Youth, Ethnicity and the Mapping of Identities: Strategic Essentialism and Strategic Hybridity among Male Arabic-speaking Youth in South-western Sydney

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This paper examines the 'mapping' of ethnic identity amongst a group of Arabic-speaking youth in south-western Sydney. Informed by theoretical approaches to questions of ethnicity which emphasise its multiple and fluid nature, the paper explores the dynamics of identity formation among adolescents in relation to interactions with friends, other language background youth and family, especially in the spaces between home and school. The processes of ethnic identity formation amongst these Arabic-speaking youth entail complex processes of 'othering'; a mapping of oppositions between and within cultures mobilising different categories and different notions of self and other. Their constructions of ethnic identity move between strategic essentialism—the assertion of the given-ness of their ethnicity—and a strategic hybridity—the mixing, in often contradictory ways, of elements of identification drawn from their parents' cultural background and their participation in Australian society. The boundaries drawn between ethnic identities ostensibly based on ethnic cohesion can be fluid and shifting, often depending on context.

Identity, Ethnicity and Youth

Scholarly literature on identity increasingly argues that our identities are not fixed and immutably singular, but shifting, plural, and even contradictory (Sarup 1996). As Mort argues:

> We carry a bewildering range of different, and at times conflicting, identities around with us in our heads at the same time. There is a continual smudging of personae and lifestyles, depending where we are (at work, on the high street) and the spaces we are moving between. (1989: 169)

This has entailed the recognition that ethnic identities, too, are cultural constructions, not primordial or biologically given as 'common-sense' understandings imply. This approach emphasises the dynamic processes of *identification* through which

such identities have to be constantly remade, even as they posit common origins or characteristics (Hall 1996). Central to this is the insight that identities are built around the construction of physical and cultural differences between groups (Eriksen 1993). The drawing of a boundary around a community is a relational act which depends on the figuration of significant others against or within which one seeks to situate it. Identities are constantly negotiated around perceptions of universalising us–them categories which serve to provide symbolic dimensions of 'community' (Featherstone 1993: 176). However, in the context of increasing globalisation, which throws differences together and juxtaposes samenesses across place in complex processes of integration and disintegration, the proliferation of ethnic, regional, national and transnational 'communities', and their articulation with class and gender relations, means that the boundaries of these 'communities' become permeable and difficult to maintain (Featherstone 1990).

Emerging interest in ethnic identities has been in part rooted in the effects migration has had in countries like Australia, where vast numbers of people, with experience of more than one culture, have investments in competing senses of identity. In the postwar period, immigration to Australia was on a larger scale (per capita) and from a more diverse range of sources than elsewhere in the world, without a large minority from one country. In this context, race, culture and ethnicity have become increasingly important in contemporary social formations. Rather than simply producing greater cosmopolitanism, however, globalisation and mass migration have encouraged new forms of ethnic identification which emphasise localism and 'bounded' cultures (Hannerz 1990). It is important here to stress two seeming contradictions. First, these forms of identification constitute 'new ethnicities' which symbolise community amongst a migrant population whose experience has been heterogeneous. Second, these new forms of ethnic identification involve active self-fashioning, but in response to conditions over which they have little control.

Emergent ethnic identities within migrant communities are fashioned out of known symbols and practices, but in ways which represent new cultural forms, not just reproduced older ones from the homeland, which borrow from various sources (Gilroy 1987). Yet because migration throws together quite different groupings from within the homeland, and locates them within neighbourhoods of migrants from diverse homelands, diaspora experiences are defined by heterogeneity and produce identities through transformation and difference. Syncretism and hybridity are constitutive of the identities of migrant communities, and fluidity characterises the boundaries between them, even as they assert a cohesiveness (Hall 1990). This is even more so for second-generation members of these communities, whose multiple identifications may generate experiences of conflict (Pallotta-Chiarolli 1989). As Brah (1996: 123) argues, identity is 'that very process by which the multiplicity, contradiction and instability of subjectivity is signified as having coherence, continuity, stability; as having a core—a continually changing core but the sense of a core nonetheless'.

It would be easy to overstate the degree of agency in these 'new ethnicities', but, as Bottomley (1979, 1991) argues, ethnic identities are the dialectical interplay of

self-identification and identification by others, and of perceptions and structural forces. Migrant communities reshape their identities in relation to historically contingent conflicts between the local and the global, and in relation to existing relations of power: there are conditions to identity which the individual or group cannot construct (Hall 1988, 1991). The celebration of fluidity is often made at the expense of registering the determining force of social relations and the role identity plays in responding to these. Identities, then, are strategic and positional: they mobilise cultural resources through practices of accommodation, negotiation and resistance in relation to economic and political processes (Hall 1996: 13–14).

Spivak's (1990) notion of a 'strategic essentialism'—the articulation of an irreducible otherness, which is operationalised primarily for the critical speaking position it offers minority intellectuals—has wider applicability to the everyday practices of marginalised groups. For all the critiques of essentialism in recent years (Brah 1996: 92), and particularly the emphasis on anti-essentialising conceptions of race and ethnicity, commentators have given little consideration to the ways a popular essentialism is crucial not just to racist constructions of others, but to the ways communities mobilise their senses of identity in specific circumstances (Gilroy 1987). Similarly, 'hybridity' has become a term of often uncritical celebration of otherness, but it is a term needing critique *and* application. Rather than prejudge the politics of essentialism and hybridity, we need to see what they *do* in particular contexts (Werbner 1997: 22). Pieterse (1995) distinguishes between assimilationist and destabilising modes of hybridity, which bear different relations to the hegemonic culture.

The ways in which groups engage in different strategies—of assimilation and differentiation, of essentialism and hybridity—has particular significance for the study of youth, for whom identification is a volatile process. Youth subcultural theory has long recognised the degree to which subcultures provide 'imaginary solutions' to the problems of lived experience by fashioning identity and community (Hall & Jefferson 1976), but much research in 'ethnic studies' still works with relatively fixed notions of race and ethnicity, continuing to focus on issues of relations rather than the constitution of these categories, identity formation and the boundaries between ethnic communities. Hewitt's (1986) study of interracial friendships amongst adolescents configures ethnic and racial divisions as obstacles which are transcended or reproduced in the transition to adulthood. Portes and Macleod (1996) discuss the malleability of identifications for second-generation Hispanic migrants in the USA, but argue that little empirical work has been done on group formation using contemporary conceptualisations of identity. Willis (1990), focusing on the creativity of everyday life, suggests that youth use their cultural backgrounds as 'frameworks for living' and as repertoires of symbolic resources for making sense of their lives. Alexander's (1996) study of the construction of blackness amongst youth is an example of recent work which has begun to move beyond generalising, fixed notions of ethnicity to recognise both the fluid and transiently essentialised nature of ethnicity (p. 194) by employing a close study of the microphysics of power within particular historical constraints and by emphasising the performativity of ethnicity. Detailed, empirical research in Australia on interactive, interethnic rela-

tions amongst youth, using contemporary conceptualisations of identity formation, is relatively limited, as a recent contribution points out (Guerra & White 1995).

This paper has a modest aim: it explores the mapping of identity—of self and others—amongst a small group of young men, in order to explore the extent to which essentialising and hybridising dimensions within self-identification open up a space of orientations which may be resourceful in relation to different contexts and to broader social relations.

The Study

The project from which this article draws is a comparative study of identity among 21 male youth of Lebanese, Vietnamese and Anglo-Australian backgrounds. The study explored the dynamics of identity formation among adolescents in relation to interactions with friendship groups, other language background youth, socio-economic contexts and gender, and with an emphasis on the ways identities are formed in the spaces between home and school. For this paper, we draw on the seven interviewees from Arabic-speaking backgrounds as a way of focusing upon the 'mapping' of identity crucial to the construction of ethnicity. All participants were aged between 16 and 19, in their later years of secondary education. They lived in the Canterbury–Bankstown area in the south-western suburbs of Sydney.

The Canterbury local government area is an area with a large proportion of residents of non-English-speaking background and low socio-economic status in the heart of Sydney's suburban sprawl. Signs proclaiming Canterbury as 'the city of cultural diversity' greet drivers on the major roadways. Of the population, 42.3 per cent were born in other than mainly English-speaking countries, with those born in Lebanon (at 7.5 per cent) the largest of the 23 listed countries. Some 23.5 per cent speak Arabic as a first language. Since the influx of migrants from Lebanon in the 1970s, this area has become a centre of the Lebanese–Australian community, and many are Muslims. The minaret of a large mosque dominates the area where most of our interviewees lived or went to school. Over 80 per cent of people come from households with annual incomes under $50,000, compared with 53 per cent for Sydney as a whole, and the area has an official unemployment rate 1.5 times the national rate (ABS 1991). For youth of Lebanese background the unemployment rate is around 43 per cent (Moss 1993).

The position of Lebanese migrants in Australia is complex. A study of prewar migrants and their offspring concluded that they exhibited little ethnic solidarity, had integrated well in Australian society and could not be said to constitute an 'ethnic group' (McKay 1989). Other studies have shown the experience of postwar Lebanese migrants to be different, especially those migrating as a result of increasing conflict from the mid-1970s. This wave coincided with the onset of economic crisis in Australia, necessitating the development of community networks and contributing to the over-representation of Lebanese among the self-employed and the unem-ployed (Collins *et al.* 1995: 73–74). In this context, racism towards Lebanese migrants and their children, particularly those of Muslim belief, has been well documented—vandalism of mosques, the removal of women's hijabs in the street,

and so on (Moss 1991: 145–146). Such incidents have escalated since the Gulf War (Hage 1996). Australians express an uneasiness towards those of Lebanese background not much less than that expressed towards Aboriginal and Vietnamese families (Jones 1997: 293). The so-called 'ghettoisation' of areas like Canterbury is the result, then, of a complex of economic, political and demographic factors, and yet also provides the foundation of the maintenance of a sense of community amongst Lebanese migrants in the face of broader processes of marginalisation.

'We Stay Lebanese Together'

Two groups of Arabic-speaking youth from lower middle-class backgrounds were interviewed—one Christian and the other Muslim. George, Amin, Ghassan and Rashid are all second-generation Lebanese youth who were Year 10 students from a Catholic boys' high school at the time of interview, and who belonged to the same friendship group. The second group are also of second-generation Arabic-speaking background, but of Muslim faith. Of these, only Ahmad's parents were both born in Lebanon; Abdu's parents were born in Syria, while Hussein's mother is Lebanese and father Syrian. All three attended a co-educational government secondary school in the same broad area as the first group. For both groups, Arabic-speaking students—or Lebanese in particular—were numerically dominant in the community and school. These young men came from families of skilled workers or who ran small businesses.

Both groups lived or studied in the same suburban area, and spent the hours before and after school hanging around the railway station and shops. They frequently visited the larger shopping centres a few suburbs away in Canterbury or Bankstown where there were better facilities and more young people. On weekends they often visit the city for a 'night out'—to meet girls, cruise around, watch a movie or visit video arcades.

For the first four interviewed, their regular group of friends—consisting of a core group of 15, and a larger circle of about 30—was primarily formed around the perception of a common ethnicity and cultural background. There was not, however, an exact fit. On the one hand, a number of students of non-Lebanese background were included; on the other, there were several Lebanese groups in the school, so cultural background alone did not define group boundaries.

The initial thing to note is the varying estimates of the group's size: one estimating 10, another 30. A third clarified this by implying that size depended on how boundaries were defined. He gave an initial number of 40, but this included acquaintances. Twenty of these were the regular group of friends 'who I go out with' (Amin). George narrowed this even further to 'three or four real close friends'. The issue of size is important because it suggests that, unlike tight-knit subcultural entities, most young people circulate within a number of friendship groupings which involve changing status of members who float in and out (Cotterell 1996).

This grouping was primarily defined around ethnicity, but not exclusively. Most of the 'regular' group were Lebanese with 'few exceptions', George explained. Amin estimated that five were not; these were 'mixed, Australian, multicultural', including

some Vietnamese. 'Multicultural' seems an odd category, but it probably equates with Amin's nomination of 'one Italian, two Greeks'. His omission of the Vietnamese student also suggests the elasticity of group boundaries, and the way these reflect patterns of individual interaction within any group. Rashid initially said there were no non-Lebanese, then later corrected himself: 'Probably one or two. They stay with us, but not all the time, like we stay Lebanese together'. He added that these were 'probably Greek or Italian'. Ghassan said that 'Sometimes you get Chinese'.

Despite pointing out that there was this non-Lebanese presence, Lebanese-ness continued to be the primary definer of inclusion. However, most of the interviewees shifted between emphasising the common cultural background, and then downplaying it to emphasise conventional friendship motivations. Ghassan, for example, explained that what they had in common was that 'we are all Lebanese. We are all the same interests and stuff like that', but elaborated these interests as 'going out, and sports', music and having 'a good time together'. The sports mentioned—rugby league and cricket—are very 'Anglo' sports. It's hard to tell whether these are initial causes of friendship, or whether these develop because of the common cultural background.

While they were happy to see their Lebanese-ness as providing a base for their commonality, they were loath to acknowledge ethnicity as a reason for excluding people. After explaining that the group was '95 per cent Lebanese', Ghassan added: 'Anyone can belong. If they act stupid to us or are bad to us, we just tell them to get lost ... Anyone, as long as they are good as a friend. It doesn't matter'. Asked how he would explain the fact they were '95 per cent Lebanese', he answered that 'Lebanese do communicate more better with each other. Same language.'

Amin also stressed that it was 'open'—'We treat everyone equal'—and that it was based on 'the same interest' like 'going to the movies ... having a laugh'. George suggested that the only ones excluded from joining were 'nerds'—'shy people [who do] not talk to the girls, wouldn't go out at all'. But he reflected that he wasn't that close to some in the group because 'they would go out more than I would, because I've got studies'. Passing over his own ambivalent status, then, he affirmed rather uncertainly that, 'It's not a racial thing; most of the time it's not a racial thing.' George was also critical of those members of his own group who were 'stricter than others' about racial boundaries. Yet he explained that there were unlikely to be any Anglos in the group because there were only two or three in his year at school, adding that, in any case, they were 'not our type'. On the other hand, when asked why the few Greek kids hung out with them, George simply answered, 'Wogs'.

George, like the others, shifts between Lebanese-ness as a primary motivation for group membership, to denying 'racial' boundaries, to returning to Lebanese-ness, and then drawing on a generic wog-ness. The existence of the group, therefore, is sometimes understood by these boys as based on ethnicity (which avoids the issue of the inclusion of non-Lebanese), and sometimes as just a friendship grouping (which avoids the issue of why it is predominantly Lebanese). This shifting is typical of these boys' relationship to ethnicity, and the different weightings it receives in different contexts.

Nevertheless, there is typically a strong sense of group identity, particularly

focused around ethnicity. Despite their flexibility, the comments indicate there are also shared rules of inclusion and appropriate behaviour. Much of this is clearly gendered—despite being friendly with the girls from the school next door, this is a boys' group. One interesting issue is the naming process which institutionalised their group identity. Some of the boys labelled their group as the SBF (for *She Be Faz'i*: something to be terrified of). While hesitant to explain this, several used it as though it was a formal label. Ghassan, however, admitted that: 'There is not really any names. Just a group of friends. They're not really called SBF. They call themselves other things.'

The dynamics of group formation for the Muslim boys were also significant. For them, however, 'Lebanese-ness' was in a complex relation with faith. Abdu, like Ahmad and Hussein, explained that all the boys in his group at a nearby government school were Muslim. Asked if being Muslim was what held them together as a group, he answered: 'Not necessarily. I mean, you can say it's more going to, yes, but not really.' There was only one Christian Lebanese student in his year at school, so being Muslim was not a clear marker from other Middle Eastern students. Hussein explained that while most of the group were Suni, there were two or three Shi'a, but that he was the only 'Alawite, so religious divisions were not significant.

When asked what united the boys' group (and it, too, was a boys' group despite being a co-educational school), Abdu explained it was their 'sense of humour', but added that not anyone could join: they had to be 'specific Lebanese ... we don't hang around with non-Lebanese'—an interesting comment from someone whose parents were born in Syria. Lebanese-ness, therefore, was more a cultural marker than one of nationality, and did not seem to conflict with Abdu's strong identification with being Syrian. When Abdu lists the groups in his school by size, he, like Ahmad and Hussein, slips between talking about the Lebanese and Muslim and 'Arabs', as though they were interchangeable. But it is clear to him that the emphasis on whether you see his group as 'Lebanese' or Muslim is a contextual issue:

> because there's not a lot of Christians. If there were Christians, there would be Christians and Muslims; because they are Lebanese they would stick together. If it was just Lebanese society, then it would come under religion. Like because there are other cultures, it would come under Lebanese.

Strategic Essentialism

Crucial here is how ethnicity is articulated in relation to identity. This is central because both groups share a sense of ethnicity as unproblematic, despite their flexible approach to it. Although these youths see themselves as half Lebanese and half Australian, and therefore already hybrid, they nevertheless articulate quite rigid notions of their ethnic allegiance. For them, ethnic identity is essentialised and taken as a given, although they find it hard to articulate because it often lacks a clear content.

While George recognises that there are a number of Lebanese groups who don't

always get on, he says that 'between the Lebanese groups there's always friendship ... we will back you or whatever ... in the end we're just like one big group. We're all Lebanese'. Lebanese-ness reaches to the core for these boys. For Abdu, of Syrian background, 'everything I say is Lebanese ... Culture has a lot to do with my personality. You always bring it out, every second word.' This essentialism is strategic because it has a 'contingent positionality' (Brah 1996: 149)—it has both the stabilising qualities needed to make identity workable and yet is malleable enough to suit different functions.

The meaning of Lebanese-ness varied dramatically. It can be both the glue that binds them to their friends, and against others, and it can be the stereotypes that others hold about them that they resent. It can be the good things that their parents pass on, and it can be the bad things that their parents do to restrict them. Amin felt 'good' about being Lebanese, but explained that the Lebanese are known 'for their troubles'. He explained this contradiction by pointing out that there was 'a stereo-type of good people, and a stereotype of bad people. I feel good for the good stereotype.' When pressed as to what he felt proud of, he focused on their Catholi-cism and the fact that they go to church at least twice a week, indicating to what extent Lebanese-ness has a particular meaning for him. He liked the 'different traditions', but criticised how sons, but not daughters, can go out. Rashid also thought that 'love toward God' was stronger amongst Lebanese. When Ghassan was asked what Lebanese traditions he would keep, he seemed unsure: 'What's it called? Oh, like eating meat. Stuff like that' (referring to Kebbe, a Lebanese dish).

The Muslim boys were clearer about the emphasis on religious traditions—taboos, prayer, fasting and reading of the Koran—in defining their ethnicity. Religion was central to Hussein, possibly because his 'mixed' parentage complicated the second-generation experience: 'I'm Lebanese Muslim. My parents are Lebanese, half Syrian ... I was born here so I'm partly Australian, and my background is Lebanese. But I don't really say that. I mostly say I'm Muslim because that's the main thing.' Despite indicating that faith was not determinate, Abdu nevertheless stressed his Suni background to distinguish himself from the 'Alawite elite in Syria and other Muslims, 'because it comes back to religion'. He explained that in his parents' homeland, the 'Alawite were numerically fewer but 'have got more power'. Religion was important to Abdu because, in contrast to Christians, whether they be Anglo or Lebanese, for his Muslim friends, 'there is always something that they will respect': religion, parents and for 'who you are'. He particularly emphasised that when it came to issues of sex, his faith gave him 'morals' which others—Anglos and Christians—didn't share: 'I like to have something inside that I can hold back ... I can't do it because religion comes into it. Some people don't have their morals.' For Ahmad and Hussein, too, being Muslim was essentially about moral discipline, about not 'doing something bad'.

For these youth, and especially for the Muslim boys, parental values provided resources of certainty, a 'framework' whereby the flux of modern consumer society could be evaluated. The second-generation experience, however, was reflected in the awareness that most boys showed regarding the different sense of what it meant to be Lebanese held by their parents. Ghassan said theirs was 'a very different view,

because they were born in Lebanon and they came over in their Lebanon tradition, and they did everything Lebanese do. I came after, and I saw the Australian world. So it's two different worlds.'

Seen as defined around family, values, customs, language, tradition or religion, this sense of ethnicity is nevertheless essentialised, often a caricature, including beliefs such as that the Lebanese fight hard, are 'dumb', are family-oriented. This essentialism is, nevertheless, useful in the sense that it defines an identity operational in a given context—such mythic images anchor a sense of self in the flux around identity and values in a globalised world. As an instance of boundary formation, where a range of social and historical criteria are drawn upon to distinguish the group, define shared aspects of existence and construct lines of difference (Brah 1996: 237), this strategic essentialism rests firmly on a process of mapping, whereby identification of the group's Lebanese-ness is secured only by positioning it against others.

Mapping Identity

These attributes are primarily understood in terms of contrasts with other cultures— their perception of ethnicity is located in a system of differences. These boys produce a mapping of identities which involves categorisation—of self and other— through which their sense of identity is deployed. It is not just that identities are relational, but that these categories are mutually defining. Every version of an 'other' is a construction of a self (Clifford 1986: 23). Goldberg (1993: 49) argues that racialised discourse operates through processes of classification and hierarchy, differentiation and identification, exclusion and entitlement. These are not the preserve of the powerful: marginalised groups also mobilise such processes to define themselves and map their identities onto a larger, ordered system of difference in the day-to-day management of plurality. Categorisation performed by the dominated involves a simplification of the complexity of the world, condensing potentially overwhelming data to manageable proportions, enabling identification, social action and providing a sense of control (1993: 121).

These Arabic-speaking youth classified others through a typology of 'given' ethnic groups and their purported attributes—Asian (that is, Southeast Asian), Australian, Greeks and Italians. This 'othering' involves crude stereotypes of self and other, between which simple oppositions are built. Amin, for example, contrasted the church-going Lebanese with Aborigines who 'go and get drunk and that. That's what they do. They live on beer', while Italians and Greeks had 'Mafia style' and were 'show-offs'. While this appears ostensibly as racism, it is more complex than that, particularly given the relative ease with which these groups interacted. It recalls Wulff's (1995) analysis of the way a mix of ethnic and racial origins in one group of friends is collapsed into a black/white dichotomy as a way of identifying each other not in a disunifying manner, but to stress similarities.

A key contrast with Lebanese-ness is what these boys view as 'Australian' culture. For them, being Lebanese means attaching greater importance to the family, tradition and respect for others than do Australians. For George, Anglo-Australians

have 'their Australian way, and you know we're Lebanese and we have a totally different thing. Like conditions and our language and stuff.' He also groups 'Australians' with 'Pommies'. Ghassan said Australian traditions are very different. Australian parents, for example, 'don't care where their children are'. Abdu contrasted the respect he felt central to being Muslim with the Christian-based culture of his former suburb where Anglo-Australians predominated: there 'it's more based on American lifestyle', where drugs, sex and 'what you are' not 'who you are' is important. For Ahmad, the biggest divide in the classroom was between Australians and everyone else: 'Muslims or Lebanese or wogs'. He saw a strong link between the various 'wogs': 'Greeks and Italians you can relate to them ... because they have the same traditions.' There is a hierarchy of otherness: markers of differentiation between religions, national origins and even 'racialised' distinctions (of 'Asians') give way in various circumstances to broader, inclusive categories of being 'migrant' or a 'wog' in distinction from (Anglo-)'Australians'.

'Australian' is, of course, a difficult category. The boys use it to denote those of Anglo-Celtic heritage, but balk as if they recognise that using such a category may place them outside the nation and access to its rights. Like Lebanese-ness, Australian-ness moves between being a marker of nation and citizenship, and a cultural marker of 'ethnicity'. This explains the linking with British and American 'culture', which seem easier to pin down. Several, such as Abdu, after using the term happily, asked us to clarify what *we* meant by 'Australian': 'What do you mean by the first one? Like Australians? Or multicultural?' Australia is both a multicultural nation, inclusive of difference, *and* refers to those of Anglo-Celtic heritage (or rather, 'Australia*n*' can be ethnicised, but 'Australia' typically is not). This signifier is not anchored, functioning as an 'empty' signifier, filled only when it is placed in context. The confusion also partly lies in the non-specificity of Anglo-Australian-ness: being 'Australian' often simply means *not* being obviously of some exotic origin.

The lack of difference in Australian-ness could be an advantage, because it was difficult to emphasise otherness. Abdu, talking about the racism of 'Australian' boys, suggests that for the Lebanese, like Asians, 'they [Australians] have got heaps of words that offend us. Australians have not got a lot of words that you can offend them.' This positioned them with Asians in the act of exchanging insults: 'We have something in common ... For an Australian, ... they can always offend us, but we can't offend them. But with Chinese or something, they can offend us and we can offend them. So we can have like an equal sort of thing.' Again difference is subsumed under a larger otherness.

Despite this 'equality', the divide between Arabic-speaking boys and Asians was almost as central as that with Australian youth. According to Ahmad, you couldn't talk to Asians: 'Lebanese and Asian will never get on.' Relations with Asians were, therefore, ambiguous. There was little friendly interaction between the Lebanese boys and Asian students. Abdu admitted that they frequently derided them by using a range of words, including the Arabic word for 'rice', but respected them for being smart, tough and 'on top when it comes to reality'.

'Asians', in fact, were crudely grouped as one, with mythic attributes: the 'racialisation' of a Eurocentric geopolitical category, but more by cultural than physical

characteristics. Amin claimed that Asians 'do drugs and eat noodles. They kill people like gangsters.' This set of oppositions manifested itself in many forms. Amin also contrasted fighting styles: Asians 'use weapons, Lebs use their hands'. A common contrast was between 'dumb Lebs' and smart Asians. George mapped ethnic differences onto school subjects: Physics, like Chemistry and Maths, is 'an Asian subject'. For him, Anglo-Australians weren't too bright either, but he didn't perceive this as a complication to his opposition between dumb Lebs and smart Asians.

As a consequence these boys reproduced images of their own ethnicity drawn from the dominant culture, a kind of 'self-othering'. For George, 'if someone thinks of a Lebanese person, they would think of a person who is strong physically, who runs their own businesses'. George took umbrage at being called a 'dumb Leb' by Asians, but he also characterised the Lebanese as 'dumb': 'Lebanese don't excel as much in the academic areas, as much as the Asian community does.' George, who is small in size and academically inclined, says Lebanese (males) 'are strongly built', an image derived from migrants of working-class or peasant background, whereas he is the son of a small businessman. Amin worried that he wouldn't be able to join the police because 'Lebanese do most crimes'. While acceptance of such labelling is typical of less assimilated groups, self-othering is a much more ambiguous process than simply an acceptance of subjugation. Imposed boundaries can become real because they offer the hope of advancement (Portes & Macleod 1996: 527–528), so dominant images are turned against groups within the ethnicity. Ghassan discussed Muslim Lebanese, assuring us that 'most of them are troublemakers you know'. Ahmad similarly rates many Lebanese people very low: 'about 45 per cent are good. Got a good business. The rest are mainly on the dole.'

Ironically, these oppositions could also be mobilised in moments of self-critique. George talked about his 'respect for Asians': 'They've got their group, and they've got people backing them.' He was critical, however, of the bluster of the Lebanese, who

> think that Lebanese are the best and you know the strongest. They are just better than everyone. Like they constantly speak of others behind their backs. Like they would say 'look at that dumb Nip' or something.

Strategic Hybridity

We have seen how the question of identity amongst this group of Lebanese youth entails complex processes. The boundaries drawn around friendship groups ostensibly based on ethnicity can be shifting. For these Lebanese boys, the interplay of identity and context produces curiously practical amalgams. On the one hand, they articulate stereotyped identities of themselves and others, in which boundaries can be recognised. On the other, these boundaries are permeable in practice. The selves that they fashion in response to different contexts reflect a high degree of plurality— a strategic hybridity. Strategic essentialism and strategic hybridity are not the strategies of different groups, but different moments of negotiation that each

performs in successive interactions. Moving between stereotypical constructions of ethnicity and an apparent lack of concern with issues of ethnic difference should not, however, simply be seen as contradictory, but as positional. Deployment of intense senses of ethnicity, fluid boundaries and hybridism constitutes a repertoire of socially useful subject positions, appropriate for different contexts.

These boys all affirm a hyphenated identity when they describe themselves as Lebanese-Australian. Ghassan describes himself thus: 'I am Lebanese. I am half Australian as well, because I was born in Australia, and I do live in Australia.' It is important to argue that essentialism and hybridity are not dichotomous strategies (Baumann 1997). Hybridisation rests on the maintenance of a clear sense of distinct elements. Nevertheless, being hybrid is never simply an admixture of pre-existing identities but negotiates the 'perplexity' (Bhabha 1990) of existential contexts in which young people are located, and in which they attempt to position themselves by drawing on 'assimilationist' and differentiating modalities.

This hybridity is most functionally seen in the code-switching and code-mixing—the movement between and mixing of two languages (Rampton 1995)—that many non-English-speaking background youth engage in. Sometimes this is purely functional, as when dealing with parents; sometimes it reflects aspects of their subjectivity, as when they swear or get angry in their first language; sometimes it is purely a marker of difference, as when they whisper things in Arabic in class. But it is important to stress that such hybridising strategies are not simply manifestations of the 'front door syndrome' in which young people leave 'Australian culture' at the front door, where their parents' 'ethnic culture' takes over (Cahill & Ewen 1987). Such conceptualisations capture nothing of the complexity of the lived experience of these youth, nor the resourcefulness of strategies of positioning. As Rosenthal and Hrynevich (1985) suggest in their study of Greek and Italian youth, while 'ethnic identity' is switched on by contexts relating to family and community, it can also be activated by taunts from 'Australian' youth. 'Australian-ness' is the preferred mode in public situations, but there are also many occasions when these young people were uncertain about which identity to 'switch on', where context demanded both.

Thus, hybridity can encompass a high degree of 'assimilationism', although not necessarily to the dominant culture. Abdu usually identifies himself as Syrian Muslim. He says that he likes to emphasise the Syrian bit because 'there has been a war', but he added that 'around here, it's more like you have to be Lebanese … Lebanese is sort of like slang for Arab.' As suggested, 'Lebanese-ness' is more a cultural marker than a category of nationality. As a result, Abdu often gets mistaken as Lebanese but is happy about this: 'it sort of makes my fear easier … it's made my life sort of better. To me it has done something for me…. because I'm "Lebanese", they stick by you.' In contrast to the suburb he used to live in, where there were fewer students of Middle Eastern origin and a greater number of Anglos, who 'don't stick up for each other', his friends here were much more ready to 'jump in for you. They are always by your side.'

The generational specificity of the idea of Lebanese-ness, and its function as a cultural rather than a political marker, is clearest in Abdu's response to the question of whether his parents shared his view of their Muslim Syrian identity: 'No. For

them it is nationalism. The love for their country.' The problem of hybridism is seen typically in the generational conflict over friends, leisure and dating. Gender and sexuality are particularly important arenas where hybridisation comes into play (Noble *et al.* 1997; Pallotta-Chiarolli 1989).

We might add that ethnicity is not something which is uniformly felt. We could speak of the differential intensities of ethnic identification. For some, identity was passionately held; for others it was less intense. Asked if others shared a sense of belonging, George said:

> Not all of them. Like one of my friends lives down the street, he doesn't mind which race as well. So it's like, sort of different levels of thinking. Like there are ones that don't care, and those who really do. The ones who care a little bit would be in the majority.

For each of these boys, the intensity of being Lebanese varied from moment to moment. Rashid states clearly at the beginning of the interview that he was born in Australia, but an interesting moment arises when he talks about being 'Australian Lebanese':

> It means like inside I'm Lebanese, but I'm Australian Lebanese because I'm living in Australia as a country. So that's what I have to follow, but it would be a different story if I was Lebanese Lebanese. If I was born in Lebanon, that's what I'd describe myself as.

His Australian-ness means being able to go for a drive or go to the beach just 'to show off'—yet he wasn't sure whether they did that in Lebanon or not.
  He then elaborated when asked what made him Lebanese-Australian:

> Rashid: Because I am divided up into, one side of me is Lebanese, and one side of me is Australian, because I was born in Lebanon, but I am living in Australia. So I am a bit of both.

> Interviewer: You weren't born in Lebanon, you were born here, you said.

> Rashid: I was born in Lebanon ... I've got Lebanese parents, plus Lebanese background. I still follow Australian, because I am living in Australia. So you can say I am divided up into two. Half Lebanese and half Australian.

The need to assert his Lebanese ancestry is articulated at that moment as an assertion that he was born in Lebanon. Later on, when in the context of talking about how he differs from his parents' values, he concedes that there is 'really nothing' that sets him apart from 'Anglo' Australians.

George, who wasn't passionate about being Lebanese to begin with, became passionate after a stabbing incident at school in the first weeks of the school year, disrupting the normally quiet relations between Lebanese and Asian students. The playground at their school is territorially divided: the 'Asian' area is the unsupervised bottom half of the oval, away from the school buildings, the 'Australian' area the top half, and the cement playground is where the Lebanese hang out. A fight broke out between one of the students in the Lebanese area (a friend of George's brother) and

one of the Chinese students for no clear reason, but an indirect cause was that the principal had banned students from the area furthest away from the buildings—the area where Asian students sat and played, forcing them into areas occupied by other groups. The result was that the former was stabbed by the Chinese student. Interestingly, George was critical of the attitude of the Lebanese 'tough guys' of the school 'who think they're it': 'The Lebs, they think, they wish, they rule the place, own the place because they've got the majority, and the Asians don't want to take any bull from them.' While both groups normally get along, George speculated that it sorted out the power relation. Things had settled: 'If anything, they're more friendly towards each other because there's more of an equilibrium between the two because now the Lebs know that they [the Asians] are capable of doing more.' Significantly, George's response was more passionate than his recount suggests. He threatened to take the Lebanese flag to school the next day, and sat in his bedroom with the flag wrapped around him.

Soon after, George, concerned that he was losing something, started reading books on Lebanese history and decided to ask his uncle to teach him to dance the *dabke* (traditional Lebanese folk dance): 'I've lost lots of language for instance. I pride myself on the Lebanese culture and country, that's why I wanted to learn *dabke*.... I want to learn from my background.' He would rather now go to a Lebanese party than an Australian one, 'because it's your culture, it's your national-ity. I don't think I'm Australian even though I was born here ... Culture is priceless. You can't pick it up anywhere. You can learn a language but not stuff that has been passed down through generations' (although that was what he was now attempting to do).

This new-found anchor to George's sense of identity, a marked change from the young man we interviewed three months earlier, suggests the kind of strategic quality to identity formation we have outlined. The irony, however, is that the student from the 'Lebanese' group whose stabbing instigated the change in George was of Greek background.

Conclusion

An ethnically based group of Lebanese boys includes Italians, Greeks and Viet-namese; a Syrian is happy to be seen as Lebanese because it is easier; an Australian-born boy asserts in a moment of passion that he was born in Lebanon; and another reinvents himself as archly Lebanese after his Greek mate is stabbed by a Chinese student.

Ethnicity, while asserted as fixed, often is revealed as fluid and shifting. It depends on context, topic and relations—it can vary across home, school and leisure; whether relations with others are involved, whether they be Asians, teachers or girls. Boys can be very Lebanese in relation to Anglos at school, or very Australian in relation to parents. This often involves, in some contexts, accepting the stereotype of oneself from the dominant culture or a pragmatic shifting of identity-content and boundaries. This shifting means that, sometimes, internal differences such as re-ligion are strong, then disappear. Identity, then, is not a static entity: it is fashioned

around different contexts—around home/parents, school, and leisure spaces—and in relation to others.

The processes of identification among these youths are complex. On the one hand they mobilise strategically essentialised notions of ethnicity in which their identity is mapped amongst a system of oppositions based on crude categories of self and other. This essentialism constructs a source of power, alternative to that of mainstream society from which they may be structurally excluded. This alternative, symbolic world gains strength from reversing the moral order of Australian society. As moral hierarchies have been crucial to systems of oppression of marginalised groups, those groups can invert that order and regain a symbolic sense of moral superiority by depicting a lax and dishonourable Australian-ness. On the other, the boundaries between identities, while perceived as rigid, can often be quite permeable. So, too, can the way identification works for these boys be fluid and multiple, attesting to the strategic and practical nature of identity formation. This study has suggested the extent to which essentialism and hybridity are not contradictory modes of identity, but are linked. Essentialism and hybridity, and points in between and beyond, provide these boys with a repertoire of socially useful subject positions appropriate for different uses, and in different contexts.

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