Belonging and Becoming in a Multicultural World

Moran, Laura

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I began this book with a description of how my own assumptions about the young people with whom I conducted research were challenged as I embarked upon my fieldwork. Recent youth scholarship demonstrates young people breaking down racial and ethnic barriers through their everyday practices and increased exposure to multicultural contexts (Harris 2013; Harris and Herron 2017). This research stands in contrast to other studies of youth, which situate young people as immersed in racial and ethnic conflict in contexts of diversity. It was the notion of youth everyday exposure to diversity resulting in progress and a sense of hope for the future of multiculturalism that most strongly influenced my thinking. It still does.

However, my bent toward conceptualizing youth as agents of change and progress presented one core dilemma: why were they so preoccupied with categories of racial and ethnic difference? The more immersed I became, the more I could see it. Race and ethnic background played a central role in how these young people from refugee backgrounds defined themselves. Race was central to how they accounted for the everyday dynamics of their social relationships, it informed the ways in which they presented themselves in more formalized cultural performances, and it affected the ways in which they constituted a sense of national belonging.

I was also made more aware, through the course of my research, of the centrality of race and ethnicity in managing and maintaining the moral landscape of multiculturalism. These young people were constantly framed as racial and ethnic beings, in both the celebration of their race and ethnicity and the denial of its relevance, through the messages they encountered in their everyday lives. Their constant engagement with a sense of their own racial and ethnic backgrounds, I came to understand, developed at least in large part through a kind of responsiveness to the messages that framed their lives in multicultural
context. This notion of responsiveness became the central premise for how I made sense of what I was observing in the complex dynamics of how these young people defined themselves.

Through placing dynamic responsiveness at the center of how young people formulate and present their own sense of identity, a relationship between personal identity and broad social narratives of belonging and inclusion becomes explicit. It is this relationship which provides perspective beyond what young people from diverse backgrounds are doing in contexts of diversity—for example, whether they are breaking down barriers or building them—but why. The implications for the “why” of youth identity in multicultural context are vast. Dynamic responsiveness as a lens for interpreting identity allows us, in essence, to push beyond identity.

In the current world context, nationalist ideology and the moral condemnation of racism butt up against one another through the management of increasing migration and displaced peoples. Debates concerning race and whiteness, immigration and border control, globalization, multiculturalism, and assimilation are of paramount concern internationally. Central to these concerns are the lives of young people, who are influencing and being influenced by all of these issues. My hope is for this research to shed light upon both the young people represented here (and others like them) who must negotiate a sense of themselves in a fraught and complex social environment, as well as the future of living with diversity and multicultural inclusion more broadly. My aim in presenting the identity work of these young people through the lens of dynamic responsiveness is to provide a framework that allows us to explore how we formulate a sense of who we are in engagement with influences from our social environment, and how this fosters a sense of affinity and connection. Also of paramount importance to me in presenting this research is to illuminate why such identity work matters in terms of what might be necessary to advance and address the current crisis of multiculturalism.

My overriding concern, in other words, has been how young people pursue and foster belonging, and in what ways belonging is, or is not, made available to them in the Australian national space. Indeed, the discursive frameworks that render national spaces visible (in this case, multiculturalism) are both implicated in and impact upon processes of identity making. Through the prism of youth, self-conscious and increasingly immersed in diversity as it is, identity work in relation to social context is pronounced.

Before drawing together some of the major themes of the book in attempt to further elucidate the relationship between the range of identity-making practices I observed among these young people and the broader narrative frameworks in which they are situated, I wish to add a final caveat. While it has been my aim to highlight the relationship between young people’s self-representations and the social contexts in which those identities emerge, I have tried not to
overstate the relationship. While the ways in which young people racialize themselves in their intimate relationships with one another emerge in dialogue with public discourses concerning race, their racialization is not born from those discourses. Their responsiveness does not reduce their actions to a mere form of mimicry, and we can, of course, still trust and take seriously both their experiences of racism and the value they place on their racial and ethnic backgrounds in contributing to their own sense of identity.

Identities indeed emerge from a constellation of preferences and predilections too vast to even begin to resolve here; and of course, equally relevant in defining a sense of oneself, to the themes of race and ethnicity that have emerged as central in this context are gender, class, religion, sexuality, language, family, peers, and so forth. The ways in which people articulate their identities, however, is most revealing. By isolating responsiveness, the intention in the ways in which these young people describe their place in the broader social landscape is made apparent. That intention helps to highlight certain social dynamics and deemphasize others. Young people’s dynamic responsiveness plays a central role in defining elements of social context, and in so doing may be conceptualized as allowing for their participation in the politics of belonging.

**Responsive Identity and Why It’s So Dynamic**

I have spent a lot of time throughout the book exploring how the work of making and remaking identities is undertaken as people respond to their social environments and the political context of their lives. But why do I describe this responsiveness as dynamic? By qualifying responsiveness in this way, I mean to capture an element of change. What emerges in local context, around which a kind of self-definition is elicited, is not static. In other words, people constitute a sense of themselves, at least in part, in response to something—but the something is not the same for everyone, and what it is changes. The young people represented here are exposed to a kind of sociopolitical management of their lives in multicultural context. Their racial and ethnic backgrounds in relationship to their status as minorities and as refugees—even their youth—are part of the formula through which their lives are framed and managed. That sociopolitical management of their lives in relation to being refugees, to their race, and to their ethnicity is the something through which these young people define a sense of identity.

As they perceive the centrality of race to the multicultural context in which they live, young people absorb, reframe, and engage this premise in their identity work. And as they encountered messages of multiculturalism in particularly constant and incessant ways, the specific cultural minutiae to which they responded through their identity work was realized. This demonstrates that our understanding of young people’s self-representations must be pitched at the local
level, but must also consider what is significant, prominent, or pervasive in their broad sociopolitical landscapes. These young people’s engagement with popular and political discourses concerning race, diversity, and inclusion, which were expressed most potently in their often humorous exchanges with one another, allowed them to have a voice in the broad social framing of their lives. To the sense of identity that they outwardly portrayed, and as reflected through the multicultural messages they regularly encountered, race was relevant.

**Perceptions of Inclusion and Exclusion: What’s Race Got to Do with It?**

Race and ethnicity, as they were called upon by these young people, served largely as a means of inclusion. The ways in which they represented themselves through sameness and difference to one another, to the broader population and to networks outside of national context, often occurred through their emphasis and deemphasis of racialized characteristics and ethnicity. Through their varied and complex “ethnic choices” (Song 2003), they associated and disassociated with people whom they described as having the same or different ethnic backgrounds or racialized characteristics to themselves.

By representing themselves in racialized ways and alternately “inhabiting” or “vacating” their racial and ethnic backgrounds (Back 1996), young people enabled a multiplicity of options for how and to whom they might assert a sense of belonging. Race and ethnicity provided them with a range of contexts through which to assert belonging, in part because of the global diasporic connections it enabled for them. However, the ways in which young people called upon a sense of belonging in relation to their wider connections to Africa, the Karen community, or sometimes America, were interpreted and invoked in relationship to perceptions and discursive frameworks they encountered in local context. Africanness, for example, was articulated and formally performed when young people were called upon to do so in school performances which framed such celebrations of ethnic diversity in terms of the triumphs of multiculturalism (Hage 1998, 204, 2003, 17). Whether emphasized or denied, racial, and ethnic signifiers were well integrated into meaningful narratives for these young people.

In contrast to the ways in which race and ethnicity enabled a multiplicity of assertions of belonging in different social contexts, categories of citizenship, refugee status, and nationality rather highlighted the ways in which participants did not quite or entirely belong to their national space. As such, these categories were not strongly integrated into young people’s self-understandings or articulations of belonging to others. Significantly, the stipulations for being popularly and politically deemed to be citizens, refugees or nationals inherently emphasize a kind of processes through which one might pursue and achieve belonging. By emphasizing belonging as in flux or in process, these categories were imposed and perceived as primarily defining the terms of exclusion rather than allowing for a sense of inclusion.
Central to how articulations of race and ethnicity were made meaningful to them, young people presented themselves in hybridized and essentialized ways that engaged with broad social discourses. There is a narrative overlap between young people’s articulations of belonging and the broader discursive frameworks that dictate its viability in their daily, lived social contexts. It is largely from within this overlap that I locate the multiplicity of self-representations I observed among young people in terms of their participation in the broad social management of their difference.

**Integrated Narratives, Hybridity, and Essentialism**

As I argued in chapter 3, the theoretically fraught concept of hybridity is useful here, not precisely in its popular current formulation to describe a kind of mixing, merging, or mimicry of cultural references in the formation of new identities. Rather, for my purposes, hybridity captures the ways in which young people justified and described their formulations of identity in terms of their denial of the limiting capacity of difference. As I use it here, *hybridity* refers to young people’s articulations of their capacity for flexibility made apparent in their ability to overlook difference, to “mix it up,” and to embody, encompass or include different cultural frameworks in various aspects of their lives. I conceptualize young people’s emphasis on their own capacity for multiplicity (and the ways in which I have endeavored to capture it through the concept of hybridity) as responding to a broad narrative context central to the social fabric of Australian multiculturalism.

As Moore has acknowledged, the concept of hybridity carries explanatory power and is theoretically valid when demonstrated as emerging from and “embedded in popular culture and celebrated through various mediations, and cultural and institutional forms” (2011, 209). I have endeavored to demonstrate the conceptualization of hybridity through which I have framed my observations of young people’s representations of identity, as emerging from and enacted within the narrative framework of multiculturalism in the Australian context. As discussed throughout the book, the popular narrative framework of multiculturalism urges the celebration of difference, often in terms of ethnic and cultural background, while it insists upon the ultimate irrelevance of cultural and ethnic difference for formulating relationships, for constituting a sense of self-together, and for being together harmoniously in community.

As young people emphasized their ability to “integrate” with the broader population despite those differences which were simultaneously framed as noteworthy, they both paralleled and contradicted various attempts to govern cultural difference that emerged through the social and policy framework of multiculturalism. The concept of hybridity captures the ways in which young people asserted a sense of identity through their ability to overcome difference,
which allowed for articulations of belonging to what they perceived as the mainstream Australian community. And while messages emerging from the broad narrative framework of multiculturalism fueled young people’s position that difference was of little significance to them in their hybridized representations of self on the one hand, their essentialized representations of self ran counter to these claims.

When they expressed their sense of identity in terms of being explicitly, exclusively, and unwaveringly African or Karen for example, they represented themselves in essentialized ways. I have sought to demonstrate essentialized self-representations also in relationship to multicultural discourse, through the language of “tolerance,” wherein difference is upheld and revered. Through self-essentializing young people emphasized characteristics that created a sense of belonging between one another in local friendship groups, and in relation to global networks of young people or pop cultural icons representative of the diasporic communities to which they also sought a sense of belonging.

Young people engaged the contradictory messages emerging from multicultural discourse in a sometimes paradoxical relationship to how they framed their own experiences and identity making practices. That is, hybridized and essentialized representations of identity for these young people were enacted, in different moments and contexts, in ways that both reinforced and contradicted messages of integration and tolerance that emerged and framed their lives in their daily social environments. Moreover, their emphasis on sameness and difference through hybridized and essentialized representations was not static. As they engaged with tensions of belonging, their essentialized and hybridized representations often merged, overlapped, and occasionally contradicted one another. And in their use of a range of cultural preferences in the presentation of themselves as a cohesive, essentialized group, these young people were at the same time engaging in hybridizing practices.

Evoking hybridized and essentialized representations of self allowed young people to create a sense of belonging through asserting sameness to certain groups and difference to others. Hybridized self-representations allowed for young people to demonstrate sameness across differences in an attempt to overcome essentializing perceptions of their marginality. In their emphasis on sameness in hybridized representations they acknowledged inherent differences while emphasizing their ability to overcome them and thus assimilate into what they saw as the mainstream population. Alternatively, in their emphasis on sameness in essentialized representations they denied inherent differences and thereby asserted a sense of belonging and solidarity with a group of insiders designated from a perceived position of marginality, in opposition to the broader population, and in a kind of resistance to assimilation or integration. This allowed young people to emphasize stereotypical and racialized representations
of ethnicity on the one hand and a lack of concern for or acknowledgment of racial or ethnic difference on the other (Noble et al. 1999, 40).

Although hybrid and essentialized representations may not likely or usually be invoked so deliberately as to warrant their description as strategies, they allow for a subtle yet certain positioning through which young people may call upon different representations of themselves in relation to the varied messages, frameworks, and influences they encounter. As such, hybridized and essentialized representations of self may be interpreted as a kind of symbolic capital in the Australian national field (Bourdieu 1986; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Such self-representations may be leveraged as capital in terms of valorizing both flexibility in demonstrating one’s ability to integrate on the one hand, and the celebratory aspect of difference on the other. As they constructed a sense of self and identification with others and played with the discourses that came to frame their lives, they did so as partially knowing social actors. They were not absent frames by external narratives, nor were they always consciously or explicitly strategic in their response to them.

The result of their oscillating racialized identities, and indeed the diverse contexts in which their everyday lives unfold, reflect diverse intercultural social bonds. As Harris and Herron's (2017) work on everyday multiculturalism among youth from diverse backgrounds in Australia also highlights, the multiplicity of alignments and differentiation among these young people represent “dynamic ‘entanglements of ethno-racial difference’” (Harris and Herron 2017, quoted in Johns, Noble and Harris 2017, 252). In their various affiliations, everyday racism and cross-racial friendships indeed exist alongside one another (Harris and Herron 2017). The ways in which young people of diverse backgrounds constitute a sense of themselves with reference to race and ethnicity, however, reflects something more complex than the fact of their increasing exposure and consequent responsiveness to intercultural contexts. In addition, their racialized identities emerge from their responsiveness to the ways in which those intercultural contexts are perceived, managed, and talked about more broadly.

The ways in which young people pursue a sense of belonging and inclusion through both their embracing and denying their own racialization is deeply relevant to the social and political context of Australian multiculturalism. That is, while these young people are constantly exposed to messages dictating where and how they fit in the Australian multicultural context, their identity-making practices effectively figure their own voices into the dialogue, at least on an interpersonal level in their daily lived environments. A significant implication of their identity work, then, is to offer reflection and consideration of how and to what extent the political and broader social framework of Australian multiculturalism fosters plurality and inclusion, as it purports to do.
Nationalism and the Multicultural Promise

Australian multiculturalism is fundamentally related to discourses of national belonging. A formal multicultural framework informs immigration policy and the path to citizenship in the Australian national context. The social and moral framework of multiculturalism, for the young people with whom I worked, emerged through overlapping and sometimes contradictory messages of integration and tolerance. These messages—to which they responded in paradoxical and sometimes oppositional ways—were encountered at their schools and in the broader community spaces through which they traversed in their daily lives.

Through these messages, it was indirectly maintained that young people might seamlessly fit within the mainstream school and community population, as race and ethnic background were of little actual relevance. At the same time, elements of their ethnic background were celebrated under the label of tolerance through festivals and cultural performance. While particular ethnic backgrounds are celebrated in such events, cultural performances are also framed as validating the accomplishments of the host community for their demonstrated tolerance and for their accumulation of a kind of multicultural capital in terms of ethnic food, dance, art, and so forth. (Hage 1998, 117). Despite its explicit aim of inclusion, certain discourses of multiculturalism resulted in an uncomfortable tension in young people’s perceptions of belonging to a national space where elements of nationalism are centrally, though silently, linked to multiculturalism.

Multiculturalism is advanced as moving away from nationalism to a more inclusive social and moral framework, but through its articulation and promotion it is certainly not free from formulations of national belonging. Indeed, both nationalism and multiculturalism are premised upon, and protective of, the starting point that the “we,” in discussions of how we Australians ought to handle difference, refers to those of white European heritage. This starting point does not change whether “we” express pride, indifference, or intolerance to all of the nonwhite people included in the Australian national space. The project of maintaining this sense of entitlement is present even in articulations of tolerance through which the majority population asserts that yes, the minority population ought to have entitlements and rights as well. When racism is only recognized through its most overt and ugly manifestations, or worse still, when it is altogether denied, we risk side stepping a deep rooted casual racism that can be just as insidious (Wise 2017). That is, what is labeled as racism and what is labeled as tolerance are different ends on a spectrum—inherent to the political and moral framework of multiculturalism—of national belonging (Hage 1998, 2003).

But I want to be careful here not to classify nationalism as an evil, backward, or inherently destructive force. And defining multiculturalism as the
progressive antithesis to nationalism is not simply ideologically flawed. Even if it were accurate, such a comparison advances us no further in terms of a more meaningful approach to inclusiveness. Feelings and expressions of national belonging are, for whatever reasons, deeply entrenched across social contexts and local and national space. Moreover, both ethnic majority and ethnic minority populations are equally capable of both nationalist and racist acts and attitudes (as well as those which may be understood as tolerant). It is more productive a goal to understand nationalism than to simply dismiss it; what does it mean to people? How is it constituted? From where does the fear of its loss emerge and how might those suffering from such a fear themselves be integrated into a deeper, more inclusive multiculturalism (Skey 2011)?

In other words, in what ways does the majority population, too, struggle toward a sense of inclusiveness, belonging and a life in which they feel a level of comfort (Hage 1998, 21)? The answers to such questions are beyond the scope of this research. However, they are necessary to ask here, if only to highlight that the culture of fear that so clearly motivates the more abhorrent acts of nationalism is also present in the nicer or more politically correct attempts at inclusion promoted in multicultural policy and discourse (see also Hage 1998, 79). That is, nationalism and multiculturalism are not mutually exclusive, and neither can claim complete moral superiority or inferiority as unequivocally good or bad. Moreover, both evoke discourses of inclusion and discourses of exclusion. These underlying dynamics, however, should not detract from the fact that, in my experience, the vast majority of professionals, service providers, and community members with whom young people interacted on a regular basis cared profoundly about the degree to which these young people realized their own sense of belonging. Indeed, the schools and other programs young people attended might be described as not only concerned, but quite heavily burdened, with the task of creating such a sense of belonging. My aim here is not to criticize the limits of multiculturalism or its practitioners, or to draw lines of comparison between it and nationalism (or, more alarmingly, racism) to no avail. Instead, by demonstrating the complex ways in which a small group of young people experience the nuance of multicultural discourse in ethnographic context, I hope to highlight the ways in which it works (see also Clyne and Jupp 2011), but also to flag the need to keep striving where multiculturalism for them appears to have missed the intended mark. Hage (1998, 26) urges “a deeper commitment to a more far reaching multiculturalism” that opens the space for a robust politics of negotiation between equals. In a similar vein, Gutmann (1994) describes Habermas’s contribution to her influential edited volume as proposing that the ideal multicultural framework would not only dictate our legal equality, but also foster a shared agreement that “we must also be able to understand ourselves as the authors of the laws that bind us” (ix; see also Habermas 1994).
Such a shift in ownership over the premise of Australian multiculturalism would necessarily require that government policy move beyond an emphasis on tolerance or recognition of cultural difference—a shift from living with or tolerate diversity, to living in diversity (Modood 2016). It would require a move toward an enhanced scope and ability to incorporate the diverse ways in which all people seek for themselves a meaningful life (Hage 2011, 2012). And while multicultural policy must equally validate the plurality of both minority and majority perspectives and pursuits of inclusion, comfort, and belonging, it should also compel a greater acknowledgment of Anglo privilege where racism could be more freely named when observed and experienced (Dunn and Nelson 2011).

However, for a more comprehensive and inclusive multicultural framework, race and racism should not be conflated. While the management of racism is appropriately within the scope of what multicultural policy must confront, the terms in which people express and embrace their own racial and ethnic identity are not. Individuals ought to have freedom to place value on the relevance of race and ethnicity in their own lives; a preference that should not merely underscore or become a requirement for the condemnation of racism.

The identity making practices in which these young people engaged in social context help us to understand multiculturalism in its current form, as it is experienced by those it inherently seeks to address. A more stable sense of belonging among these young people might be approached if, as a starting point, their difference was not at times simultaneously preserved through the celebratory language of tolerance and denied through gestures toward the simplicity of integration. Through depictions of their varied and sometimes seemingly contradictory self-representations, it becomes evident how contestable belonging is for these young people in the spaces where multiculturalism is, for them, enacted. And beyond this, the varied and multiple ways in which these young people represent themselves in engagement with the political, social, and moral framing of their lives reveals a kind of adaptability through which they have a say in defining to whom, to what, or where they belong.

**Multiple Belongings: The “So What” of Dynamic Responsiveness**

The relevance of the multiplicity with which these young people represent themselves both individually and collectively, then, is twofold. Their capacity for responsiveness and flexibility of identity reveals a strategy of resilience whereby young people may act in both subversion and accordance with the political and moral underpinnings of multiculturalism. The processes of identity making undertaken by these young people provides scope for a responsive engagement with messages inherent to multicultural discourse that both foster and inhibit their sense of belonging. Their oscillating emphasis on hybridized and essentialized elements of their racial and ethnic identity effectively permits these young
people, at least partially, to define and address their own sense of belonging or alienation. The identity practices of these young people are equally relevant to an understanding of the social context in which they take place.

It is my contention that by paying attention to those things that young people reference and comment upon in their depictions of who they are—those things to which they are responding in their identity work—we shed light upon, not only their personal preoccupations, but also the things that matter collectively. That we all project a sense of self in response to some element of our social environment is, on the surface, quite obvious. But if we center our analyses of the ways in which people project a sense of self, on what they are either openly or implicitly addressing, we can isolate particular social dynamics. Deconstructing identity in this way engages the perennial anthropological tension between structure and agency, the particular and the universal.

The national story we tell about the importance of multiculturalism is one that seeks to counter the framing lens of inequality, and consequently, the relevance of race and ethnicity. However, the messages used to foster a harmonious multicultural context paradoxically emphasize an imbalance of social and moral entitlements. The premise of multiculturalism is that race does not matter, but the messages of integration and tolerance with which it is framed and executed, show that it does. For these young people, an emphasis on their inherent need for tolerance and integration is felt and interpreted as an indication of inequality related to their ethnic and racial identity. Their identity work seeks to reframe or engage the messages we tell about them in the context of multiculturalism.

In this study, we saw these young people respond to the multicultural ideal of the irrelevance of race by projecting a sense of racial identity and empowerment in their creation of a hip hop song. Through the song, they aligned themselves with the resilience, the resistance and the cool of an essentialized, counterwhite, African American identity. In doing so, they subtly resisted messages that dictate their need for tolerance and urge their integration. Similarly, we saw them reframing the multicultural emphasis on their status as national outsiders in need of inclusion, in their relative disregard of the importance of citizenship and national identity and embracing of a racial difference that instead provided a sense of collective belonging. And on the other hand, as they sometimes described and accounted for their social relationships in their everyday lives through a denial of the relevance of their racial identities, these young people affirmed the multicultural ideal that race does not matter and embraced the benefits of integration.

By detailing minority negotiations of ethnic, racial, and national belonging, I have sought to demonstrate how the political and moral framework of Australian multiculturalism can act, sometimes paradoxically, as an instrument of inclusion or of exclusion. My aim has been to demonstrate how a sense of social
belonging might be approached by those who are popularly understood, through broad social policy and moral frameworks, as being somehow outside of the national context, in a process of becoming, and in need of inclusion. By illustrating the complex identity making practices undertaken by young people from refugee backgrounds, I have attempted to show how multiculturalism in the Australian context, and its emergent messages of (national) belonging, is felt and engaged by those it most explicitly seeks to address.

So, what do the responsive, multiple identities of these young people reveal about Australian multiculturalism? Young people appear, at times, to self-essentialize, or self-racialize in response to the ways in which public discourse racializes them. Yes, their emphasis on flexibility, hybridity, and the irrelevance of race can be read as emerging in response to the same dynamic. But what does this mean practically? Of course, their responsiveness to the ways in which they are racialized by others does not mean that their experiences with and interpretations of race and racism are any less real. Does it mean that race should be treated differently in political and social context in order for it not to be so consuming for these young people? Would that work, does it matter, and is their overidentification with race and ethnicity even limiting? These questions are all relevant and better explored with detailed attention to youth engagement with social context. But these questions are not the limit of what youth identity work can reveal.

Interpreting identity through responsiveness highlights that the ways in which we constitute a sense of ourselves considers, and responds in both opposition to and reinforcement of, the ways in which others see us. This information ultimately helps us to understand how broad social messages are perceived—how they work and how they sometimes need to be addressed and adjusted for various purposes, such as fostering a deeper sense of inclusion—and how people may collectively and individually respond to such messages. The identity work of these young people, and how it emerges in response to multicultural context, provides us with a deeper understanding of the complexity of young lives in changing circumstances.

It takes us past the “what” of how they are behaving and interacting with one another and with their broader social environments and provides us with a crucial element of “why.” The ways in which a group of young people from refugee backgrounds represent their identities—in the everyday dynamics of friendship making, in the more spectacular dynamics of cultural performance, and in their engagement with the political dynamics through which they are broadly classified in national context—demonstrates the weight of public discourse on personal narratives. Their identity work may thus ultimately be conceptualized as a kind of participation in the politics of belonging to social context.

The interplay between broad social narratives and people’s feelings and expressions of who they are and how easily they fit or belong in relation to those
narratives, carries grave implications for the effectiveness of inclusion in modern, multiethnic societies. These implications in turn have much to reveal about how people may participate in and affect the social processes that come to frame their lives. Belonging is contestable—it was constantly approached, denied, and manipulated by the young people represented here in their everyday social environments. The limits and possibilities for belonging must therefore be considered in relation to the dynamic ways in which personal identities and discourses that govern broader national spaces respond to one another.