Belonging and Becoming in a Multicultural World

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Let me begin the task of contextualizing my research on refugee youth identity in Australia by briefly explaining how I came to do this research, in this place. Immediately before having moved to Australia, I completed a master’s degree at Oxford University on what I broadly described as the anthropology of childhood. I examined the notion of agency in children’s lives; how the processes of socialization that draw them into the dominant culture are counterbalanced by the decisions and awareness they draw upon to affect that culture.

Early in 2005, with a freshly awarded degree in hand, I found myself living in Brisbane with my now husband, an Australian, born and raised in Brisbane. Brisbane at that time had seen a recent influx of Sudanese refugees, particularly in the suburb in which we lived. It was noticeable enough so that a relative, also living in Brisbane, and aware of my recently completed research on young people, suggested to me that I might next do some kind of work with the very tall, very black young people who suddenly appeared on her suburban streets amid the very white population already living there. I liked the idea, and so I began to volunteer extensively in the refugee community, tutoring school-aged children and working in an agency that provided settlement services to newly arrived refugees. I thought about the young people I was working with in those capacities as my mind started to drift back toward embarking upon more study and pursuing a doctoral degree in anthropology.

Eventually, I married my newfound interest in the young refugee communities of Brisbane with my master’s research and submitted a proposal to my soon to be doctoral committee. My research question centered on how these young people from different backgrounds form a culture among themselves that stands apart from the many social organizing categories—their race and ethnicity, their nation of origin, their status as refugees—that frame their lives. As I
came to realize, and as I briefly touched upon in the previous chapter, they don’t. As the core premise of this book suggests, in fact quite the opposite is true.

Young people develop a sense of who they are and how they fit in social place, at least in large part, by responding to the various ways in which their lives are framed in social context; which was made apparent to me through my observations of their interactions with each other that were heavily focused on issues of race and belonging. Their sense of identity and various paths to belonging were certainly influenced by a range of factors encompassing the whole of their life experiences, including their countries of origin, their family lives, and their experiences as refugees, all of which I explore in this chapter. What I came to understand as most relevant to their identity-making processes in my research, however, and what is consequently at the core of the book’s findings, was the sociopolitical context of these young people’s place of resettlement and how their lives were treated, managed and framed in that context.

Australia proved to be an ideal place in which to study the dynamics of identity formation among young people from refugee backgrounds. Its unique combination of demographics (over half the population are born overseas or have a parent who was), and recent social history (multiculturalism emerged in the 1970s as a formal political policy related to immigration) established a set of sociopolitical ideals that markedly surfaced in the lives of these young people. The social and political context of Australian multiculturalism forms the backdrop against which these young people engage with one another in the pushes and pulls of belonging.

Before delving into the ethnography, let me first detail the emergence of the Australian sociopolitical context which figured so prominently in the identity practices of these young people. I begin by examining Australia’s fraught immigration history and politics from which the current system of multiculturalism has emerged. In doing so, I seek to demonstrate how current multicultural policy in Australia rests upon a set of discursive and institutional norms which are implicitly tied, not only to national and ethnic heritage, but to race. The power dynamics of this political framework reveal multiculturalism as a kind of nation-building exercise that is deeply rooted in whiteness (Hage 1998, 2003). I argue that messages, reflective of the ideals of integration and tolerance, emerge from the broad moral backdrop of Australian multiculturalism and that young refugees intuitively perceive and express this in their identity formation.

Following this, I explore some relevant background information about the national context from which the young people in this study have migrated to Australia. I seek here to demonstrate the ways and degree to which social, political, and familial tensions related to and emerging within these young people’s everyday lives manifest and are reflected in the shaping of their identities and in their pursuit of social belonging.
Australian Immigration History and Politics

Australia’s population is reported to be approximately 24.5 million, according to the 2016 census, and includes a broad diversity of cultural, national and ethnic groups (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] 2017). There are over three hundred languages and over three hundred ancestries represented in Australia today (ABS 2017; Australian Department of Home Affairs 2017). It is among the world’s most diverse societies, considered “a nation of immigrants” to a greater degree than any country other than Israel (Hollinsworth 2006, 196). One in four Australians is an immigrant and an additional one fifth of the population has at least one immigrant parent (Castles, Hugo and Vasta 2013).

Since the Second World War, Australia has had one of the largest and most diverse immigration programs in the Western world (Collins, Noble, Poynting, and Tabar 2000). Approximately 7 million people have migrated to Australia since 1945 (Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship [DIAC] 2011a). Of those 7 million permanent residents who have migrated to Australia since 1945, 700,000 are considered refugees or displaced persons (Castles et al. 2013). As in many Western settler nations, immigration, while crucial to transformations in Australia’s economic and social welfare systems, has been the source of much political and social controversy.

White Australia Policy

In detailing the evolution of Australia’s immigration programs and policy, it must first be noted that Australia’s current wealth and position as a Western nation was built upon the systematic breakdown of its Indigenous population through colonization and subsequent immigration (Hage 1998). This is relevant because it has arguably contributed to what Ghassan Hage (2003) describes as “White colonial paranoia”— a national vulnerability and fear of loss, rooted in the nation’s emergence through conquest. According to Hage’s conceptualization, being Australian has to a large degree, relied upon expressions of “Europeanness” or “Whiteness” (Hage 2003, 48). As such, throughout the nation’s history issues of race and ethnicity have played a central role in Australia’s immigration policy (Collins et al. 2000; Hage 1998, 2003; Hollinsworth 2006, 196).

The pervasiveness of racial and ethnic based rhetoric regarding nonwhite immigration may be traced back to the White Australia Policy, a Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act passed by the Parliament of the United Kingdom in July 1900 and implemented at the time of Australia’s federation in January 1901 (McMaster 2001, 41). It was designed to prevent the immigration of nonwhite people and meant that the “Commonwealth Parliament could pass laws to ensure that, with few exceptions, nonwhites would not be permitted to settle, work, or live (temporarily or permanently) in Australia” (McMaster 2001, 41).
After the Second World War, while still under the White Australia Policy, Australia implemented a broad immigration program through which immigrants were actively sought under the social mandate to “populate or perish” (Tsolidis and Pollard 2009, 429). Waves of European immigrants predominantly from Western European countries such as Britain and Ireland arrived under this program in the twenty years following the war. When the desired numbers did not arrive from these preferred countries, immigrants then arrived from southern European countries such as Greece, Italy, and the former Yugoslavia. During the postwar period, immigrants were mainly of European descent, and issues of race and ethnicity continued to play a role in attitudes toward them. Discrimination was aimed at Greek and Italian migrants, who were considered “not completely white” but sufficiently white to be accepted as second-choice migrants after the Western Europeans (Tsolidis and Pollard 2009, 429).

The White Australia Policy served particularly to assuage anxiety over Australia’s proximity to Asia, and to attempt to prevent it from becoming a preferred destination for Chinese immigrants who might “dilute” the Australian culture and lifestyle in relationship to its British heritage (Tsolidis and Pollard 2009, 429; see also Jupp 2000, 97). Australia’s immigration history has long been plagued by a fear of being overtaken by Asian countries in what has been popularly referred to as an “Asian invasion.” The pervasiveness of this racial and ethnic based rhetoric regarding nonwhite immigration rooted in the White Australia Policy, and a sense of national vulnerability or fear from which it emerged, is widely evident as it has regularly resurfaced in political policy and debate in more recent times.

For example, in this continued political climate even after the White Australia Policy was dismantled, conservative Australian historian Geoffrey Blainey asked the question, “Should Australia continue to be dominated by Anglo-Celtic peoples and the English language and institutions? Or should it become a new Eurasia?” (Blainey 1984, cited in Hollinsworth 2006, 227). Later, the One Australia Policy (beginning in the late 1980s), mandated migrants to fully “assimilate” into what was perceived of as mainstream Australian culture. Taking an even stronger stance, Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party (beginning in the late 1990s), was premised upon Hanson’s segregation of Aboriginal people, Torres Strait Islanders, and people of Asian backgrounds from her constituency because of their perceived lack of ability or willingness to assimilate into a Western European cultural norm (Hollinsworth 2006, 230).

The White Australia Policy was officially dismantled under the Whitlam Labor government in the early 1970s. This was precipitated by Vietnamese “boat-people” traveling south following the fall of Saigon (Hollinsworth 2006, 210). Vietnamese migration to Australia was the nation’s first significant experience with asylum seekers and refugee claimants deemed to be entering Australian territory illegally (Crock 2006:74). During this time, the task of limiting nonwhite
migrants shifted to restricting the number of refugee arrivals in Australia. Australia began to develop what Crock (2006) refers to as a “culture of control.” This control is manifested in the strict guidelines and policy developed to determine who is permitted to enter Australia and settle as a refugee claimant or asylum seeker through policies such as temporary protection visas, mandatory detention, and the offshore processing of refugee claims (Crock 2006; Thompson 2011). Such measures around refugee intake continue to be highly controversial in Australian politics. By way of background, I will provide some detail here on what it means to be a refugee in the international context, and on Australia’s evolving and contentious policy toward refugee intake.

Refugees in Australia

The international definition of a refugee, as outlined in the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, to which Australia is a signatory, Art 1A(2), states that the term refers to all people for whom: “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.” (UNHCR, cited in Crock 2006, 169, see also Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Loescher, Long and Sigona 2014)

The term refugee, as it is broadly defined and used in public policy contexts, is neither neutral nor comprehensive in spite of this seemingly straightforward definition. It carries with it a range of meanings, expectations, and connotations, and it is continually amended in both a national and international framework in terms of the rights it entails for, or excludes from, those who are deemed to fall within its parameters. While in previous centuries migration may have occurred on a larger scale, today there are fewer places to which “extra” people may move (Harrell-Bond and Voutira 1992; see also Bauman 2016; Gatrell 2015; Gemie 2010; Maley 2016; Ong 2003; Taylor 1994). The UNHCR was established in response to mass movements of Eastern Europeans during the Cold War and carries the underlying assumptions of humanitarian regimes, that refugees represent a situation of disorder which is transitory and temporary (Harrell-Bond and Voutira 1992, 7).

The validity of the category of refugee and the question of who may be considered to be one is of great relevance in a global context through which concerns over national borders are emerging with increasing intensity. Moreover, an understanding of the refugee experience as distinct from general migration is of great anthropological concern in the context of modernity. As Harrell-Bond and Voutira argue, “in anthropological terms refugees are people who
have undergone a violent ‘rite’ of separation and unless or until they are ‘incor-
porated’ as citizens into their host state (or returned to a state of origin) find
themselves in ‘transition’ or ‘liminality’” (1992, 9). The work of incorporation
involves adapting to radically new conditions both socially and materially and
has a strong impact on international power dynamics (Harrell-Bond and Voutira
1992, 9).

A person officially defined as a refugee claimant or asylum seeker in the cur-
rent formulation is someone in the process of applying for protection as a refu-
gee under the UNHCR 1951 Refugee Convention. If their application for such status
in Australia is successful, they will be deemed a refugee and gain permanent
residence after the completion of health and character checks. If refugee status
is not confirmed, these people have limited options but may seek protection
under other international agreements (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al. 2014). All but two
of the young people who participated in my study (one born in Australia and
one a migrant from Papua New Guinea) had confirmed refugee status.

Australia’s refugee intake currently averages around 17,000 humanitarian
entrants per year (Refugee Council of Australia 2016a), approximately one quar-
ter of whom are young people aged between ten and nineteen years (Correa-Velez
et al. 2010, 1399). Australia recognized 2,377 asylum seekers as refugees in 2015;
0.1 percent of the global total (Refugee Council of Australia 2016b). Despite rela-
tively modest numbers Australia’s refugee intake has been the source of much
public debate and political controversy. In recent years refugees to Australia have
primarily been settled from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East (Refugee Council
of Australia 2016b).

Sudanese refugees represent one of Australia’s fastest growing refugee pop-
ulations (Marlowe 2010), and at 2006 constituted 73 percent of Australia’s humani-
tarian entrants (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017). Since 1996 over 20,000
Sudanese refugees have immigrated to Australia under the Humanitarian Pro-
gram visa system (DIAC 2007; Marlowe 2010). Additionally, Australia hosts a
steadily growing number of Karen and Chin—persecuted ethnic groups previ-
ously residing primarily in Burma, Thailand, and Malaysia—as well as an estab-
lished number of refugees who identify as Burmese (STARTTS 2007). 1

The majority of refugees from Northeast Africa and Burma, including my
research participants, currently come to Australia under the Humanitarian Pro-
gram. The Humanitarian Program issues visas under two classes: (1) onshore
applicants—those applying for visas after they have arrived in Australia; and (2)
offshore applicants—those applying for visas from the source country (DIAC
2011b). All of the young people with confirmed refugee status who participated
in my study were classified as offshore applicants.

The most fraught political debate and controversy over Australia’s Humani-
titarian Program emerges in relation to onshore visa applicants, and particularly
those who make the journey to Australia “illegally” on asylum seeker boats
controlled through those commonly referred to as “people smugglers” (Bauman 2016). During the course of my fieldwork, in June of 2012 alone, two boats of asylum seekers attempting to arrive on Australian shores capsized in a dangerous stretch of sea between Indonesia and Christmas Island, a common route for asylum seekers transiting to Australia through Indonesia. A number of asylum seekers were rescued and close to one hundred were estimated to have died on these two boat journeys (Gartrell 2012; Matt Johnston and Maley 2012).

Such tragedies continue to occur and fuel ongoing debate about how to process asylum seekers arriving on Australian shores without visas in order to most effectively deter these dangerous boat journeys. A number of controversial measures have been implemented in recent decades in order to curtail illegal entrants onto Austrian shores. Such measures include temporary protection visas, which severely restricted the rights, entitlements, and services available to asylum seekers to aid in the process of resettlement, as well as a number of strategies for processing asylum seekers in offshore detention centers, rather than allowing them to enter mainland Australia upon arrival.

Two of the most notable measures to implement offshore processing of refugee claims are the Pacific Solution, implemented from 2001 to 2007, which used detention centers in Papua New Guinea and on the island nation of Nauru to process refugees; and the Malaysia Solution, which proposed, in 2011, to send 800 unprocessed refugees arriving in Australia to Malaysia for processing, in exchange for receiving 4,000 “genuine” refugees awaiting resettlement in Malaysia (Crock 2006; Dao 2012; Thompson 2011).

Although neither of these solutions are currently implemented, this remains a live debate under the conservative government at the time of writing. Elements of both the Pacific Solution and the Malaysian Solution are still in place, and variations of those solutions as well as temporary protection visas are regularly proposed. For example, deals with other countries, including, at the time of writing, the United States (which has agreed to the terms of resettlement), are being considered for the exchange of refugees and refugee claimants (Innis 2016). Additionally, fining and banning undocumented asylum seekers arriving by boat from future reentry to Australia was recently proposed (Doherty 2016), and detention centers for the offshore processing of refugee claims are still opened on Nauru and in Papua New Guinea, in addition to a number of refugee detention centers on mainland Australia.

The offshore processing of refugees and the use of detention centers and temporary protection visas are highly controversial practices, which are argued to be detrimental to the psychological well-being of asylum seekers as well as ineffective in their goal of deterring illegal entrants (Onselen 2012; Vasek 2011). At the time I conducted this research and following the asylum seeker boat tragedies and various incarnations of potential mitigating solutions described previously, the UN Human Rights commissioner, Navi Pillay, expressed deep concern
and condemnation in regard to Australia’s temporary protection visa scheme and offshore detention centers. She argued that such strategies express “a strong undercurrent of racism in the country” (“UN Rights Chief Slams Racist Australia” May 26, 2011).

Intense political debate regarding refugee intake in Australia, despite its relatively small numbers of humanitarian entrants, is indicative of Australia’s contentious relationship with refugees in particular, and immigration more broadly. Dandy (2009) argues that despite the public- versus policy-related differentiation between the terms immigrant, refugee, and asylum seeker, the broad attitudes of Australian society demonstrate little of this differentiation in terms of perceived threat. Congruent to this lack of differentiation (and while it may be significant that research participants with refugee status were, in all cases, offshore applicants), the young people in my study did not appear to make a distinction between a perceived stigma related to being a refugee and that related to the broader categories of being a migrant or ethnic minority.

While the vast majority of my participants came to Australia under official refugee status, it is the political and moral implications designed to address immigration more broadly from which the messages I analyze in relation to these young people’s identity practices emerged. In the course of my research with them, I did not find these young people to be reflecting the negative stigma associated with the politics of refugee status, as much as the stigma of being an outsider or immigrant in more general terms and the implications associated with that status. Therefore, it is the dynamics and attitudes emerging from Australia’s general immigration history and political underpinnings where I focus much of my analysis.

**The Emergence of Australian Multiculturalism**

Australian immigration policy has changed from a postwar emphasis on “assimilation,” which encouraged migrants to adopt the cultural practices of the Anglo-Celtic majority, to a shift toward “integration,” which supported migrants to maintain more of their own cultural practices for a time before ultimately assimilating, and currently to a policy of multiculturalism and cultural diversity. Multiculturalism was officially implemented in the early 1970s and encourages migrants to preserve the cultural practices of their home countries (Hage 1998, 2003). Assimilation, integration, and multiculturalism all engage to varying degrees with the notion of tolerance, and throughout Australia’s immigration history have been both controversial and racialized (Collins et al. 2000; Hage 1998). Indeed, multiculturalism, in terms of both current immigration policy and as a broader social and moral framework, is deeply imbued with issues of racial and ethnic difference.

The varied attempts to restrict immigration based on skin color that have occurred alongside Australia’s large and robust immigration program—discussed
previously in relation to the White Australia Policy, the continuing political and public debate over refugee arrivals, and the general fear of cultural loss, which has arguably helped to prompt waves of discrimination against various nonwhite immigrants throughout its history—may be characterized as nation-building exercises. Such policy and attitudes represent, as Hage and others have argued, a construction of national belonging which is rooted in the establishment of whiteness as central to being Australian (Hage 1998, 2003; Kapferer 1998).

In opposition to the popularly held view that Australia's current immigration policy framework of multiculturalism marks a departure from nationalism, multiculturalism instead relies upon a distinct kind of nationalism (Hage 2003; Povinelli 2002). This is a nationalism that places whiteness as an implicit stipulation of belonging from which the moral obligations of inclusion and tolerance are exercised. Most simply, whiteness represents the power and privilege afforded to those who identify as white (McIntosh 1990). The sense of entitlement that allows people the capacity to exercise nationalist practices rests upon the capacity to accumulate more or less whiteness—of which white skin color may function as only one example (Hage 1998, 53). In terms of how it is both supported and upheld, and how it is denigrated and torn down, multiculturalism at present marks a crisis in white identity politics.

As I explore subsequently, it is the construction of whiteness that preserves the dominance by which race dictates the political and social boundaries of multiculturalism (Moreton-Robinson 2004). In the section that follows, I examine the particular manifestation of multiculturalism in the Australian context and explore its relationship to whiteness as well as what makes it similar to, and distinct from, that of other Western, settler nations. Issues of race, ethnicity, and whiteness inherent to the Australian multicultural context are at the core of the identity-making practices of young people from refugee backgrounds.

**Multiculturalism and Whiteness in the Settler Nation**

Multiculturalism emerged in the political and popular discourse of the Australian context, particularly in relation to immigration, after it was introduced as a policy framework by Al Grassby, immigration minister during the Whitlam Labor government in the early 1970s. Following the dismantlement of the White Australia Policy, Grassby (1973) advocated from a political standpoint for the maintenance of cultural heritage and social identity among migrants for broad social benefit. Since Grassby's initial introduction, multiculturalism in the Australian context has been a source of wide public controversy and intellectual debate (Jakubowicz 1985, 1).

When Australia abandoned the White Australia Policy, it became one of only a handful of Western nations to implement an official state immigration policy framework of multiculturalism (Joppke 2001). Along with Canada, Australia
provides one of the most prominent examples of nations with an explicit, policy backed approach to multiculturalism (Joppke 2001). Multicultural policy may be described as providing a framework for addressing various forms of diversity in the context of universal rights and inclusion in a nation-state. As a political and social policy, multiculturalism has been widely theorized in democratic nations in terms of the extent to which it helps to define a “relationship between constitutional democracy and a politics that recognizes diverse cultural identities” (Gutmann 1994, ix).

The United States, on the other hand, provides an example of implicit multiculturalism. Multiculturalism in the U.S. context differs from that of Australia and Canada in both the political backdrop from which it was conceived and in the ways in which it is enacted. It does not emerge from a colonial mindset, and rather than being formalized through policy, multiculturalism in the United States relies instead solely on its moral impetus of inclusion and equality (Gunew 1993). While implicit multiculturalism is deeply entrenched as an ideological framework in the United States, U.S. citizenship does not claim an explicit multicultural component such as is the case for Canadian and Australian citizenship. While U.S. founding myths are based on the ideals of liberty, democracy and equality for example, British Commonwealth nations instead emphasize the pragmatic benefits of cultural diversity for what sociologist, Christian Joppke, describes as a “post-British nation-building commitment to multiculturalism” (Joppke 2001, 440–441).

Explicit multicultural policy in the Canadian context serves the primary “de-ethnicizing” purpose of separating the dominant national language from the privileges of historically dominant groups (Joppke 2001, 31). Rather than being geared toward minorities, the bilingual framework of Canadian multiculturalism is designed as having an integrative capacity for society. Australian multicultural policy stresses further the limits of diversity and has an arguably more prominent nation-building agenda, with a particular focus on issues of minority integration, then present in the Canadian example (Joppke 2001).

Australia’s National Agenda for Multicultural Australia, passed by the Labor government in 1989, states that “multicultural policies are based on the premise that all Australians should have an overriding and unifying commitment to Australia, to its interests and future first and foremost” (Joppke 2001, 438). Australia has, over time, loosened constraints in the naturalization process that previously aligned more explicitly with racial selectivity, such as lowering the language requirements and expectations of full cultural assimilation. To that end, the Australian multicultural policy framework, despite its capacity to ignite debate, has been documented as contributing to the successful integration of immigrants to Australia (Collins 2013; Kymlicka 2012).

In its formulations as both purely implicit and ideologically imposed, as well as explicit and policy based, modern, Western multiculturalism is currently
under intense scrutiny. The rise of multiculturalism over recent decades through events like the demise of the White Australia Policy, the civil rights movement in the United States, and the opening up of borders in the European Union is now being reexamined (Taub 2016). The success, or lack thereof, of multiculturalism, in its many manifestations is marked by its ability to mitigate and manage diversity on the one hand, and to encourage and celebrate it on the other. From both perspectives, it is an emotionally charged battle, evoking waves of populism and a kind of turning point in white identity in the political epicenters of the Western world.

Donald Trump was elected president of the United States; the United Kingdom voted to exit the European Union; right-wing white nationalism is on the rise in a number of other European nations, including Norway, Hungary, Austria, Germany, and Greece; and Australia continues to struggle with a perceived crisis of refugee intake and integration (Bauman 2011, 2016; Roger Cohen 2016; Taub 2016). Each of these movements is the result of their own distinct conglomeration of issues broadly encompassed by race, class and gender. What they seemingly share, however, is the centering of what is depicted as a problem with multiculturalism—and at the heart of that problem, the consequent grappling with a perceived slippage of the status that a white identity once invariably secured.

A major part of Trump’s platform relies on issues of immigration; the promise to deport large numbers of illegal immigrants and the practice of “extreme vetting” of refugees, especially from certain Muslim majority countries. The extent to which the popularity of this stance reflects economic disenfranchisement versus racism per se, is the subject of much of the current debate in the United States. The most likely explanation is that the two are deeply entangled with one another. A focus on problems broadly framed as a part of multiculturalism, such as illegal immigration, loss of jobs, and increased crime, represents an acceptable way for people to articulate their fear over what they perceive as a crisis for the white majority, without being accused of racism (Taub 2016). This rings true also for the current political debates on Australia’s refugee problem, in which arguments for stopping the arrival of refugees continue to resurface in terms of protection from people smugglers and fairness to those waiting in an imaginary queue (Roger Cohen 2016; see also Hage 2018).

In the United States, as in Australia, white people are struggling with a sense of the loss of their foothold as the majority and all of the privilege that that entails. Although race is certainly part of it, the fear is better examined then easily dismissed with the label of racism or bigotry. As Taub (2016) argues, “being part of a culture designed around people’s own community and customs is a constant background hum of reassurance, of belonging.” With the perception of that hum of reassurance losing its potency, white people are being forced to
contend with how they fit within the rapidly changing demographic makeup of their multicultural cities.

It would be inaccurate, however, to argue that all majority white populations struggle with cultural diversity in this way. Many embrace the moral objective of the multicultural project to promote diversity and an ethic of tolerance. So, let’s leave behind, for a moment, the fraught political atmosphere in so many parts of the Western world where the legitimacy of multiculturalism itself is so hotly contested. Let’s assume that the broad goal of equality in the face of diversity is established and accepted. And let’s turn instead to the deep story of the power dynamics at play in how multiculturalism is implemented, and indeed, how it is experienced by those for whom it is most explicitly aimed at impacting. To do this, we need to start by looking at how race and ethnicity are intertwined with national belonging in multicultural contexts. This demonstrates how the messages that emerge from multiculturalism can be analyzed as a nation-building exercise enacted through the position of whiteness and the privilege it affords.

Managing Diversity and the Multicultural Ideal

Multiculturalism is widely and implicitly understood as a black or brown issue, with whiteness placed squarely at the other end of the spectrum. In popular understandings, multiculturalism is about how to manage, incorporate and deal with “multicultural” people—those of racial and ethnic backgrounds in need of management and inclusion—while whiteness is framed as the default norm. The inherent contradiction in this formulation in the Australian example, however, is in its implicit aim at nonwhite people. It is an aim that serves to racialize at the same time as it seeks to underscore the inconsequence of race as a broad moral aspiration of the Australian multicultural project.

Australian multicultural policy demonstrates this contradiction by providing a set of ideals that seek to both counter the relevance of race in achieving “Australianness” on one hand, and on the other, and to celebrate diversity in an emphasis of Australia’s tolerance. The disconnect between the implementation and the expressed purpose of multiculturalism can be analyzed through the alternating messages, inherent to Australia’s broad multicultural discourse, of the impetus for integration of those of nonwhite backgrounds and the need for tolerance among the white population. It is the more abstract sense of entitlement represented by whiteness that allows for the hierarchy of power through which some may lobby for better integration or, alternatively, exercise tolerance in their engagement with others.

The concept of whiteness is central to understanding both the messages projected through multicultural discourse and young people’s engagement with those messages in the Australian multicultural context. Messages urging for
smooth integration into what is broadly couched as mainstream, white Australian society, or alternatively, messages celebrating the perceived tolerance of that population are central to Australian multiculturalism. Such implicit messages are encountered at a discursive level in the terrain of young refugees’ daily experiences as well as in the more formal, policy-level articulations of national belonging they confront in the process of obtaining Australian citizenship.

In my conceptualization, it is a power dynamic afforded by whiteness in the Australian multicultural context that generates the messages of integration and tolerance young people of minority backgrounds perceive, engage, and reflect in their own articulations of identity and belonging. I refer to such messages of integration and tolerance emerging from Australian multiculturalism more broadly as the moral framework of multiculturalism. The varied and complex ways in which these messages emerge and are perceived by young people provides the ethnographic crux of the book and the subject matter of the chapters that follow. Here, however, I will briefly unpack the discourses of integration and tolerance and how they surface in these young people’s lives through what I refer to as the broad moral framework of multiculturalism.

**Integration, Tolerance, and Belonging**

I locate the particular ways in which tensions emerge for young people around the articulation of belonging as within the discourses, closely bound to multiculturalism, of integration and tolerance. Throughout the course of my fieldwork I became increasingly aware of messages, promoted in social discourse and broadly linked to multicultural policy, that sometimes ran counter to the popular multicultural agenda of equality and social cohesion. The delivery and interpretation of the messages of integration and tolerance can contribute to a sense of discord between the officially stated intention of multiculturalism and the varied ways in which it is experienced.

I take these messages as a focal point from which I analyze the identity-making practices engaged by young people. Messages of integration and tolerance operate at the national level of multicultural policy and the social and moral ideals it helps shape. They filter down to young people in their daily school environments, as well as through the more unique experiences related to being a refugee or migrant, such as that of the citizenship ceremony.

The discourses of both integration and tolerance serve to designate the need for social inclusion in national space. In doing so, a distinction emerges between those who ought to belong—and how their belonging might be approached through explicit political and social aims—and those who simply do belong. Messages of integration and tolerance are experienced by young people of nonwhite minority backgrounds as a means by which to differentiate between those whose difference is in need of governance and those who are to do the governing.
Integration and tolerance have come to encapsulate the abstract ideals of multiculturalism to foster universal rights and equality in the face of cultural diversity. They also represent the inherent contradiction in how multiculturalism is experienced by those it is implicitly designed to impact. In the Australian multicultural context, the expectations and pressures placed on young people from refugee backgrounds to integrate with the majority-white population and obscure their racial difference on the one hand, and to emphasize and celebrate it on the other, are paradoxical. The ideals of integration and tolerance are conflated with one another in the popular support of multiculturalism, reinforcing a power dynamic through which the boundaries of national belonging are established.

An article published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (Megan Johnston 2011), citing Dunn’s Challenging Racism project (2001–2008) began by posing (and then responding to) the question, “Is Australia a racist country? The answer to this troubling question turns out to be: overall, no.” But the details of this initial claim were not so straightforward. The article went on to unpack the research findings, based on extensive quantitative data collected over a decade, which indicated that the majority of people surveyed were found to be tolerant of cultural difference, despite an undercurrent of “a problem with racism” in the country (Dunn, quoted in Megan Johnston 2011).

According to Dunn’s research, approximately one third of Australians support “multiculturalism” at the same time as “assimilation” (Megan Johnston 2011). While people broadly support multiculturalism in terms of a tolerance for the desirable elements of diversity, many still see assimilation and integration as necessary for social cohesion. As mirrored in the results of this vast study on attitudes toward race, although current policies of multiculturalism and cultural diversity are characterized as breaking from the previous, less tolerant approaches of assimilation and integration, they contain a great degree of ideological overlap (Ang 2003; Ang, Hawkins and Dabboussy 2008; Butcher and Thomas 2006; Hage 1998; Kapferer 1998).

The structural similarities of the seemingly contradictory ideals of integration and tolerance are at the heart of the broad nation-building ethic of the multicultural project. As Hage argues, the “practice” of tolerance is itself a nationalist practice not dissimilar to the more obviously nationalist perspective inherent in an assimilationist or integrationist mentality. In alignment with Bourdieu’s conceptualization of “strategies of condescension” (Bourdieu 1990, cited in Hage 1998, 87), Hage frames tolerance as “a strategy aimed at reproducing and disguising relationships of power in society” (1998, 87). For Hage (1998, 87), “Multicultural tolerance, like all tolerance . . . is a form of symbolic violence in which a mode of domination is presented as a form of egalitarianism.” That is, the very capacity to exercise tolerance relies upon a perceived position of
dominance and power in an imagining of the nation (Modood 2016). The mechanism that enables people to practice tolerance is the same that enables people to call for others to integrate, or indeed, to practice intolerance.

Discourses of both integration and tolerance manifest in the everyday experiences of young people from refugee backgrounds in Brisbane. And in their self-conscious representations of self, through which the boundaries of belonging are sought and policed, they hear, engage, and manipulate these messages. Through an analysis of their engagement with such discourses at school and in the broader national context, which is the subject of the chapters that follow, young people’s identities emerge in dialogue with the multicultural agenda they encounter in their daily lives.

Integration and Tolerance in Context

Twenty of my informants became Australian citizens and attended a citizenship ceremony, seven during my fieldwork. The ceremony emphasizes that those obtaining citizenship are lucky to do so and to be in a superior nation, by virtue of its democratic nature, than that from which they came. At a ceremony I attended in March 2009, the lord mayor commented that here there are men in uniform to protect people, while in many parts of the world from which many people in the audience may be fleeing, this is not the case. He went on to state that “we are excited that you have a different religion, dress differently, eat different foods,” that in Australia everyone will be given a “fair go” and that ideal citizens should join a political party, and participate and volunteer in their communities in order to “promote understanding, tolerance, and a cohesive community.” At the ceremony, the benefits of multicultural tolerance and the celebration of difference were promoted in juxtaposition to the overriding message of the impetus to integrate into Australia as a superior nation-state.

Sentiments of national pride, expressions of tolerance, and assertions of the need for new arrivals to integrate into their new society invoked in relation to citizenship are replicated in popular and media debate. They emerged most prominently for young people in their local school environment, through anti-racist rhetoric, and the alternating promotion of Australian cultural values and tolerance for difference.

The notions of integration and tolerance, formally invoked at the citizenship ceremony and rooted in national immigration policy, were indeed echoed at Paddington High, where I conducted a significant part of my fieldwork. It was here that calls to integrate and the alternate promotion of tolerance were most immediate and relevant to the lives and identities of these young people. As many scholars have argued, for young people schools are sites where existing power dynamics and inequalities are learned and reinforced (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Simmons, Lewis and Larson 2011; Willis 1977). In my research experience, schools served as a primary site where the discourses emerging in national
context were perceived and engaged by participants with both positive and negative consequence.

Paddington High had a strong antiracism rhetoric and a policy of “mainstreaming” English Language Learner (ELL) students. On my first day of fieldwork in February 2009, an ELL teacher told me that “race is not an issue at this school” and “we’ve hardly ever had any racist incidents here.” There were so many young people with “different issues” at the school, it was explained to me, that race was simply “part of the mix.” As the teacher went on to say, “This one has a disability, this one’s in a wheel chair, this one can’t read . . . it’s like, ‘come on, what do y’got?’” In this teacher’s classification, race was akin to any other difference a student may experience—with difference positioned as an obstacle one must overcome in the quest for integration.

Race, for this teacher, was not used against fellow students, nor should it have been used by students to account for any aspect of their experience. Downplaying the relevance of race, emphasizing the rhetoric of antiracism, and the mainstreaming of ELL students all represent the broader attempts of the school to promote integration within the student community. In contrast to promoting integration, mobilizing the language of tolerance served to distinguish and celebrate young people’s difference in reference to their ethnic identities, and indeed, their experiences as refugees.

An ethic of tolerance was promoted in the school environment through events that celebrated young people’s ethnic backgrounds, such as “Multicultural Night,” as well as providing a multitude of opportunities for them to tell their life stories or recount various aspects of their journeys to Australia. Similarly, tolerance was inherently promoted at another school where many of the young people who attended Kedron Club were enrolled. Instead of mainstreaming, at this school young people were segregated in an ELL learning stream. Within the discourses of integration and tolerance where the significance of skin color was explicitly denied, young people were also simultaneously singled out and bound to their refugee status in ways that were not always in line with their own sense and representations of self.

The discourses of integration and tolerance act upon the lives of refugees and migrants at the local, community and national level, while they are framed as both problems and victims based on racial signifiers (Rios-Rojas 2011). The young people represented in this book were defined through the ways in which they were cast as other through the discourses of integration and tolerance invoked in the school and community environment. Conversely, race, as a defining feature of their ethnic identities was at the same time denied through the mobilization of the discourses of integration and tolerance. Consequently, young people have to make sense of competing and contradictory messages, and as I will explain in the ethnographic chapters that follow, in doing so constitute their own sometimes explicitly racialized identities.
My ethnographic focus is on how the tensions of creating a sense of identity and belonging surface in the lives of young people in the context of their complex and often seemingly contradictory relationship with expectations and pressures emerging from Australian society more broadly. However, despite the degree to which it was or was not acknowledged by the young people themselves, their migration is an undeniably formative experience. So, in addition to the influence of national policy frameworks, social discourses and local experiences in their host country, young people also cultivate a sense of identity out of influences emerging from the pre-migration contexts of their lives. That is, their experiences as members of other national spaces and their journey to Australia. It is to this contextual background that I will now turn before moving on to my theoretical conceptualization in chapter 3, and the ethnographic material of the proceeding chapters.

**Country of Origin and the Journey to Australia**

The young people represented here contend with a number of unique influences on their lives related to where they came from, how and why, and the associated influences of home and family, class and gender. This range of influences impact upon what it means for them to be refugees despite their apparent disregard or general reluctance to self-identify as such. Elements of their lived histories and backgrounds, in addition to the influences of Australian sociopolitical frameworks and attitudes, form the backdrop against which they seek a sense of identity and social belonging. In the sections that follow, I provide brief introductory material to the ethnic backgrounds and countries from which these young people have migrated for readers unfamiliar with these places, as well as detail certain aspects of their experiences as refugees. This material is intended to locate young people's experiences in the Australian context by providing relevant details of their pre-migration lives and their journey to Australia.

I provide this information with some hesitation however, because such brief introductory material is inevitably simplistic, and because, as explained in chapter 1, it was outside of the scope of my research design to conduct in-depth explorations of my participants' lives before resettlement. However, elements of the pre-migration aspects of their lives that emerged as significant to their sense of self and identity are revisited in greater detail in the ethnographic chapters that follow. For more in-depth analyses of the information I only briefly touch upon here, I refer the reader to the references cited throughout the sections that follow. I have organized this material both geographically and topically to distil what I observed as the most salient aspects of the young people's experiences.
African Participants
Before being resettled in Australia, a number of my Sudanese research participants lived in the Kakuma Refugee Camp in Northern Kenya, some lived in the Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement in Uganda, and others were temporarily settled in the urban center of Cairo, Egypt, where they faced racial discrimination and police violence. In addition to the twenty-three Sudanese participants, one participant migrated to Australia from Sierra Leone, via Guinea, and two from Uganda, via Kenya. The majority of Sudanese refugees come from Southern Sudan and immigrated as a result of the twenty-two-year civil war between rebel groups in the South and government forces in the North (Duffield 2003; Marlowe 2010; Obongo 2014). Many spent years in refugee camps before being settled in the United States, Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom under humanitarian visa programs (Marlowe 2010).

Anecdotal information from teachers and the young people themselves indicates that many of my African participants spent some portion of their lives in refugee camps. However, life in refugee camps, and refugee status more broadly, was not directly or usually prominent in the represented identities of my African participants. On the other hand, as I detail subsequently, the interim countries in which these participants lived before coming to Australia were a constant source of discussion, comparison, and sometimes rivalry between participants.

All twenty-six of my African participants were Christian and the majority attended church (Anglican, Catholic, or Presbyterian) regularly with their families. They came from several different tribes including the Dinka, Nuer, Nuba, and Anuak of southern Sudan and the Acholi of northern Uganda. For some, discussing tribes was a regular source of amusement, camaraderie, rivalry, and general interest, while others preferred not to identify in this way (at least not in my presence). All of my African participants had some formal education, although there was, apparently, a significant amount of variance in how much and what kind.

Karen, Chin, and Burmese Participants
All eight Karen, one Chin, and two Burmese research participants were either born or spent most of their lives in refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border. As a result, these participants have had very little formal education. They share similar stories of fleeing Burma for Thailand and the majority grew up in the Tham Hin refugee camp, on the Thai-Burma border, before coming to Australia. Many knew of each other from the camp before their arrival in Brisbane. Having spent so much of their youth in the camp and having similar stories of their lives in and journey to the camp, these participants readily discussed and identified with their experiences of refugee camps, and they regularly shared news of friends and acquaintances still living there.
There are over 140,000 refugees living in camps along the Thai-Burma border. A majority are from the ethnic minority Karen (Karen Buddhist Dhamma Dhutta Foundation). Karen people are predominantly from southern and southeastern Burma and have endured six decades of civil war (Australian Karen Foundation). The imposition of the Burmese government military regime in 1962 resulted in the persecution of ethnic minorities and gross human rights violations that forced thousands to flee the country for neighboring refugee camps. The Chin people of northwestern Burma, a population of approximately 1.5 million, have endured a similar fate at the hands of the Burmese military regime (Bagnall 2010).

Most Karen and Chin refugees that resettled in Australia are Christian. All of my Karen and Chin participants were practicing Catholics. My two Burmese participants were Muslim. I discuss the various and complex ways these young people address and downplay religion within their friendship groups in chapter 4.

The common experiences of research participants in terms of the pre-migration contexts of their lives arguably evoked varying degrees and different forms of impact on their sense of self, identity, and belonging to their present social context. While they are not an explicit focus of the research, I provide these experiences and characteristics here for a more comprehensive understanding of the background of research participants and to substantiate the claim that they contend with such a range of influences originating from beyond the boundaries of the Australian national framework.

Moreover, as I detail later, the similar variability with which young people identified with their refugee status itself is broadly mirrored in its fluctuating and arbitrary assignment through national and international frameworks. I consider such broad defining experiences through which my participants’ lives are framed in the context of their host country (e.g., being from war-torn countries, having lived in refugee camps or alternative transitory settings, being of a particular religious faith and having little to no access to formal education) in terms of the ways in which they gain shape and meaning in the lived contexts of their daily lives through, for example, the dynamics of family life.

**Being a Refugee, and Family Life**

All of the young people discussed in the book were living in some form of family arrangement. Of the eleven participants of Karen, Chin, and Burmese backgrounds, eight came to Australia with both parents and siblings, two came with only their mother, and one arrived and lived with only an older sister. Of the twenty-six African participants, fifteen lived with only their mother or a “stepmother” and siblings, eight lived with both parents and siblings, two lived with their grandmothers, and one lived with only older siblings. In the process of their journey to Australia, the familial relationships of many of these young people
underwent a process of restructuring (e.g., cousins were represented and/or perceived as siblings, aunts were represented and/or perceived as mothers, and mothers were represented and/or perceived as “stepmothers”). Family dynamics were of central importance to young people’s sense of themselves and where they fit in their social environment, as familial expectations and discourses both conflated and clashed with local and national discourses, frameworks, and pressures, as well as those stemming from peer groups.

As my central focus is on the tensions of belonging that emerge between young people, especially in the school environment, I explore the influence of family dynamics and pressures as they arose and were engaged by young people in this context. Dating, for example, was a significant issue for young people in which family dynamics were prevalent. As I will expand upon in chapter 4, one of the more regularly occurring ways in which young people expressed their desire to assert themselves as the same or different from other young people, usually based on some element of race or ethnicity, was through dating. When this clashed with parental expectations, conflict arose. Family dynamics form an important backdrop through which young people engage in a process of constituting belonging with one another and engage other defining aspects of their lives such as gender and class. Schools act as places where both young people and their parents are forced to negotiate relationships with people of different cultural backgrounds and socioeconomic positions (Neal and Vincent 2013). Moreover, for these young people it was the family that provided the most direct and relevant ties to their country of origin.

Unlike young people from second- and third-generation migrant backgrounds who also encounter intergenerational tensions but often have intangible associations with a “home” country, young people from refugee backgrounds frequently have strong ties to their country of origin and members of their family who still reside there. Therefore, they may be faced with a range of challenges, such as retaining the language and culture of the country from which they fled, while becoming accustomed to the country to which they have fled (Guerra and White 1995). Contributing to these complexities, young people from refugee backgrounds are more susceptible to high unemployment rates, low educational achievement, and the effects of trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder, loneliness, isolation, and depression (Broadbent, Cacciattolo and Carpenter 2007; Mosselson 2009).

Due to these complexities, much of the literature on young people from refugee backgrounds takes a problem centered approach in which young refugees are portrayed as victims or in constant tension as they are “torn between two worlds” (Ngo 2008, 4; see also Guerrero and Tinkler 2010; Ngo 2010; Rajaram 2002). I do not disagree that young people from refugee backgrounds are indeed marginalized in ways that are unique to their refugee status, and that such marginalization often becomes deeply entrenched. I accept, as Mosselson contends,
that “refuge youth are rendered peripheral in their societies and have learned this marginalization in their new host countries” (2009, 451; see also Badea, Jetten, Iyer and Er-rafiy 2011).

Despite these challenges however, the young people at the center of this book did not always perceive themselves as marginalized, and when they did this marginalization was not always or directly attributed to their refugee status. Instead, when discussing refugee status specifically, or marginalization generally, young people would frequently slip into discussions of their race, ethnicity or socioeconomic positioning highlighting the importance of social class in the analysis of multicultural perspectives (Neal and Vincent 2013). The term refugee was often used, even by young people of official refugee status, to describe others—they sometimes described living, for certain periods of their lives, “like a refugee.” This distancing from the category of refugee is likely at least in part the result of what Jackson (2002, 91) notes as the phenomenon through which life, in experiences of rupture, crisis and trauma, “all but ceases to be warrantable.” The refugee experience of flight often erupts so profoundly out of context to the lives of people before and after such events, that it lacks the coherent framework necessary for its retelling.

Nonetheless, and while I did not actively pursue them, young people did on occasion offer narratives of flight and trauma in association with the refugee experience. I interpret their narrative accounts as helping them to transcend the objective label of refugee. Through the process of retelling stories of their experiences as refugees, those experiences are actively reformed in ways that might integrate their personal narrative with the ways in which they are externally framed (Jackson 2002, 15). I consider young people’s overlapping narratives of their refugee experiences with the ways in which their lives are framed in the Australian context in the ethnographic chapters that follow.

In this chapter, my aim was to discuss the broader social and political contexts through which the young people in my study engaged in the processes of constituting a sense of themselves and belonging. I began by providing an overview of immigration history and attitudes toward migrants and refugees in Australia and how multiculturalism arose out of this fraught context. Contested as multiculturalism often is in the modern, Western world, I identified the discourses of integration and tolerance as emerging from the current policy framework and moral landscape of Australian multiculturalism. In line with Hage (1998) and Povinelli (2002), among others, I identified both integration and tolerance as nationalist practices emerging out of a position of whiteness. I argued that discourses of integration and tolerance are demonstrative of the power dynamics which act as barriers in belonging to the Australian national space for these young people.

The various contexts which constitute the ethnographic setting through which the book takes place—host country, country of origin, the experience and
status of being a refugee, and family life—all offer (and exclude) some form of what can be described as symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1986). It is symbolic capital that permits the kind of cultural competence that ultimately allows for an enhanced sense of being or belonging in social context. While a primary focus of this chapter was on the various ways in which a sense of belonging is both limited and made available to people in the Australian national space, the accumulation of being and belonging is not simply a passive process. Rather, it emerges as people respond to and actively engage with the constraints and opportunities particular to the social contexts in which they arise.

In chapter 3 I will establish the conceptual lens of youth responsiveness to sociopolitical context and examine relevant theoretical perspectives. In the proceeding ethnographic chapters, I examine young people’s identity work with a focus on how the narrative framework of Australian multiculturalism affects that process. It is their constitution and representations of themselves that emerges in response to the Australian multicultural context that is the key focus of the book and the subject of the central research findings in the chapters that follow.