrest and Dunn 2011, 450). When I embarked on my doctoral research, Brisbane had experienced a relatively recent influx of non-English-speaking refugees. Since 2003, Brisbane has seen a surge in Sudanese refugees entering Australia as humanitarian entrants (Shakespeare-Finch and Wickham 2010, 24). More recently, since approximately 2007 Brisbane began receiving rapidly increasing numbers of Karen refugees, from Burma, who have been settled in large numbers on the Northside of the city (Queensland Health 2012). The majority of the young people represented in this book are of Sudanese and Karen refugee backgrounds.

As in many “river cities,” Brisbane is roughly broken into the “Northside” and “Southside,” based upon the Brisbane River, which bisects the city. The time I spent with young people at the after-school program, the school, their homes, and various other places was spread across a range of suburbs. There was minimal variance between these suburbs in terms of the socioeconomic status in which the schools and homes of young people were located. The families of my research participants had low incomes and generally lived in government-subsidized housing with large numbers of extended family members and friends rotating in and out of the homes (see Department of Immigration and Citizenship [DIAC] 2011b, 36; see also Australian Government 2012). The after-school program was located only a few suburbs away from where I was living at the time. Many of the young people whom I met there lived close by. As a result, impromptu visits were frequent, and our families came to be close over the course of my research.

I initially came to know the majority of the young people I discuss here through an after-school program and a local high school. What I refer to throughout the book by the pseudonym “Paddington High” is a Catholic coeducational secondary school located in Brisbane city with approximately thirty students
from refugee backgrounds enrolled. Paddington High offers both academic and vocational training, and it emphasizes social justice in access policy and promotion of the school. Nineteen of the young people represented here were enrolled in this school. Of these, eighteen were African—fifteen from Sudan, two from Uganda, one from Sierra Leone—and one was Anglo-Celtic Australian.

The after-school program, which I refer to as “Kedron Club,” was located at a community center on the Northside of Brisbane. It was originally designed to provide homework support to students from refugee backgrounds and evolved to additionally provide mentoring and social support. It was a voluntary program that young people would regularly attend with their friends, where they sometimes made new connections. Anywhere between four and thirty young people attended during a typical session. Twenty of my research informants participated in this program; they came from Burma, Thailand, Sudan, and Papua New Guinea.

Research Methods

The primary methods I employed in my “hanging out” research (see also Ngo 2010, 13), or more formally, ethnographic fieldwork, were participant observation and semistructured individual and group interviews. The ethnographic perspective is fundamentally an attempt to understand the world from the point of view of social actors, rather than the a priori categories of the researcher. My approach to the field research was designed to provide a window into young people’s lives and their interactions with one another in the places where they most regularly spent time together.

I designed and implemented the after-school program and was formally employed as its coordinator. Balancing my role as researcher with one of explicit authority as Kedron Club coordinator presented a unique set of ethnographic challenges (see also Back 1996, 22; Madden 2010). While Kedron Club provided entry into the lives of a number of young people in the initial stages of my research, those young people knew me and regarded me as an authority figure. I worried that this might make them more reluctant to share aspects of their lives or feel pressure to participate. Because of this, rather than targeting individuals, I explained my research to the group as a whole and assured them that their participation was voluntary and not in any way required. And then I waited. As I had coordinated the after-school club for a year before beginning fieldwork meant that time was on my side. Over the course of that year, my relationship with many of the young people became mutually familiar and comfortable.

My official role in Kedron Club also meant that I had to pay particular attention to how I constructed fieldwork so as not to traverse the boundaries between a place where students came to relax, get advice, and get assistance with their schoolwork, and a place where I was seeking to extract insights and information. Because of this, I spent the majority of my fieldwork with the young people
I knew from Kedron Club outside of this program setting. While group interactions were observed, and recorded with participant permission during program hours, the bulk of the more in-depth exploration of various themes, including asking clarifying questions and conducting interviews, was undertaken in less formal atmospheres. In other words, I had to make a concerted effort to carve out time where my only role was as a researcher and I was not also undertaking the task of imposing order.

Of course, my role in Kedron Club was not the only power dynamic at play in this research. While there is always an implicit power differential between researcher and participant, it is markedly exacerbated when the participant is a young person. While I was initially regarded as a teacher by the young people, I was regarded as a “young” teacher, which helped in building trust and rapport. I was sometimes challenged when I told young people that I was not a teacher to “prove it” by doing things that they didn’t think a teacher would do, like swearing at other students or calling them derogatory names (usually based on skin color, which I will discuss later). I did not do these things. But I did consciously attempt to establish myself as a researcher rather than a teacher.

In a final note on the power dynamics that impacted upon my study, as an American, I enjoyed some privileged status among these young people—they were intrigued by America generally and they expressed some affinity toward me for also being from “somewhere else.” However, my position as a Western, Anglo, female researcher inevitably established an immediate division between myself and my informants. I sought to compensate for these dynamics during fieldwork as much as I could, but my principal strategy was to maintain awareness of these reflexive concerns and how they influenced my time spent with the young people conducting fieldwork, as well as my interpretation and analysis throughout the research process (see Denzin and Lincoln 2003, 26).

Despite these challenges, which are inherent in the nature of ethnographic research, hanging out in Paddington High, in Kedron Club and in the “spaces between home and school” (Noble, Poynting, and Tabar 1999, 32) proved that these were revealing sites through which to explore the dynamics of creating belonging in the everyday lives of young people from refugee backgrounds. At Paddington High, I was present for the daily routine of the lunch hour, attended some classes, and lingered with students in both formal and informal after-school activities. Throughout much of the day, outside of the lunch hour and when not attending a class, I positioned myself at a picnic table in the middle of the courtyard. Students would come to this area to receive extra help from the ELL (English language learner) teacher, who was also positioned there for set portions of the day, or to chat with each other, possibly avoid class, and generally pass the time.

After school, I would attend the dance practice that most of the young people attended at certain times during the school year, and which was located in a
back wing of the school and largely unsupervised; or wander with them into the city or to the train station, where they would linger for a time before going home. I spent time with participants in the relatively informal setting of Kedron Club as they worked on homework—and where they gossiped, teased, and hung out under the guise of doing homework. Thus, through my initial introduction to young people in these formal settings, I also came to spend time with them in more informal spaces like shopping centers, inner-city public recreation spaces, and train and bus stations, as well as in the homes and at private gatherings of the young people.

It was during these in-between spaces and times that I was able to be there as the undercurrent of conflict between Tino and Nine slowly escalated and intensely erupted; as Samah and Lauren gossiped about the boys they had crushes on; as Santino attempted to get “hugs” from girls; as Vic experienced setbacks and frustrations in the process of bringing her mother to Australia; and as Lisa experienced ongoing conflict with her father and shared her sadness over having to switch schools. Hanging out and sharing in these experiences of the young people allowed me to observe as the negotiations and tensions of belonging unfolded and as identity was constituted and represented in complex and often contradictory ways.

Twenty-seven young people participated in interviews through which I could tease out some of the issues observed in other fieldwork settings. At the start of the interviews, I urged the young people to only discuss those things that they saw as essential to their life experience and that they were comfortable discussing. I also reminded them that the research would be anonymous and confidential and gave them the opportunity, in which many took immense pleasure, to select the name they would like to use to protect their anonymity. Many of the young people carefully selected an alias, while others claimed not to mind if the name by which I knew them was used in my research. Nonetheless, all personal names are pseudonyms.

It was my methodological imperative not to delve into the life history of my informants in terms of their refugee status or journey to Australia beyond what they offered in casual conversation or in initial interview questions. This choice was based upon the vulnerabilities of my research participants as young people, the general research saturation they experienced regarding this aspect of their lives, and indeed, because I was most interested in learning how they defined themselves and created a sense of belonging with one another in the social landscape of the Australian context in which they currently lived. The things they highlighted and the things they left out were equally revealing to me in the interview process. Beyond this, I felt that allowing the young people to define for themselves what was significant in their lives helped to foster rapport.

As a result, however—and while I recognize the massive impact of the ruptures they have experienced on their sense of self and belonging—the breadth
of information I provide here on their life histories and the pre-migration con-
texts of their lives is not extensive. For example, I do not detail many of the things
generally associated with research among refugee populations, such as their
socioeconomic status in their countries of origin or their experiences with war,
torture, and trauma. Moreover, as it was my express purpose to explore the ways
in which young people defined and presented themselves in the pursuit of
belonging, it was outside the scope of this book to interview family members.
The experiences of home and family life, as well as the tensions of parental
expectations and familial conflicts, are engaged in my analysis insofar as they
were discussed and addressed by the young people. Consequently, the perspec-
tives of family members throughout my research findings are filtered through
the interpretations of the young people themselves.

It is also worth noting at the outset that I do not interpret my ethnographic
data through a gendered lens. This is primarily because gender was not a theme
that emerged significantly in participants’ accounts and representations of them-
selves during fieldwork. Gender is indeed of consequence when considering
issues of race and ethnicity in young people’s lives, as the hierarchical dynamics
and language of race intersect with other social relations such as gender, class,
and sexuality (Carroll 2017). Moreover, migration, displacement, and even mul-
ticulturalism are gendered in ways that intersect with age (Pruitt, Berents and
Munro 2018). I therefore incorporate some theorizing of gender and intersection-
ality subsequently and in Chapter 3 and also expound on this analysis where
appropriate in the ethnographic chapters.

However, I chose not to focus on gender as central to my analysis of the eth-
nographic data presented out of fidelity to my participants’ concerns, of which
race and ethnicity took precedence. While significant factors such as family life
and familial roles, age, gender, and cultural background certainly influence the
self-understanding and social location of these young people in significant ways,
the precise focus and contribution of this study is to demonstrate the everyday
ways in which young people, with one another, represent a multiplicity of identi-
fications in the pursuit of belonging—and in the process, they may unsettle the
perceived influence of these categories or draw upon them in unexpected ways.

While the whole of their lived histories no doubt affects the complex ways
in which these young refugees make sense of their present social worlds, my
focus is instead on the everyday practices through which they represented their
identities in ways that attempted to foster a sense of place and belonging in Aus-
tralia. It was this endeavor that seemed to lie at the heart of the interactions
between the young people as well as their interpretations of their experiences
as portrayed in interviews. And it was largely through this filter that young
people evoked (or in some cases, deemphasized) other elements of their indi-
vidual experiences such as aspects of life in their country of origin or their expe-
riences as refugees.
The Participants

My key research informants comprise thirty-nine young people, thirty-seven of whom were from refugee backgrounds, who were aged nine to twenty years and residing in Brisbane. It was through my relationships with those key informants that connections developed with a broader range of young people who also came to influence my research. While it was those key informants with whom I conducted interviews and was able to most directly pursue my research agenda, through this snowball effect, I also consider a wider group of siblings, family members, friends, and friends of friends as participants in my research.

Thirty-eight of my key informants had been living in Brisbane for between two and six years at the time they participated in the study (apart from the Anglo-Celtic Australian participant, who had lived in Brisbane for most of her life). The young people were aged between 9 and 20 years old, but the majority were aged between 14 and 16 years. One was 9 years of age; ten were between 10 and 13 years of age; twenty-one were between 14 and 16 years of age; six were between 17 and 19 years of age; and one was 20 years of age. The wide range in participants’ age is mainly due to participation in the research by siblings. It was often the case that while spending time in the home of a young person I met through Paddington High or Kedron Club, a sibling would join in the interview or express an interest in contributing their experiences to my research. In addition, at both Paddington High and Kedron Club, young people hung out with siblings and friends of siblings, creating a wide age range within friendship groups.

Fifteen of my key informants were female and twenty-four were male. They came from the following countries: twenty-three from Sudan; two from Uganda; one from Sierra Leone; eleven from Thailand who had previously lived in Burma (eight identified as Karen, one as Chin, and two as Burmese); one from Australia; and one from Papua New Guinea. Of the twenty-three from Sudan, three participants came to Australia via Uganda, twelve came via Kenya, and eight came via Egypt. Of the eleven participants who came from Burma and Thailand, all came to Australia via the Tham Hin refugee camp in Thailand. The participant from Papua New Guinea came to Australia directly as a migrant.

The route they took to Australia proved significant for the young people. For example, the few Sudanese young people who came to Australia via Cairo would describe the others who came via Kenya and Uganda and, most likely, spent the majority of their time there living in the Kakuma and Kiryandongo refugee camps, respectively, as “a little behind us,” in terms of markers of sophistication in things like taste in fashion and music. The young people from Burma and Thailand often referenced the refugee camps where they lived before coming to Australia and distinguished their current friends whom they had known from the camp before arriving in Australia from friends they had made in Australia.
Thirty-seven of the thirty-nine key informants had refugee status in Australia (one was a migrant and one was from Australia). During my research, twenty confirmed that they had Australian citizenship. Of these, twelve were from Africa, seven were from Burma, and one was born an Australian citizen. Six informants stated that they did not yet have Australian citizenship. Of these, four were from Africa and two were from Burma. Thirteen informants were not sure whether they had Australian citizenship.

My research participants were, of course, chosen in part due to access, availability, and the logistical unfolding of my fieldwork (e.g., central members of friendship groups were included regardless of ethnic background or status in the Australian context). However, I was deliberate in the decision to explore my research questions among young people from a range of backgrounds, as this approach allowed for me to explore the processes of identity making among young people with a broad lens and the aim of moving beyond constructions based on ethnicities, nationalities, or experiences as refugees.

Similarly, my deliberate focus on a small cohort of participants allows for a nuanced investigation into the lived impact of multiculturalism on young people's lives that is more broadly generalizable than a focus on a larger cohort. It enables an emphasis on everyday articulations of belonging and a multiplicity of cultural resources upon which young people may draw to assert a sense of belonging and participation in the political context of their lives outside of their explicit ethnic or national alignments. Because of the relatively small core group of research participants and the logistical, ethnographic skew toward young people of Sudanese backgrounds, it was outside of the scope of my research to take a comparative approach to the ways in which diverse groups of young people approached identity based on national or ethnic background.

While in the ethnographic chapters I make some comparative assertions between the identity practices of different friendship groups (which, in some instances, were divided along national and ethnic lines), I steer clear of broad comparisons between ethnic groups. Without a larger cohort of research participants, I felt a comparative approach would risk stereotyping. Instead, the aim of my research design allows for an exploration of the fluidity in young people's emphasis on all sorts of markers of identity.

I have provided an overview of statistical data such as age, gender, country of origin, route to Australia, refugee status, and citizenship here to provide the reader at the outset with some basic facts about these young people and the circumstances under which they arrived in Australia. In the thick of my research and as I sought to understand something of the lives and experiences of these young people, however, such facts were of value only to the extent that they were emphasized as important by the young people themselves. The ethnographic process, one of hanging out and immersing myself in the daily lives of my informants, was about being present to the emotion and
routines of their lived experience, which came alive below the surface of these objective facts.

This book seeks to distil the relationship between youth processes of identity making and the multicultural context in which they unfolded in my fieldwork. In the concluding section of the chapter, I outline the core concepts and theoretical foundations of the book as they emerged in my research and are approached in the scholarly literature.

**Identity and Dynamic Responsiveness in Multicultural Context**

My fundamental concern is with the ways in which young people exhibit a kind of dynamic responsiveness in their engagement with an underlying ethos emerging from the broad social fabric of Australian multiculturalism. Messages emerging from the Australian multicultural context inform these young people's identities and impact upon their sense of displacement and belonging. As I demonstrate, it is not only the experience of racism or exclusion that can fuel young people's highly racialized identity work, but also their engagement with the very ideals designed to address that experience. It is here, in a kind of subconscious dialogue with the continual and abstracted messages about who they are and how they fit in, that the work of identification occurs. As such, I view young people's identity-making practices through the conceptual lens of dynamic responsiveness.

Their dynamic responsiveness, made apparent in these young people's interactive exchanges with one another, informs a core of agency through which they engage with the expectations and demands imposed upon them. The conceptual architecture of dynamic responsiveness allows for a nuanced elaboration of young people's agency as they grapple with sometimes conflicting social phenomena such as peer cultures, family, multiculturalism, and national discourses concerning citizenship. The identity work of young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds is certainly self-conscious, and it is sometimes fueled by underlying perceptions and motivations, but it is always responding to some level of awareness of the larger sociopolitical context that frames their lives. I hope to illuminate such dynamic responsiveness by demonstrating young people's engagement with the rhetoric surrounding multiculturalism that they encounter in their everyday environments. From this perspective, I critically analyze the notion of the modern "hybrid" or "plural" youth identity.

Responsiveness, in the making and unmaking of identities, is ultimately about the cultivation of belonging. I am interested in those moments when participants negotiated and asserted notions of nationality, race, and ethnicity in the pursuit of social place and belonging. Belonging, as a scholarly concept related to identity politics, is often associated with nationalism and nationalist movements (Skrbis, Baldassar, and Poynting 2007, 261). In a given social context,
it may be fiercely asserted by some while it is simultaneously denied to others. In practical terms this means that the ways in which people cultivate and assert a sense of belonging is constantly shifting. The fluid nature of cultivating belonging is particularly evident in the lives of young people who are immersed in complex relations of power and for whom a sense of self and belonging are deeply significant pursuits.

I argue that these young people's negotiations of identity and belonging are undertaken at the interface of experiences and perceptions of racism and in response to the discourses that emerge to confront it. By critically exploring their identity-making processes, I hope to reveal both how young people pursue a sense of belonging in a dynamic, responsive relationship to social context, and the extent to which such being, or belonging, is made available to them. Pierre Bourdieu’s theories (1977, 1984, 1986, 1990) relating to the reproduction of social power and its effect on social agents, which I explore in greater depth in Chapter 3, underpin this central concern and have informed my understandings of the social context in which I recorded and interpreted ethnographic data.

The theoretical foundations that I take as a starting point from which to explore refugee youth identity in response to the Australian multicultural context rest upon the following scholarly positions: (1) that the making of identities is a continually evolving process of asserting sameness and difference in relation to others in dynamic interaction with existing power structures; and (2) that the dominant Australian Anglo-Celtic identity may constitute a form of capital through which the terrain of Australian multiculturalism is overdetermined. Fundamentally, I seek to demonstrate how young refugees in Australia intuitively sense and respond to the racialized power dynamics of Australian multiculturalism in their formulations of identity.

Let me further unpack the theoretical underpinnings of my research and locate them within the scholarly literature on youth, identity, and multiculturalism. First, in order to anchor my approach within the context of similar research and outline key theoretical concepts, I will provide a brief historical overview of the scholarly literature on youth and the emergence of a focus on the broad concept of identity within the field.

**Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Youth**

The terms *childhood* and *youth* are context-dependent and highly contested categories in the contemporary world. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines youth as the period of time between fifteen and twenty-four years of age, and the term is more broadly understood as a “period of transition from the dependence of childhood to adulthood’s independence” (UNESCO 2017). Childhood is defined in similarly flexible terms by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child as a “separated and safe space” from adulthood, occurring up to eighteen years of age, and also refers
to the conditions of one’s life during this time (UNICEF 2004). Furthermore, the categories of childhood and youth are defined in gendered terms; while childhood is often depicted as feminized, with children seen as vulnerable and in need of protection, youth is often depicted as masculine and threatening (Pruitt et al. 2018).

As these definitions highlight, both childhood and youth represent fluid categories, rather than fixed, age-based groups, and must be considered with critical attention to social context and the overlapping categories of class, ethnicity, gender, and disparities of access to material goods and political advantage. While the young people represented here fit largely within the defined category of “youth,” some also fit within the category of “children.” I predominantly use the term “young people” to refer to my research participants who identify themselves and are identified by their peers as broadly falling within the category of youth.

The study of youth has drawn increasing recognition from social scientists in recent decades and has come to focus heavily on the processes of identity making undertaken by young people (e.g., Bucholtz 2002; Jenks 2005; Quijada 2008; Wulff 1995b). This attention suggests that the ways in which young people negotiate a sense of self and belonging have much to reveal, not only about the making of identities more generally, but also about the broader societies in which they live and about larger global processes. Examining practices of identification among young people can provide rich and significant insights into the processes of cultivating a sense of belonging and how that occurs in response to social contexts. In doing so it can also provide an important window into the specific manifestations of social issues on local and global scales.

Indeed, as Fass (2003, 2007) and others have pointed out, children and young people may be regarded as a driving force in the processes of globalization (see also Appadurai 1996; Katz 1998). Among the central means through which young people may influence globalization are the inventive ways they express themselves in terms of consumer habits, rejecting and embracing various forms of authority, and making strategic choices about style, music, and language. My research on identity and belonging among young people from refugee backgrounds in Brisbane speaks to pressing issues in Australia today, such as immigration policy and race relations, as well as to a broader world context, wherein the diasporic communities to which many of these young people ascribe are of relevance to their sense of themselves.

The study of youth provides a particularly powerful analytic lens within the anthropological landscape. As a category of analysis that represents a contested space that is lacking a clear, universal definition, youth acts, as Deborah Durham (2004) first termed it, as a “social shifter.” As society determines who is to be considered youth and what that label entails, culturally specific determinations about social relationships, fields of power, and codes of morality emerge. In the contested and shifting space they inhabit, youth have been theorized as
both victims of society and creative agents of social change (Abdullah 2005; De Bock and Honwana 2005). These opposing analytic positions get to the heart of one of the key issues anthropologists are trying to work out—do cultures make people or do people make cultures?

What the study of youth has the potential to highlight includes both the structural forces that impinge upon people’s lives and their potential for innovation in confronting them. Issues of broad anthropological interest from media consumption to migration have been viewed through the prism of youth. Most recently, the field of youth studies has examined issues of identity and ethnicity among young people in increasingly globalized local contexts. Of particular relevance here, youth have been considered at the forefront, both literally and figuratively, of negotiating inclusion in modern multicultural contexts. The wide trends within the field of youth studies can serve as a kind of barometer measuring the importance of social issues over time.

Marking the earliest incarnation of youth studies in anthropology, Margaret Mead studied the phenomenon of coming of age among Samoan girls (Mead 1928). Following Mead, other anthropological works considered youth in terms of liminality, or a developmental life stage through which one would transition, rather than as a cultural category worthy of investigation (Evans-Pritchard 1969; Turner 1995). Sociological studies of youth have historically taken a problem-centered approach, focusing on sensationalized topics such as violence and sexuality and portraying young people as deviants, problems, or victims.

For example, Albert Cohen’s Delinquent Boys (1955), a classic work that emerged from the Chicago School of Sociology, took an ethnographic approach to the study of deviant subcultures. This work influenced research emerging from the Birmingham School, established in the mid-1970s at the University of Birmingham in the United Kingdom, and is viewed as foundational to the fields of youth and cultural studies (Valentine, Skelton and Chambers 1998). The Birmingham School, working from a Marxist and post-structuralist take on working-class youth, focused heavily on class as the basis for youth culture (Bucholtz 2002). Some members replaced the term “youth culture” with the term “subculture,” which they felt better captured the class dynamic of the cultural processes they were observing among young people (Hall and Jefferson 1976; Hebdige 1979). The concept of subculture helped to elucidate the emergent nature of culture as a process of becoming through highlighting the conscious and performative production of cultural forms. Early works of the Chicago and the Birmingham Schools demonstrated how subcultures served to facilitate a sense of community and commonality in response to challenges faced by young people, such as inequality, unemployment, and cultural conflict (Willis 1977).

Work out of the Chicago and Birmingham Schools on subcultural forms, which were extremely influential in early studies of youth cultures, provides peripheral insights into my work on young people from refugee and migrant
backgrounds in Australia: it demonstrates youth resistance to adult narratives, as well as the multiplicity of self-conscious representations of identity that I regularly observed in my fieldwork. With its well-developed theorization of class, however, these early studies were widely criticized for depicting youth cultures as too deeply dependent on highly visible image markers such as music and fashion, at the expense of other defining elements of identification such as gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity (Bucholtz 2002, 537).

With the shift of focus to these later categories of self-understanding and representation, scholarly studies of youth became more meaningfully aligned with questions of identification related to dominant national discourses of belonging. This disciplinary shift also marks the emergence of a reinvigorated anthropology of youth, which considers young people as social agents in the process of negotiating identity and belonging at the complex nexus of transnationalism and local cultures, where discourses of national belonging meet with individualized representations of race and ethnicity among young people. This is where youth studies scholarship is most relevant to my research.

Cultivating Ethnicity: Hybridity and Essentialism in Practice

As Stuart Hall’s influential work, New Ethnicities (1992), helped to distil, ethnicity, as well as race, is socially constructed. It is negotiated in the context of community as people articulate similarities and differences between themselves and other groups of people. In the context of globalization, where different regional and national groups are drawn both together and apart in local settings, the boundaries of these articulations become increasingly unstable (Noble et al. 1999, 30). While ethnic affiliation may be presented on the surface as bounded and cohesive, as it often was by the young people involved in this study, it is indeed constituted out of fluid boundaries and strategic choices.

Such fluidity is the hallmark of the notion of hybrid identities. The concept of hybridity, also of key consideration in the identity-making practices of young refugees, has been conceptualized as the process by which new subjectivities are constructed through the overlapping and interweaving of different cultural forms (Bhabha 1994, 1996; Papastergiadis 1997). While these new ethnicities may emerge out of some degree of agency or strategic overlap, they are also shaped by the perceptions of others and the structural forces inherent in social, economic, and political processes. As Noble and colleagues (1999, 31) argue, “The celebration of fluidity is often made at the expense of registering the determining force of social relations and the role identity plays in responding to these.”

The often criticized notion of essentialism is also crucial for the representation of ethnicity. While the concept of hybridity helps to demonstrate the ways in which people highlight the shifting and permeable aspect of their ethnicities (Werbner 1997b, 16), it is the use of self-essentialism in everyday circumstances that allows people to formulate and represent their ethnicities as
fixed and immutable in different ways in different contexts and in response to the structural forces that frame their lives (Noble et al. 1999, 31; Spivak 1988, 1990). I use the terms hybridity and essentialism advisedly and engage in depth with the theoretical limitations of using this language in Chapter 3. However, as they have emerged out of the social theory relevant to identity, and more specifically in relation to the study of youth, hybridity and essentialism are useful concepts for examining the multiple ways in which ethnic identity may be represented in different contexts.

The mobilization of ethnicity is particularly evident in the imperative, sensitive, and often tense identity-making practices engaged in by young people. Through their avid consumption of style, commodities, and ideas and their creative interpretation of racial signifiers from resources and symbols that traverse national borders in their origin, many studies of youth and ethnicity locate young people and their hybridizing strategies at the forefront of the processes of globalization (Back 1996; Abner Cohen 1974; Nayak 2003, 2009; Wulff 1995a). While such studies of youth culture are certainly relevant to my study, the ways in which they depict young people constituting new ethnic identities by merging various cultural signifiers do not precisely fit, nor theoretically capture, my experience.

Rather than merging symbolic references in the formation of new ethnicities, I observed young people actively emphasizing and deemphasizing ethnic identity in a creative engagement with the broad messages of multiculturalism that sought to address their ethnic difference. Moreover, in my observations, while young people may speak back to structural constraints and reflect the experiences that frame their lives in their complex and often self-conscious representations of themselves, the ways in which they do so can be described at times as strategic, but at other times as a much more subtle and even subconscious positioning—reliant, in these moments, more on the kind of unconscious engagement and internalization of those structural constraints than a direct confrontation with them (Moore 2011, 209).

As I explore further in Chapter 3, to emphasize the dynamic relationship between these young people’s sense of identity and the multicultural discourses that frame their lives, I utilize the notion of responsiveness. The literature on “everyday multiculturalism” and “multicultural drift” has established how daily interethnic encounters in multicultural spaces foster the capacity and habits for people of diverse backgrounds to live in relative harmony (Harris 2013; Werbner 2013; Wise and Velayutham 2009). The concept of “conviviality” in relation to “everyday multiculturalism” highlights the various national, cultural, and embodied structures that help to foster harmonious coexistence in multicultural settings (Wise and Velayutham 2013). Similarly, the concept of “everyday cosmopolitanism” highlights the “strategic practices of transaction in specific
contexts,” which create a sense of civic engagement and the possibilities for multiple forms of ethnic and national belonging to coexist together (Noble 2009).

In the context of everyday multiculturalism, youth are considered adept at developing “multiple identities,” from which they have been theorized as “hybrid,” “in-between,” “fluid” (Bhabha 1994; Goffman 1959; Hall 1992, 1993, 1996), and “ambivalent” (Ngo 2010). I favor the notion of responsiveness, in a step back from the accepted notion of the hybrid and fractured nature of migrant youth identities. The notion of dynamic responsiveness in youth identity making provides scope to look beyond the prevalence of their multicultural encounters to underscore and unpack a level of engagement with the broader multicultural context through which such hybrid identities also emerge.

Having migrated to Australia, the young people with whom I worked have become part of a vast and contentious immigration context historically linked to articulations of whiteness and racial and ethnic division. Throughout the course of my fieldwork, a dynamic relationship between the fluctuating ways young people treated and defined their sense of racial and ethnic identity and the messages they regularly encountered, broadly framed in relation to multiculturalism, began to emerge. It is to this multicultural context, and the challenges of identity and inclusion it presents for young refugees, that I will now turn before concluding the chapter.

**Multiculturalism, Youth, and the Refugee Experience**

The management of diversity, which multiculturalism in its various manifestations has been implemented to address, is now the subject of widespread moral panic and political debate in Western settler nation-states. In Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Europe, concerns regarding national identity, immigration, citizenship, and borders are ever present and growing. As I explore further in Chapter 2, concerns in these contexts are rooted in a fear of the cultural loss of European heritage and tradition and in political conflict over expanding populations due to both chosen and forced migration. Central to these debates is the proposed need for strategies designed to ease integration, to help people to live together with difference—difference that is often implicitly, but always undeniably, tied to race and ethnicity.

Youth scholars have argued that young people are at the forefront of negotiating inclusion in these modern multicultural contexts (Fass 2007; Gow 2005). Young people’s lives, which unfold within the thick of difference and diversity in the schools and public spaces of multicultural cities, are regarded, in both popular understanding and scholarly discourse, as central to assessing the fate of multicultural living. From youth-driven race riots, of which the 2005 Cronulla riots in Australia are a primary example, to the sunnier and perhaps less frequent depictions of youth using diversity as a creative agent of cultural change,
the lives of young people have been regarded as indicative of both promise and skepticism regarding the multicultural project (Harris 2013, 5).2

Despite their exposure to multicultural contexts, however, young people may be no more open or resistant to the ideals of inclusion than anyone else (Harris 2013). For young people, as Harris notes, within the diversity of their everyday landscape, “racism and prejudice sit alongside care and recognition” (2013, 3). The ways in which young people grapple with multiculturalism in their everyday encounters challenge profoundly the common portrayals of their inclination to embrace and consume diversity, on the one hand, and to incite racism, riots, and violence, on the other (Butcher and Harris 2010, 449; Herron 2018).

What has emerged as significant in my work with young people is, not only that they are formulating a sense of self and belonging in the context of racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity, but also that they are doing so in response to various approaches to manage that diversity. Their responsiveness to the implicit, but pervasive, messages that influence their lives in terms of how they negotiate their own sense of themselves highlights identity making as an attempt to create connection, affinity, and understanding. The ways in which young people align themselves with or position themselves against one another in accordance with, and against, broad social expectations allows them to forge connections with one another, with the broader Australian population, and with the transnational diasporas with which they also identify.

Young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds face the heightened complexity of defining a sense of self and of place at the intersections of national, ethnic, and cultural identity. As relative outsiders to the broad context in which their daily lives unfold, the dynamics of constituting a sense of self and belonging are, for these young people, especially challenging. Young people with refugee backgrounds must not only contend with the complexities of ethnic, national, and cultural identity, but must do so also in the context of rupture, trauma, loss, and the challenges of the resettlement experience.

Moreover, the fact of their migration effectively disrupts their perceived role as youth in need of protection, and the fact of this mold breaking creates the counterperception that they are risky. Their displacement, as well as their capacity to deal with diversity in a multicultural context, is also gendered; young men are more likely to be viewed as volatile and threatening in the society of their resettlement and young women more likely to be perceived instead as vulnerable. In what are often presented as crises of migration, media coverage centers around hordes of young refugees as a threat to the moral and social order and depicts young men in particular as welfare parasites at best, and terrorists at worst (Pruitt et al. 2018). In terms of both their lived experience and the ways in which they are more broadly represented and perceived, for these young people “belonging—to family, community and country—is always at risk” (Correa-Velez, Gifford and Barnett 2010, 1399; see also Jackson 2002, 33).
However, counter to the trauma-centered approach that is so prevalent in the literature, the impact of past experience is not the main factor in determining the psychological well-being of young people from refugee backgrounds (Gifford, Correa-Velez and Sampson 2009; McMichael, Nunn, Correa-Velez, and Gifford 2017). Among the most significant “indicators of belonging” put forward in Gifford’s (2009) “Good Starts” study on the health and well-being of refugee youth in the initial stages of resettlement are perceptions of social status and a sense of belonging in their place of resettlement.

I take this perspective as a starting point for my research. For young people from refugee backgrounds, the pursuit of belonging is undertaken in relation to the national context in which they currently live and is influenced by a range of other factors related to the whole of their life experiences. The lives of the young people represented in this book were quite overtly politicized through their resettlement in Australia. In the Australian context, young people are confronted with various expectations and pressures which, like the anthropologist Ghassan Hage (1998, 2003; see also Povinelli 2002), I locate in the current policy framework of multiculturalism. As I explore in depth in Chapter 2, the social values of integration and tolerance have emerged to confront ongoing tensions over immigration at various points in Australia’s history and provide the basis for those expectations that young people, in turn, perceive, engage with, and manipulate in their everyday practices. It is at this juncture between broad social influences and the everyday practices of cultivating a sense of belonging that I locate the study and where both are rendered meaningful.