From early on in my fieldwork, it became apparent that race was a central frame of reference for the young people in my study. Whether they were explaining to me how and why skin color was an essential component of their experience, critical to everything from how they chose their friends to the development of their world view; or whether they were doing the opposite and explaining how skin color had exactly zero relevance to their lives, they talked about it constantly. At the same time, it became increasingly apparent that race was a particularly loaded topic in the public moral discourses that framed their everyday lives.

As described in chapter 2, young people’s experiences at school and in other aspects of their lives after resettlement in Australia were peppered with attempts toward, and talk about, integration and tolerance. I frame the concepts of integration and tolerance as discourses emerging from a multiculturalism that manifested in young people’s daily lives. Through messages of integration and tolerance, these young people were called upon to both downplay the relevance of race for successful assimilation, as well as to emphasize and celebrate their racial and ethnic difference when called upon to do so.

Over time, I began to see these two phenomena—young people’s talk about race, and the ways in which race was treated or managed in their daily environments—as linked. Young people’s sense of identity, of course, develops from a vast entanglement of influences, experiences and beliefs. Yet certain ways in which they represented themselves seemed to emerge in a dynamic relationship with the ways in which their status as minority and refugee youth were addressed in the public and political sphere. In this chapter I seek to establish the mechanisms through which the relationship between refugee youth identities and the Australian multicultural context arises.

In doing so, I examine relevant theories of identity and develop my conceptual lens of dynamic responsiveness as a key element of the identity work of
young people from refugee backgrounds. I utilize the notion of dynamic responsiveness to explore the role of social context in the identity-making practices of these young people. Central to this conceptual lens, I explore the concepts of hybridized and essentialized representations of identity and how they are mobilized by young people in dynamic response to the sociopolitical backdrop of their lives. Also, of key significance to the ways in which young people represent themselves, I explore Bourdieu's (1986) concept of “capital” and the role it plays in helping these young people establish a sense of belonging.

I conceptualize hybridity and essentialism as modes of self-representation which allow a kind of agency or participation in the ways in which these young people are represented in the Australian national context. I utilize the concept of capital to highlight how young people's hybridized and essentialized self-representations demonstrate a degree of cultural awareness as they establish a sense of themselves and cultivate a sense of belonging in Australia. A note of warning, in unpacking these overlapping and sometimes theoretically dense concepts, I shift between abstract analyses of their broad relevance to the anthropological literature, and explanation of their relevance to the identity work of these young people. I do so to locate young people's identity work in this ethnographic context, within the scope of scholarship on broader social processes.

The often highly self-conscious representations of self that ensue between young people can be understood at once as the inevitable consequence of social and historical contexts, and also as the work of partially knowing actors who playfully engage and respond to these contexts with one another. As such, elements of structure, culture and agency converge in potent ways in the spaces where young people approximate identity and belonging through responsiveness.

Young people’s hybridized and essentialized representations of themselves emerged with reference to their sense of racial and ethnic identity. Before delving into my theoretical framework on identity and responsiveness, it is important to briefly highlight the conceptual slippage between the terms race and ethnicity in sociopolitical usage, as well as in how they were employed by my research participants and how I in turn use them in the analysis presented here.

Race and Ethnicity: Untangling the Terms of Conceptual Overlap

I use the term race to signify skin color explicitly where it was similarly mobilized by participants. I use terms such as ethnicity or ethnic identity to indicate elements of language or culture, and the term racialized to signal the overlap between young people’s references to skin color and ethnic heritage.

While there is no standard definition of what constitutes an ethnic grouping, ethnicity is usually associated with (but does not require) a distinguishing name and other shared traits such as: past history, common heritage, language, religion, nationality or territory, world view, and aspects of physical appearance.
While ethnicity is decidedly rooted in culture, the concept of race has drawn much critical engagement from scholars in recent decades due to its association with biology. It is now largely dismissed as a social construct with no biological basis.

To say the least, “race” is a highly controversial concept. In its ugliest form, it has been used to inaccurately categorize genetic variation from which racist stereotypes and power structures have been justified. Most recent developments in genetic research suggest possible links between race and DNA but purportedly maintain that such links should not be used to support current racial stereotypes, and advocate for a new way to talk about race and genetic difference that does not lend itself to racism (Reich 2018). As critics have pointed out, these most recent attempts to resurrect the category of race as more than a social construct, capitalize on geographically based genetic variation but fail to demonstrate a precise correlation with biological or social definitions of racial categories (Goodman and Darnovsky 2018). Social scientists largely maintain that a belief in innate difference between humans based on decisive “racial” characteristics is not only theoretically untenable, but also a misconception with profound implications (Billinger 2007, 6). Careful attention to historical contexts and a range of sociocultural factors demonstrate that race as a defining category must be analyzed primarily as a social construct. However, despite ongoing debate over the biological implications of race, as a paradigm upon which human difference is often categorized, it cannot be ignored that race remains a dominant conceptual framework.

In theory, political institutions in Australia and elsewhere utilize the concept of race to describe observable physical characteristics such as skin color, and ethnicity for characteristics such as language and country of origin. However, in practice there is a great deal of policy overlap as racial and ethnic markers are often used interchangeably; for example, people may be classified as of European heritage or white, or of African American heritage or black (Bucholtz 2011, 6; see also Omi and Winant 2011). Likewise, there was a great deal of conceptual slippage among the young people represented here in their identification with racial or ethnic markers—they defined themselves as African or black, as Karen or “not a white,” and as Burmese or “a brown skin.”

I utilize each of these terms in the instances and ways in which the young people themselves did so, and commonly indicate this through quotation marks. Of critical note here, is my participants heavy use of the term “African” as a descriptor, and how this sits in contrast to the Karen young people’s lack of use of the term “Asian,” despite its currency as a category of identification in Western nations. When using the term African to refer to themselves, my participants appeared to be establishing solidarity with one another through a transnational, diasporic identification in similar fashion to how they utilized the descriptor “being black.” Such positive and binding association with the
Western categorization of “Asian” appeared not to exist in similar fashion for Karen participants. Indeed, the only time I recall and recorded a Karen, Chin, or Burmese young person use the category of Asian as a descriptor was when Wah Wah described how she hoped to date an “English, not Asian boy.” Asian, as a category, appeared not to carry the cool or desirability of an African identity as young people of Karen, Chin, and Burmese backgrounds opted instead for ethnic or nation specific terms to describe themselves. Their choices of identifying terms here serve to further highlight the dynamic processes of identification.

These young people perceived and experienced a kind of external labeling of their ethnicities which indirectly emphasized and alternately denied the significance of race and ethnicity. It was in part in response to this external marking of their ethnicities that young people emphasized hybridized and essentialized representations of themselves, often with significant reference to race. Moreover, their practice of alternately evading and inhabiting racialized identities serves to further highlight the inherent link between whiteness and multiculturalism and the subtle ways in which young people may both resist and echo this nexus. That is, slippage between race and ethnicity in policy related and broader social narratives was also reflected in the complex identity-making practices engaged by these young people.

Let me now approach this complexity. In doing so, I seek to establish my conceptual lens of responsiveness by exploring some broad theoretical perspectives of identity in the anthropological literature, through which I demonstrate how identity emerges in response to social environment. I will then explore the concepts of hybridity and essentialism in the anthropological literature and as I utilize them in analyzing the identity work of young people from refugee backgrounds. I argue that hybridized and essentialized representations of identity are mobilized in response to the social and moral framework of the multicultural landscape, thereby acting as a form of capital which aids in the cultivation of belonging for these young people.

**Identity through Dynamic Responsiveness**

Cultivating a sense of identity is at its core a subjective, comparative process. It involves emphasizing similarities to certain people in certain contexts, and differences to others. Similarity and difference are not objective attributes of course, but rather perceptions and products of people’s interactions with one another (Gilroy 1997, 315; see also Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Gilroy 1993, 2005).

In a broad anthropological perspective, the cultivation of identity through an emphasis on difference manifests in socially established categories such as race, ethnic groups, or gender. Difference allows groups to define themselves in opposition to other, often dominant groups. A prominent example of this in the anthropological literature is Fredrick Barth’s (1969) classic work on ethnic
identity. In it, he detailed the strategies and production of cultural forms invoked by ethnic groups in northwest Pakistan, for maintaining their distinctiveness and boundaries in relation to other groups. Barth emphasized that establishing difference is central for the maintenance of a collective group affiliation (Barth 1969; Jenkins 2008). Likewise, Stuart Hall argued that a sense of groupness is constructed through defining who the group is not, rather than through defining who it is (1996, 17). This process of exclusion, as Hall also noted, emerges from the power dynamics of particular social contexts (Hall 1996:4).

Conversely, the cultivation of identity through an emphasis on similarity in the creation of community and solidarity, as notably demonstrated in the work of social theorists Benedict Anderson (1991) and Michael Billig (1995), is also deeply political and results in such powerful ideologies as nationalism. In his conceptualization of “imagined communities,” Anderson (1991) argued that nations are not inherent groupings but represent socially constituted distinctions in that the communion they imply exists in the minds of those who imagine themselves a part of it. While they may emerge as “imagined” however, such ideologies do not merely function in the imaginary (Jenkins 2008). Instead, the cultivation of commonality can act as a powerful motivating force in people’s lives with such far reaching implications as to define what constitutes a nation and why (Billig 1995). The creation of community through assertions of similarity is an all but straightforward process—a process, however, that for reasons difficult to define, is ever important to individuals (Skey 2011, 9).

This process of emphasizing similarity and difference that the work of establishing identity entails, represents, in effect, a response to social context. As I apply the concept of responsiveness to identity making, I seek to highlight the reactive and evolving nature through which a sense of self or group emerges. Identity is not objective, and it does not emerge in a bubble. It is established against and in accordance with the predominant social stimuli of a given social context. Dynamic responsiveness is especially relevant when theoretically leveraged in the analysis of youth identities. It usefully captures the sensitivity and perception required to cultivate a sense of self-definition and inclusion in social context—an impetus at the heart of the process of identity making. This drive for inclusion and a sense of self-definition is particularly salient for young people at the transition into adulthood; a time when how we are perceived by others is of great consequence.

For my research participants, who were effectively between national contexts and who constituted different racial, ethnic, and language groupings, asserting sameness and difference in regard both to each other and to others in the broad landscape of their social environments was particularly fraught, complicated, and indeed, significant to their sense of self and social belonging. Young people from refugee backgrounds are in between a number of identifying categories and therefore have a range of choices in whom they may align.
themselves with and differentiate themselves from, and for what purposes they may choose to do so (see also Badea et al. 2011, 586). For example, they are often viewed as different in their host country due to various racial- and ethnic-based signifiers, yet they are also often viewed as different within their own families (both in the host country and still residing in their country of origin), who see them entering and adapting to a new cultural space. They are not quite one, not quite the other.

How then did these young people create belonging by emphasizing same-ness and difference, to different people and in different ways, in their multifarious self-representations? And how did these identity-making practices act in dynamic response to their social context? In many ways, these questions are at the heart of the content of the chapters that follow. In order to develop the conceptual platform from which I interpret their identity work, however, I must provide some details of the ethnographic punch line here.

In some instances, young people articulated difference from the broader population and similarity to one another in the creation of a collective group identity and a sense of belonging with one another. They did so by emphasizing ethnic signifiers, such as skin color, through which they mobilized racialized, essentialized self-representations. On the other hand, they sometimes articulated a sense of similarity to the broader population and difference to one another as they emphasized a sense of integration and connection with wider Australian society. They did so often by explicitly downplaying those same ethnic signifiers and putting forth what they described in terms of a “mixed,” or, as I conceptualize it here, a more “hybridized” representation of themselves.

Hybridity and essentialism are central themes related to scholarship on identity in social science research. Here, I detail the broad emergence and application of these concepts as well as the critique they have drawn. In doing so, I explain and justify my use of hybridity and essentialism for analyzing the complex relationship between identity and social context among these young people from refugee backgrounds.

**The Hybridized Response: Merging and Acknowledging Difference**

Firstly, it is worth noting that the term hybridity has a loaded historical association as it was used to signify “racial mixing” in colonial ideology (Papastergiadis 1997). In current trends however, the concept of hybridity has been largely shifted from this earlier association. In the last two decades, particularly in the fields of cultural theory and postcolonial studies, most prominently through the works of Edward Said (1979), Stuart Hall (1993), and Homi Bhabha (1994, 1996), the term *hybridity* has been used to demonstrate a kind of duality which can emerge in an individuals’ sense of identity. It was initially applied to analyze the dynamics of interchange between colonizers and colonized, and then extended more broadly to the current world context (see also Werbner 1997b).
Hybridity has come to represent the fluid and emergent nature of social selves as depicted in current theoretical frameworks and in the context of the global overlapping of ethnicity, race, and culture in local settings (Bhabha 1994; Papastergiadis 1997; Young 2006). The concept is now widely used in scholarship to connote a positive process of merging, mixing, combining and overlapping different representations of ethnicity and cultural identity in the creation of new representations. In its recent appropriation for representing ethnicities, scholars use hybridity as a way of countering the simple dualities of hyphenated identities and emphasizing the dynamic and complex nature of ethnic identity (Noble and Tabar 2002). Considering this evolution of the concept, Papastergiadis urges that “we now have the confidence that Hybridity has been moved out from the loaded discourse of ‘race,’ and situated within a more neutral zone of identity” (1997, 257). It is in its relationship to self-understanding and identity making that the concept of hybridity is useful in approaching the complexity and multiplicity of the subjective positioning of young people from refugee backgrounds. Even in this more productive application to understanding identity however, hybridity has still been subject to wide debate and critique—and rightly so.

While it is a useful tool for highlighting the degree to which identities are the result of overlapping cultural influences in the modern, globalized world, hybridity is an insufficient concept for gaining understanding about how specific identities emerge or how belonging is approached. As anthropologist, Henrietta Moore (2011) states, “Its advantage is that it appears to capture differences in reception and response to external influences of all kinds, but its weakness is that it gives little insight or understanding into how or why these specific differences should be generated” (Moore 2011, 63). In other words, simply claiming that identities are “mixed” or “in-between” does not give us much analytic leverage. It does not help us to understand how or why or the processes by which such mixed identities emerge.

Considering this shortcoming, I use the term hybridity not simply to represent a merging or mixing of cultural symbols in the presentation of a new sense of identity, as it has been applied most recently to scholarship on identity. Instead, I reserve the term to capture people’s own emphasis on the flexibility with which they constitute a sense of themselves and belonging to others, albeit through a range of symbolic cultural resources. That is, I use hybridity to capture a kind of self-representation in alignment with mixing and merging, rather than to describe new formulations of identities through actions of mixing and merging as such.

In a footnote to her argument, Moore states that her aversion to the concept of hybridity, in its application as an analytic framework, is related to hierarchies of power in postcolonial contexts, not as it emerges in “those social and national contexts where the concept of hybridity has been part of lived
experience and woven into nationalist discourse of identity and citizenship” (2011, 209). As she goes on to argue, “hybridity as a sign and as a marker of cultural identity has . . . become part of a series of identifications and possibilities for self-fashioning . . . which also includes the use of cultural difference as a form of governmentality, as in policies of multiculturalism” (2011, 210). I maintain that unless demonstrated as relevant to and emerging out of people’s self-identification, the concept of hybridity is without analytic merit. I offer justification for my use of the term hybridity in line with Moore’s exception. That is, hybridity has a specific, localized context of meaning for young people from refugee backgrounds in Australia.

I use the concept of hybridity in terms of its “regional” value—it emerges in Australian multicultural discourse through the value placed on mixing and merging inherent to the notion of integration—and in terms of the doubling back wherein my informants employ flexibility as a foundational, explanatory element of their self-identification. That is, I use hybridity as a way of demonstrating young people's own emphasis on their capacity for flexibility, rather than to depict elements of their fixed identities which I, as a researcher, have deemed to derive from a process of mixing or merging. My conceptualization of hybridity refers to the ways in which young people presented themselves as flexible, and the ways in which they emphasized an ability to bridge or incorporate difference in representations of themselves and thus fit their conceptualization of the mainstream population.

The concept of hybridity is often depicted as positive and progressive in the scholarship on identity, as opposed to negative and regressive depictions of essentialism (Noble and Tabar 2002, 133). As Pieterse puts it, hybridity is conceived as, “the antidote to essentialist notions of identity and ethnicity” (1995, 55). I do not celebrate hybridity as entirely emancipatory. And to be sure, in other contexts participants also emphasized their lack of tolerance for difference as they enforced (ever shifting) boundaries on themselves and one another through their essentialized self-representations. Let’s now turn to the scholarly roots of essentialism and my application of this concept for analyzing refugee youth identity.

The Essentialized Response: Merging Difference, Emphasizing Sameness

Scholarly opposition to essentialism, as it relates to cultural identity, is due to the fact that the concept is based upon the now widely discredited notion that cultural identities are fixed and immutable (Bhabha 2006; Noble and Tabar 2002; Werbner 1997a). In its most common usage, essentialism is the act of applying given properties to an individual or group and carries the implication that such individuals or groups may be singularly characterized. Werbner (1997a, 228) defines the act of essentializing as: “to impute a fundamental, basic, absolutely necessary constitutive quality to a person, social category, ethnic group, religious
community, or nation. It is to posit falsely a timeless continuity, discreteness or boundedness in space, and an organic unity. It is to imply an internal sameness and external difference or otherness."

In this most basic form, when it is used as a mode of representation of one group, and applied by another, essentialism is an oppressive act. Moreover, as Werbner points out the objectification inherent in essentializing is as necessary in progressive political agendas such as citizenship rights and multiculturalism as it is for divisive acts of racism (1997a, 229).

In response to oppressive acts of essentializing, particularly with regard to race and ethnicity, antiessentialism emerged as an intellectual trend in academic discourse (Werbner 1997a). Antiessentialism provides an alternative to racist discourse, which seeks to apply precise defining attributes to race and ethnicity, and thereby seeks also to deny the fluid, open, hybrid nature and context driven modes through which these categories are now commonly believed to be constituted (Werbner 1997a, 226). However, as Werbner points out, essentialism should not itself be essentialized—that is, who is doing the essentializing, to whom, and for what purpose must be considered in the essentialism/antiessentialism debate (1997a, 226). It is at the crux of this argument where essentialism is made relevant to the identity-making practices of these young people.

There is a distinction between self-essentializing practices through which people depict themselves as static and unchanging despite the flexibility through which such depictions are often created, versus external, racist essentializing practices in which the explicit purpose is to represent other people in ways that do not allow for change or flexibility. As Werbner (1997a, 248) states, “Self-essentializing as a mode of reflexive imagining is constitutive of self and subjectivity. It is culturally empowering. But it is not, unlike racist reifications, fixed and immutable.” The term self-essentializing represents a positive act through which people may create an “imagined community” for some beneficial purpose (Werbner 1997a, 230). Such an imagined community is often presented as unchanging and immobile, for the purpose of creating solidarity, and through emphasizing the commonality and similarity of its members.

“Strategic essentialism” is a term for self-essentializing that prominent social theorist Gayatri Spivak (1990) first used to describe the ways in which marginalized groups create and invoke solidarity in order to respond politically to their marginalization. Spivak’s work illustrates that although it may be theoretically incorrect to represent marginalized groups in essentialized ways based upon race, gender, so forth, it is often the case that those groups do just that themselves, and they do so often for specific political purposes (Hollinsworth 2006; Spivak 1990). The concept of “strategic essentialism” can also be applied in a critical understanding of how marginalized groups may adapt an essentialized otherness in their everyday practices to create a sense of self and belonging (Noble et al. 1999, 31).
While presented as static and unchanging, the defining terms of an essentialized group may shift and evolve over time and across contexts. As Hollinsworth illustrates in reference to marginalized groups, “In the process of demanding recognition, these groups often come to depend ideologically and organizationally on Essentializing that difference, denying any common ground with their category’s opponents” (2006, 59). The category of “opponents” in acts of self-essentializing is also shifting and lacking in clear boundaries. As a result, relationships that infer sameness and those that infer difference are dynamic and context dependent.

The concept of “strategic essentialism” as well as that of hybridity helps to explain the identification processes of “switching between ‘same’ and ‘different’ in multiple and unpredictable ways” (Hollinsworth 2006, 61). Both hybridized and essentialized self-representations evolve through a process of merging differences, however in hybridized representations that process of merging differences may be acknowledged and in essentialized representations it is often denied.

It should be clear, then, that the concepts of hybridity and essentialism contain a great deal of overlap and are not entirely dichotomous or oppositional. Instead, as I employ them here, these concepts are useful in highlighting different emphases in young people’s representations of themselves and the ways in which they characterize their own processes of identification with others. Hybridity as a process is evident in both essentialized and hybridized self-representations—the merging of some inherent differences is necessary in constituting a sense of self or commonality with others. What I am interested in is the ways in which young people acknowledged and maintained this initial merging of difference in their hybridized representations of identity or denied it in their essentialized representations. Taken together, the variability with which difference may be merged in the representation of cohesion and unity might, depending on emphasis, be described in terms of hybridity or essentialism. For these young people, hybridized and essentialized representations of identity were almost always projected as they either emphasized or denied the relevance of race and ethnicity to their sense of themselves.

Race, Ethnicity, Choice, and a Note on Intersectionality

To be sure, the conceptual terms I’ve discussed thus far are both fraught—hybridity, in its historical association with race and its imprecise characterization of cultural mixing, and essentialism, in its simplification of complex and evolving racial and ethnic identities. Despite and even because of their explanatory shortcomings, these terms are both of particular relevance here. As noted earlier, I conceptualize hybridity and essentialism not only or exactly in terms of observations of young people’s actions, but more precisely as a means of interpreting and analyzing their own reflections of how their sense of identity comes
to be. Such self reflections allowed for a kind of participation in the dominant scripts of the broader national context in which their lives unfolded.

Central to this dominant script are questions about race, ethnicity, and how to manage and live with diversity. These young people reflected alternating fixed and flexible representations of their sense of an ethnic and racial self in relationship to their perception and experience of a sometimes overt, sometimes more indirect, racialization of their ethnicity in the Australian context. Their ability to emphasize and deemphasize their racial and ethnic identities through hybridity and essentialism points to the concept of “ethnic choice” (Song 2003). Ethnic choice speaks to the complex ways in which people from what are commonly conceived as ethnic minority backgrounds, can negotiate their own self-image and sense of themselves in the context of structural constraints or racial and ethnic labeling perceived as emerging from the broader community.

The notion of ethnic choice illustrates how, despite constraints, people exercise a considerable amount of agency in how they portray and represent their ethnicity for creating belonging in social life. As Song argues, people engage an array of “strategies” to respond to the limitations and manipulate the meanings of externally assigned ethnic categorizations. Among these strategies, people may choose, in Song’s terms, “adherence to the dominant scripts” or “opting out” (2003, 55–57). These labels capture the degree of flexibility in how much one chooses to match the dominant representations of a particular ethnic group or demonstrate an alternative representation. Of course, the fullness of such “choices” concerning race and ethnicity must be tempered with the reality that the expectations of other members of an ethnic group, or indeed those outside of it, will limit and police an individual’s ability to make choices that go against the dominant scripts.

Moreover, people must contend themselves with a number of scripts that both inform and inhibit the extent of their ethnic choices. For the young people represented here, their status as youths as well as their gender, socioeconomic class, and migration status intersect in the formation and representation of their racial and ethnic identities. The concept of intersectionality captures such multiple positionings and the inherent power dynamics they entail (Carroll 2017). Migrant youths in particular are faced with the dominant scripts of the mainstream culture of their place of resettlement, as well as the often competing expectations of their families and culture of origin. This complexity is especially true as it relates to race and gender among young migrants and refugees.

At the intersections of race and gender—both of which are relational, fluid, social constructs—the neatness with which young people understand themselves as same or different in comparison to broad, cultural expectations is disrupted (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall 2013). In other words, analyzing young people’s racial and ethnic identity, as it intersects with other aspects of their identity such as
gender, complicates both their essentialized depictions of sameness and their hybridized depictions of difference to the broader population. Beyond this, the complex ways in which young people may emphasize or vacate their racial identities may indeed be gendered. Are girls more likely to be urged toward tolerance or integration than are boys? How does this affect their representation of hybridized and essentialized identities? While these considerations are valid and indeed worthy of interrogation, the range of research informants represented here did not reveal a definitive gendered component to their hybridized and essentialized representations of racial identity.

What was exceedingly clear throughout the course of my fieldwork, however, was that these young people represented themselves in different and often seemingly contradictory ways, in different contexts through their near constant references to race and ethnicity. These ethnic and racial choices were determined through young people’s mobilization of what I have described in terms of hybridized and essentialized depictions of their interactive selves.

In other words, these young people cultivated essentialized representations of themselves in their daily interactions as they sought to fix themselves in relationship to one another often with reference to race and ethnicity. Paradoxically, the processes through which they created a sense of fixed and immutable identities were often heavily reliant upon hybridizing strategies. The ways in which they emphasized a sense of sameness to one another in their essentialized self-representations, or a capacity to incorporate difference in their hybridized self-representations, is indicative of a responsiveness to the political context of their lives. The oscillating hybridized and essentialized self-representations through which these young people cultivate a sense of identity ultimately act as a form of capital through which they respond to their social context and approach a sense of belonging.

**Dynamic Responsiveness as Symbolic Capital**

As Moore argues, “the interconnections between personal fantasies and social imaginaries have to be analyzed within specific social, economic and political circumstances” (2011, 61). I interpret these young people’s choices in how they represent their sense of racial and ethnic identity as related to the ways in which notions of racial essentialism and hybridity are engaged in their broad social landscapes. Consequently, their own hybridized and essentialized self-representations reflect the perception and accumulation of a kind of symbolic capital which emerges in dynamic response to certain ideals of multiculturalism. To understand the notion of “capital” and how it relates to the identity work of these young people, it is necessary to briefly outline the emergence of the concept in the work of prominent social scientist Pierre Bourdieu.
**Capital and the Field**

First, I understand the Australian national space in ways that align with Bourdieu’s conceptual framework of “field” (see also Hage 1998, 53). The field represents a lens for analyzing individuals and groups as positioned within a relationally constituted structure, in which they engage in competition for various forms of material and symbolic goods deemed valuable within the field (Bourdieu 1984, 228; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 96). The Australian multicultural context itself may be described as a “field” because it represents a space where people of diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds struggle to define what constitutes belonging and how resources and rights are best allocated. As Harris describes, Australian multiculturalism represents “a dynamic, lived field of action within which social actors both construct and deconstruct ideas of cultural difference, national belonging and place-making” (Harris 2009, 187). The Australian multicultural space may also be understood as an especially important field for the domain of youth where power dynamics and individual agency converge in localized settings (see also Bottrell and France 2015). The field, in Bourdieu’s conceptualization, represents a space where “capital” is distributed. Resources, both symbolic and material, deemed valuable within the field, are considered “capital.”

Bourdieu’s formulation of cultural and social capital refers broadly to valued preferences within a given field, in terms of embodied and dispositional characteristics (such as, in the national field, appearance, accent, preferences for behavior, etc.) and material cultural goods (e.g., art, books, etc.), as well as how these resources equate to a sense of belonging and membership within a group (Bourdieu 1986, 243–248). The accumulation of social and cultural capital when recognized and valorized by others is transformed into symbolic capital, defined by Hage as “the recognition and legitimacy given to a person or group for the cultural capital they have accumulated” (Hage 1998, 53). I utilize the concept of “symbolic ethnic capital” to describe the ways in which young people represented highly racialized depictions of their ethnic identity through performance in chapter 5.

The embodied and dispositional characteristics provoked in response to particular fields and in relation to symbolic capital is known in Bourdieu’s analysis as “habitus.” Otherwise defined as “a socially constituted system of cognitive and motivating structures” (Bourdieu 1977, 76), habitus reflects both a fundamentally embodied practical sense or reading of social context (e.g., how one moves and carries themselves in particular fields), through the accumulation of symbolic capital, as well as the generative capacity that practical sense allows for new thoughts and actions to emerge. While Bourdieu’s overall framework has been criticized as overly deterministic (Adams 2006, 515), the conceptual intersection of habitus, capital, and field is useful in reflecting the ways in which I
broadly frame the self-representations observed among participants as a kind of responsiveness to, or participation in, their current social context.

**Refugee Youth and Australian Multicultural Capital**

Cultural capital is traditionally regarded as controlled and distributed in the domain of institutions like schools and used by parents and professionals to the advantage of certain groups over others (France, Bottrell and Haddon 2012). Attention to the “objectified nature of cultural capital” as it emerges through interaction in more informal settings however, can inform a sense of agency among young people (France et al. 2012). In the Australian context, discourses promoting the value of effective integration on the one hand, and those promoting tolerance and the notion of antiracism on the other, are prevalent. I consider such discourses as a form of capital in the Australian multicultural field. I use the term *multicultural capital* to refer to those discourses and the broad moral elements of multiculturalism in the Australian space. People from refugee and minority backgrounds may simultaneously be asked to develop fragmented identities for more effective assimilation or integration; treated as more or less one-dimensional in the name of tolerance; and both problematized and celebrated from both angles. Young people are aware of these dynamics and engage with the ideals and messages emerging from Australian multiculturalism in terms of their use of multicultural capital.

Through messages of integration and tolerance, multiculturalism that young people are exposed to in their lived experiences promotes both the irrelevance of skin color, and the celebration of racialized diversity. As I observed them, these messages alternated between a denial of “race” as a defining characteristic and the consequent emphasis on hybrid identities on one hand, and on the other, the promotion of diversity as distinguished by and essentialized through skin color and culture of origin. Young people’s practice of inhabiting and evading racial and ethnic identity through hybridized and essentialized representations of themselves occurs in conjunction with those messages of integration and tolerance inherent to multicultural discourse.

By constituting themselves and their sense of belonging through what can be described as hybridized and essentialized representations, whereby they speak to their own sense of identity, young people effectively exercise their perception of, and response to, the multicultural capital that frames their lives. In doing so, they figure themselves into the dialogue and approach a sense of belonging in the Australian multicultural field. For example, despite the tenuousness with which participants’ schools (and the broader community) often engaged with race through multicultural discourse, it was indeed one of the most salient aspects of their identities. Young people’s essentialized representations of identity where skin color was made central emerged both in subtle opposition to messages promoting the ethos of integration and antiracism rhetoric and in
accordance with the ethic of tolerance and celebrating and accentuating their difference, both of which they regularly encountered in their schools and community environments (Moran 2016).

Conversely, the same participants also regularly represented themselves in hybridized ways in which they demonstrated both the insignificance of the restrictive descriptors of race and ethnicity as well as their ability to mix and merge with young people of different ethnic and racial backgrounds. Through their emphasis on hybridity in their processes of identification, young people aligned themselves with integration rhetoric based upon the value of overcoming difference, which was promoted at school and in the broader community (Moran 2016; see also Arkin 2009, Bourdieu 1984). At the same time, through their emphasis on hybridity young people subtly resist the school and community emphasis on tolerance which locates their ethnicity as central and worthy of celebration and accentuation.

But here is the rub. How are we to reconcile the fundamentally habituated and unconscious nature of people’s engagement with social context, as represented in Bourdieu’s conceptualization, and what I observed as the more deliberate hybridized and essentialized self reflections of young refugees in Australia? The notion of dynamic responsiveness helps us to do so. As people’s sense of identity emerges in response to their social context, it is through some combination of both deliberate intention and less precise perception.

I principally maintain that the self-reflections or representations I observed among these young people are the work of partially knowing social actors. What I explain largely in terms of a kind of participatory positioning in which young people’s sense of identity reflects back on their perception of messages central to multicultural discourse points to both an internal reflection of those messages and a more deliberate engagement with them. These are not mutually exclusive phenomena—conscious self-representations are not free of structural constraints that shape and provoke them, just as more subconscious and habituated representations do not disallow any kind of reflexivity. A consideration of the agency inherent in self-representations, as well as the internalization of social messages, constraints and discourses that inform those representations at a less conscious level, help to broadly explain the processes through and conditions under which these young people perceive and pursue belonging in national space.

**Responsive Identity and Multiculturalism**

At the start of this chapter, I outlined my aim to explore the mechanisms through which young people’s talk about race and the ways in which race is approached and managed in Australian multicultural discourse are linked. At the heart of this link, I explored how young people project an alternating sense of
essentialized and hybridized racial and ethnic identity which acts as a form of capital. This allows young people from refugee backgrounds to respond to the multicultural discourses (of integration and tolerance) designed to address race and ethnicity that implicitly frame their lives. In their responsive identity work, these young people sought an oscillating sense of belonging—to one another, to the wider Australian society, and to symbolic connections with global networks.

I began by conceptualizing identity in terms of assertions of sameness and difference in the search for belonging to social context. I outlined the concepts of hybridity and essentialism as reflecting the complex and seemingly contradictory ways young people engage in this process. Their self-representations act as a form of capital which allows these young people to respond to and engage with the broad moral framework of Australian multiculturalism. They do so through the nuanced ways in which they claim belonging and “not-belonging” (Moore 2011, 63) to different elements of their lived multicultural context, in large part through references to race and ethnicity in their everyday interactions with one another.

Young people’s mobilization of race and ethnicity is meaningfully connected to their awareness of and engagement with the multicultural discourses they encounter in their daily lives. Conversely, their racialized identity practices are not formulated exclusively or even predominately through their experiences with racism and exclusion, which multicultural discourses are implemented to address. Indeed, their responsiveness to the discourses of integration and tolerance demonstrates a kind of symbolic or multicultural capital (Bourdieu 1986) related to the implicit moral framework of the Australian multicultural context (Moore 2011, 61).

Young people’s experiences with multiculturalism are revealing for a number of reasons particular to their generation. Not only do they encounter diversity and live with intercultural mixing at a rapidly accelerating rate, but they have also experienced an increasing backlash against multiculturalism (Harris 2013). The ways in which multiculturalism is enacted and managed in this context is intrinsically related to these young people’s cultivation and projection of their sense of identity. However, their emphasis and denial of race does not emerge solely from their capacity (or lack of) to navigate interethnic “multicultural encounters” as established in the literature on “everyday multiculturalism” (Harris 2009; Werbner 2013; Wise and Velayutham 2009). Rather, such racialized identity work is also acutely related to the messages through which the moral fabric of multiculturalism itself is established within host communities of young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds.

The identities of these young people may indeed be described as “hybrid,” “in-between,” “fluid” (Bhabha 1994; Hall 1996), and “ambivalent” (Ngo 2010), but beneath this, it is not only their encounters with one another as well as the white Australian population which makes them so, but also their engagement with
the messages designed to manage such diversity. Young people’s alternating assertions and denial of the significance of skin color through hybridized and essentialized representations of identity critically engage discourses of integration and tolerance to which “race,” however implicit and abstracted, is central.

Rather than conscious and deliberate strategies, a kind of subtle positioning or dynamic responsiveness better reflects the ways in which young people grapple with choice and constraints in their pursuit of a sense of themselves and their social place. These young people had recently experienced the movement, loss, and restructuring of their lives inherent to the refugee experience; they expressed a pervasive awareness that racism and ethnic tension were at least perceived to be significant issues in their lives; and they were confronted by the fact that they looked so obviously different from the broader population among whom they lived.

Throughout the remainder of the book I consider these complex dynamics. In doing so, I seek to demonstrate how young people may mobilize or present racialized depictions of their ethnicities in a kind of response which may echo, resist, or manipulate the ways in which they are implicitly racialized by the white majority in a multicultural framework. In the chapters that follow, I explore the identity-making processes of these young people in the context of the everyday as well as the more exceptional manifestations of multiculturalism they encounter, and how in this context they are drawn to represent themselves in racialized ways.

In doing so, I seek to distil the lines of comparison between young people’s self-representations and the broad moral discourses that frame their lives within the social landscape of Australian multiculturalism. Their dynamic responsiveness to the external framing of their lives in their cultivation of identity and belonging allowed these young people to begin developing an enhanced sense of control and certainty in their social worlds. Through playful banter exhibited in their everyday lives, as well as in formal performative representations and their engagement with the political context of their lives, young people fixed one another in social place, asserted knowledge of who belongs where, and tested and manipulated these boundaries of belonging.