Belonging and Becoming in a Multicultural World

Moran, Laura

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Social relationships, for these young people, were foundational to describing how they saw and understood themselves. Justifying and defining their friendships, arguably even more so than cultivating them, helped them to establish how they fit in social context. The social space outside of fixed ties to kinship groups and national territory is of marked relevance to young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds for whom these relationships and ties to place have been dismantled through the experience of (forced) migration. In the hyperdiversity of the current multicultural context and following the rupture caused by their migration experience, peer groups are central to formulating a sense of identity for these young people.

Moreover, the degree of creativity, flexibility, and choice in constructions of friendship justifies such social relationships as deeply relevant to anthropological inquiry. Several scholars point to the period of childhood and youth as a time when establishing friendships is significant for creating, exploring, and maintaining a sense of oneself (Back 1996; Chen, French and Schneider 2006; Cheney 2007; Chhuon and Hudley 2010; Chikkatur 2012; Dyson 2010, 483; Montgomery 2009; Wulff 1995b). For the young people with whom I worked, forming and justifying friendship bonds is a deeply important endeavor that provides an avenue through which they may respond to and find their place within dominant power structures.

Not surprisingly from what we have seen so far, race and ethnicity—in terms of their centrality or insignificance—were central to the ways in which these young people justified their relationships. Notice I refer to their justifications rather than their choices in social relationships as key to establishing a sense of self and belonging. The extent to which they were actually free to choose was influenced by a range of social factors including family expectations and the extent to which their school structure fostered certain connections over others.
More accurately, it was the ways in which they described and justified their friendships and romantic relationships, and indeed the extent to which they emphasized the role of choice in establishing them, that provided the scope through which these young people engaged with the broader multicultural context of which they were now a part. The everyday dynamics of young people’s social relationships and how they talk about them, as well as how those relationships are tested and unsettled, is central to their everyday articulations of identity.

The particular ways in which these young people give reason for the who and why of their social relationships is itself a kind of social positioning through which they constitute themselves within, and in relationship to, the local context of the school, their home and family lives, and the broader Australian national space. The justifications they provided for who their friends were, and why, were not neutral. Instead, as in much of their identity making practices, the ways in which they describe their social relationships are intricately tied to the degree of significance they place on racial and ethnic background. The ways in which their friendships were pursued, forged, negotiated and upheld provides a clear example of how young people engage with and exhibit a kind of dynamic responsiveness to multicultural discourse in the context of their everyday lives.

What Makes a Friend?

At Paddington High, many of the young people referred to their group of friends as “the Africans” and often accounted for their exclusivity as based upon “being black.” Samah, a fourteen-year-old Sudanese girl who had lived in Australia for four years, often answered my questions about others in her class by saying, “Is he white? Then I don’t know him. If he’s black, I know him.” The background to her mobile phone featured a big red heart and the words “I love being black.” She, with her close friend Vic, who was sixteen and also Sudanese, described how she made friends like this: “It’s being black. If you don’t know someone, someone introduces you and you’re friends. It’s easy to be friends with black people . . . for me it’s hard to be friends with white people. I don’t know why . . . ’cause they’re not black.”

During another conversation which unfolded during lunch time at the Paddington High courtyard, Nine, a nineteen-year-old Sudanese boy who had been living in Australia for two years, offered his insight into how friendships were formed for himself and his peer group. In response to my questions about what he looks for in a friend he answered: “I don’t like to . . . I don’t know how to say it, but I don’t like friends from one country. It’s good to mix it up. You never know when you’ll need someone. At the studio and in the city, I don’t work with Africans. I don’t always have to be friends with the black people.”
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Samah and Vic, who were both present for this conversation, shrugged and nodded in seeming agreement. A similar dichotomy existed among young people at Kedron Club in discussions of how friendships were formed. The various explanations young people provided for what constituted friendship and how friendships were formed can be boiled down to two main and opposing categories broadly represented by the statements provided above. In some instances and contexts, young people articulated that their friendships were based largely upon racial or ethnic affiliation, and in other instances and contexts they claimed that race and ethnicity had nothing to do with who they were friends with or why. The tension between these two categories was addressed in conflicting depictions of the amount of deliberate thought or choice that went into their social relationships. Moreover, the dichotomous justifications of their friendships, and the degree to which they articulated the relevance of race in establishing them, highlights the imprecision of a binary understanding of young people's social networks as either racist or inclusive. It also represents a useful entrée to analyzing their everyday engagement with broad multicultural discourse.

Sometimes young people depicted their friendships as based upon a mundane element of happenstance or as the consequence of ordinary and casual friendly interactions. In these instances, they downplayed the significance of race and ethnicity in forming friendships. At other times, they depicted their friendships as actively pursued based upon a shared conceptualization as culturally, ethnically or racially “other” than the wider, white Australian population. Most of the young people I spoke with about their social relationships had accounted for them at separate times in both of these manners. That is, ethnic identity was often evoked differently, from not at all, to very strongly, by the same young people in different instances. However, there was a marked difference in the ways in which young people at Paddington High talked about how they made friends versus those at Kedron Club. As young people described the ways in which they made friends based upon one or the other of these broad explanations they called upon hybridized and essentialized representations of themselves that emerged in response to the multicultural landscape of their daily experience.

“Friends Is Friends”: Friendship Based on the Everyday
Atong, who was fifteen, Sudanese, and had only been in Australia for a year, told me her friends came from “Any country. Some from Africa. Some from this country. Some from other countries. . . . Some near my house. I just make friends with them. Talk to them. These girls. And other girls.” Obama,1 also fifteen and Sudanese, and who had lived in Australia for five years, stated, when asked how he makes friends, “Talk to them . . . mostly everyone. All countries. Meet them at school usually. People who like the same thing. Like sport.” And Jessica, a
thirteen-year-old Karen girl who had lived in Australia for three years, said she made friends, “Mostly at school. On weekends. Sometimes on the train. One is Australian, and one is from Sudan. I like funny people; anyone.” Atong, Obama and Jessica all attended the same school, down the street from Kedron Club where I first met them.

Like those just described here, many young people, and particularly those who attended Kedron Club, accounted for their friendships as occurring out of the mundane, every day or matter-of-fact circumstances of their lives. This included being at the same school, being in the same year at school, and being of the same gender as their friends. In these explanations of how they made friends, young people deemphasized the centrality of their own choice. When friendships were described as emerging naturally out of the local context of school and grade, young people emphasized that they were not actively sought—that they do not “choose” friends; they simply “make” friends. In arguing that they did not actively choose their friends, young people usually referenced some element of ethnic identity, such as country of origin or language, in terms of how little it mattered to them, thereby implicitly downplaying the significance of ethnicity or race in the formation of friendships.

This proposed lack of choice in developing friendships allowed young people to imply that they did not have any ethnic requirement for the people with whom they socialized. As they explained, they were instead able to create a friendship bond, or “make” friends, with whomever they met in their local context, and whoever displayed desirable friendship or personality traits. For example, when I asked Catalina, a sixteen-year-old Karen girl who had been living in Australia for three years, at the after-school club, who her friends were and how she became friends with them, without any provocation on my part toward country or language on one hand, or her everyday environment on the other, she said, “Many friends. Same class at school . . . they are all different. All different country. It doesn’t matter. They are all nice. Many are even English.” Similar responses to the same questions also emphasized everyday circumstance as central to friendship making as they actively deemphasized choice or requirements for ethnic identity. I spent time talking to several young people during individual interviews about the following questions: “What do you look for in a friend?” and “How do you make friends?” Some of their responses are as follows:

The first day I was hanging out with them, they showed me around . . . my best friend Hugh, he showed me around that first day, now we’ve been friends since primary. He lives around here and we’re still friends. He’s Australian. I can be friends with Australia or all different places. (Mathew, 13, Burmese)
I don’t look for anything. We help each other out, we become friend. . . . It doesn’t matter. Anybody. Anybody can be someone’s friend. Doesn’t matter if you can’t speak English. Friends is friends. (Jessica, 13, Karen)

Just talking to them. I usually like the ones who are not too good, not too bad, in the middle. The ones that are not concentrating too much, not getting in trouble too much. Like they get in trouble like I do, but not too much. Not like going to jail. They can be from any country. I don’t chose that. (Santino, 15, Sudanese)

I don’t really pick. Like, we’ll play sport on the same team and stuff. I got a lot friends and stuff. . . . It doesn’t really matter [where they are from]. Lots of different places. But most are from Australia and stuff. If I go somewhere I meet some people. [Local park or shopping center], or a lot of people hang out in the city. . . . I don’t call first, I just go there and go to somewhere like [arcade] and just see them. (John, 15, Sudanese)

The first few weeks, few days, you don’t know anyone. Then you get used to it. . . . I go up to one of them and ask, “What’s your name?” Friends? They’re always there when you need them. My best friends? One is Japanese, and one is Australia. There are others too. (Sam, 16, Sudanese)

Most of my cousins got other friends. They meet up with us and all of us become friends again. There are some from school, some from basketball, I got heaps. . . . Well, I actually. . . . if we’re almost doing the same thing a bit and get along together, stay happy together sometimes. . . . They’re all mixed up. Not just the Africans. (Aliir, 16, Sudanese)

In these conversations I was careful not to probe concerning the relevance of culture, race, or ethnicity. Yet these young people, all of whom I first met at Kedron Club, were careful to emphasize that their friendships were not based on ethnicity, language or country of origin but rather on shared activities or friendly interactions (apart from some examples in which young people emphasized the Australian-ness of their friends). In these accounts young people emphasized that they can be friends with anyone from anywhere and that the act of friendship can be negotiated between any two, like-minded people. Lisa, when explaining how she makes friends, stated, “They can be from Africa, China. . . . I never pick friends. I just make friends. I like being friends with everyone. It’s just the same.”

By underlining circumstance as the key foundation upon which friendships were built, these young people reflected a hybrid element, capable of overcoming differences, of their own sense of themselves. They did so by highlighting that they could be friends with anyone with whom they shared a local daily
context. In their proposed ability to identify with people of various backgrounds, they demonstrated that they did not have a restrictive, essentialized identity of their own, at least not in terms of racial or ethnic identity. Such hybridized representations of self emphasize young people’s sameness with what they depicted as the mainstream, white Australian population. Their explanations reflected the multicultural ideal of integration and acted in opposition to the language of tolerance which serves to celebrate difference and evoke essentialized reflections of ethnicity.

On the other hand, some explanations young people provided for their friendships point explicitly to elements of ethnic and racial identity. In these justifications, young people evoked essentialized representations of themselves through which a sense of otherness was central. Here choice was emphasized and similarity to one another and difference from the broader population were strongly maintained.

“We Are Them”: Friendship Based on Being “Other”

In reference to their friendships with young people who were not Australian, or who identified as members of their own racial, ethnic or cultural background, my participants explained their friendships as based on being other. When I asked some young people in the school courtyard the questions “What do you look for in a friend?” and “How do you make friends?” Nine, who argued in a statement above that he does not need to be friends with “the Africans” or “black people” and that he prefers to “mix it up,” told me, “it’s easier when they’re from ‘other’ countries. If it’s Australia it’s harder. People not from Australia it’s easier. We understand each other. We’ve been in the same situation.” Similarly, Elijah, a fourteen-year-old boy from Uganda, responded, “Sometimes it doesn’t matter where you’re from. It’s sometimes easier to get along with other people than Australians because they have some similar background to you or something you experience.”

While young people sometimes expressed that aspects of ethnic identity didn’t affect their friendships, the same young people also at times acknowledged that friendship was more immediate or easy when it occurred between two people who were not from Australia. In these instances, they projected an essentialized otherness through emphasizing similarity between one another, in a disassociation with the broader Australian population, without necessarily articulating that racial or ethnic affiliation with one another was necessary.

For example, Lisa, a Burmese Muslim, and many of the Karen girls were friends with one another despite the national conflict between their ethnic groups in their countries of origin. The girls regularly mentioned their differences based on ethnic and cultural background, but they did so as they also deemphasized those differences and forged a more united sense of identity in relationship to the broader Australian population. Around her Karen friends,
who were all Christian, Lisa usually “forgot” to account for her school absences based on Muslim holy days, she often mentioned that her father was Karen, and although she identified as Burmese based on her mother’s nationality, she regularly signaled that she was not born in Burma, but rather in Thailand.

Her friends obliged this plurality and similarly justified their friendship. Many of them made comments like Wah Wah’s that, “Lisa is OK because her dad is Karen . . . she does not hate Karen people” and “Lisa is not from Burma.” Sometimes those justifications fell short. As Jessica, a fifteen-year-old Karen girl in Lisa’s circle of close friends, answered in a casual conversation with me about making friends, “It’s hard to be friends with people from other countries. Because when it’s Muslim and they’re hungry and you give them food they can’t eat. It easy to be friends with someone from your own country, you speak same language and you understand.” Conflict occasionally erupted between Lisa, her friends and members of her family in relationship to a range of underlying factors including ethnic, religious and language differences. I explore one instance of this later. However, as Lisa emphasized her multiple identities (she is Burmese, but born in Thailand, her father is Karen, although her mother is Burmese, etc.), and as her friends similarly accentuated this plurality, they also mobilized an essentialized otherness to the broader population.

My participants from Sudan, Guinea, and Uganda also often accentuated an essentialized otherness which trumped their many differences in background. Within their friendship groups at Paddington High they argued and teased one another with insulting stereotypes based on their vast differences ranging from ethnicity and tribe, to the route they took into Australia, such as when Vic told Zi, “Shut up. I’m not a Dinka and I’m not a Sierra Leone so leave me alone!” However, they just as often represented themselves outwardly as a unified and cohesive group of “Africans” based on their identification as other than the broader population. As opposed to emphasizing the circumstantial elements of how they make friends, in these depictions they emphasized the role of choice in selecting friends that helped to cultivate their sense of racial or ethnic otherness. For example, the following responses were provided in one-on-one interviews when I asked a number of these young people, “Who are your friends?” “How did you first become friends with them?” and “Did it take a long time to make friends when you started at this school?”

My good friends are Elijah, Alex . . . mostly the Africans, yeah. Mostly we get along at this school. The Africans get along . . . I talk to people . . . somebody to trust. A lot of times it’s outside of school; [local] park, or African parties; basketball club. (Tino, 15, Sudanese)

I came to school and met more friends. It wasn’t that hard. It wasn’t that easy. It was easy with the Africans. We see each other and say hello. Even
if we don’t get to be closer friends, we still see each other, say hello. (Nine, 19, Sudanese)

Not long, it was very easy. They come up to me and talk to me. It was easy to meet friends because there are some Africans here . . . and it’s easy to make friends with Africans. (Zi, 18, Sudanese)

Both [Australian and African young people] are kind. But sometimes . . . I go to the Africans. It’s hard to explain, we’re both the same. We are the same common. We are . . . we kind of . . . we have the same nationality. It’s hard to explain. We all love the same kind of thing. We help each other. I don’t know—it’s like being African. Some of the stuff you do, you just can’t do to other people. If it’s something weird in African, we get that. But if I tried to do the same thing to someone else they would say, “what are you doing. I don’t get it” . . . It’s just what you see [starts to say “feel” and trails off]. Sometimes you laugh, and you just keep laughing. We just enjoy each other’s . . . how do you? . . . we are them. It’s impossible for me to live without them. I need to be around them all the time. (Elijah, 16, Sudanese)

Elijah very clearly stated his sense of himself and his friendship group as other in relationship to the broader population in his statement “we are them.” He tried to formulate a notion of what it is that holds them together with one another and apart from the wider population. Being “them,” for Elijah, provides the basis for friendship. In this interview, he went on to articulate how friendship with people outside of his group of “them,” particularly with white Australians, was useful in highlighting the exclusivity of his own friendship group. In describing what it was like to have Lauren, the only white Australian in his immediate friendship group, as a friend, he said, “We actually enjoy having someone like them around. She says we’re more fun than other people. She says when you sit with them they just don’t say anything.”

In their articulation of a sense of similarity and groupness based on a loose and variable sense of ethnic identity, young people evoked essentialized representations of themselves as other through their descriptions and justifications of their social relationships. As differences were cast aside in the creation of a fixed, essentialized “non-Australian” or “African” sense of self, these young people approached and manipulated their sense of an us/them binary. Self-essentializing through young people’s descriptions of how they made friends allowed them to emphasize a sense of similarity between those who identified as other, and as such allowed for a sense of community and solidarity in the context of the change they had experienced, as well as social conditions over which they had little control in their new environments.
Many young people from African backgrounds in Brisbane worked to carve out a space for this sense of community to thrive and flourish through their participation in a network of underground “African parties” initiated and attended exclusively by and for young people.

**African Parties: Being Together and “Being African”**

African parties were a big deal to a number of these young people. As Samah told me early in my fieldwork, “You want to get the good answers from me? Come to an African party, that’s where it’s gonna happen.” These parties allowed young people to establish and maintain networks of African peers—and through moments of playful exchanges and social drama, to define and revise their sense of “being African.”

African parties occurred approximately twice per month during my fieldwork and drew crowds of up to one hundred African young people. Most of my participants who attended these parties were students at Paddington High. News of the parties circulated throughout the city via text messages on mobile phones, and although Anglo young people were welcome and invited, their ethnic exclusivity was marked in their being commonly referred to as “African parties.” Groups of African young people chipped in to rent halls in community centers or pubs for the parties, and they would select, hire and pay a DJ to play music at the event. Parties began anywhere between nine and eleven P.M., usually on a Saturday night, and continued into the early hours of the morning.

For African young people who described their group of friends as being the result of active choice based largely on ethnicity, rather than the result of circumstance, African parties provided a venue from which to actively strengthen those networks. Attendance at African parties also allowed young people to articulate the significance of being African to the formation of their friendship groups. When I asked Vic about her school formal she explained, “It was good because I went to an after party. An African after party so it was good. . . . No, no one from school, it was all Africans.” In addition to adding substance to her school formal, Vic’s description of the party displayed her distinction between her school life and her identification with an African community—and the higher significance she placed on the latter. While she attended the party with her African friends from school, including Zi and Nine, when asked if there were school friends at the party she responded, “no one from school, it was all Africans.”

These parties were not, apparently, widely observed or noted by the broader community. They often occurred in out-of-the-way locations, such as in a community hall near a shopping center or on a side street surrounded by few houses, and they occurred late at night. Teachers did not mention the parties and during those that I attended, or were described to me during my fieldwork, there
was no police presence or neighborhood complaints. According to the young people who organized and attended, it was essential that the parties remain unnoticed by the broader population. As they warned, when these parties drew attention from the broader community they were likely to be interpreted as signifying deviant behavior or possible gang activity. As Samah explained, “When they see us all together—any time they see a group of Africans together, police come to our stuff.” That they occurred largely and purposefully outside of adult awareness reflects their import as places of resistance or refuge from broader social messages around the perceived danger of large groups of ethnic minority young people socializing exclusively with one another.

The main activity at the parties occurred inside the hall and in the parking lot. The parking lot was usually heavily populated by between nine and ten P.M. and young people filtered between here and the hall throughout the night. When an African young person arrived, they circulated throughout the guests that were already present and wordlessly shook everyone’s hand. Sometimes a smile, nod, or brief introduction was offered. Music and dancing took place inside the hall and socializing, and some drinking occurred in the parking lot. Hip hop music could often be heard throughout the parking lot and immediate surrounds, and when an Arabic song was occasionally played much of the crowd erupted in applause, song, and dance.

Community and belonging were established at African parties for most young people in attendance out of a shared sense of identity as a singularly “African” group. While “being African” provided access and a sense of belonging, that phrase was contested and negotiated among the young people of a wide range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds who ascribed to it. Indeed, a central endeavor at these parties among the young people who attended was to make constant reference and amendments to their ascription to, and interpretation of, what “being African” meant.

For example, at the first party I attended several young people had thrown their first of many “fancy dress” parties, in which party goers were encouraged to dress up in a costume of their choosing. Most of the girls dressed in a style one would not be surprised to find at a Western costume party among young people of the same age—very skimpy and highly sexualized nurse, witch, and fairy costumes. When I met Vic and her cousin in the parking lot, they were both alternatively wearing long colorful sheaths of fabric wrapped around their bodies to form long dresses, small lacy hats, long lacy gloves, crosses around their necks, and both were carrying clutch purses under their arms. We walked through the parking lot and they greeted their friends. When we entered the party, another friend ran over to them and said, “Are you Japanese?! . . . What are you?!” The girls shrieked with laughter and responded, “We are African ladies!”

The very meaning of “being African” was itself appropriated and manipulated at African parties in an exploration of identity and African-ness. Parties
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provided a space in which to define being African that was removed from the direct social management of African-ness initiated and stipulated by others, such as at schools, where it might on the one hand be deemphasized, and on the other hand singled out and celebrated in specific, formalized settings (see also Forman 2005).

A sense of essentialized otherness that young people cultivated in their attendance at African parties serves to create a sense of belonging in the Australian context. A context through which these young people are confronted with various structural inequalities and the appeals to integrate and assimilate, as well as the complexities and realignments of national ties and kinship and social networks. However, as demonstrated in their engagement with the notion of “being African” at the fancy dress African party, the constitution of an essentialized otherness is hybrid in practice—the boundaries of belonging are permeable, and differences may be discarded or evoked in different contexts (see also Noble et al. 1999, 39). Likewise, Noble and Tabar (2002), in their study among a group of Lebanese young people in Sydney, illustrate how various essentialized identities may be articulated in different ways in different contexts as similarities and differences are highlighted and downplayed: “It’s not that there aren’t differences, or that they aren’t important, but at this level of identification they aren’t that important, just as, at another level, Lebanese-ness becomes less important than wog-ness . . . in opposition to ‘Australian’ students. . . . This Lebanese-ness . . . is a curious amalgam of essentializing and hybridizing elements. Essentializing in that it asserts a given-ness to Lebanese identity which naturalizes it; and hybridizing in that it throws together and subsumes at least momentarily often quite radical differences.” (Noble and Tabar 2002, 134–135)

By positioning themselves as an essentialized, cohesive group through their attendance at African parties and in their descriptions of how and why they make friends, young people demonstrated a fluctuating notion of similarity to certain people and difference to others in relationship to various aspects of ethnic identity. In these instances differences were cast aside, and the role of choice was emphasized in the constitution of a unified sense of otherness to the broader population. Conversely, young people also presented themselves in terms of a kind of hybridity which allowed for the deemphasis of ethnic identity, and which was subtly articulated in accordance with an emphasis on easy integration with the broader population through the everyday circumstances of their lives.

While young people, in some instances, described friendship as being based on the mundane elements of their everyday lives and explicitly denied ethnicity as being relevant, in other instances they pointed to ethnicity as central. Their emphasis on hybridized and essentialized representations of themselves through how they made friends both echoed and resisted the messages inherent in the
discourses of integration and tolerance emphasized in their schools and in the broader social environment.

**Friendship and Identity Work**

While their tendency to affirm or deny the significance of race or ethnicity cannot neatly be divided along these lines, whether or not young people emphasized skin color or country of origin in explanations of friendship making frequently differed in response to local context. Most students who attended Kedron Club were enrolled in a school where they were segregated from the broader student population in ELL-only classrooms. These young people projected a hybridized representation of their friendship making process and frequently argued that “skin color doesn’t matter,” that they do not chose their friends, and that they like to “mix it up” in accounting for how they made friends.

On the other hand, the young people who attended Paddington High were mainstreamed with the broader student population and more directly exposed to a strong integrationist rhetoric which emphasized the supposed insignificance of race. The majority of the young people who attended this school, as demonstrated by Samah in the earlier example, tended to distinguish themselves and their friendships choices as based almost exclusively upon an essentialized depiction of “being black.” Here it can be observed that young people’s affirmation and denial of the relevance of race was mobilized in dialogue with the predominant ways in which they encountered multicultural discourse based upon integration and tolerance in their daily lives.

In their hybridized self-representations, such as demonstrated largely among those who attended Kedron Club, young people reflected a kind of symbolic capital whereby they demonstrated an understanding of the value of overcoming difference emphasized in the rhetoric of integration (Bourdieu 1984). However, as they maintained the irrelevance of ethnicity to their sense of identity and belonging, young people spoke back to and subtly resisted a notion of tolerance that posits ethnic difference as something that should be accentuated and celebrated. In the emphasis of their capacity to merge and incorporate difference, assertions such as “I just don’t think of it,” “race stuff doesn’t really matter to me” and “we like to mix it up” were frequently made in interviews with me when I asked them how they made friends.

These assertions may be explained in part by the interview context itself. Young people were more likely to banter back and forth about skin color while talking with one another than they were to openly discuss it with me in response to my follow up questions. Their reluctance to acknowledge the role of race in friendships again demonstrates an understanding that they were not supposed to see race as a relevant issue in their lives. While visiting with Santino and his brothers and sisters in their home, they were telling me who their friends were and describing them as “Aussie friends versus ‘African friends.” When I began
to pursue this distinction and probe the significance to friendships of where people are from, the direction of the conversation changed quickly, and they parroted back, nearly in unison in a tone verging on sing-songy, “No, skin doesn’t matter.” The trajectory of this conversation is exemplary of many others in which young people accounted for their friendships in racialized terms and subsequently denied the relevance of race in response to further questions.

Emphasizing a lack of significance of racial categories in forging friendships allowed my informants to demonstrate their often legitimate inattention to skin color in their personal relationships, as well as to subvert perceived racial boundaries and inequalities. However, such hybridized self-representations also allowed young people to echo dominant discourse of how race ought not to matter to them. On the other hand, presenting their race and ethnic identity in essentialized ways allowed them to subtly challenge that claim and to forge a sense of community, solidarity and belonging.

“Being black,” when actively claimed by young people, carried with it a positive feeling of inclusion based upon the cool and the resistance of a counterwhite identity. Such self-conscious racial essentialism however, also emerged in a kind of subtle resistance to the integrationist discourse that was so heavily promoted at Paddington High. As I discussed in chapter 2, under the broad framework of multiculturalism, rhetoric at Paddington High sought to frame young people as devoid of any politically incorrect differences (such as skin color) that might threaten to distinguish them from the broader student body, thereby inhibiting integration.

When an announcement was made for “international students” during the school lunch period one afternoon, I was rhetorically asked by Vic, “Why aren’t we ‘international?’” She answered her own question, “We’re not international because we’re the multiculturals. We’re not supposed to be all about black, but we’re the multiculturals.” Vic and her friends understood the subtle cues that they were not supposed to emphasize their black identities in favor of integration within the school environment outside of those occasions when they were called upon to do so. At the same time, in some aspects of their school experience, these young people were characterized as eliciting a sense of tolerance through the celebration of their cultural and ethnic difference. They demonstrated an awareness of the complex denial of race while embracing cultural difference in their representation and justification of their friendships. Sometimes they counterered the integrationist push with racialized self-essentialism in the form of near constant references to race and skin color as central to their social relationships. And sometimes they did the opposite.

That is, in their descriptions of how they made friends young people emphasized hybridized and essentialized representations of themselves that both echoed and resisted the messages inherent in the discourses of integration and tolerance emphasized in their schools and in the broader social environment.
Furthermore, as they engaged with tensions of belonging, essentializing and hybridizing representations of themselves often merged, overlapped, and sometimes contradicted one another. As they oscillated emphasis between these dual explanations for how they constituted social relationships they drew upon different implications for their sense of self-understanding and social belonging.

The various ways in which young people sought and discussed boyfriends and girlfriends was similarly instrumental to their identity work. Opposed to the ways in which they at times justified their friendships as based on circumstance, however, dating was more explicitly about choice, and most often with particular reference to skin color. While they did “mix it up” by dating people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, in the course of my fieldwork I never heard these young people argue that “skin color doesn’t matter” when it came to dating. Instead, they seemed to choose and justify their dating relationships with explicit and unapologetic consideration for skin color or other associations with race and ethnicity.

**Ethnicity, Race and Romantic Relationships**

For the Burmese, Chin, and Karen girls at Kedron Club, boyfriends were an increasingly common and charged topic of conversation over the course of my fieldwork. These girls especially referred to skin color and ethnic background in terms of who they “liked,” “loved” or wanted to date. There was great variance of racial and ethnic dating preferences, both between the girls and among individuals over time.

Eh Eh, was Karen and thirteen years old when we first met. She was from Burma but had spent the majority of her life in Tham Hin refugee camp in Thailand, before relocating to Australia only one year prior. Her current boyfriend, whom she was keeping secret from her mother, was Karen as well. Jessica, also thirteen, Karen, and relocated from the same refugee camp two years prior explained, “It’s so funny, Eh Eh said ‘no Karen boy.’ But after a few months she has a Karen boyfriend! She thought she’d have Australian [thinking], no, Indonesian boy.” When I ask what “type” of boyfriend she and her sixteen-year-old sister Catalina, would like, Catalina joined the conversation and explained, “Me, only one. Karen boy. Just one.” She looked at Jessica laughing and went on, “She told me the other day . . . she wants many.” Both girls continued laughing as Jess explained, “I want one Australia, one from another, then last one, Karen . . . I want five!” Catalina added, “But last one, Karen. Last one.”

One day after school at Kedron Club, Wah Wah, a fourteen-year-old Karen girl originally from Burma and most recently from the Tham Hin refugee camp was playing a fortune-telling game with Jessica. They traced their hand onto a piece of paper and labeled a different category for each of their five fingers: profession, wealth, transport, house, and marriage. In the center of the hand,
different options for each of the categories were listed, such as, for the category of wealth: “rich, poor, not rich but a little bit of money;” for marriage: “married, promise, boyfriend, lied to,” and so forth. The marriage category generated the most enthusiasm.

Wah Wah started to clap her hands and jump up and down upon learning of her results. She exclaimed, “It said I will marry an English! I like English, not Asian boy . . . this one is Australian.” Jessica too was excited because according to her fortune, she will “marry Karen boy.” Wah Wah explained, “Jess likes Karen boy! Yay! Cat like only Karen boy too!” They played this game for some time and continued to get excited about their own and one another’s results. Their preferences in marriage partner were always articulated based on skin color or some other signifier of ethnic background, and while these preferences differed between the girls they were aware and supportive of these differences and of the specific preferences of one another.

Approximately ten months after this game was recorded in my field notes most of these girls had boyfriends for the first time—the topic of dating became ever more contentious and complicated, with race and ethnicity still discussed as central to their dating choices. Many of the girls, including Eh Eh and Wah Wah as well as Ce Ce and Jenna, both thirteen, Karen, and from Burma, had white Australian boyfriends, who at this time also began to regularly attend Kedron Club. This was the first time any white Australian young people had attended.

Over a two-month period the girls continually broke up with and traded these boyfriends between one another. Wah Wah began dating Jenna’s previous boyfriend and Ce Ce began dating the boy Wah Wah dated prior to Jenna’s boyfriend. This boyfriend swapping did not appear to affect their friendships with one another—instead they continued to excitedly and playfully discuss dating options based on ever changing racial and ethnic preferences. During this period, the girls oscillated between their preferences for Karen or white Australian boys but giggled at the prospect of dating “African” boys. When her friends asked if she would choose an “Australian” boyfriend, Lisa responded that she did not know and provided the same response when asked if she would choose a Burmese boyfriend. However, when I followed up this line of questioning and asked if she would pick an African boyfriend, Lisa laughed, looked surprised and said, “African?” When I questioned this shocked reaction Jenna too laughed at the prospect and claimed that while there were “no rules” about dating African boys, she personally would not.

Toward the end of this two-month period in which the girls showed the most interest in dating “Aussie boys,” a shift occurred, and many of them, including Jenna, began to express an interest in dating “African” or “black” boys. The girls started breaking up more permanently with their white Australian boyfriends and these boys stopped attending Kedron Club. Ce Ce explained why she ended
her relationship with an Australian boyfriend. She said, “I saw him do something. I saw him do things like a girl. Squeal like a girl. And he can’t dance. I saw this, and I just thought, ‘Awwwe.’ I was so disappointed. I don’t like this. Now I will go out with African boyfriend.”

Ce Ce later explained that at her church she and some of her friends had been criticized for having Australian boyfriends rather than being interested in Karen boys and that this influenced her decision to date people of many different ethnic backgrounds and skin colors. She said, “Everyone at church said we [Ce Ce, Jenna, Eh Eh and Wah Wah] don’t love Karen, so now I’m gonna go out with black people! I’ll go to New York city where they can dance!”

The African boys at Kedron Club were not as vocal or direct around me, nor do I suspect with one another, about whom they wanted to date. They did, however, regularly make more indirect comments about how unattainable or unlikely it might be to date “white girls” or “Australian girls.” Stephen, a sixteen-year-old Sudanese boy, commented to Santino while discussing dating one day, “it would be funny if an African gets an Australian for a girlfriend. . . . No, it doesn’t really happen man.” And Santino equated whiteness with beauty while watching a movie in which the two main characters were white, but the man was depicted to be less physically attractive than the woman. He said, “She’s white and beautiful; he’s fat and ugly. How’s he ever gonna get her? Fat guy can’t get hot white girl! Girls don’t all like nice. They like face, body, arms. At my school the fat people are nice, and they get nothing.” Conversely, at Paddington High, the African boys lamented the fact that there were not enough “hot African girls” for them to date. As Tino quite regularly expressed, “There aren’t heaps of African girls at this school! We need African girls!”

“Next I Will Go Out with African Boy”: Dating and Identity

All of the young people, with whom I spent time throughout the course of my fieldwork, frequently discussed skin color or other signifiers of ethnic background in accordance with dating. Many spoke directly to their own and their friend’s personal preferences for the ethnic background and skin color of the people they wanted to date. For some, the preference was to date a person of the same background and skin color as themselves. For others, it was to date a person of a different and specific ethnic background and skin color than their own, which often changed over time. Moreover, there was an apparent gendered element to young people’s choices around dating and racial preference with girls acting more explicitly as consumers of the racial elements of their romantic partners.

While young people at least some of the time argued that skin color was not relevant in their friendship choices, they almost never made this argument when describing their preferences in romantic relationships. Although these descriptions of sexual and romantic preferences have racist undertones and effects,
these young people did not appear to understand their social worlds in such terms in all realms of their lives or, indeed, in all of their social relationships. This variability demonstrates what Herron (2018) describes as a “perverse cosmopolitanism,” in which young people can use racist terms to frame some domains of their lives and demonstrate inclusiveness in others.

By seeking boyfriends and girlfriends of the same ethnic background as themselves they could maintain a sense of group solidarity and cohesion as well as appease parental pressures, while by seeking someone of a different ethnic background to themselves they could challenge those norms. An expressed preference for dating people perceived as ethnically or racially “different” may be employed by young people to express a flexible and hybridized sense of self through association, while the desire to date people perceived as ethnically or racially “same” may be conversely mobilized in order to express an imagined essentialized sense of self and connectedness to a particular group.

I’m not suggesting that these young people invariably choose who they want to date (or, for that matter, be friends with) for specifically self-conscious or strategic reasons having to do with some sense of who they are or who and how they want to be. More likely, like everyone else, they develop preferences and attractions to people they meet and spend time with. Perhaps, as Ce Ce expressed, she really did just want to date someone who was a good dancer and was not as interested in someone who was not. Instead my interest here is in the ways in which these young people discuss, justify, and constantly refer to their relationships in terms of skin color and ethnic identity. Such explanations not only demonstrate their interest in and attention to ethnicity and race, but also allow these young people to speak back to structural influences or limitations to which they are exposed in their larger social environment.

Familial expectations, for the majority of these young people, dictated a strong preference for them to date someone of their own cultural and ethnic background. There were, of course, some exceptions, where parents expressed a desire for their children to socialize with white Australian young people for several reasons, such as to foster integration, to enhance English language skills, and to avoid the negative social stigma of ethnic minority youth association with “gangs.” Young people as well sought to assimilate and integrate into the dominant culture and were aware of messages to do so at the school, community and national level. Dating provided a means for these young people both to assert their own desires and to indirectly respond to those messages.

Ce Ce initially wanted to date only white European or Australian boys and outwardly rejected boys of both Asian and African backgrounds. Conceivably, this preference was rooted in some level of desire to fit in with or become more a part of the perceived white majority population. While she did not apparently achieve this sense of inclusion within the white majority in the school context and was teased for her accent and her imperfect spoken English, she was also
later rejected by members of her own ethnic background at the Karen church for not dating within that community. It was after communicating this latter sense of rejection that she began to articulate an abandonment of her earlier desire to fit in with the what she perceived as the mainstream majority population and the desire to seek a sense of belonging elsewhere. For Ce Ce, rebellion took the form of expressing a desire to date from another group that she perceived, based on skin color, as equally or even more marginalized than herself.

These young people experience the social pressures of defining how and where they fit both within their own familial and ethnic groups, and within the broad national context in which they live—an environment wherein they look different to most of the population and where they perceive themselves to be directly and indirectly singled out, based on their skin color, and through the discourses of integration and tolerance to which they are regularly exposed. As they seek and define their dating relationships, they explore their own curiosity and interest in skin color. In doing so, they may honor and reject the various pressures around ethnic affiliation to which they are exposed as they define a sense of self and social belonging in relation to their peers. After having explored the ways in which young people’s descriptions of their friendships and their dating preferences are reflected in their complex and emergent sense of themselves, let me now turn to the role of conflict and what it means for such relationships.

**Conflict and Resolution among Friends**

I present here, three conflict situations that occurred over the course of my fieldwork. These periodic episodes usually manifested in an emotional outbreak, followed by a period in which participants generally settled into the same friendship roles as prior to the conflict. Such moments seemingly allowed young people to voice similarities and differences to one another, which were sometimes masked in the outward projection of both an essentialized sense of groupness and the hybridized ability to get along despite cultural and ethnic difference. Moreover, the investment in the resolution of the conflict, among young people not directly involved in the conflict itself, demonstrates the significance of a sense of group solidarity.

**Nine and Tino**

In the Paddington High courtyard during one lunch hour, a group of African boys were playing a betting game that involved rolling change toward a cement wall. Zi and Nine were involved in the game peripherally but as far as I could tell they were mostly just lingering by the wall and taking the money that others threw. Samah was sitting with Tino and said to him, “Nine and Zi, they’re bad people
man.” Tino agreed, “Yeah, they have no respect.” Their comments surprised me. Not only were Tino and Nine cousins, but as far as I had observed up to this point, both Samah and Tino were friends with Nine and Zi. Together, they called themselves “the Africans.” They sat together at “the African table,” spent lunch times joking and hanging out, and attended African parties together.

After a time Nine gave up his wall lingering and walked over to where Samah, Tino and I were sitting and watching the game when Tino said something to him about cheating. Nine looked upset and confused. He said, “Was I even over there?! Was I playing?! Why are you being like this to me man? What’s wrong with you?” Tino, quickly moving from mumbling and dismissive, to very angry and agitated, shouted back at him, “Because you owe me money!” He then turned toward Samah, gestured toward Nine and said, “he took what is mine. It was $160, and it’s been three months! I don’t take what’s yours! You took what’s mine!” Zi, who at this point was standing with Nine and the others attempted to lighten the mood. He said to me, motioning toward Tino, “This guy is on drugs. I’ve never seen this guy act like this.”

Reconstructing the issue based on the accusations that were made and the answers to questions I later asked Tino, Nine and Samah, this is what I gathered. Nine borrowed a new microphone that Tino bought three months prior and failed to return it or reimburse Tino. During the fight, Nine initially argued back, addressing me, Samah, Zi, Tino, and others in close proximity, “I told him I lost it!” To this Tino responded, “Then pay me back!” They argued back and forth like this, with Nine saying that he would pay Tino back and Tino doubting this claim and urging Nine to make it happen. Throughout their heated conversation, Nine kept bringing up that he really was not cheating in the game, as Tino had originally accused him when the argument started and ignoring the microphone issue. Tino only responded by restating the microphone issue and ignoring the initial game cheating accusation. Nine acted bewildered as he stood above Tino. Shaking his head, he repeated, “Why are you being like this to me. What’s wrong with you?” Tino, also very upset and emotional, kept responding, “I don’t give a fuck; you owe me money.”

During the argument, Zi had slipped away and was sitting nearby at their mutual table of friends. The group was aware of what was happening and tentatively and repeatedly looked over but did not interject. Samah tried to mediate and eventually Vic came over to join her. They addressed the different topics Nine and Tino were arguing over and concluded that Nine may not have been cheating at the game, but that he did owe Tino for the microphone. When Tino and Nine began arguing over whether the microphone was $150 or $160, Vic told them to agree on $150 and work on that basis, and Tino would only lose $10. Then Vic said, “You guys are family, don’t be like this over money.” Tino responded to this comment with renewed heightened emotion: “I don’t want to be family with you anymore! I don’t care about you! You took what’s mine!” Nine responded that
he would pay Tino back soon and the subject was dropped. Vic and Samah began talking about something else and the boys continued to sit next to each other but did not speak for the short remainder of the lunch period. The whole episode lasted for about fifteen minutes.

Later that night, Nine and Tino were hanging out near each other in a group at a school function and there was no evidence of any tension between them. They posed for photos with their arms around each other and laughed at the same jokes. I asked Vic if they made up and she said, “Yeah, they’re fine now . . . I don’t know. They worked it out.” The next day when I asked Nine if they made up he said, “Nah, all I have to do is pay him back and I’m fine. Maybe he was not having a good day.” Later I asked Tino if he thought Nine would pay him back and he said no. When I asked if he was still mad he looked away, smiled and quietly said, “Yeah, until I get my money.” To my knowledge Nine never paid Tino back and they never fought about the issue again. Their relationship remains intact.

**Jenna, Ce Ce, and Atong**

This conflict occurred between three girls at Kedron Club, and rather than being acted out in a brief upheaval, it lasted for several weeks before the relationship between the main players was eventually stabilized. Two friends, Ce Ce, Karen and in eighth grade, and Jenna, Chin and in eighth grade, had a fight. When Atong, Sudanese and in ninth grade, took Jenna’s side, Ce Ce and Atong began to fight. As Ce Ce explained, the fight began when Jenna allegedly offered to read something aloud in class for Ce Ce’s friend Wah Wah because Wah Wah’s reading was slow. When Ce Ce got angry at Jenna for “making fun” of her friend’s reading, the fight began. As Ce Ce explained:

> I told her shut up. I told her shut up and now she mad at me. I don’t care. OK, Wah Wah was reading and Jenna said, “Can I read that for her?” so I said shut up to her. See, sometime when we read we have broken English. So, when Wah Wah read, she make fun and I told her shut up. And then she get mad and she tell me I’m selfish. She tell me that she learned it that October people are selfish. My birthday is October. Selfish mean you only care about yourself. When someone say something like this to me I don’t forgive it. I get very angry. I never forgive it.

She went on to explain how Atong got involved:

> I would be friend with Jenna again but not if she friend with Atong. She think she is the best! She told Jenna not to give it up if I don’t say sorry. Why should I say sorry! She told me she’d kill me! She told me if she was in Africa she just bring a knife to school and she’d kill me! I said let’s try! If she kill me, I say thank you. Then I’d be a ghost. It doesn’t matter because
if you die all your pain and problem just move on. It doesn’t stay. She said she’d kill me and I tell her let’s try! I’m not scared of her.

At the point when this conflict occurred two distinct groups were forming at Kedron Club: one consisted of Jenna, Atong, and Lisa, Burmese and in grade eight; and the other consisted of Wah Wah, and Ce Ce who were cousins as well as friends. Four other Karen girls, Jessica, Catalina, Paw Wah, and Eh Eh, floated between the groups. These four girls were present when Ce Ce told me the story. They advocated for the fight to end and encouraged Ce Ce that her relationship with Jenna could easily be salvaged. They did not mention Atong. Wah Wah, whose reading Ce Ce originally defended at the start of the fight, said, “They will be friend again at camp. I know it. They will be best friend.” Ce Ce repeated that this would not happen as long as Jenna stayed friends with Atong. Catalina added, “Yeah, I told her they will be friends again. I know because I fight with people before and now we are friends.”

**Ce Ce and Mathew**

This final example is of a conflict that arose at a shopping mall between Mathew, Lisa’s younger brother, and Ce Ce. Mathew and Lisa are Burmese, Muslim, and primarily speak Burmese, and Ce Ce is Karen, Christian, and primarily speaks Karen. Although these differences did not apparently interfere in Lisa’s friendship with Ce Ce, in this instance they erupted in conflict between Ce Ce and Lisa’s brother, Mathew. Besides Ce Ce, Mathew, and Lisa, Wah Wah, Catalina, and her sister Jessica were at the mall when the conflict arose.

The fight began at the food court when Lisa and I went to buy food for the others. When we returned, Mathew was crying with his head turned away from the group. Everyone looked uncomfortable and no one spoke. Lisa talked to Mathew in Burmese and no one else said anything or would answer my questions. Everyone looked away and said they didn’t know what happened. Lisa and Mathew privately bickered as Lisa tried to ascertain what happened. Eventually Mathew told me that Ce Ce spit in his face twice. He was glaring at her when he told me. Ce Ce said it was an accident and Mathew said it was on purpose. Lisa rolled her eyes and looked frustrated. Finally, Ce Ce glared at Mathew and said, “I know all about you.”

When we left the food court, Lisa walked with me behind the others and told me that Ce Ce swore at her brother but that she is saying he swore at her first. She went on to say, “I can’t be mad because I don’t know the truth. . . . But why does she say, ‘I know about him.’ . . . She knows about him?! She doesn’t know anything about my brother; she doesn’t know my brother; she just met my brother one time!” She then revealed that she “doesn’t always like” Ce Ce, although they hang out together in the same group, and that Ce Ce can be mean and lies sometimes. Lisa reflected that maybe this is so because “She doesn’t have
a mommy and daddy." Lisa and Mathew walked together and held hands, and Ce Ce, Wah Wah, Jessica and Catalina walked together.

Later, after Lisa talked to the others, she and Catalina told me that Ce Ce got mad at Mathew because he was “speaking in Burmese language” and Ce Ce didn’t understand it and thought he was “saying something naughty.” Lisa said, “He wasn’t saying something naughty though, they just don’t understand Burmese language.” When Lisa and Mathew left, Lisa hugged everyone goodbye, including Ce Ce. Lisa, Mathew, and Ce Ce didn’t speak of the issue again. When Mathew and Ce Ce were next together in a group they did not interact with one another directly and no further conflict episodes arose. Similarly, no explicit conflicts arose between Lisa and Ce Ce, although their relationship with one another did not appear to be as close as each of them with the other girls.

On the way home from the mall on the day of the fight, in the parking lot, Catalina and Jess told me their version of the story. Catalina explained:

I’ll tell you a secret. Mathew is very naughty. He was talking in Burmese language and Wah Wah and Ce Ce don’t understand it, but I know a little bit of Burmese language, so I know what he said. . . . Oh, I don’t want to say it; it’s too bad. . . . He said that her parents don’t take care of her or something like that. She didn’t understand it, but she knew he was saying bad things, so she get mad at him. Wah Wah told him to shut up and he said, “I hate Christian.” And she is a Christian. But I am a Christian too. He said that in English. He said it twice. He said “I hate Christian. I hate Christian.”

When I asked who they thought was at fault they replied in unison, “both.” They explained that Ce Ce was also at fault because, although Mathew said things that place some of the blame on him, as Catalina explained, “She says things that are mean and doesn’t think not to hurt your feelings.” Jessica said that she thought Wah Wah started the fight because as soon as Mathew began to speak Burmese she said, “Shut up.”

Identity at Work in Conflicts

In analyzing the implications of these moments of conflict I’ll first point out the obvious. Sometimes a fight is just that—a fight. And conflict is no more significant or unique to the relationships between these young people than it is for any other. However, within the heated exchanges illustrated above, moments in which young people negotiated, revised and reinforced a sense of themselves and where they fit in relationship to one another were brought to life, often with clear reference to signifiers of ethnic background, religion and language.

These examples demonstrate how young people’s emphasis on their similarity to one another, in relationship to the wider population, may be called into question, allowing for the articulation of difference within friendship
groups. In other instances, these fights demonstrate how young people’s emphasis on their ability to merge differences of cultural and ethnic background may also sometimes be compromised. The conflicts represent moments when young people’s outward projection of an essentialized sense of groupness, or a hybridized capacity to “mix it up” is momentarily disrupted, and when differences between young people which are often downplayed are directly engaged.

Ce Ce, Jenna, Atong, and Wah Wah, all attended Kedron Club together and were enrolled in ELL classes separate from the larger student body. Ce Ce’s initial anger at what she saw as Jenna’s transgression in highlighting Wah Wah’s insufficient reading abilities, points to the fragility of these young people’s sense of place and belonging, as well as the ferocity with which they might safeguard what standing they have. All of these girls described their friendships as based largely upon circumstance rather than deliberate choice, and all regularly emphasized how little racial or ethnic background mattered to the making and maintaining of their friendships. When they fought, despite their regular claims of the insignificance of ethnicity, they fell back on culturally ascribed and stereotypical differences in fighting styles. When Atong threatened what she would do if she were “in Africa,” Ce Ce countered by arguing that it would not matter because she would be a ghost. Atong later relayed to me in her description of the conflict that, “here we fight, but we fight with words not fighting.” As they established where they fit in the social context, their varied claims of similarity and difference to one another were continually renegotiated through momentary episodes of upheaval.

In their brief but intense argument, Ce Ce and Mathew addressed differences in language and religion which were often brushed aside in their daily lives and in their outward representation of the insignificance of background and their ability to merge difference. Although many of these young people regularly emphasized the irrelevance of differences based on aspects of ethnicity, in the heated moments when conflict arose they differentiated themselves by drawing on the very differences which they downplayed or denied in other contexts. Conflicts allowed for the articulation of those heavily laden differences between friends which were most often articulated as hardly relevant to their relationships with one another.

While the conflicts of Ce Ce, Mathew, Jenna, and Atong were all among those who attended Kedron Club and outwardly reflected the ability to merge and overcome difference through the description of their social relationships, the conflict that arose between Nine and Tino emerged from a different foundation. Nine and Tino and their friendship group of “the Africans” all attended Paddington High where they were mainstreamed, and where they regularly articulated their differences from the broader student body and an essentialized sense of groupness with one another. Momentary conflict allowed them to address disagreements or
ruptures in their relationships while maintaining their outward projection of an essentialized affiliation with one another.

These conflicts, at least briefly, deconstructed a sense of essentialized group similarity or hybridized ability to disregard difference. When this happened, other people in the friendship group often stepped in to ensure that those in conflict eventually resumed their usual relationships and roles. Vic and Samah actively mediated to reach resolution between Nine and Tino, while the table of boys disengaged but kept close tabs as the situation unfolded. Similarly, when Ce Ce and Jenna fought, Wah Wah and Catalina promised the continuity of their friendship.

The role of mediation here demonstrates the importance of friendship and connectedness in these young people’s lives. This is also evidenced in their tendency to voice issues or differences in moments of heightened emotional intensity and subsequently allow the friendships and a sense of normalcy to resume, often despite the lack of an outcome which offers any clear resolution to the conflict. The importance of a sense of group connectedness is evidenced in these conflicts, sometimes even over personal preferences. While Samah could observe in a casual and detached way that Nine and Zi were “bad people,” her friendship and affiliation with them was not affected or questioned despite this opinion.

While young people may describe and justify their relationships in ways which allow them to represent themselves in multiple and sometimes seemingly contradictory ways, such moments of escalated emotion and tension can reveal a fragility in those justifications—justifications which emerge in intimate relationship to the outward projection or denial of ethnic difference. The relevance of the wider group in resolving, moving beyond, or downplaying conflict demonstrates a sense of collective investment in those justifications insofar as they help to maintain a sense of group belonging and the established projection of the degree to which ethnic and racial background is relevant to friendships.

Relationships and Responsiveness in Context

Everyday social relationships, particularly for these young people who have been through forced migration, relocation, and the breakdown and realignment of various kin and social networks that the process entails, are essential in the constitution of a sense of self understanding and social belonging. Both friendship and romantic relationships provided a platform from which young people were able to assert or deny a sense of racial and ethnic identity, through the ways in which they justified how and why they were drawn to one another. An active emphasis on choice allowed them to embrace their sense of racial and ethnic identity while a passive emphasis on circumstance helped them to subvert the limitations of those categories. Their emphasis on socializing outside their group versus inside, and whether that was determined by choice, circumstance or some
form of coercion, provided a way to affect their sense of self and belonging in
the everyday landscape of multiculturalism. The ways in which they described
friendships and chose romantic partners reflects and rejects the language of the
multicultural ideal as they encountered it in their daily lives. Moreover, an analy-
sis of the multiple lines along which young people connect to, and differentiate
themselves from, one another serves to highlight their diverse practices of both
inclusion and exclusion in multicultural context (Harris and Herron 2017).

Young people portrayed hybridized representations of themselves and their
ability to “mix it up” and forge friendships with others from “any country”
through their explicit denial of the consequence of ethnic signifiers such as
country of origin or language. In other contexts, they presented essentialized
representations of themselves through the justification of their friendships
largely based on being “African” or being “other” than what they perceived as
the mainstream population. Furthermore, they actively sought romantic rela-
tionships with others on the explicit basis of skin color. This allowed them to
articulate a sense of affiliation and solidarity along with a cohesive and bounded
group, drawn from markers of race or ethnicity, or, alternatively, to rebel against
such limiting associations. In moments of conflict, the claims of sameness and
difference to one another that young people asserted in justifications of their
social and romantic relationships were momentarily called into question.

Young people's relationships with one another are constituted, maintained
and redefined in the context of, and in dynamic response to, a range of outside
and often conflicting social pressures. In this context, such social pressures
range from the more intimate familial expectations, to the wider messages
emerging from Australian multicultural discourse to conform and to integrate,
or conversely, to celebrate ethnic difference. But does their emphasis on “mix-
ing it up,” versus mostly hanging out with “people other than Australians” or
“the Africans,” really reflect the multicultural discourse to which they were reg-
ularly exposed, or is it just a preference?

To my observations it was a little bit of both. While the establishment of
their relationships is certainly in large part related to those indefinable nuances
of affinity and circumstance, the ways in which they described them reflects a
subtle engagement with the framing constructs of their lives. The justification
and maintenance of their social relationships can act as a form of resistance or
response to both social marginalization and to the popular discourses used to
confront it. Justifications of their relationships provides a foundation for sociopo-
litical responsiveness by allowing young people to perpetuate a sense of self-
understanding based on skin color and ethnic identification, on the one hand,
and providing a basis from which to articulate its lack of relevance and import
to their lives, on the other.

The focus of this chapter has been on the everyday activities through which
young people from refugee backgrounds define a sense of self. Central to their
everyday identity processes is the making and unmaking of social relationships. In the next chapter I will step away from the everyday nuances of identity work and explore the more explicitly self-conscious and performative aspects of how these young people define a sense of self and belonging. In their performative representations of identity young people engage ethnic capital to constitute a sense of affiliation with racial and ethnic groups, and to speak to the multicultural discourses of integration and tolerance.