

Integration, Tolerance and Belonging in Multicultural Australia

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Abstract

The lives of young people from refugee backgrounds are surrounded by various binary discourses: as refugees they are perceived as survivors and as victims; as young people they are perceived as both vulnerable and in need of protection, and as dangerous, and in need of correction (Ngo 2010). This paper explores the processes of identity making undertaken by predominantly Sudanese and Karen young people from refugee backgrounds, living in Brisbane, Australia. Based on fieldwork carried out from 2009 to 2010, I explore the cultural and racial identity politics engaged by young people as they construct and perform identities based on hybridized and essentialised representations of self. In particular, I look at the ways young people in this social field chose friends and create spaces for interactions, and the ways which, in doing so, they construct and deconstruct categories of skin colour and creatively represent and engage experiences of racism. These processes of youth identity making are revealing, especially as they relate to globalisation and social change, as young people in particular are “shaping and being shaped by all kinds of structure and meanings” (Wulff 1995: 10). For young people from refugee backgrounds, who are simultaneously constructing local, national and diasporic identities in the context of having undergone forced migration this is particularly evident. The engagement of these young people from refugee backgrounds, whose cultural identities are in constant flux, with race, culture and ethnicity, speaks to these broader issues in Australia today.

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Introduction

This paper is based on my doctoral research into the identity practices of young people from refugee backgrounds in Brisbane, Australia. The participants are primarily of Sudanese and Karen ethnic backgrounds. I explore how these young people negotiate a sense of belonging, identity and ethnicity with one another and in the context of various expectations and pressures to “integrate” felt at the school and community level within the policy and wider moral framework of Australian multiculturalism. In particular, I look at the relationship between, on the one hand, the complex and seemingly contradictory identity politics observed among these young people, and the key social discourses of integration and tolerance on the other. I locate these social discourses as they emerge within the daily, lived experiences of my informants and demonstrate how they may be engaged as the young people portray hybridised and essentialised representations of themselves.

The concept of identity has taken on major significance as well as been subject to much critique in recent decades both within academia and in wider public discourse (Gilroy 1997: 301). In my study, I draw from theories that define identities as engaged in a continual process of becoming, through social practices, and in relationship to existing power structures (Bourdieu 1977; Hall 1996). As Hall (1996) argues, identities “emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally-constituted unity” (Hall 1996: 4). The identifying processes of both inclusion and exclusion highlight the relationship between people’s subjective positions and the broader social context in which they emerge — and as they occur within existing relations of power, these processes are intrinsically political (Gilroy 1997). The processes of identification through inclusion and exclusion were particularly dynamic among the young people in my study as they sought to cultivate a sense of belonging.

As I observed throughout the course of my fieldwork, much of the young peoples' interactions engaged in a relatively overt and self-conscious process of clarifying who they were in relationship to one another, and often with particular reference to race and ethnicity. I argue that this negotiation of self and belonging is undertaken at the interface of experiences and perceptions of racism and the discourses that emerge to confront it. As such, the concept of identity helps to distil the relationship between the young people's experiences and interpretations of the world, and the discursive frameworks to which their lives are subject, in the pursuit of belonging.

In Australia, a nation with one of the world's largest and most diverse immigration programs since the second half of the 20th century, and which has since become one of the world's most diverse societies (Collins et. al. 2000), the complexities of belonging are particularly evident. In what follows, I explore the tensions that are part of creating a sense of belonging among young people from refugee backgrounds in Brisbane, Queensland. Further, I demonstrate how such tensions emerge in the context of young people's complex and often seemingly contradictory relationship with expectations and pressures emerging from Australian society more broadly.

The expectations and pressures that Australian society places on young people from refugee backgrounds are paradoxical — on one hand there are ongoing pressures from many sides to rapidly absorb into Australian society, and at the same time young people perceive and experience an overt racialisation of their identities. I locate these expectations and pressures within the national policy framework and rhetoric of Australian multiculturalism. Specifically, I refer to the key discourses of *integration* and *tolerance*. I explore how these discourses emerge in the everyday lives of my informants and how their inherent messages seek to at once downplay elements of young people's racialised, ethnic identities, and alternatively essentialise other aspects of their ethnic identities in celebratory ways; thus attempting to cast young people from refugee backgrounds in alternating hybridised, or fluid, and essentialised, or fixed, positions. In so doing, the messages of integration and tolerance impact upon young people's sense of

belonging to the Australian national space. In their daily practices of identity work, through which the desire to establish belonging is addressed, I argue, young people recast the expectations and experiences that frame their lives. As they emphasise hybridised and essentialised representations of themselves, young people may echo, resist, or manipulate the parallel defining practices emerging from the discourses of integration and tolerance.

Significantly, both local and global identities are of particular relevance for young people from refugee backgrounds, who have lived at the borders of national belonging for much of their lives. Indeed, with increasing access to a global web of cultural resources, the nation-states in which young people currently live or those, which they have emigrated from, no longer provide the only contexts to which assertions of integration may be applied (Bauman 2011; Rios-Rojas 2011). As people negotiate and make sense of the varied ideas and practices they encounter in their lived experiences, they inevitably, if indirectly, contribute to the making of their identities and spaces of belonging. Thus these young people are not passively shaped by, what I am referring to here as discourses, but rather are participants in shaping the impact and precise meaning of the sometimes-invasive expectations present in their lives.

Ethnographic Context and Research Design

My research is based on ethnographic fieldwork undertaken in the metropolitan area of the northern and central suburbs of Brisbane. The key participants comprised thirty-nine young people from refugee backgrounds, aged nine to twenty years, and predominantly from North East Africa and South East Asia. However, while I consider thirty-nine young people as key participants — those with whom I conducted interviews and was able to more directly pursue my research agenda — I also understood the school, family and friends, and other sites of social gatherings where I conducted research, as a whole. As such, a much broader range of young people also influenced my research.

Brisbane is a city with a large and recent influx of refugees. It has a population of young people seeking a sense of belonging against the backdrop of a nation struggling with the tensions of a growing population of constantly evolving ethnic make-up. Australia's refugee intake, frequently the source of much public debate and controversy, currently averages around 13,000 per year (Australian Government Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2011). In recent years, refugees have primarily been settled from Africa, Asia and the Middle East (Refugee Council of Australia 2011). In the past five years, Brisbane has seen a surge in Sudanese refugees, and more recently, in refugees who identify as Karen, a persecuted ethnic group residing primarily in Myanmar, Thailand, and on the Thai-Burma border. Key participants in my study are predominantly of Sudanese and Karen refugee backgrounds [twenty-three from Sudan, seven from Burma, four from Thailand, two from Uganda, one from Sierra Leone, one from Papua New Guinea, and one from Australia]. The ways, in which they negotiate identity and belonging, in interaction with one another and in relationship to the complex racial and ethnic tensions of their place of resettlement, are central to my study.

Before moving on, I will provide some brief background information about the participants' lives in Australia. While much of this detail will not be engaged further here, it is indeed relevant to the broader context of how they endeavored to create a sense of belonging in a new national and cultural space. The majority of participants were between fourteen and sixteen years old and of the thirty-nine, fourteen were girls and twenty-six were boys. All of these had been living in Brisbane for between two and six years at their time of participation and all were living in some form of family arrangement. Briefly, the majority of Karen participants came to Australia with both parents and siblings, while a few came with only their mother, and a couple lived with other family members such as a grandmother or a sister. Of the Sudanese participants, the majority lived with only their mother or a "step-mother" and siblings, and less than one quarter lived with both parents and siblings. These dynamics were of central

importance to young people's identity formation and the establishment of belonging as familial expectations and discourses both conflated and clashed with national discourses and pressures. My central focus here however, will be on the tensions of belonging engaged between young people in friendship groups, primarily in the school environment, as they grappled with the framing discourses they encountered together in this context.

I conducted participant observation at a local high school and an after-school program, as well as in the homes of selected key informants, and at various gathering sites, in which young people congregated, such as local shopping malls, the city centre, parks, community halls, train and bus stations, family gatherings, and parties organized by and for young people. Participants were initially recruited through the school and after-school program. My approach to the field research was designed to provide a window into participants' lives and their interactions with one another in the places where they most regularly spent time together. It was in these spaces that my participants were exposed to and demonstrated an engagement with the pressures and expectations of Australian society, through the key social discourses explored here, in their representations of identity and pursuit of belonging.

Integration and Tolerance

The discourses of integration and tolerance are rooted in national immigration policy and related to the current policy framework of multiculturalism. Official Australian immigration policy has changed from a post-war emphasis on "assimilation," which encouraged migrants to adopt the cultural practices of the Anglo-Celtic majority, to a shift towards "integration," which supported migrants to maintain more of their own cultural practices for a time before ultimately assimilating, and currently, to a policy of multiculturalism and cultural diversity, which emerged in the 1970's and encourages migrants to preserve the cultural practices of their home countries (Hage 1998). These approaches all engage, to varying degrees, with the notion of tolerance, are rooted in

nationalism, and have been, in Australia's immigration history, both controversial and racialised (Hage 1998; Collins et. al. 2000). I have chosen here to focus on the dual concepts of integration and tolerance because they most accurately capture the complexity of expectations and pressures experienced by my informants in relationship to their negotiation of a sense of belonging. While tolerance is officially promoted and integration is officially abandoned in the current framework of multiculturalism, these positions were alternately emphasised and directed at my informants in various contexts.

Furthermore, although the latter policies of multiculturalism and cultural diversity are characterised as breaking from the previous, less tolerant approaches of assimilation and integration, they contain a great degree of ideological overlap (Butcher and Thomas 2006; Kapferer 1998). Ghassan Hage (1998) illustrates the structural similarities of these seemingly contradictory positions by framing both integration and tolerance as nationalist practices. Hage argues that acts or "practices" of tolerance are themselves nationalist practices not dissimilar to the more obviously nationalist perspectives inherent in an assimilationist or integrationist mentality: "Those who execute them, 'good' as they are, share and inhabit along with White 'evil' nationalists the same imaginary position of power within a nation imagined as 'theirs'" (1998: 79). That is, the very capacity to exercise tolerance relies upon a perceived position of dominance and power in a national space. The mechanism which enables people to practice tolerance is the same which enables people to call for others to integrate, or indeed, to practice intolerance.

Such nationalist practices in the Australian context manifest in relationship to issues of race and ethnicity. For Hage, the sense of entitlement that allows people the capacity to exercise nationalist practices, as described here in the form of extending tolerance or calling for integration, rests upon the capacity to accumulate "Whiteness." This is the process of sufficiently demonstrating one's Anglo-Celtic heritage in a nation-building attempt, which Hage describes as the "White Nation fantasy" (1998: 67). Juxtaposed to

this dynamic, the identity politics in which young people engage in their search for belonging, as I will demonstrate, are largely focused on race and ethnicity. Conversely, Bauman (2011) argues that in the current context of a globalised world, nation-building agendas, such as those engaged in Australia's immigration strategies, are now of low priority to nation-states because belonging may instead be exercised fluidly and simultaneously in different settings. On the surface, the official abandonment of policies of assimilation and integration for that of multiculturalism may demonstrate this change. However, the ongoing controversies in political and popular discourse about immigration point to a more contested reality. Moreover, the discourses of integration and tolerance, with their oscillating emphasis on sameness and difference to the broader population, manifest in the everyday experiences of young people from refugee backgrounds. In their self-conscious identity work, in which boundaries of belonging are not so fluid, but instead, are explicitly sought and policed, they hear, engage, and manipulate these messages. For example, the dual discourses of integration and tolerance in practices of Australian nationalism are demonstrated in the Australian citizenship ceremony. The majority of my participants obtained Australian citizenship and attended a citizenship ceremony, many during the course of fieldwork. In the ceremony it is emphasised that those obtaining citizenship are lucky to do so and to be in a superior state, by its democratic nature, then that from which they came. At a ceremony I attended, the Lord Mayor commented, that here there are men in uniform to protect people, while in many parts of the world from which people in the audience may be fleeing, this is not the case. He went on to state that "we are excited that you have a different religion, dress differently, eat different foods," that in Australia everyone will be given a "fair go" and that ideal citizens should join a political party, and participate and volunteer in their communities in order to "promote understanding, tolerance, and a cohesive community." Here, quite explicitly, multiculturalism and tolerance are promoted in juxtaposition to the overriding message of the impetus to integrate into Australia as a superior nation-state. Similar sentiments of national pride, expressions of tolerance and assertions of the need for new arrivals to integrate into their new society are replicated in popular and media debate. They emerged most prominently for young

people in their local school environment, through anti-race rhetoric and the alternating promotion of Australian cultural values and tolerance for difference.

Sameness and Difference at School

The notions of integration and tolerance, formally invoked at the citizenship ceremony and rooted in national immigration discourse, were indeed echoed at the school where I conducted a significant part of my fieldwork. It was here that they were most immediate and relevant to the lives and identity processes of my informants. The School, as I will refer to it, had a strong anti-race rhetoric and a policy of “mainstreaming” English as Second Language (ESL) students. On my first day of fieldwork, the ESL teacher told me that “race is not an issue at this school” and “we’ve hardly ever had any racist incidents here.” There were so many young people with “different issues” at The School, it was explained to me, that skin colour was simply part of the mix. As the teacher went on to say, “This one has a disability, this one’s in a wheel chair, this one can’t read... it’s like, ‘come on, what do y’got?” In the ESL teacher’s classification, skin colour was akin to any other difference a student may experience — with difference positioned as an obstacle one must overcome in the quest for sameness, or at least integration. Skin colour for this teacher, was not used against fellow students, nor should it have been used by students to account for any aspect of their experience. This anti-race rhetoric, and the mainstreaming of ESL students, represents the broader attempts of The School to promote integration within the student community. However, while The School had a strong anti-race rhetoric in which the relevance of skin colour was denied, for my informants who attended The School, “race,” as they defined it, by skin color and culture of origin, was in fact one of the most salient aspects of their identities (see also Nayak 2009). They talked about race; they talked about skin color; they engaged with and made fun of racism; they critiqued one another’s representations of racialised identities – and they did so, on a near constant basis, with humor, and in playful exchanges among one another.

The School also engaged in implicit integration attempts through projects and

assignments that promoted an Australian national identity. While I do not want to overstate young people's resistance to integration — it was desired for a variety of instrumental purposes such as securing jobs upon graduation, and more generally in terms of valuing aspects of Australian life and culture to which they sometimes sought a sense of belonging — my informants did express occasional resistance to the push to integrate in covert and more obvious ways. For example, when a group participated in a school wide competition in which they were asked to depict a scene of a traditional "Aussie Summer" out of sweets, they constructed a giant hill-shaped mound out of a sticky chocolate mixture, with little red men made out of biscuits strewn about as though dead, and called their entry "Somertime War." When I asked them about it, one of the participants, Tino, stated, "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 an Australian identity 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 "Somertime War" entry resisted the sharedness of identification with the tradition of "an Aussie summer."

In contrast to promoting integration, and thereby emphasising sameness among students at The School, mobilising the language of tolerance served to distinguish and celebrate young people's *difference* in reference to their ethnic identities and indeed, their experiences as refugees. For example, on a number of occasions when participants were asked by outsiders where they were from and they responded by telling the school or suburb from which they came, they were urged by teachers and staff to also mention their refugee camp or country of origin in terms of *where else* they were from, or where they were *really* from. Within the discourses of integration and tolerance where the significance of skin colour was explicitly denied, young people were also simultaneously singled out and bound to their refugee status in ways that were not always in line with their own ideas about and representations of their identities.

Similarly, The School provided regular opportunities for young people to literally

“perform” their national, cultural or ethnic identities (Dimitriadis 2009). On such occasions, a primary example of which was called “Multicultural Night,” members of various migrant groups were invited to perform dance or music from their culture of origin. The majority of my informants participated in such performances and as far as I could tell they were deeply valued and much anticipated by those young people. However, throughout the process of developing these cultural performances, they worried about authenticity, making comments like, “We’re going to look so stupid – what if some Africans come to this?” In this way, young people sometimes struggled to present themselves in ways which were true to their desired portrayals of their ethnic or cultural identity, as well as in line with what they were expected to present through the varied activation of the discourses of integration and tolerance.

In addition to these events, students were also regularly invited to tell the often-painful stories of their journey from their country of origin to Australia in similarly formal settings. Like cultural dance performances, these experiences were valued and viewed as empowering by those who participated. However, they also represent a celebration of ethnic identity in terms that are defined externally to the lives of these young people. As Forman (2005) critically notes, they reveal unequal power relations where “the voice of the subjugated Other is reproduced within the authoritative structures of the dominant class” (2005: 11).

As Forman also describes, The School often framed these stories within the rhetoric that these young people were now in a safer and therefore, implicitly, superior national environment (2005:11). Framing their stories in such a way can ultimately act to bind young people to their refugee identities and thereby inhibit their ability to define their lives, experiences and identities in their own terms. Through the language of tolerance then, unequal power dynamics are reinforced. As Hage argues: “Multicultural tolerance, like all tolerance...is a strategy aimed at reproducing and disguising relationships of power in society... It is a form of symbolic violence in which a mode of domination is presented as a form of egalitarianism” (1998: 87).

In the local context of the school environment some aspects of young people's refugee or ethnic identities were valued, while others were downplayed or more strongly denied through the discourses used to mold their experiences. In this context, those who conform to the norms of integration and, when asked to do so, perform their identities within the celebratory language of tolerance are held up as exemplars of what a "good" refugee can be (Forman 2005). However such frameworks are not always in line with the defining characteristics of ethnic identity employed by young people themselves, within their peer groups and through their increasing connections to a global network of young people. Their representations of identity therefore reflect and engage with these discourses in ways that seek to revise their impact.

Furthermore, young people reflected upon and engaged with the ideas of integration and tolerance as they simultaneously made sense of their direct experiences with, and their awareness of, racism. Many participants spoke generally about experiences with racism, mostly in terms of having comments and derogatory names called out to them from moving cars when they first arrived in Brisbane; they reported experiencing this less frequently more recently, and most said they did not experience racism at school. Other participants could not directly pinpoint experiences of racism in their own lives. All participants however, knew that racial discrimination was at least generally perceived as a reality in their lives and were frequently asked at school and in other structured settings to participate in surveys about their experiences of racism. At the national level, while migration debates abound and are often constructed around the racialisation of migrants and refugees, there is also wide media coverage depicting them as victims of racism (see also Rios-Rojas 2011).

Refugees and migrants then, at the local, community and national level, are approached through the discourses of integration and tolerance, while they are racially framed as both problems and victims (Rios-Rojas 2011). These young people are racially defined through the perception of racism in their lives, through their actual experiences of racism, and through the ways in which they are cast as Other through the discourses of

integration and tolerance invoked in the school and community environment. However, conversely, race, as a defining feature of their ethnic identities is at the same time denied through the mobilisation of these discourses. As such, these young people have to make sense of competing and contradictory messages, and in doing so they are constituting their own sometimes explicitly racialised ethnic identities (see also Back 1996; Hall 2006).

Hybridised and Essentialised Representations of Identity

As they negotiated the discourses and experiences that surrounded their daily lives, I argue that these young people developed hybridised and essentialised ideas and representations of identity (Noble and Tabar 2002) in playful and creative exchanges with one another. Briefly, hybridity, as I use it here, in terms of cultural identity, is a controversial and now highly regarded concept; it has come to represent the fluid and emergent nature of social identities as depicted in current theoretical frameworks (Bhabha 1994; Papastergiadis 1997). It is this adaptation of the term — its strengths and shortcomings — that is useful in understanding the identity work undertaken by my informants. Hybridity, as it relates to identity, is often used in opposition to the concept of essentialism, which represents the now widely discredited notion that cultural identities are fixed and immutable (Bhabha 2006; Noble and Tabar 2002; Werbner 1997). These terms — hybridity, in its historical association with race, and essentialism, in its simplification of complex and evolving identities — are both fraught, and for the same reasons, they are both of particular relevance to this study. Moreover, these terms are not entirely oppositional. Instead they are useful in highlighting different emphases in representations of identity. Hybridity typically refers to a borrowing and blending of cultural forms in the creation of a new identity. However I use the concept more broadly here to demonstrate the young people's emphasis on plurality and the incorporation of difference in their representations of identity, while I use the concept of essentialism to demonstrate their emphasis on similarity. Taken together, the fluidity with which different categories may be merged in the

representation of one which is cohesive, bounded and unified might, depending on emphasis, be described in terms of hybridity or essentialism.

Young people evoked alternating hybridised and essentialised identities in “different moments of negotiation” and in different contexts (Noble et. al. 1999: 39). As they engaged with tensions of belonging, their essentialised and hybridised representations often merged, overlapped, and occasionally contradicted one another. This allowed young people to emphasise stereotypical and racialised representations of ethnicity on the one hand, and a lack of concern for or acknowledgment of ethnic difference on the other (Noble et. al. 1999: 40). Although hybrid and essentialised representations of identity may not likely or usually be invoked so deliberately 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 (Noble et. al. 1999: 40).

To provide a brief example: One night, standing outside of The School auditorium before their African dance performance, I observed Tino playfully accuse Samah of “Freestylin’ It” in reference to her speaking Dinka and Swahili dialects merged with English. During this exchange, Samah was wearing what she described as traditional African clothing and listening to American Hip Hop music. On a different day, same school, Vic teased Santino that she would “hit him up African style” if he didn’t get out of her seat. Such use of hybrid and essentialised cultural references in young people’s interactions with one another may be interpreted as emerging from and responding to the discourses and experiences that frame their lives. Furthermore, in evoking hybridised and essentialised representations of identity, young people drew on both local and global youth networks, through which they were able to adopt and create symbols that better reflected the whole of their lived experiences and consequent ideas of identity, race and ethnicity, in relation to the often limiting discursive frameworks they encountered in their social environments.

Similarly, in their descriptions of how they made friends, young people emphasised

hybridised and essentialised representations of identity that both echoed and resisted the messages inherent in the discourses of integration and tolerance emphasised in The School and broader social environment. While young people, in some instances, described friendship as being based on the mundane elements of their everyday lives and explicitly denied ethnic identity as being relevant, in other instances they pointed to ethnic identity as central.

When describing friendship as being unrelated to ethnic identity, participants made statements such as, “I don’t look for anything. Anybody can be someone’s friend. Doesn’t matter if you can’t speak English. I don’t like friends from one country; it’s good to mix it up.” In these explanations, without being asked if elements of ethnic identity, such as language or country of origin were important, these young people made clear that they were not. In so doing, they emphasised the potentially hybrid nature of their identities where ethnic backgrounds were not limiting and integration with the broader student population was possible. The concept of hybridity, as I use it here, demonstrates young people’s somewhat idealised depiction of having the capacity to incorporate different cultural frameworks into their sense of self and belonging.

On the other hand, in other instances, the same participants described their friendships as being explicitly contingent on ethnic and racialised elements of identity which essentialised being non-Australian, “being African” or “being Black” by categorising people of different national, tribal, cultural or ethnic identities as “other” in relation to their perceptions of mainstream Australian society. In these accounts, differences were cast aside in the creation of a fixed “African” or “non-Australian” identity— an identity unified by being “other.” In describing friendship making from this perspective, young people made comments such as, “It’s easier when they’re from ‘other’ countries. Not from Australia. We understand each other,” and, “It’s easier to be friends with the Africans.”

These explanations echoed the dominant discourse of integration in the representation of hybridised identities and refuted it through self-essentialising — what Spivak (1990)

referred to as “strategic essentialism.” This is the process through which marginalised groups cast differences aside in the creation of a temporary collective identity, often for the purposes of confronting their marginalisation (Spivak 1990). Similarly here, self-essentialising in young people’s descriptions of how they made friends challenged discourses of integration and allowed for a sense of community, solidarity and belonging in the creation of an essentialised, and often racialised concept of ethnic identity. In direct opposition to the anti-race and integration discourse promoted at The School, when I asked what united a group of African students in friendship, Vic responded, “We’re all different. Different tribe, different language, different culture – it’s being black. It’s easy to be friends with black people. It’s hard to be friends with white people, I don’t know why... because they’re not black.”

Young people in my study essentialised black identities in humorous interactions through which they exposed the content of various racist stereotypes in ways that mocked and thus critically commented upon them (see also Tsolids and Pollard 2009). For example, when Gabe, an African student, was horsing around with two white Australian friends he yelled to me and his teacher, “Help! I’m being mugged by two white men... I’m a black man, I shouldn’t get mugged!” Back (1996) has referred to such references to racist stereotypes as “parodies of racism.” By mobilising mock essentialised identities based on racist stereotypes, young people engaged with racist discourses in ways that allowed them to, at least indirectly, question and respond to them in the representation of their own identities (Back 1996).

Similar to the discourses young people used to explain friendship making, other daily practices allowed them to alternate between hybridised and essentialised representations of identity. Two important such practices were the creation of spaces for socialising and choosing what language to use in a given social context. All of these both challenged and reinforced the dominant discourses that framed young people’s lives. Some young people explicitly sought spaces for interaction, such as train and bus stations, through which to associate and forge relationships with others who they

defined as ethnically and racially different from themselves. This can be interpreted as an attempt to integrate with the broader student population. For example, a group of Karen girls regularly went to a local bus station after school to seek out, who they described as “Aussie boys,” and a group of African boys similarly went to the local train station after school in order to “hug Aussie girls.” Others, in other instances, instead carved out spaces for interaction marked by ethnic exclusivity, such as those who preferred to socialise at what they termed “African parties.”

Young people used language in order to establish a sense of belonging. They would emphasise their Western-ness and integration, only to then essentialise representations of their national identity, often in comparison to their peers. Comments such as, “Don’t you know you’re own language... how can this guy call himself African,” or, “I’m the best English speaker in the world... speak properly, speak English,” were made to alternately emphasise their “African-ness” or “Western-ness.” Again, such forms of self-representation do not sit well with dominant discourses about migrant identities in Australia. On one occasion, in response to a request by a teacher to translate something into Arabic for his friend, one participant responded, “Fine, I’ll use my African voice but I have an Australian voice too.”

By representing essentialised and hybridised identities in their everyday practices, these young people engaged the discourses of integration and tolerance with which they were regularly confronted in their own terms. As they self-essentialised, young people presented racialised ethnic identities in line with the discourse of tolerance. Alternatively, the representation of hybridised identities allowed them to under-emphasise ethnic identity and affirm the value of integration, while challenging both real and perceived impacts of race and racism on their lives.

Essentialising through Hybridity – Drawing on the Global

Throughout the course of my fieldwork, I observed hybridised representations of identity emerging from a global web of music and technology. Young people listened to

Arabic, Karen and American Hip Hop and pop music; they connected with other young people from across the globe via Bebo, MySpace and Facebook; and they visited websites, looked at pictures and listened to music from the refugee camps where they used to live. However, the merging of cultural symbols from global networks also aided in their representation of essentialised identities. Indeed, the performance for The School “Multicultural Night” mentioned above was choreographed by the participants through merging a number of distinct dance styles from the many tribes, regions and nations from which they came, into one essentialised “African” style. Despite the permeable boundaries through which the performance was created with the help of videos found on the internet, its singularity, above all, was emphasised by the young people. Hybridised and essentialised representations of identity emerging from the use of global resources again aided young people in this social field in responding to the dominant discourses through which their lives were often framed.

For example, seven Sudanese young people participated in a group project in which they wrote and recorded a Hip Hop song. While the adaptation of Hip Hop cultural symbols is an increasingly global phenomenon, for these young people, the symbols were used in an exploration of home and belonging, in association with Africa, through common American Hip Hop references. In this performative hybridisation of cultural identity, participants adapted themes emerging in popular media to elements of their own lived experiences, through which they ultimately asserted their African identities.

Throughout the song, Africa was referred to as “the ghetto place” and “the hood” — both terms used frequently in Hip Hop music and American slang to describe poor urban areas in US cities. These terms, in their usage in Hip Hop music, evoke racist stereotypes of crime, poverty and drugs, as well as images of power, masculinity and toughness. For these young people, the terms were most acutely associated with a sense of community and belonging in reference to an abstract and distant home. As Tino explained about the term “the hood”: “You hear it in songs, rap songs, it’s a good place – it’s family, friends, where I belong – it’s a cool place where we all hang out, just hang out,” and Lola: “It means you live in the poorest population... but it’s alright because it’s easier to find more

friends.” By using the terms “the ghetto” and “the hood” young people evoked a positive sense of home and belonging in association with Africa, as well as a representation of their identities in alignment with an image of blackness, that in its pop cultural association reflects power and toughness — in terms of the cool, the resistance, and the counter whiteness of an African American identity — as it depicts poverty and disadvantage. As such, young people’s mobilisation of images of “the hood” and “the ghetto,” through symbols gleaned from the global stage, allowed for a positive and empowering negotiation of their experiences with displacement and marginalisation, through which they asserted an essentialised African identity.

Belonging through the “Other”: Concluding Thoughts

As young people represented essentialised identities through local webs of relationships and with symbols gleaned from an array of global resources, they sought solidarity and belonging amongst those implicitly defined as Other through messages inherent in the discourses of integration and tolerance. But through this very engagement with dominant discourses, young people also emphasised their capacity for flexibility and adaptability in hybridised representations of identity, through which modes of belonging were also eventually asserted. Through their alternating hybridised and essentialised representations of themselves then, young people tested and manipulated the boundaries of belonging as they both challenged and affirmed the legitimacy of the often-conflicting messages and expectations with which they were regularly confronted.

Before concluding I delimit the conditions of the findings I’ve presented here. First, I do not wish to over-exaggerate the ability of young people to affect their broad social worlds by representing their identities in creative, complex, and contradictory ways – ways, which it also must be noted, do not fit neatly into the dual hybridity/essentialism framework I have used to describe them. Of course, there are structural limitations to the degree in which they do so. Nor would I want to define their identity work definitively in terms of *resistance* to the discourses I have outlined here. Rather, as Nilan

and Feixa (2006) point out, youth cultural practices are driven both by “impulses of resistance and challenge, and impulses of conformity and legitimacy” (2006: 9).

Secondly, and while running the risk of unhinging all I have said here, I also do not wish to over-emphasise the extent to which the identity politics, multiplicity and tensions of belonging I have described are in direct response to those discourses I have outlined. Such dynamics and tensions could be interpreted as a response to countless other discourses and structures, or indeed, may not be the response to any discourse at all. Instead, these practices could simply reflect the more general experience of cultivating a sense of self in the context of transnational movement, or some interpretation of difference: In the process of growing up, or in the universal experience of change.

However, what I hope to have demonstrated here through contextualising young people’s identity practices in relationship to their experiences and the discourses they encounter, is the multiple and complex positioning undertaken by young people, in their representations of identity, and the capacity of such positioning to illuminate and to speak to relevant and pressing issues in their social environments. This multiple positioning, as far as I can tell, is ultimately about creating belonging in the context of marginalisation or (perceived) difference. As the various discourses that frame the lives of these young people implicitly define them as problems and/or victims, the drive to create belonging through identity work is pronounced (see also Rios-Rojas 2011: 78).

So while the identity practices and tensions of belonging, I have outlined are certainly not the direct result of what I have described as the discourses of integration and tolerance, the ways in which they were negotiated by young people here can indeed speak back to those discourses, and even illuminate their inadequacy for understanding young lives in a global context (Rios-Rojas 2011). Moreover, these practices reflect the ways in which the young people experienced and affected their experience of race and racism. Viewed from a broader lens, the self-conscious identity work of these young people sheds light on the present era of an increasingly globalised world and the varied and complex ways people may engage with it in the pursuit of belonging.

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