Belonging and Becoming in a Multicultural World

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Opportunities were ample for these young refugees in Australia to display, or more formally articulate, a sense of themselves in circumstances which I broadly describe as performative—those that stood apart from the mundane dynamics of everyday life. Social performance, as it emerged from several platforms including activities initiated at Paddington High and Kedron Club, allowed for a more explicitly self-conscious engagement among young people with how they conceived of and sought to represent themselves. Through performance drawn from the intersections between memory, lived experience, and their personal imaginary, these young people cultivated alignments and affiliations with cultural, ethnic, and racial groups. Doing so allowed them to respond to the multicultural discourses that framed their everyday lives in creative and sometimes paradoxical ways.

As avid consumers of commodities and ideas from resources that traverse national borders, young people’s performative acts occur locally but increasingly derive meaning from global resources (Correa-Velez et al. 2010; see also Laura Moran 2016). Indeed, intimate relationships among young people no longer emerge solely from within the bounds of the community in which they live, but increasingly develop through social media in the form of what Chambers (2013) describes as “mediated intimacies.” Such mediated intimacies act as a kind of social capital and provoke public demonstrations of social connection which have arguably altered the meaning and experience of intimacy for young people (Chambers 2013). These virtual, transnational connections also aid in young people’s exposure to and use of a range of transnational cultural commodities. However, the development of virtual personal bonds and the creative mobilization of global resources that are often the result of such relationships emerges in relation to local narrative contexts and aids in the process of cultivating belonging therein. In their assertions of belonging in local context, the
flexibility through which young people cultivated a sense of themselves through
diverse cultural resources was sometimes deemphasized in their performative
projection of fixed and immutable identities.

Performance provides an avenue for an especially deliberate engagement
with multicultural context. While their everyday interactions demonstrate an
oscillating affirmation and denial of the relevance of racial and ethnic identity
in different circumstances, performing identity represents a unique moment of
particularly heightened, self-conscious intercultural exchange. Removed from
the delicacy, nuance, and savvy so useful in everyday multicultural context, per-
formance permits more pointed representations of identity. In performative
moments, young people engaged with what I describe as symbolic ethnic capi-
tal in ways that tended to represent a sense of their racial and ethnic identity in
primarily essentialized ways.

In making these claims I draw on Bourdieu’s (1986) conceptual framework
of symbolic capital as well as Modood’s (2004) and Tabar, Noble and Poynting’s
(2010) work on ethnic capital to outline a concept of symbolic ethnic capital
observed in young people’s performative identity practices. Through perform-
ance, these young people used textual resources (Dimitriadis [2001] 2009) as
capital in the construction of a shared and favorable sense of place and ethnic
association around which a sense of belonging might develop. I frame their
resourcefulness in this endeavor as a form of symbolic ethnic capital through
which young people negotiate the competing drives of cultivating racial and eth-
nic identity in conjunction with a sense of local and national belonging (see
also Tabar et al. 2010, 11).

My analysis of youth performative identity first requires the establishment
of an analytic category of symbolic ethnic capital and its relevance to the Aus-
tralian multicultural context. From here, I explore the various forms of capital
through which these young people engaged in their performative representations
of self. Formal performances of what is broadly couched as “cultural identity,”
as they were elicited in the school context, and a hip hop song written and per-
formed by a small group of Sudanese young people who attended Kedron Club
allow for my analysis of the relevance of performance in establishing identity in
multicultural context.

I consider young people’s performative acts beyond simple mimicry or adap-
tation, but rather as indicative of agency and participation in globally relevant
mediums that help them to define a sense of self and belonging in local context
(see also Moore 2011, 62). The use of capital in performance helped these young
people to construct a shared and favorable sense of place, to create positive asso-
ciations with their own black or “nonwhite” identities, and to negotiate and
create meaning out of the displacement and marginalization they experienced
in their lives.
Capital and Performance in Multicultural Australia

In the opening vignette of the book, I observed Tino teasing Samah about “free-stylin’” in reference to her merging of English, Dinka, and Swahili languages, while listening to hip hop music and wearing “African clothes.” This scene unfolded as they waited outside of the school auditorium for their African dance performance to begin. The dynamic I sought to illustrate in sharing it—the merging and overlapping of various cultural resources and ethnic symbols—was commonplace among my research participants. Playing with cultural signifiers in this way allowed them to communicate; to differentiate themselves from and to find common ground with, one another. They engaged in such playful banter over various and sometimes conflicting cultural symbols as together they answered the call to perform elements of a collective cultural identity.

As Tino demonstrated in his exchange with Samah, in their self-conscious projections of identity, the authenticity of these young people’s use of ethnic symbols and cultural resources was routinely scrutinized in their playful interactions with one another. What I describe as symbolic ethnic capital captures young people’s performative adaptation of global resources as they were mobilized in projections of identity. Symbolic ethnic capital allowed young people to articulate a sense of self and belonging with one another, and through that endeavor to also engage and respond to the multicultural context in which their daily lives unfolded.

Capital or symbolic cultural resources, and particularly those that involve pop culture, are central to young people’s performance of identity. In their performative representations of self, these young people utilized various cultural resources, concepts, and associations from local and global arenas in ways that were not always obvious or straightforward. They mobilized cultural resources as a kind of symbolic ethnic capital in performance as they sought to define a sense of where they came from, sometimes in alignment with an imagined Western other, in their projects of self and belonging in local context.

Symbolic Ethnic Capital

The relationship between ethnicity and social and cultural capital has been taken up by many scholars as a kind of negative capital (Bourdieu 1986; Hage 1998). As briefly described in chapter 3, cultural and social capital in Bourdieu’s formulation refers to elements of personal characteristics and material goods that enable a sense of belonging in a particular group or social context (Bourdieu 1986, 243–248). Fundamentally, people achieve status based on economic, cultural, and social capital. Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic capital represents the process by which capital is recognized and given meaning in social context (Bourdieu 1986, 102; see also Hage 1998, 53). From this formulation, it was argued
that a lack of capital among ethnic minority groups resulted in various forms of social exclusion and an uneven distribution of wealth and resources.

The concept of “ethnic capital” instead highlights a productive relationship between ethnicity and the accumulation of capital for the purposes of educational achievement and social mobility (Modood 2004; Shah, Dwyer and Modood 2010; see also Collins et al. 2000; Nayak 2009; Reynolds 2010; Tabar et al. 2010; Weller 2010). As Modood explained in his conceptualization, young people of nonwhite ethnic minority backgrounds in Britain demonstrated higher levels of educational achievement than their white working-class counterparts. He attributed this to a kind of ethnic capital whereby an ethos of high educational aspiration was transferred from parents to children of ethnic minority backgrounds (Modood 2004).

In the context of Australian cultural politics, ethnic capital has been defined as the resources and capacities, validated by the state, which are utilized by migrants and their children to settle in Australia (Tabar et al. 2010, 16). As I employ the concept, “symbolic ethnic capital” emerges. not through familial parent-child relations, but through the transmission of attitudes, norms, and aspirations that emerge from young people’s diasporic connections which are “self-fashioned” based on a highly racialized sense of ethnicity (see also Tsolidis and Pollard 2009). The mobilization of race and ethnicity as symbolic ethnic capital is particularly evident in the critical and often tense practices of identity making engaged by young people as they mobilized what I have described in terms of their hybridized and essentialized representations of self.

As I have described, hybridity and essentialism are modes of self-representation that allow a kind of dynamic responsiveness to the ways in which these young people are represented in the Australian national context (see also Moore 2011, 61). As I demonstrate it here, symbolic ethnic capital is mobilized by young people in the performative representation of a kind of self-racialized identity which serves as a rallying point for solidarity and a sense of belonging in the moral and political context of Australian multiculturalism (Moran 2016). In addition to enabling a sense of belonging with one another, symbolic ethnic capital allows young people to engage with the ideals of multiculturalism as they encounter them in their everyday lives.

Their strategic use of capital in highly racialized and essentialized self-representations demonstrates young people’s identity work at times as somewhat subversive. Rather than inserting themselves into the Australian multicultural context in terms of either assimilation with white Australian peers or demonstrating their ethnic heritage in ways that adhere to Australia’s multicultural agenda (Anthony Moran, 2011), young people borrow from a range of cultural signifiers to define their ethnicity also in terms of a broadly conceived Western other, or in terms of being black or not white (see also Warren and Evitt 2010).
Just as whiteness emerges as a form of symbolic capital in the Australian multicultural field, these young people may mobilize ethnicity as a distinct form of symbolic capital in the context of multiculturalism. In the school context, those who conform to the norms of integration by downplaying their racial and ethnic identity and alternately, when asked to do so, perform their ethnic identities within the celebratory language of tolerance are held up as exemplars of what a “good” refugee can be. Symbolic ethnic capital captures the specific enabling capacities of young people’s explicitly racialized ethnic resources in aligning themselves with others in the context of Australian multiculturalism. By representing themselves in overtly racialized ways, young people reflect essentialism in ways that respond to discourses of integration and tolerance encountered in multicultural context.

The ethnographic detail that follows demonstrate young people’s use of symbolic ethnic capital in the construction of both an imagined Western other and an abstracted sense of their cultural backgrounds. Following this, I demonstrate how such cultural resources aid in performative representations of home and belonging to place. I explore how one group of young people forged alignments with an Americanized or African American other using hip hop culture and symbolism, and how others performed essentialized representations of their cultural and ethnic backgrounds as they were called upon to do in the school environment. Their use of symbolic ethnic capital in the performative cultivation of home and belonging, often through presenting racially essentialized depictions of themselves, allowed these young people to engage and respond to the multiculturalism they encountered in their daily lives in the Australian context.

America, Africa, and Cultivating the Other

In a shopping mall with Catalina and Lisa, Karen and Burmese research participants respectively, Catalina enthusiastically grabbed Lisa’s arm and said, “I took another picture last night!” She pulled out her phone and showed Lisa a picture of herself leaning against a wall with her hair down, a serious expression on her face and wearing cut off denim shorts and a bikini top. Lisa squealed, “Oooh!” when she saw it. They began to analyze the photograph. Catalina pressed, “How old do I look in this one? Do you think I’m looking twenty? I wanted to look twenty in this one? Twenty and America [sic].” After some continued discussion of this photo, who took it, whose clothes she was wearing, and so on, Catalina asked Lisa, “You taking many pictures, yeah?” to which Lisa said that she was and pulled her mobile phone out of her pocket.

All of the young women involved in my research, and especially those with Karen and Burmese backgrounds, used photographs taken with mobile phone cameras to create and share images of themselves with one another. For these girls, taking pictures of themselves usually posing alone, often in sexually
suggestive positions while wearing Western style clothes and makeup, and then later scrutinizing the results with one another, was an everyday practice. As Catalina explained to me, “Karen are always taking pictures. They like to. I don’t know why. We did it in camp too. But not with camera like this. Simple.” The girls took pictures with their mobile phones, shared them with one another and uploaded them onto social networking websites, such as, initially, Bebo and Hi5, and increasingly, Facebook. This practice, as Hjorth argues, allows people “the ability to document, re-represent and perform the everyday” (2007, 227). And particularly for young women, mobile phone cameras allow them to “perform conventional gender roles with a twist” (Hjorth 2007, 235).

Such self-representations often occurred in accordance with Western styles and imagery, and in particular, with the American hip hop culture and musical scene. All of the young people with whom I worked asserted some sort of claims of knowledge about or association with American and hip hop culture. I interpret their constant engagement with all things American and hip hop as a form of symbolic ethnic capital. Young people with African backgrounds played with and asserted claims of knowledge and belonging to various elements of African culture which also reveal the role of symbolic ethnic capital. Similarly, Karen young people participated in cultural events through which they portrayed what it means to be Karen, often in juxtaposition to the benefits of now being a part of the Australian multicultural tapestry. Their use of cultural references to an abstracted notion of America or to their own cultural backgrounds act as a form of symbolic ethnic capital in that they elicit essentialized, highly racialized projections of identity which young people mobilize in their varied assertions of belonging.

Young people’s use of symbolic ethnic capital in self-conscious, performative ways carves out a space for a more deliberate engagement and a responsiveness to their social context that exists alongside the dynamics of everyday life. Moreover, the use of symbolic ethnic capital in performance allows for an avenue through which young people might negotiate the vulnerability and marginalization that is a part of their lives in complex and unpredictable ways (Dimitriadis 2001| 2009).

**Claiming Culture: “You Don’t Even Know America Man”**

An abstract idea of America forged an association to hip hop culture, and indeed a sense of opportunity and material wealth for many of these young people. In addition to their constant references to and expressions based upon the hip hop music scene, American cultural references also emerged around young people’s style of dress, their use of English and American colloquial language, and their assertions of their own and policing of one another’s knowledge about and connections to America. Going to the United States was expressed as a deeply entrenched desire for many of these young people.
America as an abstract identifying reference point was reinforced by the fact that most of them had some family members who had been resettled in the United States. Because of this, many had visited America or were planning to visit at some point in the near future. Moreover, checking the authenticity of one another’s claims to go, or have been to America, was a common theme. Upon learning that I’m from New York State, Gabe insistently and incredulously asked, “So you’re from the neighborhood of New York?! Are you telling me you’re from the neighborhood of New York?!” And when Vic “discovered” that Gabe’s claims to have been to America were false, she excitedly reported to the rest of the group, “Ha! I proved Gabe didn’t go to America. I asked his sister. That’s the biggest lie of all!”

In addition to regularly and persistently asserting their connections with and desires to go to America, these young people also drew upon a style of colloquial language and dress commonly associated with American hip hop culture. One day, Catalina greeted Ce Ce upon her arrival at Kedron Club with the phrase “sup” (American slang for “what’s up”). Ce Ce, somewhat satirically, shook Catalina’s hand and responded with an overexaggerated “Suuuuup Maaaan!” Both girls laughed, and they never looked back. After that first seemingly sudden, “sup,” I rarely heard these girls, or their friends greet one another in any other way. Similarly, and around the time of the “sup” launch, they made increasingly regular use of the word “man” to punctuate their sentences.

Many girls represented in the book experimented with Western makeup and dress, and many of the boys preferred clothing with prominently displayed American logos and brand names—sometimes in accordance with stereotypical associations such as criminal activity and material wealth or the lack thereof. Gabe, when attending Kedron Club, dressed in jeans slung low around his waist and a thick black belt with a large, gun-shaped rhinestone buckle, a baseball cap worn sideways, a white tank top and a lot of big silver jewelry, asked rhetorically, “Just because I dress all gangsta does that mean I’ll whip out a gun and steal something?” In his creation of an Americanized “gangsta” image and its stereotypical association with criminal activity, Gabe made frequent reference to the police even though he had apparently not ever been in trouble with them. In a typical interaction, at Paddington High one lunch time he approached a table of his friends who were engaged in some school assignment related conversation and asked them, “What are we talking about? Police?”

In their projection of a sense of American-ness young people referenced African American people with whom they associated in playful, performative ways. For example, Obama, who claimed to have had this nickname long before he ever heard of the U.S. president, was called “black Obama,” in opposition to the then-president, whom he and his friends had nicknamed “half-black Obama.” Obama’s friends constantly referenced his nickname in association with the concept of “America,” material wealth, and the president, such as
when Santino teased, “You’re rich, Obama, go back to America, go to your wife and kids.”

While such language and symbolic action demonstrates a playful and seemingly inconsequential engagement with American colloquialisms and hip hop style, young people’s interest in and use of “America” as a reference point for their sense of self was significant and entrenched. The most prominent and widespread example of the mobilization of America as a form of symbolic ethnic capital emerged through young people’s engagement with the hip hop music scene itself.

**The Centrality of Hip Hop**

A music genre born out of disadvantaged urban neighborhoods of New York City during the 1970s, the use of hip hop music for a sense of belonging and identification among minority young people is a widely documented and increasingly global phenomenon (Aidi 2014; Forman 2002; Warren and Evitt 2010). The global uptake of hip hop music demonstrates an evolving “transnational black culture” positioned around ideas of brotherhood and resistance which provides scope for interpretation and the infusion of local experience (Patterson and Fosse 2015; Warren and Evitt 2010). “The progressive politics of rap,” as Moore describes it, engages with social exclusion, racism, urban violence, poverty and issues of power and dominance (2011, 65).

As Warren and Evitt have argued in the context of Indigenous Australian young people’s adaptation of hip hop music, disenfranchised groups relate to hip hop because it encompasses a “fusion between the traditional (language, cultural stories, histories and dance) and contemporary (equipment, software and technologies)” and is “appropriated through transnational black networks, across diverse locations” (Warren and Evitt 2010, 156). As a medium of expression which is explicitly designed to respond to localized identity politics in urban contexts, hip hop music provides an ideal platform from which young people can consciously engage issues of race and ethnicity as they emerge within the political and social climate of their own lives.

In reference to Sudanese refugees in Cairo, Forcier (2008) argues that rather than a simple adaptation of American hip hop style, young people’s mobilization of hip hop cultural references can be interpreted as the emphasis on themes of wealth over the abject poverty of being a refugee (see also Moore 2011, 64). He writes that this manifestation is not an attempt to mimic African American culture, but rather is a rejection of the proscribed refugee identity characterized by poverty and lack of opportunity in favor of an identity that emphasizes material wealth and financial success.

The young people represented here, in addition to certain aspects of style and colloquial language, expressed an affiliation with hip hop cultural references. They did so through their alignment with symbolic urban spaces such as
“the ’hood” and “the ghetto,” and through their constant policing of the authenticity of what is “real” in terms of their own and one another’s connection to these spaces (Forman 2002, xviii). Associations with place, as well as the notion of “the real,” are treated with great consequence in hip hop culture, which deals explicitly with issues of locality and authenticity (Dimitriadis [2001] 2009, 66; Warren and Evitt 2010).

The young people in my study sought to identify with “real” black experience in terms of the cool, the resistance, and the counter whiteness of an African American identity (Laura Moran 2016). They forged these alignments through essentialized, highly racialized representations of their identity and sense of belonging which drew on American and hip hop cultural references as a form of symbolic ethnic capital. While many of the young women represented here appropriated elements of American hip hop style and colloquialism, it was predominately the boys who more explicitly engaged with the messages of power, police and toughness emerging from hip hop. Their use of hip hop cultural references allowed young men to use their masculinity, which, as young migrant men, often acts to stigmatize and work against them (Pruitt et al. 2018), toward more positive associations. hip hop culture offered a nonwhite identity associated with power and belonging for these young people, and rap music provided a medium through which to constitute and represent their own self-understanding and to engage with the everyday politics of their lived experiences.

In informal interactions and formal performances at their schools, young people also utilized symbolic ethnic capital that they defined as emerging from their cultures of origin in defining a sense of self in multicultural context. African participants established their sense of association with Africa through their assertion of knowledge and talk of things decidedly “African” such as the tribe to which they belonged, the language they spoke and elements of a self-conscious and decidedly African image and sense of style.

**Everyday Africanness: Tribe, Language, and Style**

African participants engaged in assertions of what constitutes “being African,” as they emphasized their sense of Africanness and guided one another to do the same. They did so through teasing one another in a kind of playful, animated bravado. Just as in relation to American and hip hop cultural symbols, young people were interested in asserting claims of knowledge about and alignments to their countries and cultures of origin. Tribes were of relevance as symbolic ethnic capital in asserting young people’s connections to, and knowledge of, Africa.

Through playful teasing, young people critiqued either the characteristics of one another’s tribe or their lack of knowledge about their own or others’ tribes. When Vic and Samah were discussing a friend of a friend, Samah’s first
question was, “Is he Nuba, Dinka, Nuer?” to which Vic replied “No, he’s Nuer and Logbara.” When Samah asked, “What’s Logbara?” Vic replied, “It’s an African tribe! What the heck. Don’t you know your African tribes?” On another occasion, Joseph similarly scolded Vic for her lack of knowledge about her own tribe. During lunch hour at Paddington High, Joseph told me that the Nuba were the first known tribe in Egypt. When I confirmed with Vic that she is Nuba, and as she said yes, Joseph interjected, “She doesn’t even know the history of her own people.”

African young people also teasingly insulted one another about their respective tribal affiliations, and less frequently, their countries of origin. On one occasion Samah was teasing Vic because Vic kept grabbing things out of Samah’s bag. Vic was the only Nuba person hanging out with all her Dinka friends. Samah slapped Vic’s hand away and said, “What’s the matter, you Nuba people can’t keep your hands to yourself!” Another day, when Nine and Zi were obviously and mockingly talking about Vic and laughing from one table away from where she was sitting, Vic shouted, “Don’t say anything about me! I am not Dinka and I’m not Sierra Leone so shut up!” And later, on the same day, Samah was teasing Zi about something and said, “You Sierra Leone.” They both laughed, and he asked her “What did you mean by that?” Vic didn’t answer Zi’s question and he let it go without saying more. Later, I asked Vic why she called him a Sierra Leone and she said, “That’s his place!” Zi then explained to me, “She’s just making a stupid. She doesn’t know what she’s talking about.” Again, they both laughed.

Tribal and sometimes national affiliation provided a platform from which young people asserted knowledge about being African that allowed them to both identify and disassociate with one another in different moments. Through assertions of knowledge about tribes as a form of capital, young people both fully inhabited and vacated their sense of Africanness. Tribal identity was most often mobilized by African young people for creating playful distinctions and one upping each other in their performative demonstrations of Africanness. When asked directly about tribes and their significance, however, they often said that tribes were not very important now that they are living in Australia. As Samah explained, “I don’t think the tribal thing is a big deal. Just in Africa. It’s weird how Australians don’t have tribes. They are just one people. . . . That’s so boring.”

In their projection of a sense of African identity, young people also playfully teased one another about their proficiency in African languages. The use of regional dialects indeed served a practical purpose—participants reported using Arabic, Dinka, or other languages than English in the classroom to comment about the teacher or other students without their understanding, and English with siblings and friends at home to have conversations without their parents understanding. However, language use also provided a means through which young people asserted their superior sense of Africanness in comparison to one
another. On numerous occasions, participants teased one another about their lack of proficiency in African languages, usually in front of a group of other young people, such as when Vic teased Samah, “You don’t understand him?! He’s speaking your language—how do you not understand!”; when Santino accused AJ, “This kid doesn’t even know how to speak!”; and when Tino jokingly mocked a new student, “And this guy calls himself an African. Let me say it in African for you!”

In a final example of asserting Africanness as symbolic ethnic capital, African young people regularly assessed and critiqued how African one another looked depending on hair and clothing style. When Vic explained to her friends, during the school lunch hour that her straight hair look that day was not her real hair she said, “It’s not mine. No good African girl would have this hair.” Similarly, when an Australian student approached wearing a hat tilted to the side, Vic told him, “You look like an African coming over here with that hat on,” and everyone laughed. On another occasion, Zi approached Vic and Samah one afternoon, pulled out a blue tie, and said he was going for a job interview. Vic and Samah burst out laughing and told him the tie was too big and in the wrong color. Vic said, “Since when did you start wearing colors like this anyway? You should be wearing yellow, or orange, or red. That’s what we wear! Give this thing to a business man! It looks like you’re a little kid wearing a grown up’s clothes.”

Young people engaged in teasing insults based on being African by critiquing one another’s Africanness in style and dress and asserting knowledge about Africa through tribal references and language use. This allowed them to police the boundaries of who belonged where and to constitute their own sense of themselves through identification and disassociation with one another. Symbolic ethnic capital, both in claims ofAmericanness and Africanness, was central to these young people’s sense of themselves and engagement with their local context. In the section that follows, I will explore how such capital was mobilized in formalized performances for the purposes of cultivating identity and belonging, and in engagement with the multicultural context in which these young people were immersed.

**Performative Constructions of Place and Home**

American cultural capital, and particularly that gleaned from the hip hop music scene, was utilized in the constitution of self and group identity for many of the young people represented here. In a primary example of this, an interest in hip hop music translated into a project in which I assisted a group of seven Sudanese participants to write and record a hip hop song during my fieldwork. By strategically mobilizing American cultural resources as symbolic ethnic capital, the song the young people wrote helped them to articulate and negotiate their sense of place within the various racial constructions they inhabit in
multicultural Australia. As I’ll describe, young people participated in equally noteworthy performative representations of their own cultures of origin, through which they also used symbolic ethnic capital in the cultivation of a sense of identity and in responsive relationship to their local context.

**Africa as “the ’Hood”**

The writing and recording of their own hip hop song helped this small group of Sudanese young people to articulate and negotiate their sense of place in terms of their journey from Africa to Australia and their experiences as black people in Australia today. The participants in this project were Santino, his sister Lola and brother Omar, as well as Obama, Gabe, Omot, and Aher. I met with them at Kedron Club on Saturday afternoons and during the summer break over approximately three months to work on the song. The result provides an exploration of home, race, and racism through associations with common American hip hop references to poverty, crime, power, and toughness, primarily through their use of the terms “the ’hood” and “the ghetto.” In doing so, they reveal the complex ways in which young people utilized certain themes emerging in hip hop music and culture—in their song lyrics and in the interactions that ensued in the process through which they were constructed—to make sense of and represent their own lives.

The group constructed the lyrics to the song on their own with minimal grammatical help from me, and with some adjustments by the studio’s recording engineer to fit their lyrics with an audio track. They structured the song so that each had an individual verse and all seven sang and wrote the chorus collectively. Throughout the course of writing the song, references to “America” were constant. In the usual fashion, they regularly claimed they were going to America soon while their peers would accuse them of lying. They danced wildly to Michael Jackson songs which they played from their mobile phones, and they went into the yard to play “American ball” during impromptu breaks.

When the group brainstormed ideas around what the song should be about, they came up with the following: “the ’hood,” “Africa,” “Sudan,” “basketball,” “President Obama,” “marijuana,” “MTV,” and “yourself.” They narrowed it down to “the ’hood,” “Africa,” “basketball,” and “President Obama.” From this initial brainstorming session, the American and hip hop references to “the ’hood,” “basketball,” “President Obama,” “marijuana,” and “MTV” were utilized in accordance with participants’ references to experiences that were most salient and personal to their own lives: “Africa,” “Sudan,” and “yourself.”

When they began brainstorming lyrics, after an initial period of silence, the first line was called out by Santino: “We’re poor!” In response to this, everyone shrieked with laughter and shouted things like, “You, not me! Don’t write that!” Following this, everyone joined in and came up with a series of lines including: “The hood in Africa was pretty hard,” “In order to survive we had to sell drugs.”
and “Moving with da thugs. Rollin’ faster than slugs.” The juxtaposition between their real experiences of poverty and living in Africa with associations of power and toughness through selling drugs and hanging out with “thugs” allowed participants to subtly shift their self-representation toward a sense of empowerment rather than poverty. The associations they claim to draw such links is based on a constructed and racialized sense of ethnic identity. In these instances, “being black” carries value that transcends other cultural and ethnic alignments. I interpret the conceptual link these young people make between their own experiences of being young, black, African refugees with the power and the cool of the American hip hop scene as indicative of their creative employment of symbolic ethnic capital.

In another proposed verse, which African teasingly directed at Obama, he sang, “Obama is a refugee. Refugee. Refugee,” and everyone, including Obama, laughed. Throughout the song-writing process, young people engaged with what they saw as negative stereotypes about themselves (poor, refugees) and reconstituted these to create a more positive and tough image associated with “gangstas,” “the ‘hood,” and “the ghetto.” I explore this process through an analysis of specific verses of the song.

The chorus of the song, which all participants sang together, is as follows:

We were born in Africa, Born young
Walking everyday in the ghetto place
We were born in Africa, Hot sun
Walking everyday in the ghetto place
Came to Australia, Left the ‘hood
Came to Australia, When we could
Now we wanna go back, To a better place
Make it all good, Make it all good

In this verse, Africa is referred to as “the ghetto place” and “the ‘hood”—both references used frequently in hip hop music and American slang to describe poor urban areas in U.S cities. The terms “the ‘hood” and “the ghetto” in their usage in hip hop music evoke racist stereotypes of crime, poverty, and drugs, as well as images of power, masculinity, and toughness. For my informants, these terms are associated most acutely with a sense of belonging. An abbreviation of the term “neighborhood,” Forman similarly describes the use of the term “the ‘hood” in hip hop music as signifying, ‘quite simply . . . a ‘home’ environment’ (2002, xix).

When I asked the young people what the terms “ghetto” and “the ‘hood” meant to them, they described them primarily as references to home and a sense of community belonging with family and friends. As Tino explained about the terms, “You hear it in songs, rap songs, it’s a good place—it’s family, friends, where I belong—it’s a cool place where we all hang out, just hang out”; and Lola,
“It means you live in the poorest population . . . but it’s alright because it’s easier to find more friends”; Gabe, “It’s a place to go back to see family and all that . . . it’s kind of anywhere”; and Aher, “I think it’s just leaving home and coming to a new place . . . it’s a place where you live.” The terms “the ghetto” and “the ’hood,” represented finding a place of home, community and belonging, despite various obstacles related to poverty. By using these terms, young people were able to create meaning in their own experiences of displacement through an alignment with an image of blackness that in its pop cultural association reflects power and toughness as it depicts poverty and disadvantage. Obama’s verse reveals tension in a conceptualization of Africa as “the ’hood”:

I know this place hurts, but you can go back, back to the hood.
Where I live right now, it’s all good. All good.

Obama reflects a positive association with Africa in terms of home and belonging in his verse while acknowledging that the place he’s living now, although it does not provide such a sense of belonging, is in some ways a good place. Similarly, Gabe lamented the loss of Africa in an early version of his verse in the song, “I used to roll in the ’hood but now I can only roll in the suburbs.” The sense of loss experienced by participants in their transition from life in Africa to life in Australia was reflected throughout the song. Aher’s verse engaged this theme of leaving:

I never thought that I would leave this place.
Sitting in the plane, thinking about my fate.
The first school that I went to was so gay.
As they say, do the right thing and stay safe.
I got a detention for saying one thing.
I got all the attention that I need.
It’s a big wide nation, the next generation
Follow the operation or end up on probation.

In addition to his experience of leaving Africa, Aher’s verse provides an account of what happened to him when he arrived in Australia. It reflects the difficulties young people in his position have, despite the notion of increased safety, in adjusting to Australian school systems, as well as the outcome (detention and probation) that they frequently experience. However, when I questioned Aher about this experience he responded, “It’s just a song, Miss!” Lola’s verse provides further commentary on the movement from Africa to Australia:

My name’s Little Moon Man
Man, in the moon
Came to Australia because of the war
Ran for my life
Not too soon
Got on that plane
Had to survive
Tried to keep safe but I lost my faith.

In Lola’s verse about leaving Africa she evoked an image of survival with phrases like “ran for my life,” “not too soon,” and “had to survive.” Lola was five when she arrived in Australia after a period living in Egypt as a Sudanese refugee. When describing her migration in an interview context she said, “I don’t know why, school, studying, education maybe.” Her depiction of Africa in the song did not involve the more positive associations with “the ’hood” of belonging and power, but instead evoked a sense of war, danger, and flight, which were not reflected in her lived experience as expressed in an interview context. The performative nature of the song-writing process instead allowed Lola to engage in a reconstruction of her experience of leaving that did not reflect the same sense of loss as in the others’ verses.

Santino’s verse is a departure from the previous verses which engaged explicitly with leaving Africa. He uses American and hip hop imagery in a reflection on the complexity of his experience in Australia:

Basketball is my favorite sport
I’m rolling with the President on the court
I got arrested and went to jail
They didn’t give me any bail
So many nets it was a crime
Too many points in my time
See Obama in my court
Aussie girls messed me up
So, I just wanna go play ball
Kawaja, Africa

Santino relies on American cultural imagery in a depiction of his current life in Australia and in juxtaposition to the hip hop imagery of criminal activity and going to jail. He describes playing basketball with President Obama in response to his experiences with “Aussie girls.” His final line points to a sense of the inherent juxtaposition of American hip hop symbolic representations, and a sense of identification with Africa, reflected throughout the song, but in this case in an explicit racial construction. Kawaja means white person in Sudanese Dinka. The juxtaposition of African and American symbolic references in the song was not always a straightforward association for all members of the group and sometimes caused controversy. In the construction of this verse, for example, Gabe argued that he did not want to use the word Kawaja because, he said, “It doesn’t go. It’s not in English.” The others liked it, so it stayed.
In his verse, Omot explicitly engaged his experiences with race and racism as a black person in Australia:

I came from Africa, I'm too black.
I see people white but I'm too black.
They eat Octopus and I eat vegetables
They eat fortude, but I eat fruit.¹
They say my place is where I live today.
But some day my place is where I used to live.
So many special memories
I bring along with me
and together they make my place.

Omot highlights the overt distinctions he notices between himself and the wider population upon arrival in Australia. Skin color was one of the most prominent references in constructing the song. When the group sang the chorus together they would interchange, “We were born in Africa, born young,” with “We were born in Africa, born black,” further highlighting the overlap between ethnic identity and race as defined by skin color. Similarly, the group decided to name themselves “B Unit,” short for “Black Unit.” The other names they came up with, including “the blackies” and “the fabulous black boys” further demonstrate the salience of their sense of themselves as black people in Australia.

In reference to the proceeding line of his verse, Omot explained the word fortude to mean “morning tea.” His description of differences in diet, in conjunction with skin color, illuminates the sense of alienation that his first line portrays. Moreover, Omot’s verse demonstrates an acknowledgment and acceptance of the pervasive implication that Australia is a “safe” place. His line about “place” being constructed “together” out of the different environments in which he has lived was initially written at his previous school and reflects the sense of luck and opportunity in his migration promoted in the school context.

Omot alludes to his sense of alienation in juxtaposition to racial and ethnic references. Beyond this though, he is not only providing commentary on his experience of social division based on his skin color, but this sentiment sits in direct dialogue with the integrationist push to which he is regularly subject as he negotiates what “they say” in comparison to what he feels in terms of his “place.” Omot’s awareness of race as central to his sense of self and indeed his perception by others, is evident in the first two lines of this verse. Yet he was equally aware of multicultural rhetoric that denies the relevance of race in its promotion of integration. As he states, “they say my place is where I live today,” despite feeling a sense of belonging in the place where he “used to live.” This tension between what was broadly expected and what was actually experienced in terms of cultivating a sense of belonging was evident throughout the development of the song.
Gabe, who had prior recording experience, took his role as a rapper in the song very seriously. For this reason, and, it eventually became apparent, because he could not read written verses proficiently he chose to “freestyle” and rap slightly different lyrics each time he performed. He would argue, “I don’t write it, I don’t read it, I’m all freestyle” and the others would become frustrated when each time it was his turn he would stand at the microphone for ten minutes and say, “I got nothing” before starting to rap.

During one such confrontation between Gabe and the others, Gabe struggled with the dichotomy between positive associations with Africa and American hip hop symbolic representations. While standing at the microphone preparing for his verse he said, “I got nothing . . . I only got gangsta stuff. I don't have Africa stuff. It doesn't go in this song. This song is about safe places. I only have gangsta stuff.” For Gabe, the relationship between Africa and hip hop associations of “the 'hood” and “the ghetto” did not always match up. The other participants who were not as immersed in rap and hip hop culture were looser with their associations, while for Gabe the distinction between gangster associations and Africa or Australia as “safe places” was important. In the end result, Gabe conveyed a similar message to the other verses—that while he has experienced “the 'hood” in many places, he wants to go back to the hood in Africa where he might experience a greater sense of belonging. His verse is as follows:

I've been a lot of places, seen a lot of 'hoods
But I've never seen a 'hood just like this.
My homies in the back, my homies in the back.
I never wanna see them
Never wanna be them
I never wanna click, clack, bang
I've been to different 'hoods
But I wanna go back to the 'hood.

The minor confrontation between Gabe and the others illustrates the flexible use of pop cultural references as a form of symbolic ethnic capital in young people’s self-representation. Such references were not simply adapted by young people but reflected their individual imaginary as well as broader social discourses. As such, inconsistencies were reflected in the range of ways young people used hip hop symbolism to make sense of their lives. “Africa” was often represented positively through associations with power and toughness portrayed in imagery of “the 'hood” and “the ghetto,” while for Gabe, Africa represented a “safe place” which was incompatible with his interpretation of the hip hop imagery of “gangsta.” Despite different interpretations of specific symbolic images, in its overriding messages, American hip hop associations were used in the verses of the song to construct an image of home and belonging in association
with Africa. The final verse, which the whole group sang together in a call and answer fashion demonstrates this:

We got the 'hood in this place,  
But Africa’s the best.

In this verse, “the 'hood,” as it represented a sense of home and belonging for these participants, could be detected in their current social environment, but was argued to be stronger in association with Africa. The mobilization of images of “the ghetto” and “the 'hood,” through symbols gleaned from the global arena, allowed for a positive and empowering negotiation of these young people’s experiences with displacement and marginalization, through which they asserted their sense of identification with Africa.

In the song they wrote, which in the end they decided to name “Born in Africa,” hip hop associations with power, belonging, and toughness were particularly instrumental in constructing a positive image of Africa as home. Moreover, through the medium of hip hop, young people were able to express their sense of loss over leaving Africa, as well as the difficulties and advantages associated with their migration to Australia. Using symbolic ethnic capital in the cultivation of their hip hop song, my informants sought to cultivate an oscillating sense of belonging—to one another, to the wider Australian society, and to symbolic connections with global networks.

In addition to their use of symbolic ethnic capital related to American culture and the hip hop music scene, the young people represented here mobilized cultural resources from their home countries as a form of capital. In doing so, they also sought to define a sense of self and belonging in engagement with the everyday dynamics which framed their lives in multicultural context. Below, I explore formal cultural performances as they were elicited through school. In these examples of African and Karen cultural performances, both authenticity and flexibility were emphasized in articulations of belonging to a sense of home that existed in young people’s memories and in their personal imaginaries.

“What if an African Comes to This”: Multicultural Night and Navigating Authenticity

Both Karen and African young people participated in formal cultural performances at schools, articulated a sense of immense pride in these productions, and commonly sought to make them as “authentic” as possible. “Multicultural Night” was a highlight of the year at Paddington High for my African informants who each year performed African dancing on stage for the student body. After anticipation that began early in the school year, when the time for their performance came in the spring, young people began to discuss and plan what they would do at length and critique the performances of previous years. In their discussions, it was made apparent that dance performances produced through
“mixing” dance styles from different cultural backgrounds were perceived to upset the preservation of authenticity and therefore deemed unsatisfactory. In previous years, a white Australian student dance group that called themselves “The Bring it on Dancers” utilized dance styles from many different cultural groups in their performances. In one of their lunch hour planning discussions, Elijah expressed the opinion of many: “Bring it on Dancers are lame because they’re a mix of everything.”

A group of eighteen African research participants at Paddington High danced to the song “Karolina,” by Congolese musician Awilo Longomba at Multicultural Night. They practiced and choreographed their dance together during their lunch hour for weeks prior to the event. In the making of their African dance, despite their distaste for obvious “mixing” of different cultural dances, my participants merged a number of distinct dance styles from the many tribes, regions, and nations from which they came into one generalized “African” style with the help of videos found on the internet. During this process, they worried about authenticity. While we were sitting in the school courtyard the day before their performance, Samah commented to Vic, “We’re going to look so stupid, what if some Africans come to this, they’ll be like, ‘that’s not how we dance, you’re embarrassing us.’” Samah’s reference to “real Africans” demonstrates Africaness for these young people as a performative, constructive process rather than a fixed trait. Her worry about the legitimacy of their performance is indicative of the flexibility with which young people mobilize symbolic ethnic capital and the insecurity such flexibility can sometimes induce.

The same group of students performed a more traditional dance, which they referred to as a “Boro” dance, at a subsequent school event. Similarly, to their performance at Multicultural Night, in this dance the young people merged different tribal dances from the many different regions from which they came and negotiated with one another about who would do what. In the process they laughed, teased and played with different ideas; as Joseph told Aliir, “You do the Nuba mountain part. I’ll do the other.” Tino, when critiquing a new student’s pronunciation of an African word, launched excitedly into the question, “Do you like African dance!? You should see us all do Boro dance! Next year we’ll bring spears!”

Participants’ constant concern with authenticity in formal performances points to a tension between their own desires for self-representation and that which was imposed by others. They were concerned with what was “real,” what “real Africans” would think of their performance, and they occasionally struggled with feelings of inadequacy in achieving the desired authenticity. That these performances happened in school when they were invited by others in positions of authority to “perform” their culture, and simultaneously encouraged to merge and mix with other “cultural groups,” in the name of both tolerance and integration, indicates some inherent constraints on young people’s quest.
for authenticity. Moreover, while they sought to outwardly depict themselves in these formal representations as an authentic but cohesive African group, these young people had to exercise flexibility in their boundaries.

I was able to also observe formal cultural performances among Karen and Burmese research participants on a few occasions. During one such performance at their school seven Karen participants and one Burmese participant performed two songs together. One song was about Australia—how lucky they were to be there and how Australia had helped them—and the other was called “We are Karen” and was sung mainly in Karen. As in African cultural performances, the young people were proud to participate—they practiced all day at Kedron Club the day before their performance. However, these young people were less outwardly concerned with authenticity then African participants.

Participants initially told me that they wrote the first song about Australia themselves but were guided by the question from their teacher, “How has Australia helped you?” When I asked what they would have written about without this prompt Lisa said, “Friendship” and Jessica said, “Yeah, or friendship and Christian . . . friendship, Christian and Country.” When I asked which country, Lisa yelled out “Australia!” Jessica said, “Yeah, Australia and Karen . . . but not Burma.” Lisa quietly nodded. The second song, “We Are Karen” was performed by mostly Karen participants but included Lisa, my Burmese participant, who did not normally identify as Karen. Participants were unconcerned about this apparent distinction and willingly included Lisa, as their friend, in this performance.

These participants were outwardly inclusive in their cultural performances and were malleable to influences from the school they attended which framed their performance in terms of opportunity in Australia. Nonetheless, as this example of performance demonstrates, while cultural performances in formal settings provide an opportunity for self-representation in which young people often take great pride, such performances are often initiated and framed through relationships of power and dominance (see also Forman 2005; Van Meijl 2006). Cultural performances in this context emphasized the dominant national, cultural ideal of diversity central to the moral and political framework of multiculturalism. And in so doing such performance points to the critical distinction between those who are empowered to impose and enjoy ethnic cultural diversity, through their endowment with “the code, into which it is encoded” (Bourdieu 1984, 2), and those who provide it (Hage 1998, 204).

Young people’s demonstrations of flexibility as well as their policing of the boundaries of authenticity in performance indicates the intersections between self-representation, the cultivation of belonging, and an awareness of social context. African participants’ quest for authenticity in cultural performance allowed for the outward projection of a cohesive, exclusively African group. In their projections of Africanness young people sought to blur distinctions between different ethnic groups and they worried about the accuracy of their
representations. Karen participants’ alternate reliance on flexibility permitted a sense of inclusion which subtly shifted the focus of their performance from their own cultural backgrounds to the desirability of being a part of Australia. Both Karen singing and African dance performances, which occurred at different schools, were decidedly rooted in a multicultural context where the ideals of Australian inclusiveness and tolerance for diversity were highlighted alongside the cultures that young people were called upon to portray. Whether they emphasized a strong concern with authenticity, or more openly demonstrated flexibility, cultural performances allowed the young people to make use of symbolic ethnic capital for participation in their own self-representations and engagement with dominant discourses and relations of power.

**Symbolic Ethnic Capital and Multicultural Belonging**

To summarize, young people approach a sense of belonging within the context of Australian multiculturalism through their use of symbolic ethnic capital—a process reflective of Bourdieu’s conceptual framework of cultural and social capital and Modood’s subsequent work on ethnic capital (Bourdieu 1986; Hage 1998; Modood 2004). American style, slang, and hip hop cultural references, in addition to a range of cultural symbols from their own countries of origin, acted as forms of symbolic ethnic capital which these young people utilized in various demonstrations of self-conscious cultural performance. At the heart of their representations, young people negotiated messages they regularly encountered in their school and community environments related to the complex ways in which their lives are framed in the Australian multicultural context. Most prominently, young people’s highly essentialized, and often racialized, representations of self in performance reflect their perception and accumulation of capital which emerges in dynamic response to the ideals of multicultural tolerance and inclusion.

School multicultural performances, initiated by and performed in young people’s schools, are reflective of how young people mobilize performative representations of identity in juxtaposition to the messages of multicultural inclusion and tolerance that they regularly encounter. The schools these young people attended called for inclusive cultural performances and referenced Australia as a superior nation-state, but such performances were also premised on the imperative to celebrate difference. In subtle engagement with these messages, young people couched their cultural performances through a range of concerns and priorities. In their African dance performance, a group of young people used hybridizing strategies to draw upon a catalogue of cultural resources that allowed them to present an essentialized and cohesive African identity (see also Noble and Tabar 2002; Tabar et al. 2010). As they sought authenticity they projected essentialized self-representations based on an overriding notion of being African through local webs of relationships and with symbols gleaned
from an array of global resources. Their fretting over the authenticity of their performance in the process demonstrates the inherent power dynamic through which they are called upon to perform, against a pervasive backdrop created by an ethic of tolerance.

The cultural performance of a group of Karen young people (plus one youth who was Burmese) similarly demonstrates how cultural representations are often engaged within or alongside representations of Australia as a symbol of the inclusive multicultural ideal. These young people emphasized the flexibility and adaptability inherent in their capacity for inclusion through which modes of belonging were also eventually asserted. Their performance of the song “We Are Karen” was developed across ethnic, cultural, and religious divides, and significantly, in juxtaposition with a song praising the Australian multicultural ideals of inclusion and tolerance. While it does present some evidence of awareness of multicultural ideals, their performance of “We Are Karen,” was something of an anomaly. While this performance allowed for flexibility, the much more common dynamic was that young people asserted essentialized representations of themselves in performance through the hybridizing strategies of adapting global references for specific, localized contexts and meanings.

To further clarify the connection between youth performances of identity and multicultural context, I will focus my analysis on the hip hop song written by Santino, Lola, Omar, Obama, Gabe, Omot, and Aher. This example of performance bears one critical difference to the others that emerged through school multicultural programs—the ideas for what the song would be about, the lyrics for the song, the song structure, the decision to write and record a song at all, were entirely theirs. Emerging more independently, the song provides a useful example of how the self-conscious nature of performance allows for a particularly deliberate engagement with social context.

As coordinator of Kedron Club at the time the song was written and recorded, my instigating role was solely to inform the young people that we had some extra funding and could do with it what they chose. I suggested a field trip, they informed me they’d rather record a song. At the start of the project I told them that the song could take whatever form they chose and that it could be about anything they wanted. I gave them no further guidance. Through their own words and ideas, as playful, light, and silly as they were at the start, participants were able to comment on their sense of loss at leaving Africa, the fear they experienced on their journey to Australia, and the complexity of their feelings of both exclusion and opportunity in making a new home, or a new ‘hood, for themselves in Australia.

Not only do the lyrics of the song engage with the discourses of integration and tolerance to which young people were regularly exposed, but they were treated by the young people themselves as being in some ways subversive. Their song lyrics did not provide a foundation for integration with what they perceived
as the mainstream, white population, nor did they represent traditional African culture as they were often called upon to do in cultural performance. Instead, young people’s use of symbolic ethnic capital in this example allowed for them to reach further afield as they aligned themselves with African American notions of the ‘hood and the ghetto in their representations of Africa as home. In doing so, they aligned themselves with one another through images and references to a broader social context entrenched with agency, dominance and community. In addition, their association with a hip hop ethic of power and dominance allowed for participation in the broad cultural values of moral authority and material wealth (Patterson and Fosse 2015).

In addition to enabling them to adapt certain ideals of hip hop culture, the writing of their song allowed these young people to respond to messages that both celebrate and deny the relevance of race in multicultural discourse. When they initially discussed ideas for the song, Omot said, “Let’s make it about different colors. We’re not all the same colors so color doesn’t matter. Paint yourself. Spray paint. Blue.” Lola echoed this broad sentiment of inclusion when she said, “yeah, let’s make it about the world.” While their gestures toward the trivial nature of skin color in their brainstorming session indicate an awareness of a kind of multicultural moral code to deny the impact of race, on the other hand they also demonstrated an understanding of race as central to their perception by others. For example, when discussing with the group my own research, and the possibility of writing about their rap in one of our song-writing meetings, one of the young people described my research to another as, “It’s about Australia stuff. You’re poor, you’re black, why’d you move here.”

Their occasional claims of skin color as insignificant, juxtaposed to their alternate highlighting of skin color as central and defining to their sense of themselves, reflect the symbolic capital through which young people demonstrate their awareness of both the centrality of race and the distaste of racism in relation to popular multicultural discourse (Bourdieu 1984; see also Arkin 2009, 725). This is evident in the complex ways in which young people grappled with the supposed irrelevance of race in the song-writing process, but ultimately embraced its centrality in the final outcome of the song. Their explicitly racialized ethnic resources in forging certain alignments demonstrates an engagement with symbolic ethnic capital as a resource in cultivating a sense of belonging in the broad social and political backdrop of their experience (Modood 2004; Tabar et al. 2010; Weller 2010).

Hybrid Youth and Essentializing Selves as Performative Multicultural Identity

In their more ordinary, everyday interactions, young people’s presentations and descriptions of their own sense of identity oscillated between flexibility and hybridity in certain moments, and rigidity and essentialism in others. The highly
self-conscious nature of performance, however, allowed for their unapologetic effort to depict largely essentialized, often racialized, representations of ethnic identity. Hybridizing strategies are evident in the ways performative interactions unfold within the global web of music and technology—my informants listened to Arabic, Karen, and American hip hop and pop music; they connected with other young people from across the globe via Bebo, MySpace, and Facebook; and they visited websites, looked at pictures and listened to music emerging from the refugee camps where they used to live. Hybridity allows young people to emphasize or deny both authenticity in their essentialized representations of self, and the inherent flexibility through which such representations are often constituted. Through their performative engagement with symbolic ethnic capital, young people from refugee backgrounds can complicate popular perceptions of the modern, hybridized youth (see also Arkin 2009).

However, young people’s performative representations cannot be explained away as easily fitting within the conceptual categories of hybridity or essentialism. As Moore argues, “it is not just a matter of appropriating images from elsewhere, of mimicry, hybridity or even of resistance, but rather an active means of participation, a form of agency” (2011, 61). That is, young people’s use of cultural texts and symbolic ethnic capital suggests an active participation in global trends and self-representations. For example, hip hop as a medium of communication is a tool through which people critique and respond to certain social conditions—research participants are no more adapting, hybridizing, borrowing than anyone else. They are using tools and resources available, as do we all, to reflect the whole of their lived experiences. The performative use of symbolic ethnic capital for these young people, especially considering the range of cultural influences and social perspectives they have encountered throughout their lives, enables dynamic responsiveness to the multicultural context of which they are now a part. Through both informal performative interactions and literal cultural performances, young people sought to fix one another in social place—a process through which certainty in belonging was asserted, sometimes challenged, and then reasserted.

Participants’ negotiation of a sense of belonging with and to one another in their performative acts and interactions was entangled with their constitution of racialized selves and their awareness of race and racism as prevalent issues in their broader social environment. In the following and final ethnographic chapter I explore young people’s dynamic responsiveness in national context as they negotiate issues of racism, citizenship and national belonging. This chapter illustrates their constant referencing of skin color as it emerges against the backdrop of their experiences and awareness of the treatment of “race” within the broader community. As they encounter issues around citizenship and nationality, rather than seeking to bind one another to categories, young people are explicit in their allowance of flexibility.