Belonging and Becoming in a Multicultural World

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Much of the identity work undertaken by these young people emerges with reference to some element of their sociopolitical positioning. They regularly framed themselves with reference to race and ethnicity in terms of how much it does or doesn’t matter. As they described the elements that for them constituted friendship, they demonstrated the importance of being black, not white, or African in their essentialized projections of identity. On the other hand, young people sometimes rejected those claims in hybridized depictions of the irrelevance of race and their capacity to “mix it up” in terms of racial and ethnic backgrounds in friendship groups. In their more formal performative demonstrations of identity they largely favored essentialized self-representations which blurred differences between ethnic backgrounds in the presentation of a cohesive and racialized whole.

At the core of what I’m interested in exploring in this chapter, is why sociopolitical context plays such a foundational role in these young people’s projections and negotiations of identity. I hope to demonstrate that they engage with sociopolitical context, particularly in terms of race and ethnicity, because their lives as refugees and as minorities, are overtly politicized according to these categories in the Australian multicultural context. Whiteness, for them, is a political construct through which “being white” functions as the default (majority) racial position. Falling outside of this construct, as these young people do, means that their race needs to be managed or at least addressed through calls for tolerance or integration in multicultural context.

I argue that their capacity for national belonging is both fostered and restrained through a kind of political representation or governance of their difference (Moore 2011) that emerges in response to their status as refugees, as young people, and as racial minorities. I seek to demonstrate their lives as overtly politicized by exploring a range of defining categories in terms of both how they
emerge and are treated in public discourse, as well the numerous ways in which they are engaged and perceived by young people. The categories of representation I explore here include citizenship, national identity, refugee status, definitions of home, and the treatment and management of racism. Among the strategies for confronting the elements of power inherent to multicultural discourse was the flexibility young people allowed one another in their representations of national identity, including the extent to which they identified as refugees and how and where they defined a sense of home. Such flexibility, I argue, acts as a form of responsiveness to the governance of their difference.

**Governing Difference, Identity, and the Politics of Representation**

Henrietta Moore (2011) describes the recognition and governance of cultural difference as a form of “politics of representation.” Cultural difference is governed by the ways in which differences are categorized and represented in political discourses and for what purposes. The governance of difference has been integrated into government policy and institutionalized in many parts of the world, most notably from the 1970s on, in policies of multiculturalism (Moore 2011, 32). I interpret both the management of racism and the ways in which citizenship is protected and attained as at the core of how difference is governed, managed, and represented in multicultural context.

As Moore notes, difference as a form of governmentality has emerged and is implemented in government policy, law, the media, through nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and through a wide range of social practices and rights movements. The governance of difference effects political and economic life as struggles over the representation of group identities and needs are implicated in the allocation of resources and entitlements (Moore 2011, 33). One consequence of the governance of difference is the eruption of the notion of cultural diversity through which cultural claims to citizenship and national identity emerge in relation to cultural identity.

Defining citizenship and nationality in the Australian context has posed unique challenges and contradictions throughout its complex immigration history. Its relatively recent history as a nation-state, the diverse origins of its population, its largely symbolic ties to a foreign monarch and the lack of any historical event to mark its autonomy (Zappala and Castles 1999, 273–276), underpin the vulnerabilities through which a sense of Australian national identity and consequent ideas around citizenship and belonging are imagined. As discussed in chapter 2, claims of belonging in the Australian national field emerge in large part in relation to one’s ability to demonstrate their Anglo-Celtic heritage as a form of symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1986; Hage 1998; Kapferer 1998). Official multicultural policy and discourse, although premised to do the opposite, can serve to further distinguish those who do not belong to this majority population. Indeed, the term “multiculturalism” itself is most often reserved for those
from non-English-speaking minority backgrounds (Gunew 1990, iii). Given the relevance of race in dictating degrees of belonging in multicultural context, both the ways in which citizenship is implemented and the ways in which racism is acknowledged and managed serve as ways of governing difference.

In the Australian context, as struggles over the interpretation and representation of racism and citizenship are engaged at a political level, these categories are perceived by young people as coming from the wider world. Consequently, as I explore and analyze here, the degree to which these concepts resonated in young people’s own sense of their identity was variable. Central to this variability are the ways in which the notion of racism is framed as an obstacle to national belonging.

**Experiencing and Interpreting Racism**

When Vic missed the first half of lunch period at Paddington High one day, she explained upon her return, “They asked me about racism again. They asked if I’ve ever experienced racism. Again! I said it happened once... Not here. Not at school.” To say that these young people experience research saturation about the racism they experience is an understatement. It was commonplace for various government agencies or university researchers, like myself, to visit the schools these young people attended with questionnaires about their experiences with racism. The complex ways in which young people both vacated and inhabited (Back 1996) a sense of racialized identity in their everyday practices and in performative moments (explored in chapters 4 and 5, respectively), is mirrored in the way racism as a significant issue is both affirmed and denied in popular multicultural discourse. All of my research participants reported having experienced racism to some degree, and they had complex understandings and awareness of racist discourses across community and national contexts.

In my observations and conversations with them, young people described their experiences and understanding of racism as primarily class specific and often conflated skin color with socioeconomic status. They were acutely aware of the structural limitations placed on them, which emerged largely in relationship to their economic vulnerability (see also Hage 2002a, 15) and they described their consequent perception of themselves as social outsiders in terms of their skin color. When a group of Sudanese participants listened to a radio interview about their hip hop song described in the previous chapter, and the interviewer referred to them as having “difficult backgrounds.” Santino, in a typical explanation said, “Hey, is she calling us poor! Because we’re black? That’s what difficult background means! It means you’re black!” Everyone in the group laughed.

Though they apparently perceived this common assessment that they are black and therefore poor and understood that racism was believed to be a significant issue in their lives, most of my participants maintained that they did
not experience racism in the contexts of their school environments and friendship groups. In their descriptions of racism they often merged accounts of their own experiences with indications of a public perception of the role of racism in their lives. An awareness of racist attitudes was regularly evoked and enacted in mock demonstrations of racism and teasing accusations, exchanged between young people, of being “a racist.” In such exchanges, young people essentialized black identities in humorous interactions through which they exposed the content of various racist stereotypes to mock and critically comment upon them (see also Back 1996, 161). In doing so, young people sought to elicit reactions and nodded to the perception that racism looms large in their lives.

“I’m a Black Man and I’m Being Mugged”: Demonstrations and Accusations of Racism

I observed mock displays and playful accusations of racism through comments such as, “Don’t do that, you’re such a racist” or “Stop being such a racist and give me the ball” regularly throughout the course of my fieldwork. Young people engaged in such exchanges with humor as they traded accusations of racism back and forth. The practice of playfully deliberating over what was racist and why was also pervasive. I once observed a group of four boys, two white and two black, laughing and jokingly discussing whether the word “boy” was racist. A group of four black young people on their way out of school at the end of the day were laughing later that day, pushing each other and shouting, “I’m not racist! I’m not racist!” Accusations of racism were often aimed at one another in a teasing and mildly ironic tone, as if to indicate that being racist was not so much an option for them.

To provide just a brief sampling of mock demonstrations and accusations of racism over a range of circumstances: Obama argued with Santino over the computer at Kedron Club, pleading with me, “He can’t go first, he’s a racist;” Vic playfully slapped one of the dancers who did not know her steps during African dance practice and said, “You’re such a racist! Do it right;” Samah informed me that Vic didn’t give her a ride to her formal by saying, “No, she didn’t bring me. She’s a racist. Racist, I tell you;” and Gabe yelled to me while laughing and wrestling with some friends at school, “Miss, miss! I’m being mugged. I’m being mugged by two white men. I’m a black man, I shouldn’t get mugged!”

In addition to their mock accusations of racism, young people engaged in the constant use of derogatory, racist terms. One afternoon at Kedron Club a volunteer was talking about Arnold Schwarzenegger, oblivious to the four African boys cracking up with laughter over the sound of that name. They thought the “nigger” in “Schwarzenegger” sounded like that most nefarious of slurs and were coaxing each other to “say it out loud if you’re a man.” Through their near constant use of this term young people were able to assert that they knew the negative and deeply racist sentiment it entailed, but they were able to use it themselves,
and thereby subtly negate its problematic association. They did so for the purpose of engaging racist attitudes, or in this case it seemed, for their simple amusement as teenage boys. On two other occasions, Nine pointed out his friends to me by gesturing toward Aliir and saying, “My best friends are this monkey and that monkey,” and Samah explained to Joseph why my baby was crying when he held her by saying, “She just doesn’t like monkeys.”

Through their easy use of racist terms and their joking accusations of racism, young people demonstrated their awareness of racism and indeed its perception as a significant issue in their lives, while at the same time they were able to slightly invalidate racist stereotypes by making fun of them. In this way, their exchanges around racism created a sort of caricature in which the absurd content of racism was highlighted, and young people postured that they were not so deeply affected by it. I interpret young people’s playful use of racist stereotypes and accusations of racism in terms of what Back describes as “parodying” racism (1996, 161). Through their joking engagement with constructions of racism, and as Back also observed among young people from minority backgrounds, “‘race’ ideologies were subverted and ‘commonsense’ racism publicly ridiculed” by my informants (1996, 173). Furthermore, as Back also describes, young black people regularly engaged with racist name calling and racist terms and they did so not to hurt one another, but rather as a means of “exposing the content of [the] stereotype and ridiculing its meaning” (1996, 177).

That is, through their teasing use of racist discourse young people were able to strip such discourse of any real meaning. In addition to hinting at the fallacy of racist thinking and ideology and allowing young people to demonstrate that they were perhaps not so profoundly affected by it, they also demonstrated their ability to invoke racist discourse to their own advantage in particular and occasional situations. For example, Zi explained to another African student how he might get away with wearing beads in his hair against school policy. As Zi explained, “All you have to do is say, ‘How dare you tell me not to wear these, this is my culture, that’s racist.’” At Kedron Club Santino claimed to Obama, both African participants, that racism was the reason for his low exam grade. He said, “She gave me a B-, she’s racist. Racist to me only. She wasn’t racist to you . . . you deserve your grade.” And when I asked Vic why she left her previous school, she responded “It was boring Miss . . . [and as an afterthought] they are racist.” In some instances, “racism” was used as the simplest explanation for a range of complaints which may or may not have been based in experiences with racism.

When an incident was perceived as having racist undertones but did not appear to demonstrate this decisively enough, it was also common for young people to enhance the racist content in their retelling. In one prominent example, a group of girls who attended Kedron Club were at their school hanging out in a classroom and straightening one another’s hair during the lunch hour. I was there too as their teacher stormed into the classroom and started yelling at the
students that they should not be straightening their hair during the lunch hour. The teacher told them they would have to pay for the electricity they used in doing so and the girls were clearly confused and did not realize that they were breaking any rules. They didn’t argue and immediately started packing up their hair things to leave the room. As they did so, they mumbled quietly in Arabic to one another. The teacher’s agitation escalated, and she yelled, “Don’t you use that lang- [starts to say language] Arabic in my classroom!”

The girls left and as they debriefed and related the incident to the others outside, the main girl involved said, “She’s a racist! She’s so racist! She told me ‘Don’t speak in your dingo languages!’” While this incident clearly had racist elements, such as the teacher’s refusal to let the girls use their languages and her stumbling over what to call it, and quite possibly her general contemptuous attitude toward them, the story was retold with statements that were never made. While racist foundations were likely present in and affecting the encounter, the girls used their own experiences and interpretations of racism to more emphatically illustrate what they felt to be a racist attack.

This incident illustrates the juxtaposition of racism as an actual and prevalent experience in young people’s lives, with the self-conscious pervasive awareness that racism is also perceived to be a significant issue in their lives—the latter a reality that can be utilized and tapped into for various purposes and to make various points. By deconstructing their experiences of racism and engaging racist stereotypes in playful verbal interaction or in exaggerated ways to make a point, young people may become active participants in racist discourse and thereby affect its weight in their lives.

*Racism and Belonging in Multicultural Discourse*

In the context of Australian multiculturalism, Anglo cultural privilege, and ethnic minority disadvantage (in terms of, for example, public sector employment and media representation) exist in juxtaposition to the denial of racism in social and political discourse (Dunn and Nelson 2011, 588). This complexity is evident in the social practices of young people represented here. These young people recounted experiences of racism mostly in abstractions and sometimes claimed not to have experienced it at all, but nonetheless demonstrated a pervasive awareness of its significance as a social issue. They did so in their frequent depictions of racist encounters and their sarcastic accusations of racism among one another. To interpret my informants’ engagement with racism more fully I now look to perceptions and treatment of racism as they emerge in broad public discourse.

Research on racism in Brisbane, and Australia more broadly, demonstrates a complexity of societal beliefs that both acknowledge and deny the existence of racism. Survey data collected for the Challenging Racism Project (Dunn and Nelson 2011; Forrest and Dunn 2011), previously described in chapter 2, was
conducted in Brisbane and its outer suburbs via telephone interviews. People were asked whether it was good for society to be made up of different cultures; whether and to what extent they felt a sense of security in the context of cultural difference; and (to gauge their position on multiculturalism) whether Australia is weakened by people from different ethnic backgrounds maintaining their cultural traditions (Forrest and Dunn 2011). The results of this data were that Brisbane is “tolerant” but that the “acceptance” of ethnic diversity was accompanied by pro-assimilation views (Forrest and Dunn 2011:446). That is, people were accepting of cultural diversity to the extent that ethnic groups largely adapted the cultural practices of the majority population—findings were similar across Australia as a whole. According to Dunn and his colleagues’ research, intolerant attitudes manifest through media representations of ethnic minority groups in outlets such as tabloid news and talk back radio (Forrest and Dunn 2011, 450). Despite evidence of intolerance, much public discourse denies the prevalence of racism. Dunn argues that the denial, deflection, and justification of racism as inevitable manifests in the Australian context in a range of ways and is a prominent aspect of “contemporary racism,” or “new racism,” which, as Dunn describes, “is typified by denial politics, and discourses of deflection and absence” (Dunn and Nelson 2011, 589). The denial of racism manifests most strongly among political leaders, according to Dunn’s research, while there is a much higher level of acknowledgment of racism among the Australian public (Dunn and Nelson 2011, 589).

The deflection and denial of racism finds scope to manifest in the social context of current discourses of multiculturalism, which position racism as something that exists outside of or opposed to multicultural social policy. Indeed, a principal impetus for multicultural social policy is its potential to overcome the pitfalls of racism in an ethnically diverse society (Hage 1998). However multicultural “tolerance” allows for the subtle acknowledgment of privilege in the context of belonging to a nation, while indirectly subsuming issues of race. Moreover, as Dunn’s research outlines, there is a positive association between reported experiences of racism and its denial which is closely tied to the degree to which people from minority backgrounds perceive a sense of national belonging. That is, when people perceive a sense of belonging to national space they are positively empowered to critique it (see also Hage 1998). As Dunn illustrates, when minority groups perceive a “lesser claim to citizenship” this may manifest in “a reticence to state that there is racism in Australian society” (Dunn and Nelson 2011, 597). Indigenous Australians are more likely to acknowledge their experiences of racism and perceptions of Anglo privilege than other non-Anglo minority or migrant groups because, as Dunn contends, “their [Indigenous Australians] belonging is less contestable, and therefore their right to make claims and sense of entitlement is stronger” (Dunn and Nelson 2011, 598).
Likewise, the occasional lack of public acknowledgment around issues of racism may leave these young people from refugee backgrounds disempowered to assert their own experiences with it. Conversely, their sense of belonging may be hindered precisely because of the ways in which they are framed as affected by racist experiences, despite their claims that such experiences are not pervasive or significant. The slippage between discourses of multiculturalism that deny racism and those that acknowledge, and even insist upon it as an issue in the lives of young people from minority backgrounds, mirrors the duality of young people’s intermittent denial, and playful depictions of their own experiences of racism. While young people’s acknowledgment of racism in their lives was inconsistent, their humorous engagement with it was a constant. This allowed for them to participate in the ways in which their lives were framed around issues of racism in a sociopolitical context that simultaneously denied racism and warned of its prevalence.

That their experiences with racism are absolutely real, and in many cases, pervasive, is not in question. Rather, what I seek to tease out by demonstrating a relationship between young people’s creative engagement with racism and the contradictory ways in which it is treated in public discourse, is how the treatment and management of the concept of racism itself can act as a tool in the political representation of these young people’s lives. The identity practices through which young people both project and abandon racialized self-representations emerges in part as a kind of responsiveness to the political representation through which they are implicated in the management of racism. The various ways in which young people’s lives are framed through public discourse around citizenship and nationality can also be examined as central to the governance of young people’s difference. Their engagement with these categories reflects a flexibility that similarly acts as a form of responsiveness to the political representation of their lives.

**Belonging to the Nation: Citizenship, Nationality, and Inclusion**

Citizenship and nationality carry specific and contextualized meanings and reflect a sense of belonging (and not belonging) to place. In the Australian context these categories are engaged most acutely, and perhaps paradoxically (Castles 2000, 130), through the current political and broad social framework of multiculturalism. My participants conceptions of nationality and citizenship demonstrate how they perceive and engage the various connotations these categories invoke in ways that often delimit their sense of social belonging. Their engagement with citizenship and nationality demonstrates a perception of the often racialized power dynamics inherent to multicultural discourse through their conflation of immigration status and skin color. For these young people, categories of nationality and citizenship acted in part as externally imposed
devices related to the treatment and management of difference in multicultural discourse.

There is a congruence between what I have labeled as the discourses of integration and tolerance related to multiculturalism and multiculturalism as official immigration policy dictated through the categories of citizenship and nationality. It is through the process of designating and attaining Australian nationality and citizenship that the discourses of integration and tolerance take on broad social and cultural significance at the scale of the polity and the nation. The process of recognition or representation of who belongs in national context serves to reinforce the superiority of the recognizers and thereby reproduce the social context in which such is required (Dalsheim 2013; Povinelli 2002).

In my interactions with them, young people acknowledged the social organizing categories of nationality and citizenship in two primary ways. First, they talked about Australian citizenship and national identity as being practically beneficial in terms of designating a status that enabled travel, especially to their countries of origin. Second, however, they understood and discussed citizenship and nationality as indicative of barriers to inclusion in the Australian national space which they often explained in terms of skin color.

Young people grappled with citizenship through paperwork, tests and ceremonies and they were confronted by articulations of national belonging regularly in their school context. Below I examine the complexities reflected in the extent to which my informants implicated themselves in the discourses of citizenship and nationality, and why. In doing so, I’ll present two key ethnographic examples. One details Vic’s internal conflict in taking up Australian citizenship, and the other explores Tino’s response to the everyday politics of nationality with which he was confronted at school.

**Acquiring Citizenship: Reconciling the “Real Stuff” with the “Fake Stuff”**

The process of applying for Australian citizenship has been revised with changes implemented in April and June of 2017 (Webster 2017). Among these changes, the residency requirement for applying for citizenship increased from twelve months to four years, a formal English language test was implemented, and changes were made to both the “pledge of citizenship” and the citizenship test (Webster 2017). The citizenship test was changed to include more questions to assess “good character” and to weed out religious extremism (Benson and Baxendale 2017). Specifically, questions were designed to assess attitudes about violence against women, forced marriage, and genital mutilation. In addition, applicants for Australian citizenship are now asked to provide “evidence of integration,” including employment records, tax payments and children’s school payments (Benson and Baxendale 2017).

The citizenship test is “designed to assess whether you have an adequate knowledge of Australia and the responsibilities and privileges of Australian
citizenship” (Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship [DIAC], n.d.-a). The test asks various questions relating to the historical, political and cultural knowledge inherent in an Australian national identity, such as: “What do we remember on Anzac Day?,” “Which official symbol of Australia identifies Commonwealth property?,” and “Which of these statements about government in Australia is correct” (DIAC, n.d.-b). Upon obtaining Australian citizenship through the completion of the citizenship test and other application materials, new citizens must attend a citizenship ceremony wherein they make a “pledge of commitment” to Australia. The current pledge reads: “From this time forward, under God [optional], I pledge my loyalty to Australia and its people, whose democratic beliefs I share, whose rights and liberties I respect, and whose laws I will uphold and obey” (DIAC, n.d.-c).

To fully adhere to the logistical procedures and paperwork requirements of the citizenship process, young people sometimes had to compromise aspects of their own sense of identity. They did so not always to achieve a sense of belonging in the Australian context (although this was sometimes a primary motivation), but also for the more practical purpose of subverting structural barriers which allowed for the maintenance of connections to their countries of origin. During one lunch hour at Paddington High I helped Vic, along with her friend Samah, to fill out the initial paperwork in the process of obtaining Australian citizenship.

When she came to the questions about her family background Vic asked, “Do we have to have real stuff on here or can it be fake stuff?” When we asked her what she meant, Vic became agitated and said, “I mean real or fake?!” Samah and Vic went back and forth like this for a while before Vic explained that she wrote the name of her “real” mother’s name, who is still in Africa, on the citizenship form. But on her paperwork utilized upon entry to Australia her “step-mother,” with whom she currently lived, was listed as her mother. I offered that the form says, “real or adoptive,” and Vic responded that her step mother did not adopt her. Samah then urged Vic that for her citizenship to go through she had to fill out the paperwork with her familiar relationships exactly as they were on the paperwork she used upon entry, or alternatively, she could change that information first and then apply for her citizenship. Vic, at that point very agitated, yelled, “I want to write my real mother! Because I just want real stuff! My real mother! I don’t want to have fake stuff!” Samah restated her argument and Vic responded, “Shut up Samah! You’re annoying me now. Just shut up,” before leaving the room.

A few days later I asked Vic if she finished with the citizenship paperwork and she responded, “No. I quit that. I don’t want to be Australian. Not now.” A few weeks following this Vic approached me and excitedly told me, “I’m getting my citizenship on Tuesday! Because it was easy. My mom just said let’s go down to immigration. Then they asked me a few questions and said, ‘You have your
citizenship.’” Vic attended the citizenship ceremony in a formal dress, and her “stepbrother” and two friends from school came to watch. After the ceremony she told me, “It was so cool! For my family, it felt good” and that she felt “a little bit Australian.” I didn’t ask her how she handled the discrepancy of how to define her mother on her citizenship paperwork.

During my fieldwork Vic struggled with various immigration officers and lawyers to work out a way to bring her “real” mother, residing in Africa, to Australia. She described this as essential to feeling at home and frequently said that she wanted to live in Africa but, “if my mom comes here I’m gonna stay here.” She would alternate between calling the mother she lived with in Australia her “mom” and her “stepmom” depending on the state of their often volatile relationship. In the process of filling out her citizenship form, Vic needed to compromise her deeply held feelings of familial ties to conform to the categories and definitions required. She did so, however, not necessarily to deepen her feelings of belonging to the Australian national space, but more immediately to close a gap of belonging to her country of origin by furthering the possibility of bringing her mother to Australia.

Vic’s desire for Australian citizenship, her adherence to the familial labels required for acquiring citizenship, and the extent to which her Australian citizenship contributed to a sense of “being Australian,” were unstable and continually revised and changed. The process and outcome of becoming an Australian citizen, while ultimately a positive experience that allowed Vic to feel “a little bit Australian,” served to maintain a feeling of being slightly outside of the bounds of social belonging in the Australian context. Moreover, many young people recounted that, regardless of formal citizenship, skin color remained an obstacle to a complete sense of national belonging. In one telling comment, when I asked him if he considers himself Australian, Mathew, a Karen participant laughed, “Nah . . . it’s skin color, not citizen. . . . My family, my grandpa and grandma.”

Not all of my research participants experienced this sense of conflict over citizenship choices as intensely as Vic. For many, the idea of citizenship was primarily embraced as a form of practicality. When I asked them about acquiring citizenship, common responses included “If I want to apply to anything, like Uni or anything, it’s better if you get it,” “I want to get it, so I can travel around the world for soccer,” and “I could travel and go overseas with that.” However, for those who were intensely entrenched in personal conflict over the acquisition of Australian citizenship, like Vic, their lack of belonging in the Australian national space was emphasized through the very process of becoming citizens.

As Hage argues, for many who have experienced migration, the intensity of emotion with which they negotiate the dynamics of national identity represent “guilt-ridden moves within a general moral economy of social belonging” (2002b, 203). Vic’s internal struggle over becoming an Australian citizen reflects her
attempts to repay a symbolic moral debt to the country she left behind, and the mother she left behind, as well as to the country that offers her the hope for a better future (see also Hage 2002b). Moreover, the complexity involved in young people’s personal choices regarding discourses of representation, such as citizenship, was broadly understood by their peers. As such, they often supported one another, as Samah did Vic, in the sometimes fraught task of navigating structural frameworks while maintaining their sense of authenticity. Young people similarly encountered, and worked to manipulate, resist and sometimes substantiate political representations around notions of national identity. In doing so, they were able to speak to their experiences of social belonging in Australia.

**Defining Nationality: Flexibility and the Implications of Multiple Belongings**

While young people grappled with an abstracted notion of national belonging as they negotiated the citizenship process, they were more explicitly confronted with the task of “being Australian” in their daily lives, and particularly in the school context. There was an annual competition at Paddington High in which students were given a topic or concept they were challenged to depict using chocolate crackle (a sticky concoction made of rice cereal, marshmallow and cocoa powder) and other sweets in a sort of diorama. Most students and staff participated in and looked forward to this event. The topic for the competition during my field research was to create an image of an “Aussie summer.” Most students made dioramas of beach scenes, picnics, barbecues, and other typical Australian summer scenes, as did most of my research participants who attended Paddington High.

Tino, and three other of my African participants who attended Paddington High, worked together in the competition. They constructed a giant hill-shaped mound of chocolate crackle, with little men made from biscuits strewn about as though dead and surrounded by lashings of red gummy sweets which appeared to depict blood. They called their entry “Somertime [sic] War.” Judges of the competition walked around the entries with a clipboard discussing and noting the “Aussie-ness” of various entries. They ignored Tino and his friend’s entry without comment. Their ELL teacher complimented another African student’s entry while I was standing with him and exclaimed, “What was Tino thinking? He did war!? What was he thinking?” And then to me, sarcastically, “You’ll have to write about this; you better take a picture.”

When I talked to Tino about the project the next day he said he didn’t remember what his project was. I asked him if it was called “Sometime War” and he said, “Yeah, something like that I think . . . because people think of summer and they think of happy. But in some people’s lives it’s not as happy as in our lives.” While aligning himself with other Australians in his use of the phrase “our” lives, Tino critiqued the value and relevance for himself, and a portion of the students participating, of such a nationalistic topic. Their “Sometime War”
entry resisted the sharedness of identification with the tradition of “an Aussie summer.”

Like citizenship, young people’s encounters with the externally defined category of Australian national identity sometimes served to highlight their lack of belonging in the Australian national space. In these moments, young people expressed an inhibition to fully participate in, or an inclination to speak back to, nation building projects at their schools and in other social settings. However, embracing Australian national identity also enabled, for these young people, a straightforward way of identifying themselves which helped them to evade the more nuanced and complex range of national identities they might otherwise inhabit or portray. That is, while in some circumstances, and for some young people, the oversimplification inherent to various politics of representation led to frustration and turmoil, for others this oversimplification was precisely the draw. As Wah Wah exclaimed when I asked her what she considered to be her national identity, “Australia! Then if the person asks you where you’re from you can say, ‘I’m Australia too.’ Just like that! And you can go to Thailand like that too.”

Moreover, young people strategically chose to emphasize different national identities in different contexts and for a range of purposes. Lisa described her nationality as Australian during one interview with me. She explained, “Because when I live in Thailand nobody said I’m Thailand. In Australia if you have citizenship you are Australian. I want to be Australian because I don’t want to go to Thailand anymore because it is my new life in Australia.” However, on another occasion while discussing her Burmese background, from which she often tried to distance herself, Lisa stated, “I’m with Thailand. And if they don’t believe me and ask me more questions I can answer everything. . . . It’s not Burmese; I’ve never been to Burma.” As Lisa’s differing emphases on national identity demonstrate, categories of national identity do not necessarily evoke a sense of belonging but can instead reflect an inherent sense of not belonging, as they are often mobilized in response to the perception of needing to provide answers to the question about where they belong.

With each other my informants knew and understood the flexibility with which they might define themselves through one or another nationality. As such, they allowed each other to identify differently to one another and flexibility was normalized and supported. In a group interview I asked siblings Santino, Omar, and Lola whether they felt at all Australian (or Sudanese, African, both, neither, etc.); Santino immediately responded “No” while his brother Omar said “Yep.” Santino responded to Omar by saying, “No we’re not, we don’t do anything like Australians. We don’t eat the same thing. All different.” Omar responded, “We eat pizza, ham, lettuce.” Santino thought and responded, “No, I don’t feel like Australian,” and Omar said, “I do.” Santino and Omar were close in age, attended the same school, and moved within the same circle of peers. Yet they
often defined their sense of national identity in different terms. And signifi-
cantly, they allowed one another to do so. While young people often sought to
fix themselves and one another to particular racial and ethnic categories, when
asked to define themselves in terms of citizenship and nationality they allowed
one another to diverge, consider, change, and manipulate.

Having lived at the borders of national identity for much of their lives, citi-
zension and nationality as markers of identity were neither bounded nor fixed
for these young people. And they were deeply aware of the complexity of ways in
which their lives were framed in public discourse with relation to these cate-
gories. Through the emphasis of citizenship status and Australian national
belonging each as something to achieve and work toward, these categories of
governance highlighted participants’ social belonging as something in progress.

The categories of citizenship and nationality, in their establishme-
t and maintenance, served to subtly propose that young people could and should be
full participating members of Australian society, but that they were not quite
there yet—and that they would therefore indeed benefit from accelerated inte-
gration as well as the tolerance of the broader community. Refugee status as
another aspect of political representation in these young people’s lives similarly
evoked the messages of integration and tolerance implicit in multicultural dis-
ourse. Young people perceived refugee status as something that was treated by
the broader population as problematic in some way. And their identification as
refugees was tenuous.

The Double-Bind of Refugee Status

Unlike discourses of citizenship and nationality intended to highlight who
belongs and provide an avenue to extend that belonging to others, the political
representation of refugee status explicitly distinguishes those who identify as
such to be social and national outsiders. The notion of being a refugee didn’t
appear to manifest in the everyday lives of my informants with the same fre-
quency and clarity as concepts of citizenship and nationality. Instead, “refugee”
remained an elusive concept understood vaguely as something negative and
something that hindered belonging to the broader Australian population. More-
over, their status as young people from refugee backgrounds calls into question
a matrix of further considerations around defining notions of home and
belonging.

I conceptualize their classification as refugees as a form of political repre-
sentation insofar as young people’s personal identification as refugees was weak
and variable, while the label carries political implications—which, as I explore
below, young people apparently perceived—that yield negative associations in the
Australian context. The lives of these young people are regularly represented in
broad sociopolitical context with both positive and negative connotations. As
young people from refugee backgrounds they are framed by the predominant discourses of “dysfunction and failure” or “resilience and success,” as well as by the binary division of a generational culture clash which leaves them torn between cultures (Ngo 2010, 3). In addition they are perceived as lucky to have resettled in Australia but unlucky in their experiences prior; they are survivors, victims and sometimes freeloaders; they are both vulnerable and in need of protection, as well as dangerous and in need of correction. The reality, of course, is infinitely more nuanced than these binaries can capture. And like in their engagement of citizenship status and national identity, young people allowed one another flexibility in whether or not they identified as refugees.

Rather than intensely arguing over their refugee status, or perceived lack thereof, even siblings debated the issue in a decidedly dispassionate way and settled on one side or the other seemingly without a great deal of angst or deliberation. Significantly, in negotiating refugee status they engaged with various externally applied identifying categories through the language and conceptualization of a dichotomy of “good” versus “bad” perceptions about their lives and experiences. Through their direct consideration of whether refugee status may be easily conceptualized as “a good thing” or “a bad thing,” it is evident that their categorization as such gains meaning externally as a political and popular discourse of representation which emerges through the governance of difference.

**Defining the Good and the Bad Things**

Young people were aware of the broad implications of their status as refugees and citizens as potentially contentious and publicly perceived through conflicting positive and negative associations. Their perception of positive and negative connotations in association with their refugee status was particularly evident when I asked them open-ended interview questions based on their broad life experiences (e.g., “What is important or significant to you in your life?”). Before responding they would regularly seek clarification by asking if I was after something “good or bad.”

For example, when I asked Elijah what the word “refugee” meant to him, he answered, “Is it in a bad way or in a good way? I don’t think it’s bad to be a refugee because it’s just a situation they’re in.” When I asked Shalla, a fourteen-year-old Karen girl, “what is important in your life?” she answered, “Like what kind? Is it something bad or something good?” And in an interview with Santino and his brother, Ben, and sister Lola, I asked them to describe something important about their lives and Santino answered, “You want something bad or something good?” And in an interview with Santino and his brother, Ben, and sister Lola, I asked them to describe something important about their lives and Santino answered, “You want something bad? I don’t get it . . . I’m different, I’m from somewhere else.” To this Ben clarified, “Santino is lucky to be here because some people don’t get the chance,” and Santino answered back, “Why are you just saying my name, you’re lucky too?!”

My question, which was intended to allow Santino and his siblings to define for themselves what was significant in their lives, immediately led to their
engagement with the idea of being outsiders. What is noteworthy is that they did so in direct association with a scale of public perception (of which I, as the interviewer, for them embodied) by initially asking if I wanted “something bad.” Perhaps this sense of internalizing is best captured by Mathew who would constantly, teasingly and provocatively use words associated with elements of his status as a refugee youth to anything and everything—while riding in the car with him, his cousin and his friend one afternoon, he said, “Who names these streets? If it were up to us we’d name this one ‘Vulnerable Street’ and that one ‘Violent Street.’”

Many of my informants associated refugee status most readily with poverty and needing financial assistance, or with living in a refugee camp. In Elijah’s interpretation of refugee status, he described it as “just a situation they’re in.” Following his statement I asked Elijah directly whether he considered himself a refugee. He responded, “Probably. I didn’t actually have any trouble there. But it’s hard because I don’t want to say like, ‘I’m not a refugee,’ but I didn’t have any trouble.” Elijah states that technically he is “probably” a refugee but maintains a distinction between his situation and his understanding of “them” as drawn from associations in media representations and his perception of public understanding. He expresses simultaneously his reluctance to fully separate himself from the category, indicating that he feels that at least on some level it is one which technically applies to his life.

From his brief statement two key factors may be drawn—both pointing to the broad perception, observed among most of these young people, of themselves as outsiders in association with their representation as refugees. The first, the term refugee is associated with trouble of some form, and the second, young people feel a sense of obligation to define themselves as refugees. In other words, they have not all experienced the difficulties typically portrayed as defining the refugee experience—not all have lived in camps or experienced a harrowing journey. But they do understand themselves to be on the outside of what they recognize as mainstream society, and they do understand that their lives are portrayed in association with the term refugee often enough, so that they believe they are most likely defined by it in some way.

The category of being a refugee, then, carried more meaning externally than it did to the young people who were labeled as refugees. Nonetheless, their broad perception of their association with the term refugee led young people to debate and engage with one another to define the term and their relationship to it. When Santino and his brother and sister discussed whether they were refugees, an argument about what constitutes being a refugee ensued. In a group interview I asked them what the word refugee meant, and Santino answered, “That means. . . . Yeah, I know it. It’s a camp like. A place they help you before you come here. I think I am one.” Omar thought this was absurd and said, “No you’re not!” to which Santino answered, “Yes I am. Who give you the chance to come here
and fill out those forms? Refugee people.” Omar reflected and offered no further comment.

Young people would sometimes distance themselves from the term refugee by describing their situation of living in refugee camps or fleeing their country of origin in terms of being “like a refugee,” as though being a refugee were some indefinable experience they could approximate but were not quite classified by. As Wah Wah, who had spent much of her life in Tham Hin refugee camp described it, “Refugee is the people who don’t have a country. It’s when you leave, and the UN gives you food and a teddy bear at Christmas.” Moreover, many young people who didn’t spend time in refugee camps expressed greater ambivalence about their status as refugees. Obama, who had not spent any of his life in a refugee camp, was tenuous in his self-identification with the label *refugee*. As he explained, “That’s people, when government treat them bad they leave to come to a camp. I didn’t go to a camp. I went to Egypt then straight to Australia. I don’t know if I’m one.”

Other Sudanese young people, all of whom had refugee status in Australia, reflected similar ambiguity in their identification with the term refugee. When I asked him the meaning of being a refugee and whether he defined himself as such, Gabe stated, “It’s people who come out of a place that’s wrecked already. Like kids who are in war. There’s a lot of trouble in the town. I’m not really one. Well I guess . . . I think I am.” Samah stated, “I don’t really know. I am a refugee, but I don’t know that much. I don’t really care about it. I don’t know why I came here. I reckon it was fun there.” And Vic similarly offered, “Refugee, refugee . . . I don’t know. People say you’re a refugee, but I never really lived in a camp. But most of the kids in my school lived in a camp in Africa. I don’t know if I am. I don’t think so.”

While in some of their accounts a sense of wanting to evade negative categorizations with which they don’t seek to identify was evident, young people also expressed a sense that they genuinely didn’t fully understand the term but believed that they were implicated in it in some way. Bound up in this implication is the perception of opportunity and safety afforded to refugees. Indeed, young people often externalized their experiences and understood the label of “refugee” to be for others who they perceived to have had a worse experience than themselves. During a casual conversation at a shopping center in response to my question about why she thought some of the African students who also attended Kedron Club came to Australia, Catalina, a Karen participant who had spent most of her life in the Tham Hin refugee camp, explained: “They came here because they are poor like us—but more poor. Like they have no water. I know because I’ve seen shows on TV. But in Santino places [I ask where and she says Africa] more people help them. I’ve seen it; all people go and help them. Not where we come from.”

In her account Catalina distanced her own experience from Santino’s whom she described as having lived through “a more difficult situation” than herself.
Prompted by a question about refugee status, Catalina constructed a definition of “refugee” as somehow other than herself and her own experience. While Catalina pointed out that her struggle was indeed as severe as Santino’s, she simultaneously evaded the external definition of “refugee.” These young people were generally aware of the associations with the term refugee as being a “bad” thing. As such they avoided defining themselves by it to the extent that they could, but also portrayed their awareness that the negative connotation of refugee in some way applied to them. This may be explained in part with the extent to which refugee issues, in the Australian context, are focused around “boat people” or those who enter Australian shores unauthorized (see chapter 2), while most of my informants arrived in Australia as approved humanitarian entrants. But I believe there is more to it.

By identifying with the classification of refugee young people aligned themselves with something they perceived as broadly and vaguely negative. However, their tendency not to identify as refugees seemed to evidence not only the reluctance of identification with a category about which they perceived negative associations, but also a genuine disparity between the way in which they were externally framed as refugees and the extent to which that label carried meaning in their own lives and experiences.

Similarly to the variability with which they negotiated their citizenship and nationality, the degree to which young people felt implicated in discourse around refugee status may be partially accounted for in their experiences of social belonging. While status as a refugee reflects a sense of being other than the dominant Australian society of which they are a part, some of my informants, by not identifying as having refugee status as shown in the statement from Elijah mentioned earlier, perceived themselves as not demonstrating a sense of belonging with one another. In this sense, identifying as refugees leaves young people in a double bind. If they do not represent themselves as refugees they risk disassociating with one another in their broad perception as outsiders and, if they do, they risk alienation with the wider population. This sense of alienation from broader Australian society, in relation to their refugee status, is related in part to the political and popular discourse of being “torn between two cultures” with which young people from refugee backgrounds are often represented.

Where Is Home: Political Discourse of the Culture Clash

The discourse of a “clash of cultures” or “being torn between two worlds,” manifests in relation to the resettlement of young people from refugee backgrounds and depicts intergenerational conflict and a struggle to define home (Ngo 2010, 5). For the young people with whom I worked, the theory of a culture clash should be all the more prevalent, according to the narrative of struggle between modern versus traditional or first world versus third world (Ngo 2010, 5). They had recently been through the process of forced migration and resettlement in
Australia, and as such had much of their immediate family still living in their country of origin or in neighboring refugee camps. However, rather than experiencing a “clash” between two distinct cultures or being “torn between two worlds,” as they negotiated belonging, my informants expressed a sense of home in both the countries from which they were displaced and in their place of resettlement. And they did so in ways that appeared relatively unproblematic.

There was a great degree of flexibility and nuance based on individual circumstances and choice in the ways in which young people characterized home, and this was understood and supported within peer groups. Thakin, a twelve-year-old Karen boy, responded to my question about where home is by saying, “I don’t really think about that. I just think of where I am right now. What I’m doing right now.” Gabe said, “Home is first my house. Then Sudan. I don’t really know if I miss there. I’ve never really lived a life there,” and Elijah offered, “Australia is good. And if not Australia, Africa. Back to my village.”

Significantly, the ability of these young people to oscillate between different conceptualizations of home did not appear to emerge out of confusion, frustration, angst, or even a sense of nostalgia. Rather, it was apparently related to more practical considerations such as where “a good job place” might be. Based on their depictions and stated opinions about their lives both past and present, neither were characterized as entirely good or bad. These young people seem to have a sophisticated awareness of the positive and negatives of each, as well as a nuanced understanding of the inconsistencies between how aspects of their lives are popularly depicted and how they emerge in lived experience.

For example, I didn’t ask Nine about violence in his previous home when he stated, “I was young when I was there. I couldn’t capture the violence. It’s bad and good. That’s what I always say. But I was used to it. People say it’s bad now because they’ve seen something different.” Nine’s comment captures the unconflicted feeling with which these young people often spoke about notions of home in their country of origin. At the same time, it captures an awareness of the perception of difficulty through which their lives are often publicly managed and represented. Contrary to this public representation, as young people considered their feelings of where and what home was, tension, confusion and frustration were observed only very minimally.

The concepts of home and familial belonging are not without complexity for these young people. A degree of culture and generational clash and frustration may, of course, have been evident in ways that I did not capture in my participant observation–based fieldwork. “Culture clash,” along with the trauma young people from refugee backgrounds often experience in the process of relocation and resettlement, often leads to serious mental health concerns (Gifford et al. 2009; Correa-Velez et al. 2010, 1400). I accept that feelings of nostalgia and longing for another home do occur and that these feelings may lend themselves to conflicting emotions and turmoil. However, this experience appears not to
be nearly as dominant as the “torn between two worlds” discourse seems to suggest.

In the political framing of these young people as refugees, as in the process of becoming citizens and becoming Australian nationals, the notion that they were away from home was emphasized and the task of creating a new home was urged. Popular media accounts detail familiar stories of refugee and migrant young people confronted with wildly different and conflicting cultures and struggling to reconcile the traditional cultural expectations of their parents’ and grandparents’ generation, with what it means to be a young person in Australia today. Such illustrations help to distil and advance understanding of the momentous changes and challenges faced by young people of refugee and migrant backgrounds (Ngo 2010, 7).

However, by framing their cultural influences in binary and conflicting categories, participants’ cultures of origin were invariably framed as somehow developmentally behind their modern Australian counterpart, if romantically exotic. Such binary distinctions in popular and political discourse relate to the governance of difference in the Australian national space and contribute to the push for migrants and refugees to redefine a notion of home in relationship to Australia. Young people’s perception that the fact of their refugee status is pervasive and problematic is at least in part rooted in the discourse of culture clash. In the process of defining home they were regularly exposed to pressures at school, home, and from the wider community to acknowledge the country from which they were displaced, or another element of their refugee experience.

At Kedron Club one afternoon Wah Wah was holding my baby and cooed, “Hello. My name is Wah Wah, I come from [provided name of] School.” A staff member at Kedron Club then commented pointedly, “And where else do you come from?” Wah Wah’s looked puzzled and her friend Jessica answered for her, “I know! She’s like me, she come from the camp.” The staff member looked at Wah Wah and said, motioning toward the baby, “Then tell her that.” Wah Wah, with a confused look on her face complied and told the baby that she came from “the camp.” As this somewhat bizarre interaction illustrates, the tenuousness with which a notion of these young people’s “home” was treated among the broader community was not necessarily reflected in their own sense of their life experiences. It is within these social portrayals of cultural conflict and turmoil about home that young people encounter the perception of their refugee status as an obstacle to belonging.

How young people implicate themselves (or do not) in discourses of cultural clash, in defining the terms of their citizenship and nationality, or in their experiences with racism, reflects their perception of those categories as framing constructs in their lives. Indeed, I propose it was through the treatment of racism, citizenship, nationality and refugee status that young people were most explicitly confronted with a kind of outsider status and the broad public
marking of their difference. And, I argue, their identity work engaged with the ways in which their lives were framed in political and public discourse.

Let me illustrate the tentative sense of belonging discourse around citizenship, nationality and refugee status often evoked in participants with a final ethnographic anecdote. Omot could briefly shift his status as outsider to that of insider when he felt he had more claim on the Australian national space than I had. When he realized that he had lived in Australia for a longer period of time than I, Omot soon gave me a card to commemorate my first year of work at Kedron Club, which he signed at the bottom “P.S. Welcome to Australia.”

**Politics of Representation, Processes of Implication, and Dynamic Responsiveness**

Discourses drawn out of the politics of cultural diversity around citizenship and nationality, refugee status, the management of racism and how to define home emerge in and have come to impact upon the lives of these young people. Through the governance of difference in the Australian context, young people from refugee backgrounds are presumably offered a better future as Australian citizens, refuge from their country of origin and the chance to create a new home; and they are also presumed to be subjected to racism. These dynamics, I would venture, emerge similarly in other settler nations where discourses of opportunity rub uneasily against current political trends toward protection and isolationism. Young people in such contexts often engage with the broad political discourse that seeks to frame and manage their lives, highlighting the prevalence of youth as social actors in contexts of migration. In doing so they are apt to make allowances for themselves and one another regarding how and to what extent they implicate themselves in those discursive frameworks. As Ngo (2010) states: “Identity thus involves a double action, where in one movement we are put in subject positions by others who draw on available, powerful discourses to identify us; and in another movement we take up subject positions by drawing on available discourses ourselves.”

So as Ngo (2010) argues, young people respond to the discourses and structures that frame their lives by manipulating, resisting, or reproducing them in their own sense of identity. The extent to which political and popular discourses around racism, citizenship and national belonging affected my informants certainly differed in intensity. As Hage (2002b) explains, the intensity of an experience has to do with “the extent to which a reality is involving and affecting” (2002b, 193).

The analytic tools of implication and intensity are useful in considering the degree to which these young people are affected by the conceptual categories I have outlined here that frame their lives in popular and political discourse. Hage (2002b, 201) links this notion of implication to Bourdieu’s concept of *illusio*, which
demonstrates the ways in which people invest themselves in particular social realities in order to import meaning into their lives, and how this process masks the fact that life is not intrinsically meaningful but rather meaning is derived through such investments (Bourdieu 2000, 11). One’s implication in a particular social reality is dependent upon their sharing in the illusion of that reality. Following Hage, I interpret the degree to which some young people implicate themselves within the dominant discourses around racism, citizenship and refugee status in terms of social belonging.

As Hage argues, migration is often “a guilt-inducing process” (2002b, 203). For young people who have left their country of origin at a relatively young age, the debt of belonging to their new community is likely to be felt as much as or even more strongly than their debt to the one they have left. By obtaining citizenship the moral debts to each country might be illuminated while both are only partially reconciled. The intensity through which my informants implicated themselves in the discourses of opportunity reflected in the representation of Australian citizenship, in the notion that they are outsiders in the representation of their experiences of racism and as refugees, and in the idea that they have complex relationships to multiple symbolic homes, reflects their sense of social belonging, or lack thereof, in the Australian context.

I do not want to overstate young people’s resistance to belonging in the Australian national space—they desired it for a variety of instrumental purposes such as securing jobs upon graduation from secondary school, and more generally in terms of valuing aspects of Australian life and culture to which they sometimes sought a sense of belonging. Instead, I have intended to demonstrate how these young people engaged the multicultural discourses they encountered in complex ways that often reflected a subtle resistance to the power dynamics to which they contributed. Multicultural citizens in the current Australian context absorb the competing push toward integration and national belonging and the pull toward various forms of transnationalism and maintaining and forging diasporic connection. Such hybridities, as Carruthers (2013) argues, challenge the capacity of modern multicultural nations to adequately recognize and engage these new multicultural subjects. The negotiations of identity captured through young people’s engagement with the dynamics of representation explored here help to distil a relationship between their experiences and interpretations of the world, and the discursive frameworks to which their lives are subject.

The very ways in which young people engaged, manipulated or denied the relevance of such discursive frameworks reflects their awareness of and responsiveness to the politics of representation. Lisa explained how she handles, or indeed stops, questions and challenges to her identity in terms of citizenship, nationality, refugee status and home. She said, “If they ask me . . . I just say I have a strange life in Thailand. But now I’m OK to live myself forward—to be who I am today.” Friends present nodded in approval. Lisa’s recognition of the ways in which
her life experiences might be framed around particular categories of political representation, and her reluctance to be defined in this way, resonated.

Indeed, my attempts during interviews to ask open-ended questions about the broad defining features of their life experiences often resulted in responses that seemed to implicitly deny the relevance of those categories that take on such major significance in public perception. For example, Catalina and Jessica were nearly constantly engaged with one another in discussions about being Karen (or Australian, or even African) and seemingly sought to define themselves accordingly. When I asked what they saw as the most important thing about themselves, Jessica answered, “It’s that I have straight hair. But a little bit wavy,” and Catalina responded, “I have curly hair.” And when I asked the same question of Gabe, for whom his association with Africa, African Americans, and “being black” appeared central to his sense of identity, he responded: “It’s just that I’m a trouble maker. I like to start trouble, but I don’t finish it. To some people it’s bad. To me it’s not bad or good. My life story is good I guess. Because I’m living a good life. I got my ma with me, my sisters with me. My brothers and aunties are overseas in America and I’m going there this year or something. I’ve played basketball my whole life. I love music. That’s about it really. There is nothing else.”

Gabe’s response simultaneously acknowledges the dichotomy of good versus bad connotations he perceives in externally imposed defining categories, while it challenges any pressure to adhere to or define himself by those categories. An awareness of their political representation is indeed reflected in young people’s tendency to resist definition through externally imposed categories related to the governance of their difference. Just as significantly, however, the self-definitions these young people do more readily adhere to, namely their sense of racial and ethnic difference, speak to the ways in which their lives are overtly politicized as refugees and as minorities in the Australian multicultural context.

Viewed through the lens of dynamic responsiveness, young people’s identity work demonstrates an awareness of the political context through which their lives are framed, as well as a sophisticated engagement with the messages implemented by government bodies and other authoritative entities which ultimately emerge to adjust and affect that context. The complex processes through which the politics of representation and personal identity mirror one another indeed highlight the interrelatedness between broad social narratives and self-understanding.