Multicultural Selves: Young Australian Muslims’ Images of Self and Belonging

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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

Signed:
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Summary

Diasporic Muslim communities have recently been the subject of intense public scrutiny in many multicultural Western societies, particularly since September 11, 2001. Australia is no exception. Increased national anxiety over the presence of Muslims in Australia has prompted, among other things, calls for headscarves to be banned in public schools and for Muslims who follow Sharia law to leave the country. In late 2005 anxiety erupted into widespread violence in the Sydney suburb of Cronulla, when some 5000 “Aussies” sought to forcefully reclaim “their” beaches from “Lebs”. While the conservative commentators who declared Cronulla to be the direct result of ideological multiculturalism may be in the minority, recent issues concerning Muslim Australians have most often been framed within a discourse of multiculturalism in crisis. This crisis cannot be interpreted simply as rhetoric, for it has taken place alongside a discernible political retreat from multicultural policy. Today, even relatively minor issues arising from the recognition of Muslim identity (women-only hours at public swimming pools, for example), prompt serious reflections on the future of Australia’s multicultural identity, and multiculturalism itself as a political ideology. Academics writing from within diverse disciplines and indeed across them have been no less critical of multiculturalism, albeit for very different reasons – normative theories of multicultural recognition are often said to reify cultures and may lend tacit support to harmful group practices. These criticisms raise important questions concerning identity, particularly the epistemological treatment of cultural identities and the conceptualisation of individual agency.

This doctoral thesis presents a “bottom up” view of multiculturalism, using ethnographic analysis as a basis for engaging with some of these issues. It explores how a group of 40 young members of an Australian Islamic youth association visualise their self-identity in a social environment in which their right to belong is often seriously questioned. Over a six-month period I assisted participants in the design and production of photographic self-portraits for inclusion in a public exhibition entitled I am a Muslim Australian. My analysis is structured around the narratives of selfhood and belonging that emerged through participants’ discussions of their images, and observations made during the time I spent with the association.
Public hostility towards Muslims was a prominent theme in these discussions. All of the young people involved in this study described the strategic ways in which they negotiate it, and many of the self-portraits they produced were consciously designed to subvert what they perceived to be negative representations of their identities. This incorporation of externally constructed representations of identity into self-representation is – as symbolic interactionists have long argued – fundamental to identity formation. The purpose of this study is not simply to describe this process, however, but to critically examine the dynamics of power in which it is enacted, both in relation to the public sphere, where Muslim identities are discursively constructed as Other, and also within the religious association to which participants belonged.

The dialogical conception of identity that informs this study is outlined in Chapter One. Here I explain how and why I make a seemingly unorthodox synthesis of the work of Goffman and Foucault. Most theories of multiculturalism are based on a similarly non-Cartesian understanding of identity, and I explore some influential arguments in favour of multicultural recognition, before describing in some depth the main critiques of the theories. These set the theoretical tone for later analysis chapters. The visual ethnographic methodology employed in this study is discussed in Chapter Two. The innovative studies involving visual methods that have inspired my methodological approach, and the important epistemological assumptions of this rapidly growing interdisciplinary field are discussed here. Chapter Three presents the images produced for the exhibition and provides an overview of the central themes participants explored in their images. These themes provide a structural framework the following four analysis chapters.

Chapters Four and Five are concerned primarily with participants’ articulations of their ethnic and national belonging, particularly in relation to Anglo-Australian cultural hegemony. Several participants explicitly described their sense of identity as “multicultural”, and a central aim across these chapters is to provide an account of how hybridity – a key theme in theoretical discussions of multiculturalism – is experienced at the everyday level and what this can contribute to broader discussions of multiculturalism. Chapter Six focuses on the experiences of the female participants who wear hijab. Historically contextualising contemporary public concerns over the hijabi body, I examine how participants used their scarves as a vehicle for voicing their resistance to public perceptions that they are oppressed. I also look at participant
agency in a more nuanced manner, exploring how participants who did not wear hijab negotiated subjective positions in relation to norms established by the association’s Islamic educators. This theme of agency continues into Chapter Seven, which focuses on religiosity and modernity. Drawing on several influential theories of modernity and identity, I outline the way in which participants view their religious identities as the outcome of rational reflexive choice, and the implications this has on the sociological study of religion. I consider what Muslim identities that are consciously constructed as “modern” mean in relation to Orientalist assumptions about Islamic subjectivity. This is significant given that these assumptions not only dominate public discourse on Islam, scholars otherwise seeking to subvert binary conceptual categories also often unwittingly infer them.
Introduction

I took [a photograph] of Barbie, my cockatoo; I had him on my head. I put him on my head and it’s like he’s flying, and I’m sort of on his path, the way he is, and I’m a woman in hijab and I indicate myself as a bird. I’m free, you know, I have no limits in life, I can do whatever I want, study, educate… No-one’s gonna stop me coz this is my religion Islam. That’s what I meant. And Barbie — cockatoos — they’re on the Australian… you know your citizenship, when they give it to you, it’s got a cockatoo and a kangaroo on it so it also indicates that I’m an Australian Muslim. (Haifa)

Marcus, a 28-year-old builder from Penrith in western Sydney, according to the Herald wore a singlet with the words, ‘Mahommid was a [expletives]’, and raised his arms triumphantly, shouting ‘F--- off Leb’, as a young woman pursued by a frenzied mob of a thousand had her hijab torn from her head by a baretopped young man in board shorts, in the cause of that Australian value, respect for women. (Poynting 2007: 4)

In 1988, when I was ten years old, the Australian government threw a birthday party. Australia was turning 200, they said. A catchy television advertising jingle told us it was “the celebration of a nation” and urged everyone to “make it great in ‘88”; my favourite t-shirt at the time sported both phrases, along with streamers and balloons. At school they gave each of us a specially minted coin to commemorate the occasion. Mine had been miscast: the back and front weren’t aligned, so I asked to swap it. I wasn’t allowed. The government had made one for each child, the teacher said, there were no spares. In order to show our gratitude for our coins we had to complete a homework assignment: we were to go home and draw the bicentenary. Unsure what to draw, I asked my dad – a cartoonist – for advice. He suggested a bison, a “10”, an “R” and an “E”. Frustrated, I settled on a variation of the same thing most of my classmates drew: a group of men in red uniforms proudly hoisting the Union Jack on a beach, their tall ships moored behind them. One of those central figures had in his charge a group of convicts towing iron balls; other onlookers included various native animals, and, in one corner of the picture, thin black figures holding spears.

Although I literally grew up with Australian multiculturalism, my childhood sense of belonging to the Australian national community was shaped almost exclusively around the Anglo-centric vision of nationhood depicted in this drawing. This was so much the case that in that same year, when a copy of the First Fleet passenger list was distributed in class, I eagerly scoured it and was genuinely surprised and disappointed to find that my surname was not there, despite knowing perfectly well that both sides
of my family were of much more recent migrant origin. My miscast coin was therefore an apt metaphor for my self-identity in this respect: the almost primordial sense of ethnic belonging that allowed me to imagine British convicts to be my direct ancestors sat at odds with the real-life migratory histories of my family.

The miscast coin metaphor also neatly describes the relationship between my childhood identity as an Australian and the way in which Australian identity has been officially defined by the state. Australia was then – as it is now – an avowedly multicultural nation. In contrast to other societies in which multiculturalism is associated primarily with the support and maintenance of minority cultures, Australian multiculturalism (as consistently articulated through government policy statements since the 1980s) is said to offer a vision of nation identity relevant to all Australians, not just minority groups (Joppke 2004: 244-247). In my experience, however, this notion of multicultural identity had very little – if anything – to do with my sense of social belonging. In fact, my understanding of multiculturalism was for a long time restricted to the quaint (if not crude) variation of multiculturalism often referred to as “samosas, saris and steelbands” in the UK. A poster in the school hall depicting a stylised globe encircled by smiling yellow, pink, brown, white and black children holding hands beneath the word “multiculturalism” is one of my recollections. Another is a multicultural festival held at my local town hall where people dressed in national costumes sold food and craftworks from trestle tables. That particular event stands out as the first time I tried Malaysian sweets. As a result, multiculturalism still has an inverted Proustian effect on me: when I think of multiculturalism I can’t help but imagine the sickly sweetness of kuih kosui.

My experience of Australian multiculturalism is certainly not unique. Like most other Australians who either claim what I loosely term an “Anglo” identity, or possess the physical attributes (appearance, accent, etc.) that allow others to identify them as such, my experience and conceptualisation of Australian multiculturalism corresponds with what Ghassan Hage (1998) terms “White multiculturalism”: a vision of Australian social space that positions White Australians as its central occupiers, relegating “ethnic” or Indigenous others to the margins. Hage refers to this form of imaginary geography, to borrow Said’s (2003) term, as a fantasy because those it deems Other do not subscribe to it. If this is the case, how then do those who can’t mould their Australian identity so easily around White multiculturalism construct a
sense of national belonging? This doctoral research project is concerned with alternative narratives of self-identity and belonging in contemporary Australian society. As the opening quotes illustrate, I am specifically interested in how young Muslims see themselves and their place in Australia, particularly in relation to the way their very presence within the national community is problematised or, as described in one of these quotes, even violently contested.

Through the use of visual ethnographic methodology, my study explores how a group of young Muslims visualise their sense of national belonging. It is structured around my involvement with a Melbourne-based Islamic youth association. Over a six-month period between late 2005 and mid-2006 I taught photography to 40 members of the association’s adolescent development program. These photography workshops were incorporated into the weekly program structure, and were aimed at enabling participants to create photographic self-portraits for a public exhibition on the theme of Australian Muslim identity. While much could be written about the large body of images produced by participants in this study, this is not “visual” research in the sense that it is about visual artefacts or image production as such. Rather, the images and the processes through which they were created provide a methodological and analytical anchor. My analysis is based primarily upon participant narratives of selfhood expressed during the creation of their images and through recorded in-depth interviews in which their portraits served as the focal point of wide ranging discussions about self and belonging.

The visual methodological approach I adopted was devised as a means to help participants articulate what were often complex notions of selfhood. This study is also concerned with the visual in a more abstract sense, however, for it is framed by the paradoxical nature of Muslim visibility in Australian society. In recent years – like in many other Western contexts – diasporic Muslim communities have become increasingly more visible. One reason for this is simply a marked increase in the number of Australian Muslims: 340 400 Australians – 1.7 per cent of the total Australian population, compared with 1.1 per cent a decade earlier – identified themselves as Muslim in the 2006 national census (ABS 2007). Another is the close scrutiny under which Muslim Australians have found themselves in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks, and the subsequent US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. The dominant representation of the minority “Other” within Australian
media and political discourse has undergone a transformation from “ethnic Other” to “Muslim Other”, as Muslim Australians have been demonised through a series of moral panics (Poynting and Mason 2006). At the same time that images of Muslims as public menace loom large in the national psyche, Muslims themselves are very often absent from public debates in which their identity is at stake. When calls were made to ban hijabs in Australian public schools in 2005 (several weeks before I commenced fieldwork), for example, only one of the many opinion pieces published in major Australian newspapers actually expressed the views of a Muslim woman (Aly 2007: 108-110). Australian Muslims therefore find themselves in the curious position of simultaneously appearing to be everywhere yet nowhere within the Australian public sphere. The images produced by participants in this study are important in this regard, for the self-representation of Muslim identity – particularly Muslim youth identity – is a rare phenomenon in Australian society, especially in comparison to the omnipresence of externally constructed representations.

Representation – particularly the relationship between self and externally constructed representations of identity – is an important theme in this study. While the primary purpose of the Islamic youth association was to provide religious education to its members, one of its stated aims was to help young Muslims develop a sense of belonging to the national community. The association’s program workers therefore actively encouraged discussions about what it means to be a young Muslim in Australia. That encouragement, however, hardly seemed necessary as participants frequently arrived at program sessions eager to discuss events of the previous week that led them to feel alienated from the broader community. These discussions tended to be dominated by what the group perceived to be public misrepresentations of Muslim identity in the media, ranging from statements made by politicians to the portrayal of young Muslims in television programs. Participants also discussed incidents involving negative reactions to visible Muslim identity in everyday social encounters: being stared at in the street, for example, or, for one participant who had recently began wearing hijab¹, suddenly being greeted with a wan smile from a

¹ I use the word “hijab” as both a concrete and an abstract noun throughout this study. As a concrete noun it refers specifically to Islamic dress (the headscarf, and often loose clothing as well) while the abstract noun takes in not only the clothing itself, but also a notion of modesty of conduct that extends beyond dress. Participants used the two terms interchangeably, and I have sought to illustrate that by
previously warm and friendly neighbour. Participants’ expressions of self-identity were not merely articulated in the context of such misunderstandings or misrepresentations of their identity. These external narratives of Muslim identity were woven into participants’ expressions of selfhood and play a determining role in how they see themselves and the way they represent that sense of self to others.

The significant extent to which self-identity is constructed from outside is acknowledged throughout this study through the symbolic interactionist theory of identity underpinning it. Symbolic interactionists stress that self-identity is a process in which individuals are continually engaged in dialogue with the social world around them. Whether social interaction occurs between the individual and others encountered in day-to-day activities, the public sphere or an art gallery audience, self-identity is inherently intersubjective. This dialogical conception of selfhood is also relevant to this study in a more abstract sense, for it is central to liberal theories of multiculturalism. Such theories rely on the assumption that negative external representations of identities affect the way individuals and groups see themselves, ultimately impinging on their psychological wellbeing and ability to participate socially as equal citizens. The way in which I engage with this conception of multiculturalism as a theory of individual and group rights is outlined below. While Australian multicultural policy explicitly recognises the right of individuals or groups to express their sense of cultural identity, albeit within the boundaries of certain limitations, it prioritises a different notion of cultural identity.

Australian multiculturalism is primarily understood not as a politics of recognition but as a unifying national identity borne out of immigration. As in other avowedly multicultural societies such as Britain and Canada, policies of multiculturalism were adopted in Australia in response to large-scale post-war immigration in which Muslim immigrants played a significant role. Although the presence of Muslims in Australia actually predates British settlement and Muslims played an important part in the nineteenth century exploration of central Australia, Muslims have migrated to Australia in significant numbers only since the late 1960s when increased demand for labour led to the dismantling of the White Australia policy (Kabir 2004). In addition

using both myself. The same applies to the word “hijabi”, which participants used as a noun meaning a woman who wears the hijab, but more often as an adjective describing the same (i.e. “I was talking to a hijabi” / “I was talking to a hijabi woman” are both correct according to local usage).
to earlier waves of Southern European migrants, the arrival of large numbers of Turkish and Lebanese Muslims in 1969 and 1970 respectively rendered the previously existing Australian national identity based on Anglo ethnicity untenable. As Stratton and Ang (1998) argue, the *jus sanguinis* conception of national belonging that was the basis of the White Australia policy actually facilitated Australia’s transition to a multicultural identity; in Australia, multicultural policy could be adopted at state level without challenging the longstanding universalist images of nationhood that such a move would involve in countries such as France or the US.

While Muslim immigration was part of the process leading to the development of Australian multiculturalism, the presence of Muslims in Australia has recently – particularly since September 11 – been associated with a crisis in multiculturalism (Jakubowicz 2007). This situation parallels similar developments in other multicultural societies. In the Australian context, a report by the Anti-Discrimination Board of NSW (2003) examining media coverage of a series of local moral panics focussing on Muslims, including the Tampa crisis and “Lebanese gang” rapes, found that not only are they conflated with international events (the so-called “war on terror”), they are also seen to be directly related to Australian cultural policy, as evidence of the failure of Australian multiculturalism or of minority cultures being afforded privileges at the expense of the Anglo-Australian “mainstream”. For some, the death knell of Australian multiculturalism sounded internationally late in 2005 when a crowd of approximately 5000 young Sydneysiders, many of them draped in the Australian flag or wearing t-shirts emblazoned with racist and Islamophobic slogans, attacked anyone on or near Cronulla beach deemed to be of “Middle Eastern” appearance. The riots were sparked by a text-messaging campaign calling for “Aussies” to reclaim “their” beaches from “Lebs” after four young men of Lebanese background assaulted three off-duty lifesavers the previous week. Muslims were especially targeted, as the overtly racist behaviour of Marcus from Penrith described

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2 For a discussion on how this crisis has played out in Britain see Modood (2007).
3 In August 2001 a Norwegian cargo ship carrying mostly Muslim Afghani and Iraqi asylum seekers rescued at sea was denied permission to dock on the Australian mainland because those on board were “illegals” and potential members of “sleeper cells” (terrorists who lie dormant in the community for long periods before attacking).
4 These sexual assaults were committed by young Lebanese Muslim Australians in 2000, but received no significant media coverage until the following year. The crimes were predominantly represented as Lebanese Muslim “rape gangs” targeting white Australian women throughout the extensive media coverage of 2001 and 2002.
in the opening quote illustrates. While no one was killed, a number of people were seriously injured and police and ambulance officers were also assaulted. Revenge attacks occurred over the following days, as carloads of young Lebanese-Australian men bashed and stabbed several people in nearby Maroubra, and calls to descend on the Lakemba mosque in Sydney’s west circulated amongst those originally involved in the beach riots (Poynting 2007). In the aftermath of Cronulla, rightwing print media columnists and radio “shock-jock” DJs and their talkback interlocutors blamed the riots not on alcohol-fuelled racism but multicultural policy and its alleged fostering of separatist Islamist enclaves (Poynting 2007, Kendrick 2006); prominent conservative historian Keith Windschuttle even went so far as to dub Cronulla the “multicultural riots” (Moreton-Robinson and Nicoll 2006). While most centre-left commentators were quick to defend Australian multiculturalism, the discourse on multiculturalism in Australia since Cronulla has been overwhelmingly framed by the question – as one broadsheet headline put it a year later (Szego, 11/11/2006) – is multiculturalism dead?

This implication of Muslims in a discourse of multiculturalism in crisis has taken place alongside a discernible political retreat from multicultural policy in Australia. The idea of multiculturalism entered Australian politics under the Whitlam Labor government elected in 1971, and was developed into concrete programs and policies several years later under the conservative Fraser government (Lopez 2000). Following the election of a Labor government in 1983, policies introduced by the previous government remained largely intact until the mid-1980s, when Labor made a decisive move away from multiculturalism. Faced with vocal protest from migrant communities Labor recommitted to multiculturalism in an effort to secure the “ethnic vote” (Castles et al 1992: 71-78). In 1989 the Federal Labor government released a policy statement entitled *National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia*, which defined Australian multiculturalism as a social compact entailing civic rights and obligations:

The rights are:

- cultural identity: the right of all Australians, within carefully defined limits, to express and share their individual cultural heritage, including their language and religion;
- social justice: the right of all Australians to equality of treatment and opportunity, and the removal of barriers of race, ethnicity, culture, religion, language, gender or place of birth;
• economic efficiency: the need to maintain, develop and utilise effectively the skills and talents of all Australians, regardless of background.

The limits are:

• multicultural policies are based upon the premise that all Australians should have an overriding and unifying commitment to Australia, to its interests and future first and foremost;

• multicultural policies require all Australians to accept the basic structures and principles of Australian society - the Constitution and the rule of law, tolerance and equality, parliamentary democracy, freedom of speech and religion, English as the national language, and equality of the sexes;

• multicultural policies impose obligations as well as conferring rights: the right to express one’s own culture and beliefs involves a reciprocal responsibility to accept the right of others to express their views and values. (Office of Multicultural Affairs 1989: vii)

This conception of multiculturalism was upheld in 1995 (Office of Multicultural Affairs 1995), and in the policy statements made by the Liberal Howard government elected in 1996 (Commonwealth of Australia 1999, Commonwealth of Australia 2003). While this suggests that multiculturalism has remained a relatively stable national political ideology in Australia since its inception, other policies introduced after 1996 and government discourse on multiculturalism during the Howard era tell a very different story. Over three consecutive terms in office the Howard government withdrew funding from various ethnic community organisations, tightened immigration entrance requirements, reduced migrants’ access to welfare and abolished the Office of Multicultural Affairs (Forrest and Dunn 2006: 209, Noble 2005: 109). Howard government articulations of Australian multiculturalism consistently emphasised the need for adherence to “mainstream” Australian values that are presented as having emerged organically through the course of Australian history (Johnson 2007). Such values reflect an explicitly normalised Anglo-Australian identity: “Although people of different ethnic origins may not, for example, be expected to pass as being ersatz Anglo-Celts, they are expected to be integrated into values that the Prime Minister has identified as British” (ibid: 198).

The citizenship test introduced in 2007 is illustrative of this shift away from the civic nationalism outlined in the policy statements referred to above. The controversial test makes the acquisition of citizenship conditional on significant knowledge of not only useful civic information, but also familiarity with a populist version of Australian history that prioritises Anglo-Australian experiences and perceptions. Individuals applying for citizenship must demonstrate that they know, for
example, that a certain Australian “was the greatest cricket batsman of all time”; that the taxidermied carcass of a 1930s racehorse is held in the Melbourne Museum; and that some Australians apparently disregard the Gregorian calendar: “Many Australians count the years by the name of the horse that won the [Melbourne] Cup” (Commonwealth of Australia 2007: 26). The citizenship test is required to be taken in English, thus effectively restricting citizenship to proficient English speakers, as was the case during the White Australia era. The test further deviates from the policies described above by replacing the word “rights” with “privileges” and emphasising responsibilities and obligations throughout documents pertaining to it: “Australian citizenship is a privilege that offers enormous rewards to all who strive to uphold its obligations” (ibid: 1). Despite official government commitment to multiculturalism, in the words of Forrest and Dunn (2006: 209), “an ethnocultural or assimilationist perspective has returned to the forefront of at least government concern in Australia.”

The Howard government’s 2007 rebranding of the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs as the Department of Immigration and Citizenship further supports this view. In response to controversy caused by the removal of “Multicultural” from the department’s title, Howard remarked that while the government would not discourage immigrants from retaining “a place in their heart for their home culture [...] the premium must be upon, the emphasis must be upon, the dominant consideration must be, the integration of people into the Australian family” (ABC News Online, 24/01/07). While the Rudd Labor government elected in late 2007 has made an important symbolic gesture by recognising past injustices inflicted upon Indigenous Australians, at the time of writing the citizenship test is under review yet remains in place, and it is not yet clear whether a retreat from this assimilationist direction in cultural policy is likely.

The crisis in Australian multiculturalism, in terms of both policy directions and popular understandings of Australian identity, shapes this study in two ways. Firstly, given that issues concerning Muslims and multiculturalism dominated media and political discourse during the time I spent with Islamic youth group participants, Australian multicultural identity was a prominent theme in their narratives of selfhood and belonging. The Cronulla riots occurred shortly after the program commenced, and the fallout from the riots prompted public debate over “Australian values” that lasted well into the following year and beyond. I argue that, in contrast to the popular belief
that multiculturalism “is losing its salience among Australians” and “means little or nothing to our youngest residents” (Williams 20/05/08). Australian multiculturalism plays an important role in how the young people involved in this study see themselves and their place in Australia. Secondly, the crisis highlights the need for renewed scholarly engagement with theorisations of multiculturalism, particularly within the contemporary Australian context. This is because even relatively minor issues arising from the recognition of Muslim identity – relaxing school uniform rules to accommodate hijab or having women-only hours at public swimming pools, for example – prompt serious reflections on the future of Australia’s multicultural identity and on multiculturalism itself as a political ideology.

While much of the “crisis” in multiculturalism in Australia – as in other national contexts – may be the result of xenophobic reactions to Muslims due to increased anxieties over national security, there are valid reasons for questioning the central assumptions made about selfhood and belonging in theories of multicultural recognition. Certain scholars argue, for example, that state recognition of cultural groups is ethically suspect given that individual identity itself is inherently multicultural. Many of the participants in this study explicitly claim that their cultural identities are hybrid (or indeed in their own words “multicultural”). A detailed ethnographic mapping of the contours of hybrid identity as it is experienced at the everyday level is therefore undoubtedly highly relevant to the theorisation of hybrid identity in more abstract terms. For other scholars, the recognition of minority cultures is potentially harmful to certain individual members of minority groups because it may legitimise oppressive cultural practices. These arguments tend to focus on minority women – particularly Muslim women – and raise questions about practices such as clitoridectomy, forced marriages and hijab. The relevance of this study to those debates is somewhat limited given that there was no evidence that its participants were subject to violence or oppression at the hands of other minority group members. Even so, through the analysis of the power dynamics at play within the youth association, I argue that this study makes a contribution to these debates, particularly in terms of how individual agency is conceived.

This study therefore explores individual identity in relation to two of the three analytical registers of multiculturalism referred to by the French sociologist Michel Wieviorka (1998). According to Wieviorka’s typology, the term multiculturalism can
refer to the observable existence of and interaction between multiple cultural groups
within a state; normative political theories concerning how states ought to recognise
and manage cultural diversity; or the range of policies and programs states employ in
order to do so. A state can therefore be “multicultural” in one sense but not in another;
many states with culturally heterogeneous populations such as France, for example,
do not formally recognise that diversity at an institutional level. While these three
registers are interrelated in practice – in that multiculturalism in the sociological sense
of existing cultural plurality, requires the theorisation of how such diversity should be
recognised, which in turn influences policy directions – each register needs to be
recognised as analytically distinct. As Wieviorka argues (1998: 883-4), scholars too
often merge these approaches, “thus preventing us from knowing whether the issue at
stake is one of the diversified structure and working of a society, or a position as to
what would be desirable for society, or, finally, a reference to a specific institution or
law.” In this study I distinguish between registers by referring to existing cultural
diversity as “everyday” multiculturalism, and theoretical notions of how diversity
ought to be managed as “normative” multiculturalism. While I am conscious not to
conflate the two registers, issues concerning both are at stake and I adopt an
interdisciplinary approach as a result, drawing on both sociological theories of how
individual identity is constructed and normative theories of recognition put forward
by political theorists.

Although my approach is interdisciplinary, I nevertheless engage with questions
concerning the theorisation of multiculturalism from a sociological perspective. Put
simply, this study presents a “bottom up” view of multiculturalism, using sociological
findings as the empirical basis for entering debates concerning multiculturalism at the
theoretical level. Through thick ethnographic description I look at narratives of
everyday multiculturalism, which Stratton (1998: 15) describes as the “syncretic” and
“rhizomatic” way in which cultures “merge, creolise and transform as people live
their lives, adapting to and resisting situations, and (mis)understanding, loving, hating
and taking pleasure in other people with whom they come into contact.” This in itself
is valuable, for as Van Leeuwen (2008: 148) observes, sociological aspects of
multiculturalism tend to be treated as secondary to normative and institutional
questions of cultural diversity within scholarship on multiculturalism. In this respect
my study can be situated within and has been influenced by a wide body of
sociological scholarship on everyday multiculturalism and ethnic identity in Australia (Collins et al 2000, Vasta and Castles 1996, Castles et al 1992, Kalantzis 1988, Bottomley and de Lepervanche 1984). What sets my study apart from this literature, however, is its overriding concern with theoretical debates over multiculturalism that extend beyond the Australian national context.

Chapter One maps the theoretical terrain of this study. I begin by outlining the conception of self-identity that informs my analysis of participant narratives of self and belonging. While my theoretical approach draws strongly on the work of Erving Goffman, whose work can be described as symbolic interactionist (even if he himself did not use the term), it is also informed by (although this may initially seem incongruous) Michel Foucault’s poststructuralist accounts of subjectivity, particularly in relation to three key analytical themes in this research: embodiment, power and agency. As noted above, this conception of subjectivity as socially constructed is relevant to both the sociological and theoretical aspects of this study. It is an understanding of subjecthood that rejects the Cartesian logic underpinning the Enlightenment conception of subjectivity upon which universalist political theory is based; thus it is aligned with the way theorists of multiculturalism tend to view the subject. In this chapter I also outline major strong and weak theories of group rights, and present some of the critiques of such theories. In doing so I emphasise the ways in which subjectivity is conceived within these arguments, thus laying the foundations for taking up some of these issues in later analytical chapters.

The methodology used in this study is discussed in Chapter Two. Visual ethnography, while now a thriving interdisciplinary field, is often seen to be overly concerned with aesthetics at the expense of academic rigour. In this chapter I challenge this assumption by situating the research method I devised within a body of visual methodological literature that is shaped by the epistemological concerns of interpretive anthropology. I outline how anthropological engagement with the notion of reflexivity has influenced the methodological literature and studies I have drawn upon, and demonstrate the way in which it has been incorporated into my own methodological approach. I also provide a detailed account of how I sourced participants, which is particularly important given that I found that other researchers (at least in the local context), tended to regard the Iraqi and Afghani Shi’a communities from which participants were drawn as difficult for outsiders to gain
access to. The chapter concludes with a discussion about the method adopted in relation to analysing the visual material produced by participants.

Chapter Three provides an overview of the main (interrelated) themes of ethnic, gender and religious identity expressed through participant self-portraits. It is here that I engage most closely with the photographs created in the course of this study, and establish the basic structure of the four following analysis chapters.

Chapters Four and Five are concerned with ethnicity and national belonging. Following the dialectical conception of identity that frames this study – which necessitates looking at the interplay between self- and externally-constructed narratives of identity – Chapter Four focuses on participants’ own understandings of their self-identity as “multicultural”, while Chapter Five concentrates more on how external constructions of Muslim identity as Other shape the way participants construct and enact their identity. Both of these chapters engage with hybridity, which as noted above is an important theoretical concept within contemporary theoretical critiques of multiculturalism. Chapter Four uses the concept of diaspora in order to explore participants’ self-described hybrid identities, which are a consequence of transnational migration. In terms of normative theories of multiculturalism, hybridity is often associated with ambivalence, particularly in Homi Bhabha’s (1990, 2004) influential work. The central premise of this chapter is that the notion of ambivalence is also crucial to understanding hybridity in terms of subjective experience.

Chapter Five begins with an exploration of how participants negotiate the often precarious sense of belonging that is the result of their engagement with external constructions of Muslim identity. In this chapter I am particularly concerned with the intersection between participant narratives of everyday multiculturalism and the White multiculturalism described by Hage, especially the hegemonic power it affords Anglo-Australians. I explore this juncture first at an everyday level, paying particular attention to participants’ use of language and concepts associated with multiculturalism, then at a more abstract level, drawing on Simmel’s concept of strangerhood. There are clear parallels between my own Proustian understanding of multiculturalism described above and the last section of this chapter. Here I examine the use of gastronomic metaphors of consumption in relation to multiculturalism and representations of hybrid identity. Focussing on audience responses to one participant’s exhibited self-portrait, I draw on a variety of sources to highlight the
tensions implicit within multicultural celebrations of hybrid identities. In exploring
hybridity from the way it is conceived of within self-constructed narratives of identity
at the beginning of Chapter Four, to the external understandings of that identity at the
end of Chapter Five, my aim across these two chapters is to provide both an account
of how hybridity is experienced at an everyday level and evaluate its usefulness as an
analytical tool.

Chapter Six deals with the interplay between externally and internally constructed
narratives of selfhood in relation to hijabi identity. The hijab has long been interpreted
as a symbol of oppression in the West. I begin this chapter by charting the
development of Orientalist discursive representations of the hijabi Muslim body from
its use as a justification for imperialist expansion to contemporary efforts to define
national identity. I then turn my attention to the ways in which such deeply
entrenched perceptions of female Muslim identity shape the self-identity of hijabi
participants in this study. My analysis here highlights corporeality: the female Muslim
body has long been and continues to be placed at the centre of various Western
attempts to govern Muslim populations. As I will demonstrate, the body is also the
locus – at least in this study – of female Muslim resistance to the power of the
representations deployed in relation to those attempts. This chapter is framed by one
of the broader questions explored in Chapter One: is multiculturalism bad for women?
I argue that any consideration of minority women’s experiences in relation to
normative theories of multiculturalism should entail serious engagement with
questions of women’s agency – not as it is construed through Orientalist
representations, but as it is enacted in everyday settings.

The theme of agency carries over into Chapter Seven, which focuses on religiosity
and modernity. I outline the way in which participants view their religious identities
as the outcome of rational, reflexive choice, rather than adherence to tradition, and
consider what this means in relation to theories of secularisation. My aim here is not
merely to provide empirical evidence that challenges the Orientalist charge that Islam
is counter-modern. Rather, I seek to understand how and why the participants and
religious educators involved in this study consciously construct their religiosity as
modern. I argue that, for them, highlighting the rational aspects of religious
identification has much to do with challenging external perceptions of Muslim
identity, which leads me to consider the nonrational aspects of participant religiosity,
particularly in relation to hijab. This allows me to return once more to the question of minority women and multiculturalism examined in Chapter Seven. In this chapter I also revisit the concept of hybridity, this time drawing on the theory of alternative modernities to explore the changing nature of the social lives young Australian Muslims.
CHAPTER 1

Theorising Self-identity and Multicultural Recognition

The Social Construction of the Self

Within sociology and cognate disciplines where questions of self-identity are important, contemporary theorisations of self-identity are generally based upon a critique of an Enlightenment conception of subjecthood. Representing an important break with the pre-modern conferral of identity through traditionally recognised agencies of moral authority, that modern Western understanding of the self was underpinned by a logic succinctly captured by Descartes’ maxim, “Cogito ergo sum”: “I think therefore I am.” Hall (1992: 275) writes that this understanding was based on a conception of the human person as a fully centred, unified individual, endowed with the capacities of reason, consciousness and action, whose ‘centre’ consisted of an inner core which first emerged when the subject was born, and unfolded within it, while remaining essentially the same – continuous or ‘identical’ with itself – throughout the individual’s existence.

That conception of a free, autonomous social agent has been challenged by the idea that self-identity is socially constructed. This ontological approach, evident in Marx’s (1966: 509) assertion that it “is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary it is their social being that determines their consciousness,” has become the disciplinary norm in sociology, even if scholars hold differing views on the ways and extent to which external influences shape who we are.

Until the late twentieth century, symbolic interactionism provided the most detailed accounts of the social construction of identity within sociology. In an overview of sociological understandings of self-identity, Callero (2003) notes that recent scholarship on the self tends to be influenced not so much by the work of symbolic interactionists such as Cooley, Mead and Goffman, but by interdisciplinary interest in the effects of the exercising of social power on individuals. Callero advocates for a renewal of interest in symbolic interactionism in order to understand individual agentive capacity in the face of such power. Power and agency are important themes in this study and I address them below. Although I do not return to
Mead (as Callero suggests) in order to correct perceived problems in poststructuralist accounts of the relationship between power and the subject, I do draw upon the work of one symbolic interactionist – Goffman – for a number of reasons. Despite some notable problems with Goffman’s approach, his firm analytical focus on everyday interaction and appreciation of the embodied nature of such interaction is undoubtedly useful to this study. Also, looking at the shortcomings of his work provides a good entry point to more recent theorisations of subjecthood that address those issues. Goffman’s work, therefore, serves as a point of reference to tie together the varied conceptions of self-identity that have informed this study.

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (1973) uses a dramaturgical metaphor to describe self-identity. Focussing his analysis on everyday social interactions, he argues that individuals engage in public “performance” of their identities, like actors performing for an audience. Goffman argues that just as different theatrical productions require actors to take on different roles, individuals too must tailor their identity performances to the social context in which they are performed. How the “self” is portrayed in any given situation is shaped – consciously or unconsciously – according to our need to garner approval or acceptance from others, or by the traditions dictating the range of actions deemed appropriate to the social setting in which the interaction takes place. Self-identity, for Goffman, is therefore not a static set of attributes but a dynamic process that is realised only through social interaction.

The idea that we present ourselves as different characters before different audiences raises the question of authenticity. Goffman’s conceptualisation of identity as performance could be taken to imply that our “true” identity resides in an ever present back-stage self working to direct our public performances of identity so as to produce the desired audience responses. Goffman’s analysis, however, is so firmly focussed on the interplay that occurs between the actor and audience that it precludes any notion of a cynical authentic self lurking about behind the scenes:

In analyzing the self then we are drawn from its possessor, from the person who will profit or lose most by it, for he and his body merely provide the peg on which something of collaborative manufacture will be hung for a time. And the means for producing and maintaining selves do not reside inside the peg; in fact these means are often bolted down in social establishments. There will be a back region with its tools for shaping the body, and a front region with its fixed props. There will be a team of persons whose activities on stage in conjunction with available props will constitute the scene from which the performed character’s self will emerge, and another team,
the audience, whose interpretive activity will be necessary for this emergence. The self is a product of all of these arrangements, and in all of its parts bears the marks of this genesis. (1973: 253)

For Goffman, therefore, the “self” consists of the entire dramatic production; it is a synthesis of individual performance and audience reception of that performance. Our self-identity resides in the interplay between our public identity performances (and the associated private mechanisms underpinning them) and the audience for which it is performed.

Goffman has quite rightly been criticised for overly focussing on the public performance of individual identity at the expense of a more thorough exploration of the relationship between the acting and backstage self. As Anthony Elliott (2001: 36) argues, although Goffman maintains that there is a self backstage, the “psychic orientations or emotional dispositions” shaping the acting self remain sketchy in his work. For the purposes of the present study, the fact that Goffman presents an account of self-identity that is primarily concerned with the dynamics of the relationship between the individual and her everyday social surrounds is nevertheless an appropriate theoretical starting point. A useful conceptualisation of this relationship that sidesteps some of the problems associated with the Goffman’s theatrical metaphor can be found in Richard Jenkins’ (1996) notion of the “internal-external dialectic of identification”. Clearly influenced by symbolic interactionism, this is an understanding of the self “as an ongoing and, in practice simultaneous, synthesis of (internal) self-definition and the (external) definitions of oneself offered to others” (ibid: 20). For Jenkins, the self is the product of the process by which the stories that we tell ourselves and others about ourselves are interwoven with how they are perceived and reflected back to us (often in altered forms) by those around us:

Self-identification involves the ongoing to-and-fro of the internal-external dialectic. The individual presents herself to others in a particular way. That presentation is accepted (or not), becoming part of her identity in the eyes of others (or not). The responses of others to her presentation feed back to her. Reflexively, they become incorporated into her self-identity (or not). Which may modify the way she presents herself to others. And so on. As presented here, it appears simple, sequential and linear; it is multiplex, simultaneous and tortuous in practice. (ibid: 50)

What Jenkins is describing here directly equates with what Giddens refers to as “narratives of the self”, which he defines as: “the story or stories by means of which self-identity is reflexively understood, both by the individual concerned and by others” (1991: 243). In this study I explore participant self-identity through such
narratives of the self. It is important to note that the narratives explored here are not the private ones participants recount to themselves, but those that are represented to others. These take the form of not only verbal representations of self, but also visual representations of self, in the form the photographic self-portraits that participants created, as well as physically enacted representations of self-identity. In exploring how discourses of multiculturalism influence such representations, like Goffman, I am particularly interested in the way representations of self-identity are modified in accordance with participant preconceptions about how audiences will or (or in their eyes should) interpret them.

**Power and Self-identity**

Power is an undeniably important theme in contemporary sociological theorisations of identity. If self-identity is socially constructed in the dialectical manner described above, then it follows that a sociological analysis of self-identity must consider the relations of power within which subjects construct their identities. Foucault provides the most obvious theoretical means for doing this. Although I seldom engage explicitly with Foucault in the following chapters, his work provides a valuable theoretical frame for conceptualising participant self-identity in relation to power exercised over them by various authorities and thus requires some attention. In examining Foucault in relation to this study I find it useful to draw parallels with Goffman; while a French poststructuralist and a North American symbolic interactionist may initially seem unlikely bedfellows, I argue that their work can be seen as complementary in several significant respects.

The most obvious correlation between Foucault and Goffman is their shared interest in what Goffman (1991:11) terms total institutions, those “place(s) of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life.” In describing the modernisation of total institutions such as the prison and mental asylum, Foucault (1977) presents compelling accounts of how power comes to bear on the individual in modern Western societies. Goffman (1991), on the other hand, focuses on institutional power from the perspective of the subject, providing detailed ethnographic descriptions of how individuals behave in relation to it. Ian Hacking (2004), who also finds Foucault and Goffman relevant to
his work on power and subjectivity, observes that both Foucault and Goffman are interested in the power relations between institution and individual: Foucault’s analysis focussing on power itself in a top-down sense, Goffman’s on the individual in a microsociological bottom-up approach.

While Goffman informs my understanding of how identity is performed in everyday social interactions, his conception of power is limiting in the context of this study. As Hacking remarks (2004: 294), Goffman does not account for how the regimes of power embodied by total institutions come into existence, nor does he, I think, fully realise the potential for understanding how the way in which that power is exercised relates to other less overtly regimented areas of social life. In the introduction to Asylums, for example, Goffman (1991) is keen to make the distinction between total institutions with their “batch living” arrangements and other forms of social organisation (the family is the example he cites). According to Goffman, total institutions are unique forms of social organisation in that “they are the forcing houses for changing persons; each is a natural experiment on what can be done to the self” (1991: 22). This overt reference to the exercise of power over the institutionalised individual certainly has a remarkably Foucauldian ring to it (although Foucault would surely object to the word “changing”; “constituting” would be more in line with his thinking). Yet there is an important difference in the way Goffman and Foucault conceptualise power. For Goffman, the power of the total institution is confined to that particular institutional setting. Certainly the way power operates upon individuals in total institutions is different to other institutional settings such as the family. However, as Foucault demonstrates, there are also important similarities in the way power operates within total institutions and other social settings.

Foucault’s archaeologies of total institutions gain much of their potency by presenting contrasting images of the exercise of power over subjects. The grisly spectacle of the quartering of Damiens the regicide in the opening pages of Discipline and Punish (1977), for example, could not be more different to the picture of discipline painted at the end of that text. In the modern prison we find that the art of discipline has been refined by way of numerous technologies and techniques of power: panoptic architecture, systems of normalising judgement, micro-management of time, and so on. It is through these mechanisms of power that the government of
the conduct of individuals and populations is modernised and rationalised, and the
human sciences developed:

I am not saying that the human sciences emerged from the prison. But, if they had
been able to be formed and to produce so many profound changes in the episteme, it
is because they have been conveyed by a specific and new modality of power: a
certain policy of the body, a certain way of rendering the group of men docile and
useful. This policy required the involvement of definite relations of knowledge in
relations of power; it called for a technique of overlapping subjection and
objectification; it brought with it new procedures of individualization. The carceral
network constituted one of the armatures of this power-knowledge that has made the
human sciences possible. Knowable man (soul, individuality, consciousness, conduct,
whatever it is called) is the object-effect of this analytical investment, of this
domination-observation. (Foucault 1977: 305)

As Rose argues, this conception of government provides a very broad picture of
power operating within diverse settings for a wide range of purposes:

[It] draws our attention to all those multitudinous programs, proposals, and policies
that have attempted to shape the conduct of individuals – not just to control, subdue,
discipline, normalize, or reform them, but also to make them more intelligent, wise,
happy, virtuous, healthy, healthy, productive, docile, enterprising, fulfiled, self-
esteeing, empowered, or whatever. (1999:12)

This is not to say that Goffman is not attuned to these techniques of power Foucault
speaks of. Again, one could easily believe that it was Foucault rather than Goffman
who argued that:

When persons are moved in blocks, they can be supervised by personnel whose chief
activity is not guidance or periodic inspection (as in many employer-employee
relations) but rather surveillance – a seeing to it that everyone does what he has been
clearly told is required of him, under conditions where one person’s infraction is
likely to stand out in relief against the visible, constantly examined compliance of the
others. (1991: 18)

However it is Foucault who, by focussing his analysis on these mechanisms of power
rather than how individuals behave in response to them (as Goffman does), offers the
most scope for considering the effects of power beyond the confining walls of the
total institution, in settings in which the participants in this study find themselves.

Drawing on Foucault, throughout this study I conceptualise belonging as an
ongoing process involving the negotiation of multiple (often intersecting) relations of
power. Belonging, for the participants in this research project, is played out within the
context of power exercised by a range of authorities. The most obvious of these is the
state. Through immigration legislation and policies and the range of administrative
techniques employed to enforce them (from visa and citizenship application processes
to the incarceration of asylum seekers), the state determines who can and cannot
belong to the body politic in a very immediate physical sense. Elected representatives of the state also play a powerful normalising role in determining who belongs. Along with others whose voices hold sway in the public sphere, political elites contribute to the discursive construction of norms of national subjecthood through public debates over issues of national identity, most often by defining the characteristics of the deviant subject who ought to be denied the right to belong. These norms also operate in everyday social interactions. Deployed by those self-appointed White guardians of national social space described by Hage (see below), in interactional settings as diverse as schoolyard bullying, conversations between neighbours, and fleeting remarks made by strangers on the street, they are used to determine whether the subject is recognised as an authentic member of the national community, an intolerable Other, or a variation between. One of the aims of my study is to analyse how these relations of power come to bear upon the ways participants construct their self-identities, particularly in terms of their sense of belonging. As Hage (1998) points out, those who find themselves the discursive object of White multiculturalism do not necessarily submit to the power of that discourse. I seek to explore how they negotiate this positioning, and in doing so conceive of the participants in this study as agentive social actors, rather than the mere products of the discourse of White multiculturalism.

This consideration of participant agency could perhaps seem at odds with the Foucauldian macro-sociological frame within which I am situating this microsociological analysis of self-identity. As Allen argues (2000), Foucault’s assertion that the subject is the effect of power, and his claims about the “death of man” are routinely interpreted as the denial of the subject’s capacity for agency. A straightforward way around the difficulty that this reading of Foucault presents here would be to accept this as a flaw in Foucault’s work and appeal instead to Goffman’s overtly agentive conception of subjectivity. However, like Allen, I do not subscribe to the idea that Foucault’s conception of the subject implies that individuals do not possess agency, and want to briefly sketch out the case in favour of an agentive interpretation of Foucault. In this respect Allen (ibid: 120) makes a deceptively simple yet pertinent point: Foucault’s argument that the subject is an effect of power should not be taken to mean that the subject is merely or nothing more than the effect of power, “To say that subjects are the products of forces that are largely out of their
control, as Foucault does, is not to say that they have no control over anything whatsoever.” Bevir (1999: 67) puts forward a very similar argument; Foucault’s critique of the subject is a critique of Cartesian autonomy, not agency:

[Agents exist] only in specific social contexts, but these contexts never determine how they try to construct themselves. Although agents necessarily exist within regimes of power/knowledge, these regimes do not determine the experiences they can have, the ways they can exercise their own reason, the beliefs they can adopt, or the actions they can attempt to perform. Agents are creative beings; it is just that their creativity occurs in a given social context that influences it.

Bevir also makes a distinction between an “excitable” Foucault – who so famously pronounced the subject dead, and who sees the individual as a product of power – and a “composed” Foucault (evident in his later writings and lectures, particularly those concerning governmentality and care of the self) who allows room for the “subject to constitute himself within the context of a regime of power” (ibid: 68). Shortly before his death, Foucault (1988: 19) himself remarked that he had perhaps “insisted too much on the technology of domination and power”, and that he was becoming “more and more interested in the interaction between oneself and others in the technologies of individual domination, the history of how an individual acts upon himself, in the technology of the self.” For my purposes, the composed Foucault provides a conceptualisation of selfhood that augments what is useful in symbolic interactionism with a compelling account of the way power is exercised over individuals in modern societies that extends well beyond total institutions.

One of the types of power Foucault describes as pervasive in modern Western societies is pastoral power, which has spread from its origins in the Catholic Church throughout the social body (1994: 332-335). Existing in modern societies in multifarious forms and social settings, pastoral power manifests itself as a relation of care, of “spiritual guidance between a figure of authority and each member of his or her flock, embodying techniques such as confession and self-disclosure, exemplarity and disciplinship, enfolded into the person through a variety of schema of self-inspection, self-suspicion, self-disclosure, self-decipherment, and self-nurturing” (Rose 1999: 26). While Rose points out that pastoral care exists alongside disciplinary regimes of subjectification within many different types of social institutions (including schools, asylums and prisons), it is most immediately recognisable (and obviously most relevant here) as the modus operandi of religious organisations. In Chapters Six and Seven I examine how pastoral power operates within the Islamic
association to which participants belonged. Bearing in mind that this is not a total institution and submission to such power is voluntary, I am interested in how the authority of the association could be established and maintained in a secular societal setting, and the ways in which participants negotiated its norms of proper conduct. And this brings me back to Goffman, because my emphasis on subjective experiences rather than regimes of power calls for a methodological approach other than Foucault’s genealogies; it necessitates the kind of ethnographic investigation Goffman did so well.

**Embodiment**

Foucault’s work also highlights another serious problem with the Cartesian conception of subjecthood: its ontological separation of the mind from the body. In exploring the ways modern disciplinary power produces certain types of corporeality (the “docile” bodies formed through the disciplinary techniques described above), Foucault draws attention to the embodied nature of subjecthood. Rose, whose work on identity is heavily influenced by Foucault, maintains that

> If subjectivity is understood as corporeal – embodied in bodies that are diversified, regulated according to social protocols, and divided by lines of inequality – then the universalized, naturalized, and rationalized subject of moral philosophy appears in a new light: as the erroneous and troublesome outcome of a denegation of all that is bodily in Western thought. (1998: 7)

This Foucauldian understanding of subjectivity has contributed to a “corporeal turn” in critical theory, which has in turn inspired growing sociological interest in the body. Since the publication of Turner’s *The Body and Society* in 1984, numerous sociological theories of the body have emerged. Engagement with themes of embodiment in sociological research has become so commonplace that it is now appropriate to speak of sociologies of the body (Waskul and Vannini 2006:2).

This new found interest in the corporeal could be read as suggesting that within sociology and other social science disciplines (with the exception of anthropology), most scholars have, until recently, simply overlooked the social significance of the body. Such an interpretation is flawed, and warrants a brief note about the uneasy relationship between bodies and theories of identity. One of the crucial components of the mid- to late-twentieth century critical theory informing the politics of identity discussed below is a conscious distancing from the corporeal in the analysis of
relations of power in society. Following Fanon’s (1967: 31-44) important distinction between crude phenotypical theories of race and “new” racisms founded upon notions of cultural determinism, critical race theorists have been at pains to demonstrate that race does not exist within the body, but is a social construct that is written onto it. Similarly, as Witz (2000) argues, while feminist scholarship has been attributed with sparking the corporeal turn, as a philosophical project feminism has for many years actively sought to push the corporeal out of the analytical frame by replacing the biological determinism of sex with the social determinism of gender. In short, it wasn’t that bodies wandered off in critical theory and now must be mustered back, but that their longstanding status as the locus of the naturalisation of oppressive social practices rendered it necessary to send them away.

Although there is now a wealth of research in which the body is the direct object of sociological inquiry, my interest here lies not in embodiment itself. Rather, I consider corporeality analytically important to this study because, as Turner (1996:1) argues, modern Western societies are “somatic societies” in that “major political and personal problems are both problematized in the body and expressed through it.” Within such societies, particular types of bodies feature more prominently than others as the somatic vehicles for the expression of a variety of social problems. Certainly, in the “age of terror”, the Muslim body is constructed as especially problematic in Western societies. Throughout this study (and particularly in chapters Six and Seven) I’m interested in exploring how the problematisation of Muslim corporeality is negotiated within the dialectical identification process described above, particularly as it is played out in everyday social interactions.

To this point I have sketched out the theoretical framework underpinning this study in terms of the dialectical process through which self-identity is formed, and the intersubjective relations of power in which identities are enacted. I have also introduced corporeality as a concept that is relevant to the analysis of the dialectics of identification, and I will elaborate on this later in this chapter. What should by now be apparent is that self-identity is intrinsically linked to representation in both an internal and external sense, in terms of how the individual represents herself to others and how others perceive that individual’s identity and represent it back to her, and that a sociological exploration of self-identity entails analysing the interplay between these modes of identification.
**Self-identity, Collective Identity and Identity Politics**

In his influential essay, *The Politics of Recognition*, Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor (1992) presents a dialectical conception of self-identity. Like Jenkins, Taylor argues that individual identity doesn’t derive purely from within the self, but is “dialogically” constructed, meaning that it is shaped by and dependent upon a dialectical relationship with the social world. Identity for Taylor is inherently intersubjective because, as social beings, humans operate within “webs of interlocution.” An important point that both Jenkins and Taylor make is that it is not just individual identity that is constituted in this manner; collective identities are forged this way too. “That identity is, so to speak, both interior and exterior is one reason why it is so important for the integration within social theory of the individual and collective” (Jenkins 1996: 27).

A central premise of Taylor’s work is that public recognition of identity is a fundamental social requirement for individuals and groups alike:

> The thesis is that our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being. (Taylor 1992:25)

As Taylor points out, this is particularly destructive when individuals internalise negative representations of themselves. Nancy Fraser (2003: 24) explains this logic as follows:

> Depreciated in the eyes of the dominant culture, the members of the disesteemed groups suffer a collective distortion in their relation to self. As a result of repeated encounters with the stigmatizing gaze of a culturally dominant other, they internalize negative self-images and are prevented from developing a healthy cultural identity of their own.

Such an understanding of identity has a profound impact on the political accommodation of culturally diverse populations. According to Taylor, affording individuals and groups due recognition politically necessitates a revision of the “politics of equal dignity” that is associated with universalist political programs that, in order to uphold Enlightenment-derived philosophies of universal human worth, aspire towards the extension of the same set of rights to all citizens:

> With the politics of equal dignity, what is established is meant to be universally the same, an identical basket of rights and immunities; with the politics of difference,
what we are asked to recognize is the unique identity of this individual or group, their distinctness from everyone else. The idea is that it is precisely this distinctness that has been ignored, glossed over, assimilated to a dominant or majority identity. (Taylor 1992:38)

The recognition of identities in their uniqueness, Taylor argues, is central to the “politics of difference” that is characteristic of theories of multiculturalism. Such theories therefore represent a radical ontological shift in the way that the self as political subject is understood.

**Theories of Multiculturalism**

For a significant number of philosophers and social theorists, issues of culture have to a large extent replaced class as a primary theoretical focus within normative theories of justice. This shift is the result of increasing demands for the political recognition of group identities sparked by the US black civil rights movement of the 1960s. Today, demands for recognition are made on the part of group identities based on ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion and (dis)ability. The political realisation of such claims can result in exemptions from laws which penalise or burden cultural practices; assistance to do certain things the majority can do without assistance (i.e. affirmative action); land rights; the application of internal rules for group members; public recognition of traditional legal codes; and the political representation of minority groups (Levy 1997). The varied and sometimes conflicting theoretical positions that can be subsumed beneath the banner of multiculturalism share a common concern with how and why such claims should be accommodated within democratic nation-states.

This study is not directly concerned with organised collective claims for recognition and their public policy implications, but rather with how young Muslims incorporate notions of multiculturalism into their sense of self, and the way in which this intersects with the White multiculturalism that is dominant in Australia. However, the normative theories of multiculturalism that inform and/or justify claims for recognition raise important questions concerning the epistemological treatment of identity and culture. By exploring political theorisations of multiculturalism in some detail, paying particular attention to some of their shortcomings, I foreshadow the direction that the analysis chapters take in this respect. Two themes emerging from my engagement with critiques of multiculturalism concern culturally hybrid subjectivities and the intersection of gender and “minority” cultures. These are also
prominent themes in the portraits produced by participants and they frame my analysis of participants’ narratives of self and belonging. I have already made clear that I am particularly conscious of the ways in which multiculturalism is understood and experienced at the everyday level. As participants’ narratives of self presented in the following chapters will demonstrate, the language and many of the key concepts central to political theorisations of multiculturalism are frequently transposed into discussions and visual representations of national belonging, albeit in vernacular terms. The theories discussed below also provide a useful background in that respect.

While multiculturalism is undoubtedly a contested term, and theories of multiculturalism vary considerably, they are generally structured around the notion that cultural identification plays a central role in individual and collective well-being. For proponents of multicultural recognition in all its conceptual forms, culture provides the social context in which individuals can make fulfilling life choices and participate in communal existence in a meaningful way (Benhabib 1999: 407, Gutmann 2003: 41, Parekh 2000: 47). Most theorists of multiculturalism argue that individuals have the greatest potential to construct meaningful lives through the powerful sense of belonging they feel within their own culture. As Parekh (2000: 156) writes, “a sense of rootedness, effortless communication, a structured moral life and ease of mutual understanding, all of which are important parts of human well-being, are the spontaneous products of membership of a stable cultural community.” For Margalit and Raz (cited in Kymlicka 1995: 89), cultural belonging constitutes a more substantial basis for self-identity than accomplishment because our need to feel that we belong precedes our desire to achieve goals.

Implicit in these understandings of the self as culturally embedded is a critique of the liberal autonomist notion of the self, in which a subject capable of autonomous will pre-exists the exercise of that will. As Sandel (1998:12) points out, this Kantian “deontological” view of the subject involves an epistemological rather than psychological claim: it does not imply that individuals are socially detached to the point that they can overcome personal prejudices or convictions in the exercise of their will. Even so, communitarians such as Sandel argue that the Kantian view and more recent reworkings of it, as found in Rawls’ early writings, emphasise the autonomy of the subject to the detriment of understanding the importance of culture in relation to individual identity. In a similar vein, Joppke and Lukes (1999:3-4) make a
distinction between a singular understanding of culture, where culture is, according to the Kantian conception, “the mark of human beings as moral agents directing their lives according to universal moral laws”, and a plural understanding inspired by Herder in which culture refers to “the particular life form of a collectivity as against the life forms of other collectivities.” They argue that multiculturalists identify with this Herderian view of culture.

Understanding culture as the basis of subjective identity has significant ramifications for democratic politics when the social institutions of the state are connected with particular culture(s) rather than others. According to Gutmann (2003:41),

Democratic politics typically depends on some dominant culture that includes a common language (or languages), school curricula, occupations, ceremonies and holidays, and even architectural styles that are not culturally neutral. Members of minority cultures are therefore denied equal freedom and civic equality, the argument continues, when democratic governments fail to protect minority cultures while effectively protecting the dominant culture simply by virtue of politics as usual.

In his influential *Multicultural Citizenship* (1995), Kymlicka similarly argues that recognition of cultural identity is necessary for maintaining social harmony because tensions over the conflicting demands of cultural minorities sometimes lead to violence. He asserts that a theory of recognition is a necessary supplement to human rights theory, which he sees as an inadequate framework for answering difficult questions concerning culture, including which language(s) should be nationally recognised or what degree of cultural integration national governments can demand from immigrants. While most proponents of multiculturalism would agree with both Gutmann and Kymlicka’s descriptions of the cultural particularity of national political space, there is significant variation among theoretical approaches as to how group rights should be realised. One central area of difference concerns whether the state should place internal restrictions on cultural groups where cultural practices are seen to violate individual rights. Strong theories of multiculturalism are synonymous with what the French term “communautarisme” (as distinct from Anglo communitarian political philosophy) and are often referred to as “mosaic” multiculturalism. Strong multiculturalists posit that nation-states are ideally comprised of a mosaic of clearly delineated cultural groups subject to minimal state interference. By contrast, soft theories of multiculturalism, while still concerned with the maintenance of the cultural integrity of minorities, are generally characterised by the tendency to
privilege individual rights over those of the group when the two are seen to be in conflict.

Kymlicka’s theory of multicultural citizenship is a clear example of soft multiculturalism. Kymlicka (1995: 152-172) argues that while democratic nation states should afford certain group-specific rights to national minorities, these rights need to be subject to limitations applying to both the internal dynamics of minority groups and the external relations between different groups. Firstly, individuals within the minority group must be ensured freedom from restrictions on their basic civil and political rights, and must be allowed the capacity to revise elements of their culture as they desire. Secondly, any system of rights that would allow one group to oppress another (e.g. apartheid) cannot be tolerated. According to Kymlicka, a liberal conception of minority rights must therefore require that the principles of individual freedom and personal autonomy are upheld within the group and that minority and majority groups are granted equal political standing. Halbertal and Margalit, on the other hand, exemplify a hard multiculturalist approach to group rights. They argue that a group’s right to uphold culture practices should have precedence over individual rights, provided that individuals are assured the right to exit the cultural group (Gutmann 2003: 58-63). While Halbertal and Margalit do not provide an explanation for why only a right of exit should be upheld as a fundamental individual right, Gutmann (ibid.) believes that their argument is based on a liberal notion of individual informed consent, where failure to exit the group could be assumed to signify consent to group practices, including those which deny group members fundamental rights enjoyed by members of society outside the group. Gutmann is highly critical of this model of group rights, arguing that some cultural practices, such as denying children the right to education, can affect the free exercise of this right because such practices diminish group members’ ability to construct meaningful lives outside the group. Kymlicka (1995: 86) agrees, asserting that “the choice to leave one’s culture can be seen as analogous to the choice to take a vow of perpetual poverty and enter a religious order.” Appiah (2005: 78) is also critical of the hard pluralist principle of right of exit, drawing attention to its incompatibility with the multiculturalist notion of the socially constructed subject: “if the unencumbered self is a myth, how do you extricate yourself from the context that confers meaning?”
Kukathas (2003) provides a somewhat more substantial justification for privileging group rights over individual rights. His argument derives from what he sees as the shortcomings of Rawls’ proposed restrictions on cultural groups that want to live collectively apart from the national society. Rawls’ approach to group rights requires that members of minority groups be afforded the right to keep their children out of the public education system if they believe it to conflict with the beliefs or interests of the group. However, this is subject to two main limitations. Firstly, children must be imparted with an understanding of their civil rights so that when they reach adulthood their continued group membership is not based on ignorance of their rights or fear of punishment from the group if they leave. Secondly, their education should prepare them to function as members of the broader society by imparting them with some sense of political virtue so that they can interact peacefully with people outside their group (ibid: 123). Kukathas finds Rawls’ approach problematic because it presupposes the existence of a shared national moral outlook that is decidedly autonomist in character. For Rawls, like other soft multiculturalists, certain group practices that violate liberal principles of autonomy and individuality, even where there is no adverse effect on individuals outside the group, cannot be tolerated in a just society. While Kukathas is aware of the severity of some cultural group practices, including clitoridectomy, restricting women’s access to education and denying children life-saving medical treatment, he nevertheless advocates that the principle of multicultural toleration be extended to allow minority groups full control over their own affairs. According to Kukathas, withholding the right of the majority culture to intervene will allow those cultural practices to change through interactions with groups of different moral outlooks, avoiding the situation where minority elites clinging to “illiberal” cultural practices as an act of defiance against (real or perceived) outside oppression. While the result of tolerating these practices may lead to the existence of, as Kukathas puts it, “islands of tyranny in a sea of indifference”, he maintains that this is preferable to the centralised tyranny of the majority: “One reason to prefer it is that while all power tends to corrupt, absolute power corrupts absolutely” (ibid: 137).

Kukathas’ theory of group rights exemplifies the argument made by many multiculturalists – particularly strong multiculturalists – that Western liberalism is one of multiple moral outlooks and attempts to assert its inherent superiority should be
treated with suspicion. Whether explicit or implicit, this view is (to varying extents) a central tenet of most theories of multiculturalism: “To the degree that there is a coherent intellectual doctrine beneath its manifold manifestations, multiculturalism appears as a critique of Western universalism and liberalism, with affinities to post-structuralism and communitarianism” (Joppke and Lukes 1999: 5). For communitarians, claims of a universal system of values that transcends cultural and structural particularities have been rendered suspect by the atomizing effects of free-market liberalism (Lasch 1995: 93). For others, the main criticism of universalism concerns the absence of a neutral framework for assessing conflicting cultural claims. Parekh (2000: 16), for example, argues that those who continue to judge non-liberal moral outlooks from within the parameters of universalist liberalism are guilty of “moral monism”. The accusations of moral monism commonly leveled at classical liberalism, he claims, remain relevant to contemporary forms of liberalism: “For many liberals, non-liberal ways of life are irrational, tribal or obscurantist…” According to this rationale, universalism has a distinct cultural character and any attempts to characterise it as neutral are ethnocentric. Todorov argues that universalism is underpinned by “imperialism and colonialism, the subjugation of the Rest by the West” (cited in Joppke and Lukes 1999: 5). These views are premised upon postcolonial analyses of the fundamental role Enlightenment-derived universalist philosophy played in the imperial conquest of the “Orient” (Said 2003, Amselle 2003), and the epistemological relativism that has framed methodological debates over writing about culture, most notably within anthropology (see Clifford’s Writing Culture 1986), but also across the social sciences as a whole. Claims of cultural particularism are not just concerned with the historical roots of universalism but also its contemporary character, evident in Taylor’s assertion (1992: 62) that liberal universalism “is not a possible meeting ground for all cultures, but is a political expression of one range of cultures, and quite incompatible with other ranges.”

Another area of contention among theorists of multiculturalism concerns how cultural collectives are defined within theorisations of multiculturalism. When discussing the rights of cultural minorities Kymlicka is most concerned with what he terms “societal” cultures. According to Kymlicka (1995: 76), a societal culture “provides its members with meaningful ways of life across the full range of human activities, including social, educational, religious, recreational, and economic life,
encompassing both public and private spheres. These cultures tend to be territorially concentrated, and based on a shared language.” This definition encompasses national indigenous minorities and cultures connected to territories absorbed into larger national societies by way of conquest or modern nation formation, such as the Basques, Bretons and Corsicans within France. Kymlicka draws a distinction between these societal cultures and immigrant minority cultures. He argues that immigrants should not be considered members of societal cultures because they cannot recreate their societal culture in their new country given that they migrate as individuals and families rather than entire communities, and therefore do not bring with them the institutions necessary to maintain their societal culture (Kymlicka 1995: 77-78). His notion of societal cultures also precludes religious minority communities, which do not make the territorial claims, associated with indigenous and national minority cultures. This does not mean Kymlicka believes that minorities originating through immigration or based on religion are not sometimes entitled to group rights; he simply reserves the consideration for an extensive range of rights (including secession) for societal cultures. Other scholars have looser categorical requirements in their definitions of cultural groups than Kymlicka. Gutmann’s conception of cultural groups takes in certain religious groups, which she considers to represent “fairly encompassing cultures” (2003: 39). Gutmann (2003: 40) also adds that when defining a cultural group theorists generally assume a “rough fit” to Kymlicka’s description: “Actual cultures encompass the lives of their members in many of these ways but not necessarily all.” Seyla Benhabib (1999: 407), however, finds Kymlicka’s notion of societal cultures untenable, arguing that he has “conflated forms of collective public identities that were institutionalised by welfare states with the concept of culture”: 

There are British, French, Algerian nations and societies that are organised as states; but there are no British, French, Algerian “societal cultures” in Kymlicka’s sense. Any complex human society, at any one point in time, is composed of multifarious material and symbolic practices with a history. This history is the sedimentation and repository of struggles for power, symbolisation, and signification – in short, for cultural hegemony – carried out among groups, classes, and genders. There is never a single culture, one coherent system of beliefs, significations, symbolisations and practices, which would extend “across the full range of human activities.”

Thus, for Benhabib, there are no sustainable grounds for making normative distinctions between the cultural identities derived from narratives of nationhood, ethnicity, religion or social movements. What is most significant about Benhabib’s
argument, for the purposes of this study, is that she raises the important issue of cultural reification.

**Multiculturalism and the Problem of Cultural Reification**

Many scholars are critical of multiculturalist representations of cultural groups due to perceived tendencies towards essentialist notions of culture. According to this rationale, the dynamic and often complex heterogeneous nature of cultural groups is overlooked in favour of constructing simplified group representations. The cultural identity conferred to nations, minority groups within them or even “civilisational” collectives is constructed as natural or at least not contested, rather than being seen as the expression of a select range of symbols and practices elevated above many others through continuous social interaction.

At an international level Yuval-Davis (1997: 56) highlights the homogenising and reifying force of certain multiculturalist positions by drawing attention to UNESCO’s 1993 publication entitled *The Multicultural Planet*. According to the view presented by the UNESCO document, the world is neatly divided into distinctly separate cultural blocks designated as European, Russian and eastern European, Arab, North American, Latin, African etc. which must negotiate their cultural differences through “positive open dialogue”. The flipside of this is, of course, open hostility. No leap of logic is required to move from the UNESCO document’s image of harmonious global diversity to the conflicts occurring around the cultural “fault-lines” marking the ideological divide between civilisations depicted in Huntington’s (1993) *Clash of Civilizations* thesis. According to Huntington, civilisational identity is the broadest form of collective human identity:

defined both by common objective elements, such as language, history, religion, customs, institutions, and by the subjective self-identification of people. People have levels of identity: a resident of Rome may define himself with varying degrees of intensity as a Roman, an Italian, a Catholic, a Christian, a European, a Westerner.

This notion of civilisation as a coherent level of subjective identity becomes highly problematic when a resident of Rome identifies herself as a Roman, an Italian, a Shi’ite, a Muslim and a European. Which side of Huntington’s Western-Islamic civilisational “fault-line” would she occupy? In addition to his reduction of historical and structural issues to problems of cultural difference, Huntington attempts to assemble the multitude of varied individual identities existing within his expansive
“civilisations” into homogenous collectives able to be represented by a single coherent identity. While it may emphasise cultural difference in order to achieve mutual understanding, the UNESCO document shares Huntington’s untenable essentialist conception of collective identity. Such an understanding denies the cultural heterogeneity existing between, and, perhaps more importantly, within the various national societies forming each cultural/civilisational block.

At a national level, multiculturalism challenges the notion of a coherent national cultural identity through the official recognition of cultural diversity. However, some critics argue that multiculturalism nevertheless perpetuates cultural essentialism at this level through the use of reified notions of ethnic identity in the representation of cultural minorities. Donald and Rattansi (1992: 2), for example, claim that multicultural celebrations of diversity in Britain concentrate on superficial manifestations of culture such as food, music and dress in what they describe as the “samosas, saris and steel-bands syndrome”. The visual representations of Australians found in James Jupp’s (2001) An Encyclopaedia of Australia and its People supports this claim. Photographs accompanying historical accounts of the different ethnic groups making up the Australian population predominantly depict group members dressed in traditional costumes of their countries of origin participating in cultural activities, particularly traditional dances. Captions beneath these pictures indicate the truncated ethnic identities represented. While one caption refers to a multi-national ethnic identity (“Arab-Australian”), the majority are primarily national identities: “Italian-Australians”, “Croatian-Australians” etc., and even simply “Spanish women”. Notably absent are images of the white Australians who might define themselves as “Australian” without a national prefix, and who might choose a configuration of football, meat pies, kangaroos and Holden cars (as the jingle of a long running Australian television commercial would have it) as representative symbols of their national culture. In this context such a stereotype would be as representative of Australian culture as the “old German-Australian” (ibid: 720), complete with feathered cap and antique pipe, is representative of contemporary German culture. Jupp’s use of photographic images therefore demonstrates that multiculturalists can hold a paradoxical position, which simultaneously rejects cultural essentialism in the representation of the members of one national society while embracing it in the representation of other sociologically multicultural national societies.
According to one important strand of the critical debate over multiculturalism, cultural essentialism is not limited to these examples but is characteristic of a politics of recognition in general. Behabib’s recent work examining the recognition of culture called for by multiculturalism focuses on the prevalence of flawed understandings of culture amongst multiculturalists. Benhabib (2002: 4) asserts that arguments in favour of cultural preservation – whether they are of the conservative primordialist kind employed by nationalists, or the progressive kind adhered to by multiculturalists – share several faulty epistemic premises she collectively terms the “reductionist sociology of culture”. These are:

(1) that cultures are delineable wholes; (2) that cultures are congruent with population groups and that a noncontroversial description of the culture of a human group is possible; and (3) that even if cultures and groups do not stand in one-to-one correspondence, even if there is more than one culture within a human group and more than one group that may possess the same cultural traits, this poses no important problems for politics or policy.

For Yuval-Davis, this impoverished sociology is due not solely to a lack of intellectual rigour concerning the complexities of culture on the part of proponents of multiculturalism, but is engendered by the very act of recognition itself. In order for a minority culture to be recognised within a multicultural social context it must be distinct from the majority culture. She argues that recognition therefore leads to a process of differentiation in which the construction of a group’s representative voice derives authenticity from its difference: “within multiculturalism, the more traditional and distanced from the majority culture the voice of the ‘community representatives’ is, the more ‘authentic’ it would be perceived to be within such a construction” (1999: 118). From this perspective the multiculturalist call for recognition of collective identity leaves little room for a more dynamic understanding of culture.

It is important to note that neither Yuval-Davis nor Benhabib suggest that the construction of reified representations of minority cultures is purely the domain of outsiders in the guise of cultural theorists or policy makers seeking to manage cultural diversity. Minority group members often play active roles in these constructions, which, while they may effectively deny the heterogeneity of a group, can also provide a deep sense of cultural pride and belonging for group members. This is especially important in societies where multiculturalist political ideologies were preceded by policies of cultural assimilation or worse, for example slavery or genocide. From this perspective recognition, even if it focuses on the most superficial elements of culture
and tends to overlook the rich variety of identities subsumed within a collective, is a welcome relief from past injustices. Yet while this may be the case, even seemingly benign essentialist representations of culture – representations which are constructed or assented to by certain group members and which acquire political salience through multiculturalist recognition – have the potential to marginalise certain other group members. Appiah (2005) refers to the ossification of cultural identity under the gaze of multiculturalism as the “Medusa Syndrome”. He argues that while the valorisation of previously maligned collective identities may often be historically necessary, merely rescripting negative representations into positive ones can impose constraints upon individual identity:

The politics of recognition, if pursued with excessive zeal, can seem to require that one’s skin color, one’s sexual body, should be politically acknowledged in ways that make it hard for those who want to treat their skin and their sexual body as personal dimensions of the self. And personal, here, does not mean secret (per impossible) wholly unscripted or innocent of social meanings; it means, rather, something that is not too tightly scripted, not too resistant to our individual vagaries. (ibid: 110)

Appiah’s argument supports Amselle’s assertion that recognising and problematising the Other go hand in hand (Amselle 2003: xiv). The criticism implied here is that multiculturalist recognition merely inverts the content of the category of Other in the dichotomy of Self/Other, without seeking to disrupt it. This criticism is clearly influenced by postcolonial theory. Drawing on the psychoanalytic work of Fanon concerning cultural identity under colonialism, postcolonial theorists argue that Western liberalism continues to rely on this imperialist Manichean structure of opposition in contemporary considerations of cultural identity. The postcolonialist position, according to Bhabha, instead emphasises the hybridity of the cultural identities that exist at the margins of designated cultures. For Bhabha, hybridity does not imply the inversion or correction of imperialist (mis)representations, it instead subverts the very binary terms on which cultural recognition is based. As a result “the difference of cultures can no longer be identified or evaluated as objects of epistemological or moral contemplation: cultural differences are not simply there to be seen or appropriated” (Bhabha 2004: 163).

The epistemological anti-essentialism of postcolonialism informs the sociological understandings of minority cultures employed by many critics of multicultural recognition. This is evident in Yuval-Davis’ (1997: 57) criticism of the assumption she claims exists within multiculturalist policies and discourse: that all members of a
cultural collective are equally committed to that culture. She argues that this assumption fails to recognise that individuals can be committed to multifarious cultures simultaneously and to varying degrees. In a similar manner, Benhabib (2002: 25) pleads for the “recognition of the radical hybridity and polyvocality of all cultures; cultures themselves, as well as societies, are not holistic but polyvocal, multilayered, centred, and fractured systems of action and signification.” In terms of sociological analysis, whether applied to the nation (see Bhabha 1990) or minority collectives, the postcolonial perspective calls for recognition of the heterogeneous nature of cultural collectives and resistance to attempts to establish what Bhabha (2004: 248) terms “holistic forms of social explanation.”

Other critiques of multiculturalism, including Susan Moller Okin’s (1999) essay *Is Multiculturalism Bad For Women?* focus on gender relations within minority collectives in order to illustrate the potentially harmful nature of multiculturalist ideologies. According to Okin, the tendency amongst political theorists writing on issues of group rights to view minority cultures as homogenous entities has led to the neglect of gender issues. She claims that theorists routinely ignore the domestic realm, which many liberals tend to equate with the private sphere, an area outside the scope of mainstream political theory. She argues that shifting the focus onto the private sphere and internal group relations raises two significant issues concerning the relationship between gender and culture. Firstly, according to Okin, defending the practices of cultural groups has a greater effect on girls and women than men and boys because female sexuality and reproduction are central themes in cultural practices and rules. Secondly, she claims that patriarchal control of women is a principal aim of most cultures, particularly where religion is concerned. She argues that while many contemporary interpretations of Christianity, Islam and Judaism are less focused on the control of women, in many orthodox and fundamentalist interpretations women’s sexuality is not only the focus of male control, women are also often blamed for men’s lack of sexual control. She cites examples of rape laws in many parts of Latin America, Southeast Asia and Western Africa that exonerate the perpetrator if he marries the victim and similar laws in the Middle East where female rape victims can be seriously punished or even killed for having committed the crime of having sex outside of marriage. Okin (ibid: 12) claims that certain minority cultures can therefore be considered “illiberal” in terms of gender relations because
they "substantially limit the capacities of women and girls of that culture to live with human dignity equal to that of men and boys, and to live as freely chosen lives as they can." For her the acceptance of illiberal cultural practices in the name of multicultural toleration withholds from women within those cultural groups the same rights that liberalism strives to uphold for women of the cultural majority.

Critics of Okin’s position argue that she falls prey to the very thing she expressly seeks to avoid: an essentialist view of culture (Nussbaum 1999; An-Na’im 1999). According to Benhabib (2002: 103), by mapping culture onto nation-states and continents Okin fails to differentiate between diverse traditions, peoples, territories and political structures. Bhabha is also critical of Okin’s “liberal gaze”, finding within it overtones of assumed Western moral superiority. He argues that the various cultural examples cited by Okin combine to form an ahistorical view of patriarchy in which non-Western cultures are represented as “having no local traditions of protest, no indigenous feminist movements, no sources of cultural and political contestation” (Bhabha 1999: 82). In contrast to Okin, Yuval-Davis focuses her feminist critique of multiculturalism on issues specific to minority cultures within western nations rather than making sweeping generalisations about cultures. According to Yuval-Davis, women take on the role of "border guards" in cultural collectives, through which the imagined community – whether minority culture or nation – is maintained and reproduced (1997: 39). She argues that within the context of multiculturalism, the maintenance of group differentiation through styles of dress, modes of cultural production (art, craft, culinary styles etc.) and language therefore rely heavily on symbols of gender. Structural factors further strengthen this role for female members of minority cultures:

Often, wives of immigrants are at least partially excluded from the public sphere because of legal restrictions, a lack of work opportunities or linguistic inadequacies, while at the same time they are expected to remain the primary bearers of a distinctive “home” culture. This is one of the main reasons that stronger social control is likely to be exercised on girls than on boys, especially among the children of immigrants. The importance of women’s culturally “appropriate behaviour” can gain special significance in “multicultural societies. (Yuval-Davis 1999:115)

Like Benhabib (2002: 88), Yuval-Davis bypasses Okin’s cultural essentialism to arrive at a very similar conclusion: that liberal multiculturalism can endanger the rights of minority women by tacitly condoning discriminatory cultural practices in the name of multicultural toleration.
Certain scholars agree with the central anti-essentialist tenet of postcolonial theory yet are deeply sceptical of its relevance as a politically useful form of critical theory. Like postcolonial theorists, San Juan, for example, argues that multiculturalist policies and programs continue to be underpinned by the Self/Other binary (2002: 6). He describes this “bureaucratic mechanism of inclusion” as “a mode of appropriation: it fetishizes and commodifies others…(R)etrograde versions of multiculturalism celebrate in order to fossilize differences and thus assimilate ‘others’ into fictive gatherings that flatten class, race, and nationality contradictions” (ibid: 7). Yet San Juan’s historical materialist position places him at odds with postcolonial theorists such as Bhabha and Spivak, whom he accuses of deploying “psychoanalytic and linguistic frameworks that take market/commodity relations for granted” (ibid: 252).

San Juan’s criticism of postcolonialism’s critical focus on culture at the expense of materialist concerns echoes earlier claims made by Ahmad (1996: 290), who argues that “the entire logic of the kind of cultural ‘hybridity’ that Bhabha celebrates presumes the intermingling of Europe and non-Europe in a context already determined by advanced capital, in the aftermath of colonialism.” This point has been argued most forcefully by Žižek, who asserts that pundits of contemporary critical theory are in many respects complicit in the maintenance and reproduction of capitalist social relations.

It is effectively as if, since the horizon of social imagination no longer allows us to entertain the idea of an eventual demise of capitalism … critical energy has found a substitute outlet in fighting for cultural differences which leave the basic homogeneity of the capitalist world-system intact. So we are fighting our PC battles for the rights of ethnic minorities, of gays and lesbians, of different life-styles, and so on, while capitalism pursues its triumphant march - and today’s critical theory, in the guise of "cultural studies", is doing the ultimate service to the unrestrained development of capitalism by actively participating in the ideological effort to render its massive presence invisible: in a typical postmodern "cultural criticism", the very mention of capitalism as a world system tends to give rise to the accusation of "essentialism", "fundamentalism" and other crimes. (Žižek 1997: 46)

The claim here is that focussing on the cultural at the expense of the material amounts to marching on the English department while the Right takes the White House (to appropriate Gitlin’s much cited phrase). Banting and Kymlicka refer to the logic underpinning this argument as the “crowding out effect”: that there is a finite amount of time, energy and material resources able to be mobilised for political struggle. This would suggest that it is not possible to simultaneously lobby the English Department for increased recognition of minority identities in course syllabuses and voice opposition to, for example, the shrinkage of national welfare programs. Banting and
Kymlicka argue that even if the Left is indeed generally resigned to global capitalism, victories in the “PC battles” Žižek refers to should be seen as opportunities to reinvigorate the Left politically and subsequently increase support for struggles focussed on redistribution. Fraser likewise does not see the “cultural politics of difference” and the “social politics of equality” as two mutually exclusive political projects competing for attention. She argues that socio-economic injustice and cultural injustice, while theoretically distinct, are in practice intertwined:

Cultural norms that are unfairly biased against some are institutionalized in the state and the economy; meanwhile, economic disadvantage impedes equal participation in the making of culture, in public spheres and in everyday life. The result is often a vicious circle of cultural and economic subordination. (1998: 23)

Fraser’s argument implies that even if critical theorists and activists devote more attention to cultural injustice than economic injustice, the effect is not likely to negatively impact upon redistribution, but rather go some way towards enhancing it through a flow-on effect from gains made in terms of recognition.

While I think Banting, Kymlicka and Fraser are undoubtedly correct in a normative sense, my own experiences lead me to feel that Žižek’s remarks accurately represent the worst of what is assembled beneath the rubric of cultural studies. I came to higher education in Australia (or was perhaps pushed into it) in the late 1990s after several years of unemployment sporadically broken by the type of low-skilled casual work that was bearing the brunt of successive neo-liberal industrial relations reforms. Upon entering the university it was disconcerting to find that, over in cultural studies, my peers seemed to be more concerned with deconstructing pop-culture than engaging with the pressing local and global political concerns that were to inspire those very same students to blockade the streets when the World Trade Organisation came to town. (A very bright activist friend’s dissertation on liminal space in soap operas was a case in point.) Yet to take this to be representative of cultural studies in its entirety would be misguided. As Hall has argued (1992), the intellectual origins of that field (at least in Britain) lie within critical theories that take what are perceived to be the shortcomings of orthodox Marxism – chief among them its economism, reductionism and Eurocentrism – as a starting point for theorising issues of power and domination. Hall’s own work on race and ethnicity draws heavily on Gramsci’s notion of ideology in this respect, and the question of whether that should be viewed as constituting a break with the Marxist tradition or a continuation of it into areas that
were previously under-theorised, glossed over or neglected altogether⁵, is not
important here. In answer to Žižek, if cultural theory of this persuasion (and the
politics of recognition it inspires) is silent on the issue of global capitalism it is not
because it is resigned to it, but because it recognises that it is not just economic capital
at stake in conflicts between different social collectives. In the culturally diverse
national context, problematic relations between so-called majority and minority
cultures are undoubtedly related at least in part to struggles over economic capital
(e.g. racism fuelled by anxieties over labour scarcity, the social effects of past
colonial economic exploitation, etc.) but should not be reduced to them. The task of
the social researcher addressing questions of cultural identity today, it would therefore
seem, consists of situating oneself somewhere between a politically purposeful yet
theoretically incomplete materialism, and the postmodernist fetishisation of signs and
language that can occur when one pursues too single-mindedly the theoretical
trajectories arising from the materialist approach.

**Multiculturalism and the Sociology of its Relations of Power**

As outlined in the previous section, a central critique of multiculturalism concerns its
potential to ossify cultural identities. Many scholars also argue that not all cultural
identities suffer the same fate in this regard. Yuval-Davis (1997: 56) points out that
while the liberal multiculturalist gaze reifies minority cultures, the naturalisation of
western culture continues. Any sociological analysis of minority cultures within the
context of an avowedly multicultural society, therefore, needs to consider what is
represented in the public sphere as the majority culture in this hegemonic sense,
regardless of whether it can realistically be said to represent the demographic majority
or not. This means looking beyond “culture of origin” as a primary analytical frame.
Sassen (1999: 78-79), writing about minority groups born out of immigration, argues

⁵ In Lenin's ([1917] 1999) account of imperialism, for example, the plight of colonised peoples as a
distinct phenomenon receives no attention. According to Lenin, imperialism represented the highest
form of capitalist exploitation, and colonised workers therefore presumably had the same interest in
shaking off their colonial masters as their exploited counterparts positioned on the wrong side of the
wage labour divide in the metropolis. The importance of theoretically distinguishing between issues of
economic and cultural domination was later made dramatically apparent by Third World theorists.
Fanon’s (1966) psychoanalytic mapping of the hellish contours of the cultural alienation experienced
by subjugated peoples stands as a graphic reminder of why systems of power need to be thought about
in more than economic terms, even where the accumulation of capital is their primary raison d'être.
that the focus on the internal dynamics of cultural groups and/or abstract relations
between them risks overlooking the “pain and rage” produced through the
intercultural relationship between the dominant majority and minority cultures.
Whether engagement with the majority culture leads to the need for the refuge of
one’s culture or fosters new alliances between group members, which blur or erase
previously existing gender or class boundaries, once this relationship is explored, she
argues, “culture of origin” no longer serves as a viable analytical tool. This argument
draws attention to the fact that minority cultures that derive their membership largely
from immigration are not simply smaller versions of the home culture. Even where
members of such minority groups have sought to retain their cultural identity and
have been aided by the state in their quest to do so, the institutional structures of the
country of origin cannot migrate with them. The individual identities of members of
such minority groups are instead constructed through an ongoing and often deeply
complex negotiation with the dominant culture. Returning again to the realm of
postcolonial theory, the notion of hybridity (as maligned by San Juan) must therefore
be a central theme in any consideration of this negotiation, and hybridity as lived
experience is therefore a central concern in the following chapter.

While Sassen’s exploration of majority/minority intercultural engagement is
classified with the sociology of the minority culture, others share this ontological
approach yet shift the methodological focus to the majority culture. In his influential
*White Nation: Fantasies of Supremacy in a Multicultural Society*, Ghassan Hage
(1998) provides a compelling account of how White multiculturalism operates as a
discursive practice enabling and reproducing White hegemonic control of Australian
national social space. According to Hage, an internal version of what Said termed
Orientalism operates within that space. This fantasy of White supremacy, as Hage
describes it, constructs an “ethnic” Other as an object to be governed. What some
have found controversial (see Hodge and O’Carroll 2006: 51-55) is Hage’s claim that
not only is this fantasy subscribed to by those Australian flag toting neo-fascists who
in 2006 rioted to protect “their” suburban Sydney beaches from invading “wogs”; it
is also present in the discourse of many who position themselves as anti-racist
defenders of multiculturalism. In this respect Hage is highly critical of the notion of
multicultural tolerance, arguing that the (White) tolerant subject of multiculturalism
also possesses the power to be intolerant, something the tolerated Other has no
recourse to. He goes so far as to argue that multicultural tolerance “is a strategy aimed at reproducing and disguising relationships of power in society, or being reproduced through that disguise. It is a form of symbolic violence in which a mode of domination is presented as a form of egalitarianism” (1998: 87). Specificities of the argument aside, the overall picture Hage paints is one of a multiculturalism that, as experienced and enacted by the White majority, poses no challenge to the hegemonic dominance of that majority. Hage’s main contention that the power derived from this position is not only exercised as violent rejection of the Other (as seen at Cronulla), but can also take the form of a positive embrace of what marks her out as different, is highly significant. In the context of this study, exploring this relationship of cultural domination in terms of the former is a fairly straightforward matter: although documenting racist/discriminatory attitudes towards the young people involved in this study was not one of its objectives, the narratives presented in the following chapters certainly suggest the existence of a White fantasy of supremacy. However, critiquing seemingly benevolent celebrations of the Other as Hage does is a less comfortable scholarly endeavour. It runs the risk of raising the hackles not only of well-intentioned anti-racist proponents of multiculturalism, but also those of the individual or group who are the object of that celebration, and who may (and quite likely) have a strong investment in such attention. Yet as awkward as it may be, I feel that the multiculturalist fetishisation of difference (the “Benetton” aspect of multiculturalism, as Amselle [2003] puts it) requires greater analytical attention, and I address this sentiment in Chapter Five by looking at a concrete example in the form of one participant’s self-portrait.

Central to Hage’s analysis of White Multiculturalism is a conception of belonging that is very useful to this study. Drawing on Bourdieu, Hage has theorised national belonging, as it is enacted in an everyday sense within a postcolonial Western context, as a market-like struggle over capital. Within the culturally diverse nation, accumulated cultural capital in the form of particular physical appearances, tastes, accents, etc. is exchanged for the symbolic capital of national belonging:

at the most basic level of its mode of operation, national belonging tends to be proportional to accumulated national capital. That is, there is a tendency for a national subject to be perceived as just as much of a national as the amount of national capital he or she has accumulated. Thus, a national subject born to the dominant culture who has accumulated national capital in the form of the dominant linguistic, physical and cultural dispositions will yield more national belonging than a male migrant who has managed to acquire the dominant national accent and certain
national cultural practices, but lacks the physical characteristics and dispositions of the dominant national ‘type’. This male migrant in turn can yield more national belonging than another female migrant or than a more recently arrived migrant who has not even mastered the basic national language or any of the dominant cultural practices. (Hage 1998: 53-54)

This capital exchange metaphor is a valuable way of theorising belonging for a number of reasons. Firstly, it allows for a more nuanced understanding of belonging than that engendered by the analytical categories of dominant and dominated; it accounts for both why there are degrees of belonging – that is, why some cultural identities and individuals are seen to belong more than others – as well as differences in the power held by those of the cultural majority. Secondly, it implicitly recognises the central role the body plays in the process of identification that determines national belonging. Even though a person may be legally recognised as belonging to the nation, through citizenship for example, this does not necessarily translate into recognition of belonging at an everyday level, where the embodied forms of cultural capital described by Hage provide a more immediate basis for determining who belongs.6

One final point that must be made in relation to Hage’s sociology of White multiculturalism concerns his use of the term “White”. Hage conceptualises Whiteness as a “fantasy position of cultural dominance” that is not biologically reducible to skin colour or ethnicity, although these are certainly important elements in one’s ability to be recognised as White. “Whiteness” is, according to Hage (1998: 58):

an everchanging, composite cultural historical construct. It has its roots in the history of European colonisation which universalised a cultural form of White identity as a position of cultural power at the same time as the colonised were in the process of being racialised. Whiteness, in opposition to Blackness and Brownness, was born at the same time as the binary oppositions coloniser/colonised, being developed/being underdeveloped, and later First World/Third World was emerging. In this sense, White has become the ideal of being the bearer of “Western” civilisation. As such, no one can be fully White, but people yearn to be so. It is in this sense that Whiteness is itself a fantasy position and a field of accumulating Whiteness. It is by feeling

6 A much earlier use of a similar economic metaphor can be found in W E Du Bois’ analysis of Whiteness in the southern states of the US in the 1860s and 1870s. He writes that although the wages of White labourers were low, Whites were “compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage. They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white. They were admitted freely with all classes of white people to public functions, parks, and the best schools … The newspapers specialized on news that flattered the poor whites and almost utterly ignored the Negro except in crime and ridicule” (cited in Banton 2004: 453).
qualified to yearn for such a position that people can become identified as White. At the same time, to be White does not mean to yearn to be European in a geographic sense.

To yearn to be White Australian is clearly to belong to a specifically Australian variant of the dominant North European tradition of domination over “Third World-looking people” – the term which sums up best the way the dominant Whites classify those “ethnics” with very low national capital and who are invariably constructed as a “problem” of some sort within all White-dominated societies.

I agree with this understanding of Whiteness as it is enacted within Australian society, and this is why I use Hage’s term “White multiculturalism” when referring to multiculturalism in its localised discursive sense. However, throughout this study I refer to White Australians as “Anglo”, a term that Hage avoids given that while White people unconsciously identify themselves as White, “Anglo” is not a “dominant mode of self-categorisation” among White Australians (1998: 19). While I do not disagree with this, “Anglo” is, however, a fitting term in the context of this study, given that I am not directly concerned with White subjectivity. As I will discuss in greater depth in Chapter Five, participants often used the term “Australian” in the same sense that Hage uses “White”. Yet, when queried, participants said that what they meant was “Aussie”, a term that had a very specific ethnic connotation for them. While I think Hage is quite correct in arguing that people who are not necessarily fair-skinned can possess other forms of cultural capital that can be considered White, Whiteness – as participants conceptualised it – tended to be the exclusive domain of those recognised as being of British descent. The term “Anglo” is therefore my approximation of what could be clumsily referred to as British-lookingness, and I use it because I feel that it is most consistent with participant perceptions of White Australians.

In looking at the theorisation of Whiteness and its relation to participant belonging it is perhaps also relevant here to briefly reflect on my own Whiteness. In the course of this research project my overtly Anglo physical appearance was often commented on (and was sometimes the focus of good-natured teasing). However, I was also recognised as “not really Aussie” given that my maternal family were of non-White (and, perhaps most importantly, non-Christian) migrant origins. To invert Hage’s conceptual framework, therefore, in the field of “Otherness” (as it was enacted in this

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7 This is also why I do not use the term “Anglo-Celtic” that White Australians often use to describe themselves. I apologise to any Australians of Irish descent who feel that I have erased them from this picture of White privilege; this was not my intention.
very localised context) a set of Jewish immigrant great-grandparents may not have constituted much in the way of the cultural capital needed to claim belonging as a non-White Other, I am convinced that my tenuous Otherness allowed me to sometimes transcend my otherwise corporeally discernible “Angloness” in the eyes of participants. In many circumstances, this most certainly allowed me insights into perceptions of Anglo Australians that a more straightforward Anglo identity may have otherwise precluded. On this methodological note, I now turn my attention away from the theories of identity and multiculturalism framing this study to look at who was involved in the research and how it was carried out.
CHAPTER 2

Visualising Muslim Identities

My first venture into the field, so to speak, occurred in early 2005 when I attended *My Dress, My Image, My Choice*, a public event held by a Melbourne community-based Islamic women’s organisation. The event received federal funding through the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA) “Living in Harmony” initiative, and was one of many community events held across Australia to mark “Harmony Day”, an annual one-day festival celebrating Australian cultural diversity.

Gathered in a plush suburban town hall conference room, an audience of approximately 100 mostly older Anglo-Australian women and roughly 40 hijabi Muslim women seated themselves at large round tables to see what had been promoted as an Islamic fashion parade. The event was women-only because, as the gregarious hijabi MC explained, it was felt that the best way to spread a positive message about Australian female Muslim identity was through Australian women and their informal social networks.

The “fashion parade” turned out to be a refreshing change from the image of vacant-eyed, underfed teenagers marching before fashion buyers or bored shoppers that the term usually evokes. A dozen Muslim women, dressed in Islamic street wear, formal wear, bridal wear and even a hijab bathing suit wove their way between the tables to an upbeat soundtrack of contemporary Islamic music. Each woman introduced herself to the audience; spoke briefly about her background, work or study; and explained the outfit she was wearing. Interspersed with commentary from the MC, the parade served as an informative introduction to what the women felt hijab represents in Islam, as opposed to the different cultural meanings attached to it; and, through the snippets of life-stories told by the “models”, helped demonstrate to the predominantly non-Muslim audience that the lives of hijabi women are as diverse as any other segment of the Australian population.

A halal lunch followed the parade, and audience members were encouraged to get to know the women at their tables. Muslim organisers and those who took part in the
parade dispersed themselves among the many tables that consisted of only non-Muslims, so that all of the lunchtime conversations included both Muslim and non-Muslim women. I had strategically sat myself at one of the two tables occupied predominantly by Muslim women who were not involved in the event, having come along as audience members. Introducing myself as a researcher upon arrival, I was somewhat overwhelmed by how supportive and helpful these women were. As the lunch progressed, I was introduced to members of the organising community group and talked at length to two women at the table who were particularly interested in my research. One of these women said that she had come to the event because was extremely upset by the negative way in which Muslims are spoken about on the commercial breakfast radio program she listens to and would like to see that redressed in any way possible. She said that initiatives such as *My Dress, My Image, My Voice* would go some way towards this, but added that she doubted the people who believe what she called propaganda about Muslims would attend such a gathering. The second woman, who was actively involved in a prominent Islamic community group, described her personal brush with Australian media constructions of female Muslim identity. When a commercial television station approached the community group for participants for a forum about Islam to be aired on a tabloid-news style current affairs program, she organised a group of articulate women to attend. She said that in the ensuing negotiations with the program’s producers she was told to ensure that the group wore black hijabs for the filming for the sake of visual conformity. Already uneasy about being involved in the forum but eager to change negative public perceptions about hijabi women, she said that this stipulation ultimately led her to decide to withdraw from participating altogether.

After lunch women from several local and regional Islamic community organisations spoke formally about their personal experiences of being Muslim in Australia. The emphasis was clearly on providing correctives to common misconceptions about Muslim women by explaining the basics of Islam and the role they perceive women to play in it. While these speeches tended to be very funny – one of the women described herself as an “Aussie Mozzie”, for example, and I was introduced to the term “having a bad hijab day” – this did not detract from the overall impression that there is something seriously wrong with the way female Islamic subjectivity is understood by many Australians, and that Muslim women are unfairly
placed in a position from where they must defend themselves against damaging representations of their identity. This was reinforced during the question time that followed when one non-Muslim woman, after hearing first-hand accounts of what hijab means to the Muslim women involved in the event and the reasons they wear it, still felt the need to ask the speakers to reassure her that they weren’t wearing hijab under their husband or father’s duress. From a semiotic perspective, it therefore seems that what has come to be signified by the hijabi woman (at least in this case) is powerful enough to undermine even her own articulated reality. Seen through the lens of Hage’s (1998) critique of White multiculturalism, this particular exchange can be read as a White worrier’s reluctance to relinquish her paternalistic role as multicultural defender of minority rights, despite overwhelming evidence that her concern is misplaced. In a more general sense, the event itself validates Hage’s argument that White multiculturalism supports a relationship of power that privileges Whiteness. The expression of Islamic identity in this context is not simply a straightforward public representation of female Islamic lifeworlds, but a carefully constructed strategy enacted with the specific purpose of altering White perceptions of the ethnic Other.

Apart from introducing me to supportive contacts, this event reinforced the important role representation must play in the consideration of Islamic identity in a diasporic context. Issues of visual representation are especially important where female Islamic identity is concerned, for it is the visible expression of that identity, in the form of the hijabi body, that is particularly contentious in Western diasporic contexts. In France, for example, identifying as Muslim may be permitted within public schools, but the visible manifestation of that identity is not. Likewise, as illustrated above, the visual trope of the hijabi woman often “speaks” louder than her own voice. In short, the external aspects of the dialectical process of identification that I am interested in tend to be not only somatic in the case of Muslim women, in that Islamic identity is problematised in the body, but also primarily visual, in that the Otherness of the hijabi body is externally determined first and foremost through its visibility.

This study recognises the importance of the visual in the dialectical construction of Islamic self-identity through the incorporation of visual ethnographic research methods into the research design. The photographic self-portraits produced by each
participant in this study were created in collaboration with both myself and other participants. The following section of this chapter provides a brief introduction to the growing field of visual social research, and situates examples of the collaborative studies that have informed the methodology developed here within it. I then outline the rationale underpinning the methodology selected, before describing how it was eventually implemented. The chapter concludes with a brief reflection on how image analysis in a visual research context relates to the broader themes of representation that are at stake in this study.

**Visual Ethnography**

Researchers who use visual research methods frequently claim that the visual is undervalued within the social sciences. According to Hughes-Freeland (2004: 205), “the mainstream logocentrism of academe results in such works being classed as subordinate to written analysis and presentation of research results.” Emmison and Smith (2000: 2) argue that within sociology in particular, visual researchers have been “ghettoized and reduced to communicating with each other about a narrow range of specialist issues.” While words and writing still certainly dominate the social sciences, these proclamations are beginning to seem overstated. Pink’s (2006, 2007) recent overviews of visual ethnographic research practices indicate the existence of a flourishing array of diverse interdisciplinary research projects, and strong student demand for visual methodology courses in Britain and elsewhere (Banks 2001: 2) suggests that if visual research can still be described as marginalised, then the corresponding demand for experienced practitioners will ensure it does not remain that way for long.

While university ethics committees (known as institutional review boards in North America) may often have reservations about certain visual research methods, disseminating the results of completed studies is becoming much easier. Advances in publishing technologies mean that the incorporation of images into monographs is no longer prohibitively costly, while online academic journals often welcome visual content and peer refereed print publications such as *Visual Studies* (formerly *Visual Sociology*), *Journal of Visual Culture* and *Visual Anthropology* are dedicated to visually orientated research. In terms of research focused on themes of identity, recent publications in mainstream journals academic indicate that the findings of visual
research studies are reaching audiences beyond specialist publications (see, for example, Twine’s (2006) and Knowle’s (2006) respective contributions to *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 29, no. 3). At the teaching front, social research that includes visual results is well suited to contemporary education delivery practices. All the courses that I taught into during my doctoral candidature at RMIT University included significant amounts of visual material, whether in the form of films, Powerpoint slideshows or hypermedia content. The assembly and delivery of such materials is no longer time consuming and does not require access to non-standard equipment. In fact, many young researchers in well-equipped Western universities would be hard pressed to recall a time when access to a lap-top and data-projector in order to deliver a lecture or conference paper was not the norm. If visual research methods remain epistemologically suspect for some, then this certainly stands in marked contrast to the visual turn in day-to-day academic life.

As Pink (2004: 8) notes, visual methodologies are as varied as ethnographic projects. However, in terms of the research process, images are incorporated into research in three ways: as data; as part of the data collection process; and in the presentation of research findings (Knowles and Sweetman 2004). Information about people, their experiences, beliefs and cultural practices and how they see themselves and are seen by others can be found in all manner of already existing visual data, as well as that produced or selected by researcher participants. Such data can be as diverse as anthropological archival photographs (see Edwards 1992, Pinney 1997), advertisements (see Goffman 1979, Grady 2007), children’s drawings (see Whetton and McWhirter 1998) and even photographs left on pet gravesites (see Chalfen 2004). Potential research data are of course not limited to still images, and can also consist of non-figurative visual representations such as maps, tables and diagrams (see Banks 2001: 23-33). Emmison and Smith (2000), who argue that visual research tends to be unnecessarily dominated by photographic images, extend the conceptual realm of the visual to include three-dimensional data such as museum exhibits and customised cars, and “lived visual data”, in the form of personal and public spaces. The potential sources of visual data are therefore virtually limitless. In terms of visual data collection methods, showing images to research participants as a means of stimulating discussion in interviews is a well-established ethnographic research technique (Collier and Collier 1986). While this technique is often termed “photo-elicitation”, such
images need not be photographs. Heath and Cleaver (2004), for example, showed clips from popular television programs to research participants to “break the ice” and stimulate discussion in ethnographic interviews. Lastly, the ways in which research findings might be communicated include photo-essays (Visual Studies regularly includes photo-essays), ethnographic film or hypertext such as web content (see, for example, www.artlab.org.uk) or CD-ROMs.

My study involves the use of participant-produced visual data in the form of photographic self-portraits. The relatively recent research projects described below had the greatest influence over the method I devised. An earlier methodological text specifically focusing on the use of visual research in relation to self-identity also initially seemed promising in terms of research design. In Photographing the Self: Methods for Observing Personal Orientation, clinical psychologist Robert Ziller (1990) uses content analysis to explore questions of identity through participant-produced photographs, a method that entails coding the various visual symbols contained within each photograph for quantitative analysis. This is a useful approach in relation to some aspects of self-identity. In one study carried out among university students (Ziller and Rorer 1985), for example, Ziller found that shy students showed a marked tendency to produce fewer photographs depicting people than their more outgoing colleagues.

From a sociological perspective, however, Ziller’s approach is limited by the polysemous nature of photographs. While Ziller admits that the coding process can be problematic because photographs are “infinitely describable” (1990: 39), and as such can be saturated with symbols, I find that he does not engage sufficiently with the meanings of those symbols. Firstly, coding symbols as “religious iconography”, “food”, “interior”, etc. as Ziller does overlooks differences in the generic conventions of image production. For instance, is what people photograph the same across cultures or social classes? Bourdieu’s work on taste and distinction indicates that it is not. Bourdieu (1984: 35-40, 45-47) demonstrates that class and gender play a significant role in the aesthetic judgements people make about not only photographic images, but the material world in general. In another study, Ziller asked Polish and American students to construct images depicting their concept of the “good life”. The results demonstrated considerable difference in image content between the two groups. In his analysis the author considers the likelihood of certain objects being present in each
place (stereos, for example, frequently appeared in the American images yet were, as objects, relatively rare in Poland at the time) and the values held by the two groups. However, might not the Polish conception of what constitutes an object worth photographing differ from the American? If so, then Ziller’s cross cultural comparison could yield unreliable results. Secondly, this form of empiricist analysis (without lengthy consultation with the image-producer) relies on the assumption that visual phenomena have, beyond a superficial level, unambiguous semiotic significance. This is where things really become unstuck. As far as my study is concerned, some of the objects photographed by participants require considerable cultural knowledge in order to understand the significance attached to them, while others are so deeply personal that an uninformed reading cannot possibly grasp the intended meaning.

To criticise quantitative visual research carried out in a different disciplinary setting any further would be unproductive; I have mentioned it here only as a way of providing contrast to the epistemological assumptions that most often inform contemporary ethnographic visual research practices, including those underpinning this study. In the past decade, writing on visual research methods has become increasingly influenced by the epistemological turn towards reflexivity that has gained credence across the social sciences. Reflexive research is guided by the assumption that social research is always inherently political “in the sense of being implicated in power relations”, as Hammersley (1995: 103) puts it. Social research can therefore no longer mimic the positivist approach to knowledge of the natural sciences. The notion of a detached, impartial researcher is replaced by that of the researcher deeply implicated in multiple and often intersecting power relations. Within sociology, recent debate over “public sociology”, cohering around Michael Burawoy’s (2005) presidential address to the American Sociology Association, demonstrates an unprecedented discipline-wide (at least within the English-speaking world) epistemological engagement with the notion of reflexivity. Broadly speaking, public sociology refers to a reflexive project that seeks to foster critical awareness of whom sociological research is for, both in terms of intended audiences (e.g. other sociologists or non-sociologist publics) and whose interests it serves (e.g. policy-making clients as opposed to social movements).
From an ethnographic fieldwork perspective, Clifford’s (1986) *Writing Culture*, a collection of essays by prominent anthropologists, has played a crucial role in informing considerations of the relationship between the researcher and her subjects, particularly concerning the ethnographic representation of the Other. Arguing that researchers must carefully consider the power dynamics of their role, Clifford (1986: 6) contends that ethnographies are fictions:

To call ethnographies fictions may raise empiricist hackles. But the word as commonly used in recent textual theory has lost its connotation of falsehood, of something merely opposed to truth. It suggests the partiality of cultural and historical truths, the ways they are systematic and exclusive. Ethnographic writings can properly be called fictions in the sense of “something made or fashioned”...

In other words, it is the undeniably constructed nature of ethnographic writings (the researcher deciding what to include and why, according to both explicit and implicit concerns) that warrants the term “fiction”. Ethnographies are also “fictional” in the sense that a shift in the ontological treatment of the object of ethnographic writing – culture – precludes the possibility of an empiricist epistemology:

If “culture” is not an object to be described, neither is it a unified corpus of symbols and meanings that can be definitively interpreted. Culture is contested, temporal, and emergent. Representation and explanation – both by insiders and outsiders – is implicated in this emergence. (ibid: 19).

The fact that it is amongst anthropologists, and visual anthropologists in particular, that this notion of reflexivity has been most enthusiastically received stands in stark contrast to early anthropological and sociological practices. Many scholars argue that the historical origins of ethnographic research lie in the European subjugation of the colonised Other (see Vidich and Lyman: 2000). Ethnographic photography, in particular, was an important technology of imperialist governance. Photography was a means through which anthropologists sought to scientifically “prove” evolutionist theories of race that positioned colonised populations as lagging behind the West on a teleological scale of development, thereby justifying exploitative imperial rule (Edwards 1992). Various anthropometric systems involving the photographing of indigenous subjects alongside measuring devices and grids were devised in order to provide an empirical basis for comparing the phenotypic features of different peoples (see Spencer 1992). The use of anthropometric props such as measuring sticks became an accepted convention in nineteenth century photographs of colonised peoples, as images in which the props obviously serve no ostensible purpose demonstrate (Pinney 1997:50). Even seemingly innocuous representations of
indigenous populations often served very direct political purposes. *The People of India* (1868-75), for example, consisted of eight volumes of 468 photographic prints depicting (erratically classified) Indian “tribes” and “castes”. Notably, half of the 200 published sets were reserved for “official use”. Created in the wake of violent insurrection against the Raj, Pinney (1997: 34) argues that the publication is illustrative of the British colonial administration’s “ongoing desire to provide practical clues to the identification of groups which had so recently had the opportunity to demonstrate either their fierce hatred of British rule or their acquiescence.” This is but one example drawn from the wide body of literature on imperialist ethnographic photography; I will take up the issue of early photographic representations of Muslim women in a later chapter. For now it is sufficient to point out that the reflexive turn in visual ethnography is highly appropriate in light of – and undoubtedly informed by renewed interest in – past injustices inflicted upon Other populations.

A reflexive approach to ethnographic research entails an examination of one’s involvement in the research process. Writing oneself into the research, so to speak, has become standard ethnographic practice. The methodological design of this study has been influenced by visual researchers who not only reject a neutral “scientific” epistemology, but who also actively embrace the notion of ethnography as construction by emphasising collaboration between the researcher and research participants as ideal practice (da Silva and Pink 2004, Pink 2007). Between 1975 and 1989 anthropologist Corinne Kratz (2002), for example, photographed the cultural rituals and daily activities of the Okiek people of Kenya. Kratz later sought to exhibit a selection of the images in order to address issues concerning the nature and formation of cultural stereotypes and how they might be challenged. Before exhibiting the photographs in the US, Kratz showed prints to members of the Okiek community and recorded their responses. The pictures that were then exhibited were accompanied by Kratz’s captions along with excerpts of dialogue generated as a response from the Okiek themselves. The responses offered an insight into how the Okiek perceived themselves as well as their concerns over how they are represented to outsiders, especially to European or North American audiences. Kratz’s description of the project not only emphasises the intersubjectivity existing between herself and
her research participants, but also provides an interesting insight into the dynamics of the relationship between self and representation:

Questions of identity and cultural difference figure centrally in both the communicative practice and the politics of representation associated with exhibitions, and they are a recurrent topic in my analysis… In creating Okiek Portraits, I sought to foster possibilities for visitors to encounter Okiek as interconnected individuals, and to encourage contact and interaction across differences in ways that acknowledged contemporary Okiek life in Kenya. (Kratz 2002: 3)

In aesthetic terms, the images that formed the basis of Kratz’s exhibition do not breach the accepted generic boundaries of anthropological photography; they are typical of the types of images one associates with publications such as National Geographic. Olivia da Silva (da Silva and Pink 2004), by contrast, radically breaks with such conventions. Da Silva uses overtly staged photographs to communicate issues of cultural change and identity in a comparison of the fishing communities of Grimsby, UK and Matoshinos, Portugal. Setting herself up as a resident photographer within each community, she became involved in the daily lives of her subjects. Part of the larger project involved the production of a set of studio photographic portraits of individual members of the small Portuguese fishing community and British fish market traders. The backgrounds of her portraits are significantly different in each cultural context. The Portuguese portraits are photographed in front of a backdrop of cascading fishing nets of varying brown tones. Pieces of rope and orange floaters are strewn apparently haphazardly through the tangled mass of nets. In one portrait, a small dog perches on top of the large mound the nets form where they meet the floor. In the Grimsby photographs, by contrast, a large sheet of blue plastic tarpaulin is used as a backdrop. This visual contrast operates as a metaphor for the differing ways in which change, in terms of the modernisation of European fishing industries, has been culturally interpreted in each place. In her analysis of one of da Silva’s portraits, Pink (2004: 164) remarks that objects included in each photograph were selected after the artist conducted interviews and informal conversations with the subject:

Through collaboration and negotiation they produced a portrait that represents elements of [the subject’s] personal and professional life… Thus da Silva implies the intersubjectivity between people and their material cultures, suggesting how the narratives of individuals and objects intersect. However da Silva’s methodology appreciates that meanings are not made simply through the photographer’s creativity and intentionality and contained in the image, but are interpreted by viewers.

This appreciation of intersubjectivity is very much in line with the theoretical framework of my study. While the method used differs somewhat from da Silva’s
approach, her work has influenced the methodological design by demonstrating how photographic portraiture can constitute an innovative and useful social research method.

Although I discovered her work after commencing the fieldwork component of this study, it is also worthwhile briefly mentioning photographer and educator Wendy Ewald. While she is not a social researcher, Ewald employs a method very similar to the one I used. Working in locations as diverse as Morocco, India, the US and UK, Ewald teaches photography to children so that they may express their own understandings and perceptions of their lives and communities to a wide audience. Ewald often collaborates with the children in the production of studio-style self-portraits, and the resulting images bear an aesthetic resemblance to the portraits produced by participants in this study. In particular, it is Ewald’s combined role as educator/artistic collaborator that interests me. Her use of her technical photographic skills to help young people express themselves visually reflects my methodological intentions in this study. He comment on her artistic approach, “it doesn’t interest me to put a frame around somebody’s world… it interests me to help bring pictures out of that world” (Hyde 2005: 173), is an apt description of my own research approach.

**Designing and Carrying out the Study**

As an undergraduate student I supplemented my income by working as an assistant to a photographic portrait artist, so the potential for incorporating photographic portraits into my own research was immediately apparent. In popular contexts, portraits that tend to be perceived as “good” are those that use the visual to “say something” about their subjects. Ideal practice in constructing photographic portraits that seek to express a sense of identity (as opposed to formalist studies of the aesthetics of human corporeality) necessarily involves the establishment of a relationship of mutual respect between the artist and subject. In my own experience, the construction of photographic portrait images had always been an inherently intersubjective process, one that seemed highly compatible with contemporary ethnographic research practices and an ideal basis for a collaborative visual methodology.

Working with participants to construct self-portraits also corresponded with the process of identification I was interested in, particularly the politics of representation
that are part of that process. Creating self-portraits would obviously require, on the part of participants, considerable self-reflection in order to work out how they would represent themselves visually, and a mindfulness of how such representations might be interpreted by others. In other words, thinking through how to represent internal narratives of self in a photographic image necessarily involves a simultaneous consideration of their reception by an external audience. This methodology is therefore ideally suited to a study of the dialectic process of identification described in the previous chapter. Not only does it encourage reflexive participant engagement with that process, it does so in a way that reflects the intertwined nature of its internal and external aspects.

Although the development of the research methodology used here has been inspired by formal photographic portraiture, the idea of a self-portrait in this context need not necessarily involve a visual depiction of the corporeal self. While I am interested in embodied aspects of self-identity, particularly the ways in which bodies become the locus for the political expression of social anxieties, I am also cognisant of the fact that the self, as it is internally and externally understood, extends beyond the boundaries of the flesh. Individual identity is also experienced through and inscribed in material culture; as Pink observed in relation to da Silva’s work above, narratives of self and objects frequently intersect. Whincup (2004), whose visual ethnographic work explores the convergence of selfhood and objects, uses photographs to demonstrate how objects become mnemonic repositories for self-identity. According to Whincup, objects can transcend their intended functionality by acting as signifiers for memories of personal relationships and experiences. In doing so they become charged with emotional value that often far outweighs their monetary worth. While the meanings inscribed onto objects in this sense tend to be highly personal and not immediately intelligible to others, objects can also be the means through which narratives of self are articulated externally. Bourdieu’s (1984) work on taste and distinction is particularly relevant in this respect. In arguing that the aesthetic choices people make in the objects they accumulate are far from arbitrary, but rather are reflective of an individual’s social standing, he allows objects to be seen as the bearers of often highly specific information about how people see themselves, how they are perceived by others, as well as how they aspire to have others see them. In short, material objects can be just as important in the conveyance of notions of
selfhood as the body, and it therefore makes sense to extend the idea of a self-portrait to refer to a photographic expression of selfhood involving whatever subject matter participants determine to be meaningful.

In addition to this relatively loose definition of what constitutes a photographic subject, I also decided that the production of self-portraits should not be restricted to a studio setting. Providing participants with disposable cameras in order to create their own images is a common visual ethnographic research technique (see Wang et al 1998, Radley and Taylor 2003, Frohmann 2005, Mizen 2005, Frith 2007). While I envisaged providing all participants with a disposable camera, I was also keen to encourage the creation of more formal studio-style portraits, given the relative ease with which I could assist participants in the production of images. Through my experience as a photographic assistant I had developed the ability to construct a “studio” virtually anywhere there is natural light and a surface on which a backdrop can be taped (or a person available to hold it). This would allow participants to construct images in a location in which they felt comfortable, as opposed to a potentially alienating professional studio. Aside from my familiarity with it, this formal style of portraiture also appealed to me because it involves limitations that stimulate creative thinking. Say, for example, a person considers her home an important element of her self-identity. How might she express that photographically using a backdrop, a limited amount of foreground space, her body and/or whatever material objects fit within the frame? Writers, artists and thinkers as diverse as Perec, Hemingway and Marx have long believed that constraint is conducive to creative production (Elster 2000). In designing the research methodology it seemed that if constraint enables ways of thinking that can result in better works of art as claimed, then perhaps it would be equally beneficial to the creative process this methodology entails.

This initial feeling that visual methods help foster ways of thinking and expression that are different to or substantially augment language-based research methods has since been supported by a methodological text published some time after the fieldwork component of this study was completed. In Creative Explorations: New Approaches to Identities and Audiences, Gauntlett (2007) finds that research methods which require the creation of something allow participants valuable reflective time. This enables them to formulate ways of expressing often complex abstract ideas that
are not necessarily easy to articulate verbally. Drawing on Jung’s work on art therapy, he argues that creative methods may help tap into the nonlinear, unconscious brain activity of which our conscious thoughts and subsequent verbal utterances are but a highlight. Creating objects, he maintains, also encourages participants to present their ideas holistically in comparison with the use of language-based research methods alone (Gauntlett refers to Lego models, but the point could equally apply to photographic self-portraits). Whereas a photograph or model of identity can incorporate and give equal weight to as many elements of a person’s sense of self as she sees fit to express, in an ethnographic interview narratives must be ordered sequentially. As a consequence, the researcher may attach greater significance to what is said earlier in the interview or comments made in response to her questions. Like Pink (2007: 21), who remarks that there is no such thing as purely visual social research, Gauntlett recognises that language is still needed in order to make sense of visual representations of identity, yet he finds images/objects to be the most effective way of showing how different elements of the self are related.

Helping participants create studio-style portraits also initially seemed to present an opportunity to materially recognise participants’ involvement in the research project by providing them with good quality prints of their work. Pink (2007: 59), however, argues that feeling compelled to “give something back” to research participants neglects the extent to which ethnographic fieldwork is part of the researcher and participant’s everyday experience. Collaborative projects are not based on a simple exchange where something must be given to make up for what has been taken from participants. Instead, “there may be a continuous flow of information and objects between the ethnographer and informants. This might include the exchange of images, of ideas, emotional and practical exchanges and support, each of which are valued in different ways.” It wasn’t until after I had completed the study that this rang true. At the beginning of the study I envisaged participant involvement to be an agreeable experience, yet I was nevertheless conscious of the fact that however collaborative the research process, the project was of more direct benefit to me than potential participants. The time I invested in it would lead to professional advancement; participants, however, could have a compelling personal investment in the politics of representation, or, alternatively, they might regard the production of
images with a potentially very limited audience as eating into time that could be otherwise better spent.

Early concerns about the politics of participant involvement were based on my plan to work with participants on a one-on-one basis. I sought to include approximately 15 young people aged between 15 and 20, to be sourced via contacts made through *My Dress, My Image, My Choice*, university-based Islamic associations and community groups. When I came to pursue these leads, however, I was put in touch with a newly formed Islamic youth organisation and the research design changed considerably. A woman running a young Muslim women’s education and support group out of a community prayer centre was looking to expand the group into a community development program. Her stated aim was to empower young Muslims by encouraging them to challenge negative stereotypes of Islamic identity in their local community. She had applied for government funding, and was looking for a voluntary art practitioner to provide art classes as one avenue for participant self-expression. These art classes would operate alongside religious instruction and confidence building activities. The symmetry between our objectives seemed quite uncanny at first, but on reflection is not surprising: it is, rather, highly indicative of how serious the problem of the misrepresentation of Islamic identity is in contemporary Australia.

After some negotiation, my research project therefore became embedded into the youth group’s program design. Each week I would teach program participants the fundamentals of photography and help them create self-portraits. The resulting images, it was planned, would form the basis of a public exhibition where participants could also deliver speeches on what it means to grow up Muslim in Australia. In mid-2005 the organisation’s funding application was approved, and the program commenced in December of that year and concluded in June 2006. In addition to the program coordinator, four program workers staffed it: two men in their early twenties, a middle-aged man and a middle-aged woman. Participants were sourced from two Shi’a Muslim communities: an Iraqi community located in Melbourne’s northern suburbs and an Afghani community in the outer south east. Weekly sessions for each group were held at separate locations selected on the basis of geographic convenience. What program workers referred to as the “Iraqi” group (although it also included participants of Lebanese, Iranian and Bosnian backgrounds) met each Sunday.
morning in a large town hall function room located in a busy suburban shopping strip. The “Afghani” group met in a community centre in the late afternoons. The program coordinator and three of the program workers were of Iraqi backgrounds, and participants in the Iraqi group were sourced mainly through the Islamic prayer centre previously mentioned. The other program worker was a member of an Afghani cultural organisation through which participants in the Afghani group were mostly sourced.

Whereas roughly one-third of Australian Muslims are born in Australia, only three participants in the Iraqi group and three participants in the Afghani group were Australian-born. The majority of participants in the Iraqi group were born in Iraq, five were born in Lebanon and one was born in Bosnia. All but three participants in the Afghani group were born in Afghanistan. The birthplaces of the other three participants were Iraq, Uzbekistan and Iran. The length of time participants had lived in Australia when fieldwork commenced varied between eight months and 17 years, the average being five years. Some participants had arrived in Australia as asylum seekers and were incarcerated in immigration detention centres. While describing the experiences of these participants is beyond the scope of this study, participants wanted to share their stories with public audiences in order to raise awareness of the plight of those continuing to suffer as a consequence of the mandatory detention of asylum seekers in Australia. I have therefore sought to give some indication of the hardship they experienced by reproducing one participant’s story as she told it (see Appendix 1). Most participants, whether seeking asylum or not, and particularly those in the Iraqi group, had migrated to Australia by circuitous routes. Many had spent considerable time in Iran, and as such identified strongly with Persian culture. Participants’ ethnic identification is somewhat complex as a result and constitutes a significant theme in this study, particularly in Chapter Four, where it will be explored in depth.

Each program session lasted approximately three hours; the Iraqi session ran between 9am and noon, while the Iraqi session began at 4pm and ended at 7pm. Sessions were divided into three workshops: religious instruction; discussion of relevant social issues; and an activity designed to encourage confidence building, the acquisition of new skills and/or creative expression (these ranged from the photography workshops I convened to simulated stock market investment and a one-
off karate class). While the program was designed to be delivered to two groups of 20 participants, the number of young people in attendance fluctuated each week, according mostly to family and school commitments. Several participants in each group drifted away for various reasons. One Iraqi participant fell ill and another two left after several weeks in order to help teach Arabic to young children at the community prayer centre mentioned above. Another two participants joined this group after the photography exercise had been completed. In the Afghani group, two sisters left shortly after the program commenced. Three participants joined the group several weeks in, one of who left after two sessions. The numbers of young people attending this group was also swelled most weeks by the presence of older brothers and cousins of participants who were responsible for dropping off and picking up their relatives. Although not officially registered as participants, they often contributed to workshop discussions. Participant attendance in both groups was lowest in the program’s last weeks, when the study loads of those in their final years of high school was most demanding.

Running the groups separately made sense not only in terms of geographic amenity – there were also significant cultural differences between the groups (as the program coordinator predicted beforehand), which meant that the program content differed accordingly. Participation in the Iraqi group was restricted to females, because, according to the program coordinator, these participants would not be likely to feel at ease in a mixed-gender environment. She also said that although most Iraqi participants attended local public high schools, they tended not to feel comfortable mixing with non-Muslim students. She felt that providing confidence building activities to this group was particularly important. The overall impression she gave of participants in this group being shy was reinforced during the first program session. Seated quietly around a large boardroom table, these participants (with several exceptions) were generally embarrassed when speaking before the group. Although I soon discovered that four of the group members were sisters, and several others attended the same local high school, these familial and friendship bonds were not immediately apparent to me.

The majority of participants in the mixed-gender Afghani group, however, were far from shy. From the outset it was clear that many of these participants were either related or knew each other through the social network of the community association
to which they belonged. Workshop sessions were generally quite rowdy affairs, typified by good-natured teasing and constant chatter. The older non-participants were often particularly noisy, and the program coordinator considered asking them to leave during the workshops. She realised, however, that this might discourage them from coming altogether – thus excluding the younger cousins and siblings relying on them for transport – and consequently decided to allow them to stay and participate. Similar concessions were also made concerning the age of participants. According to the program coordinator’s original design, participants would be in the middle to upper years of secondary school. The program received considerable interest from young people outside this target group, and as such the age of participants ranged from 13 to 22. The average age was roughly 16 in both groups.

The first photography workshop took place in the second program session. In the first half of that introductory workshop I explained the idea of using photography to explore themes of self-identity and presented some slides of the work of two female Muslim photographers, Zineb Sedira and Shadi Ghadirian (see Tawadros and Bailey [2003], for insightful commentary on their work). I also showed self-portraits (including non-corporeal images) created by young Britons aged between 14 and 19 as part of the Channel 4 (2006) Self Portrait UK 14-19 campaign. In the second half of the workshop I explained the basic principles of photographic composition and lighting, and provided SLR cameras in order for participants to practice composing images. Each participant had been supplied with a notebook and was expected to work on small assigned writing tasks between program sessions. For the portrait exercise I asked that each participant record at least one self-portrait idea to be discussed during the next workshop session. The majority of the following workshops were spent discussing each participant’s portrait ideas as a group. In the third workshop participants were provided with disposable cameras and offered the opportunity to create a more formal portrait, while later workshops were devoted to creating the portraits of participants who chose to use the studio format. Each of these photographs was a group accomplishment, as participants helped each other use

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8 Equipment used consisted of a Nikon D70s digital SLR camera with zoom lens, an older Pentax Spotmatic 35 mm camera fitted with an 80mm portrait lens, a tripod, several light meters, a collapsible reflector, a piece of neutral coloured fabric to use as a backdrop as well as tape and assorted pegs and bulldog clips to secure it to walls etc. All of these things (bar the tripod) fitted into a medium-sized camera bag, along with a journal used to record fieldnotes during workshop discussions.
equipment and offered advice about composition and how to overcome problems encountered.

The collaborative nature of the research therefore extended beyond the researcher-participant relationship. Participant interaction with their peers in the development of portrait ideas provided a particularly rich source of observable data. As participants discussed their ideas with the group, questions of how to represent individual identity, in a technical sense, frequently brought notions of collective Islamic identity and audience perceptions to the fore. What started out as straightforward questions about how to achieve certain aesthetic goals, therefore, often ended in more complex discussions about identity and the politics of representation. Encouraging participants to work together not only stimulated a productive research environment for me, it also satisfied the program objective of learning through teamwork activities. Some of the skills taught in the photography workshop were not strictly necessary to image production, given the equipment we used, but were rather designed to require participant collaboration. In teaching participants how to take light readings, for example, I was more interested in making sure that everyone had an integral role in the image production process rather than the instrumental value of the specific task (in this case, the cameras’ inbuilt light meters alone would have been sufficient for our purposes).

In total, 22 participants returned the disposable cameras for processing. Nine participants emailed me digital images they had produced on their own cameras at home, and one participant emailed me digital images created in Photoshop. Six participants also created portraits using the studio set-up, in addition to their photographs produced either with a disposable camera or their own digital camera. Those who chose to create digital images at home presented them to the rest of the group (via a lap-top and data projector belonging to the association), explaining the creative and technical process behind each image. Not only was this useful in terms of my research objectives, it also satisfied the program’s aim to build participant confidence.

In early March 2006 I asked each participant to nominate two self-portraits to be included in the public exhibition. Each participant’s preferred image was enlarged to 8”x10”, and was exhibited together with the smaller second print (6”x8”). It was initially difficult to find gallery space large enough hold the exhibition, especially
given that the opening would involve speeches and food. When it seemed likely that the exhibition would have to be held in an inner-suburban school hall, a prominent Melbourne photography gallery made space during a scheduled exhibition, allowing the opening to be held in its large main gallery and the work to hang for a fortnight in a smaller adjoining space. In order to publicise the show I designed postcard-sized invitations which participants and association staff distributed widely. A press release was sent out to a wide range of local and national media outlets and electronic versions of the invitation were distributed to individuals, community organisations and relevant internet forums. The exhibition attracted over 200 visitors on the opening night, as well as significant local, national and even international media attention. Participants knew from the outset that one of the program objectives was to present positive representations of Muslim identity to a wide public audience. Although they were not obliged to contribute work to the exhibition, and some self-portraits were clearly not intended for public display, most of the photographic images were produced with the exhibition in mind. As later chapters will demonstrate, this public audience came to play an important role in the conception of photographic representations of self-identity.

The final stage in the fieldwork process involved conducting in-depth interviews with participants. A photo-elicitation method was adopted in which participants were asked to explain what they were seeking to communicate through their portraits. Pink (2007: 84) is sceptical of the term photo-elicitation because of the empiricist logic associated with “eliciting”, that is drawing out answers and admissions from a person. I share this uneasiness, and use the term here only to indicate that the discussions were centred on images. These interviews were more about restating what had been said elsewhere than “eliciting” information. Participants had already discussed their images in the workshop sessions (often numerous times as ideas evolved and changed), and I had made notes as they spoke. I had also discussed portrait ideas at length with certain individual participants outside of the workshops, either during program breaks or while the rest of the group was engaged in other activities, and through email exchanges. While my field notes alone could have provided more than enough material for analysis, I wanted to be able to present the narratives of self that were stimulated by these discussions in participants’ own words wherever possible. This is, as most ethnographic researchers would agree, an important aspect in the
representation of participant identity. However, in terms of the ethnographic writing process, I do not claim that my position of power in relation to the research participants is diminished by this approach, for as the narrator of this study I nevertheless maintain control over the process of data analysis and writing. Words included may indeed be participants’ own, but it is ultimately me, the researcher, who decides which of them to include and which to leave out.

Although 40 young people were involved in the program, and by extension this study, a comparatively small number of participants – eight females (three from the Iraqi group and five from the Afghani group) and two males – were included in the final interview process. There were two principal reasons for this. Firstly, by the time I was ready to conduct interviews, my field notes were sufficiently extensive that I was not reliant on interviews as a main source of data: I was therefore under no pressure to “elicit” information from participants. My recorded observations extended well beyond the photography workshops to include all aspects of the program in which the themes of identity and representation were central among issues discussed. In other activities participants were required to produce written works on the theme of Muslim identity for publication on the association’s website. These ranged from speeches prepared for the exhibition and other public gatherings to poetry, prose and brief essays. While this study focuses mostly on discussion surrounding the creation of visual expressions of identity, I also occasionally draw on these texts. Secondly, in light of a number of participants’ personal experiences of media interviews and an overall mistrust of the way Muslims are represented in the Australian media, recorded interviews were not always an appropriate way of engaging with participants, and in many cases would have unnecessarily provoked anxiety. This is not to say that I feel participants would have been overly concerned with the way I might construe their experiences and opinions; I had always made it clear that my political convictions regarding the representation of Muslim identity were in line with those of the association. It is rather that, as young Muslims, continually seeing Islamic viewpoints misconstrued in the media and personally experiencing hostile journalistic tactics had engendered a wariness of making any pronouncements for a potential non-Muslim public. This ranged from outright fear for the sisters involved in the newspaper interview described in a later chapter, to a general feeling of needing to “say the right
thing” in order to correct negative stereotypes. Participation in the interviews, while encouraged by the workshop coordinator, was therefore entirely self-selective.

The relatively small number of interviews conducted presented a dilemma in the writing up of this study. Faced with the choice between the text being dominated by the voices of the small number of participants who chose to take part in the interviews, or my own approximations of what was said during program sessions, I chose to quote directly from interview transcripts wherever possible. This was both a stylistic and politically informed decision. Participant narratives of self are undoubtedly most engaging when represented verbatim; and while the theoretical basis for claiming that they are any more “truthful” than any other representation of identity occurring within the context of an ethnographic study is somewhat shaky, giving voice to young Muslims in this very literal way is important in light of the absence of those voices within the public sphere.

The collaborative nature of this study was not limited to the design and production of its visual component: it carried over into the interviewing process. As Fontana and Frey (2005: 27) argue, it is now common disciplinary practice for interviews to be viewed in the same reflexive terms as other aspects of the ethnographic research process:

> Ethnographers have realised for quite some time that researchers are not invisible neutral entities; rather, they are part of the interaction they seek to study, and they influence that interaction. At last, interviewing is being brought in line with ethnography. There is a growing realization that interviews are not the mythical neutral tools envisioned by survey research. Interviewers are increasingly seen as active participants in an interaction with respondents, and interviews are seen as negotiated accomplishments of both interviewers and respondents that are shaped by the contexts and situations in which they take place.

The interviews I conducted began with a request for participants to describe the images they had produced, or those they had planned to produce. Discussions that followed were directed by the themes of identity participants spoke about in relation to their images. At certain times I also asked participants to reiterate or explain in greater depth their contributions to group discussions held in the photography workshops or other program sessions. In this way certain intricacies of ideas and experiences that were not examined in earlier discussions (simply because workshop time was limited) became apparent. In terms of process, interviews lasted between 40 minutes and just over one hour and took place in a quiet corner of the foyer of the afternoon session venue (towards the end of the program both groups had to be
merged for a number of pragmatic reasons). I gave participants the option of being interviewed individually or in pairs. Two participants chose the former option, while the remaining eight selected the latter.

The incorporation of ideas of multiculturalism into participant expressions of identity was clearly evident early in the fieldwork process. It struck me as particularly significant that the term routinely figured in participant narratives of self. I therefore sought to demonstrate how deeply embedded it was in these narratives by deliberately avoiding mentioning multiculturalism myself in interviews (unless in response to participant discussion of it), and adopting the phenomenological technique of “anthropological estrangement” when participants did speak about it (as was the case in all interviews conducted). My feigned naivety concerning a notion regularly discussed in the program did not seem incongruous to participants who, knowing that I was conducting the interviews specifically for a research project, obviously inferred my reasoning. One participant, however, did view it as an opportunity to send me up. On being asked to explain what she meant by the term multiculturalism, she cheekily asked how, if I didn’t know that, a university could possibly allow me to research the lives of Australian Muslims. While she did go on to provide an earnest explanation of what she intended multiculturalism to mean, her initial remark illustrates both how close and informal the nature of my relationship with research participants became (while initially shy to begin with, by the time interviews were conducted most participants felt comfortable enough to tease me), and the importance of multiculturalism in their lifeworlds.

Finally, before moving on to discuss the method of analysis used, it is important to mention one other source of data that sits somewhat uncomfortably with the epistemological underpinnings of this study. At the beginning of this study I was invited to contribute questions to a survey of participant attitudes and beliefs required by the program’s funding body. Many of the questions I devised were altered into closed, tick-box formulations, presumably to allow for quantifiable results that could be easily incorporated into charts, tables and graphs. Some questions did remain in their original formulations, however, and I occasionally refer to participants’

9 Drawing on Schutz’s discussion of the stranger, methodologists (see Maso 2007) use the term “anthropological estrangement” to describe ethnographic attempts to render the known unknown.
responses throughout my analysis where relevant. One of these questions, “Do you feel that your ethnic and/or religious identity is accurately reflected in the media?”, provoked a uniform negative response – including numerous strongly worded elaborations – from all participants. All interviews also included lengthy discussions of negative media stereotypes of Muslims. While I would have liked to explore these discussions in greater detail, I have only referred to them where they directly relate to the central themes of the following chapters. It is important to note that I have done this only for the sake of brevity; the negative public representation of Muslim identity was identified as a serious problem by not only all participants and program staff directly involved in this study, but all Australian Muslims I encountered during the course of the research.

One page of the survey was deliberately left blank so that participants could express their self-identity through drawings. While I refer to one of these drawings in the course of the analysis, a thorough analytical engagement with them was unfortunately beyond the scope of this study. Likewise, I occasionally refer to other non-photographic artworks produced by participants that could have otherwise formed a central body of data. A more in-depth engagement with the artwork produced throughout the course of this study would undoubtedly make an interesting and valuable study in another disciplinary context.

Participants’ names have been changed throughout this study in order to maintain anonymity. One participant, however, chose to use his real name due to the nature of the work he produced. He and another participant whose portrait allows her to be recognised consented to the inclusion of those images separately to their consent to participate in the study. Several portraits have been described but not included due to the possibility that participants might be identified. Other images depicting people who were not involved in the research have also been omitted. Almost all the images presented have been publicly exhibited and, at the time of writing, most were in the public domain in connection with the religious association to which participants belonged.
Method of Analysis

Visual sociology is distinct from other visual research methods in that it is not, generally speaking, focused on the practice of writing about visual phenomena but, rather, the integration of visual materials into the research process (Gauntlett 2007: 109, Knowles and Sweetman 2004: 5). The analytical implication is that whereas a methodology that is chiefly concerned with writing about the visual would presumably employ semiotic theory as a central analytic frame, a sociological methodology, while in this case unavoidably interdisciplinary, nevertheless implies forms of analysis that reflect, broadly speaking, relevant disciplinary assumptions. In other words, visual representation may be fundamental to this study, but visual representations themselves are not the object of it. My central concern is the way in which discourses of multiculturalism are incorporated (or not) into the process of self-identity formation; the images produced by participants are primarily of use here as a means of exploring that relationship, rather than as objects of interest in their own right. Participants’ narratives of their intended meanings have therefore primarily informed the analysis of the participant-produced images included in the following chapters. While this approach to interpreting images is fairly straightforward, the politics of representation within which these visual representations of self-identity have been constructed call for some consideration of how images are “read”.

Banks (2001) refers to the content of an image as its internal narrative (which he argues is not necessarily the same narrative intended by the image maker), and the social context in which it is produced and interpreted as its external narrative. He argues that while an analytical distinction can be made between them, internal and external narratives are always intertwined, “and elements of external narrative – information about the nature of the world beyond the photograph – are always involved in readings of the internal narrative” (ibid: 11). Good visual research, he maintains, demands close readings of both internal and external narratives. Throughout this study the internal narratives of participants’ self-portraits have been interpreted in accordance with the semantic intentions of the image makers. Likewise, the images’ external narratives - in the form of public perceptions of Islamic identity - have been interpreted largely from the point of view of participants. Chapters Four and Five are concerned with these narratives in everyday interactional contexts, whereas Chapters Six and Seven concentrate more on the public sphere, with Chapter
Six paying particular attention to their articulation through visual representations of Muslim women. Where I refer to such representations as “negative”, I am not making an abstracted normalising claim about the representation of Muslim women. To do so would naïvely imply that there is a universal “positive” or “true” representation of female Muslim identity. Rather, I describe such representations as negative or damaging because that is how the young Muslim women who took part in this study routinely interpret them. Their perceptions are privileged in reading the external narratives of non-participant produced images of Muslim identity because such images are sources of external narratives of identity, and these narratives are a fundamental part of the dialectical process of identity formation.

The parallels between the analysis of images in social research and the process of identification I am interested in ought to be immediately apparent here. Making sense of images and identity necessitates engaging with internal and external narratives. Not only are these narratives intertwined in relation to images and self-identity as distinct from one another, in the context of this study the internal/external narratives relevant to understanding Muslim self-identity and its visual representations are also interrelated. This fundamental entanglement of identity and representation is one of the overarching themes of this study.
CHAPTER 3

The Portraits

Over the course of this research project participants produced well over 1000 images in a variety of media. The lifespan of many of these images was relatively short: at the end of workshop sessions participants frequently culled unwanted images from the principal digital camera used. However, the body of work remaining at the completion of the fieldwork component of this study was still extraordinarily large and therefore, as a whole, does not lend itself easily to detailed analysis.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the main themes expressed in participants’ self-portraits. Mapping them is difficult due to the diversity of themes expressed not only across the body of work, but also within the range of images produced by each individual. As already mentioned, the work produced by participants culminated in an exhibition entitled *I am a Muslim Australian*. The exhibition – widely hailed as a success both in terms of attendance at the opening and the media coverage it attracted – was the outcome of many months of hard work on the part of all who were involved in the Islamic association. The young people who participated in this study contributed not only their artwork to the exhibition, but also presented speeches on Australian Muslim identity at the opening and chaperoned visitors through the exhibited portraits, providing detailed explanations of their own work in the process.

I have therefore decided to structure the following discussion around images that were included (or created with the intention of inclusion) in the *I am a Muslim Australian* exhibition. It is, of course, by no means a substitute for the one-on-one guided tours conducted by the artists themselves that those who attended the exhibition were fortunate enough to experience. I do, however, seek to present participants’ descriptions of their work and discussions of the surrounding themes in their own words wherever possible. It is as close as I can come to simulating a tour of the exhibition, and it should also serve as a guide to the main themes of the following chapters. In a certain respect, the discussion of images presented here does allow the reader some insights that were not available to the gallery attendee. Here multiple
voices may be heard, as opposed to only that of one’s personal gallery guide. Also, given the nature of photography, certain ideas that seemed brilliant in theory often turned out to be impossible to photograph: a number of carefully constructed portraits (particularly those captured on the disposable cameras) were the cause of much disappointment when prints were returned from the processing lab. Some of those portraits that were missing from the exhibition – but are nevertheless important – are discussed here.

What follows has been organised around what I consider to be the four main themes expressed in participants’ portraits: culture and ethnicity; piety; Islam and gender; and friendship and leisure.

**Culture and Ethnicity**

Culture and ethnic identity is a dominant theme throughout the work produced by participants. In this section I analyse expressions of ethnic identity that fall broadly into two categories. The first, represented by the portraits of Meena, Pareesa, Leila, Najwa, Haifa and two male participants, Ibrahim and Ali, concerns the expression of multiple cultural belonging. The second, exemplified by Badra and Karida’s portraits, concerns fierce attachment to ethnic origins.

Like images produced by several participants, Meena’s three exhibited self-portraits express corporeal statements about her cultural identity. Born in Australia to Afghani parents, 15 year-old Meena used the mini-studio to create images to illustrate her sense of multiple cultural belonging. In the first of her three exhibited photograph she strikes a martial arts style pose at the viewer, her left arm folded across her chest with the right outstretched. She wears a pair of vivid red martial arts boxing gloves and above her head an Australian flag has been taped to the backdrop. Aiming her confident gaze directly into the camera lens, the overall effect is reminiscent of the posters used to advertise professional boxing matches. The likeness, however, is undermined by this “fighter’s” gender, a disruption accentuated by her clothing. Contrasting sharply with the red gloves, Meena wears a dark patterned Islamic headscarf with matching black headband, and a fashionable loose kimono top in a complementary brown tone. In a second image she adopts a similar pose again with one arm outstretched in a striking position, while in a third she holds a second blue
pair of boxing gloves in her left hand and a stuffed toy bear in the other. Dressed in a black-belted karate suit, the bear holds an Australian flag. In the latter two photographs a fashionable wide leather belt, heavily studded with square metal rivets, can be seen slung low around her hips with a brown karate belt, while in the third photograph the same karate belt is draped around her neck.

![Image](image.png)

*Figure 1. Meena: "My dream is to represent Australia in karate at the Olympics."*

The discord between Meena’s representations of herself and dominant media images of female Islamic oppression is immediately striking. Her self-representations simultaneously subvert stereotypical images of irrational Islamic aggression aimed at
the West, and the notion that an Islamic identity is incompatible with being Australian. Along with the elevated position occupied by the Australian flag, Meena’s images are accompanied by the caption, “My dream is to represent Australia in karate at the Olympics.” These three images attracted a considerable amount of attention at the exhibition, including that of a group of young Muslims recording a pilot for a television program about Muslim Australians who interviewed Meena about her photographs. The first image was also selected to accompany a feature article about the exhibition that appeared in *The Jakarta Post* (Anggraeni 2006).

While Meena’s representations of herself deliver a metaphoric blow to dominant gendered/racialised understandings of female Australian Muslim identity, her discussion of the images indicated that this was not her foremost objective:

> They were about just like showing there are two sides of me. There’s me being Muslim and wearing hijab and stuff and that was represented by that, and there’s me being into karate and sports and I used my gloves to represent that.

Her discussion of her images focussed not so much on righting the wrongs associated with negative perceptions of her identity, but with her ability to express her identity as she sees fit. This was evident when I asked Meena about the positive and negative aspects of having, as she describes it, a “two-sided” identity. She said:

> You’re Australian and you have something else there as well. You’re not just Australian you’re Muslim and you can represent it by you know doing Australian stuff and wearing a hijab, or you know doing your prayers or something like that.

Her phrase “you can represent it” could be considered a verbal motif for her discussion of her identity. While Meena did not use the word “multiculturalism” here, her discussion of her ability to represent her identity in the public sphere drew on the notion of multiculturalism in both its everyday and normative sense. This was especially apparent where she discussed Australian culture with another participant, Pareesa:

> Meena: Well I reckon Australia doesn’t really have a culture, it’s made up from all different other cultures put together…

> Pareesa: Different cultures in one…

> Meena: Yeah, just like anyone can be whoever they want here, like you don’t have to follow the one, kinda, “everyone’s doing this so you gotta do it too.”

> *How do you think that’s come about in Australia?*

> Meena: Well it’s a free country and people can –
Pareesa: – And everyone just moves here so –

Meena: – that’s why it’s different.

*How is it “free”? What do you mean by that?*

Meena: Well, people don’t get… there’s not like laws against… you know you’re not allowed to do this or that coz it’s not Australian… It’s not like that coz you’re allowed to present your religion, your culture.

Meena’s notion of a “free country” constitutes a normative understanding of multiculturalism: freedom means having no restrictions placed on the expression of religious or cultural identities. According to Meena, it is this conception of multiculturalism that has brought about the conditions which allow Australian society to be described as multicultural in the sociological sense, or in her words “made up of all different other cultures put together.” The important role Australian multiculturalism played in Meena’s articulation of her self-identity was further demonstrated by her use of language. In discussing the negative aspects associated with her “two-sided” identity, she drew on the language of majorities and minorities associated with multicultural discourse:

I guess the negative side is that it’s not really the majority in Australia so you’re part of the minority. That can be difficult because not everyone’s used to it. If you meet someone who is in the majority you gotta explain to them, not everyone’s aware of Islam…

Pareesa also explored a theme of “two-sided” identity in her self-portraits:

I took photos of my Islamic stuff like I took a picture of Allah’s name and I also took a picture of Ayer’s Rock because it’s Australian and I’m Australian.

Other photographs, many of which were not included in the exhibition, used similar motifs to express themes of cultural diversity existing within the self. The El-Badwi sisters (whose work will be discussed in further detail in the following section) also used Australian geographic iconography; two of their images depict two of the sisters posing independently in Islamic dress in front of a large map of Australia. Similar images were also constructed to express group identity. Towards the end of the program participants were asked to submit proposed designs for the program’s logo. One example of these images depicts a Mosque against a starry night
sky. On one side of the sky a star and crescent moon forms the symbol of Islam, while on the other the stars are aligned in the form of the Southern Cross. The border containing this image takes the shape of the Australian coastline. Another portrait expressing male collective identity cleverly draws on sporting symbolism. Designed and photographed by the male participants as a group, it depicts a boy kneeling in prayer, his head in contact with the ground with his shoes and a cricket bat at his side. This photograph attracted considerable attention during the exhibition, and a gallery staff member expressed interest in purchasing it. Its appeal is perhaps due to its neat merging of distinctly Islamic and Australian iconography and the playful surrealist humour of its setting. The boy, who has presumably taken a break from a cricket game and has taken the time to lay down a tissue and remove his shoes in accordance with Shi’a prayer ritual, has in fact positioned himself in the middle of a road, as the zebra crossing behind him makes clearly evident.

Leila’s photographic work provides another example of self-identity constructed around multiple cultural resources. Leila immigrated to Australia three years ago via Iran, and now describes her ethnic identity as “half Afghani, half Australian”. She indicated early in the program that she was very interested in the photography project because it complemented the photography component of her Year Twelve art classes. She was consequently particularly keen on producing a studio-style portrait, as she had been assigned an almost identical project on identity at school and could use the

Figure 3. Male participants’ group portrait.
photographs in her visual diary. In the discussions I had with Leila regarding how she would construct her studio photograph she expressed an interest in the work of Shadi Ghadirian, particularly the image of a hijabi woman holding a can of Pepsi. Leila indicated that the juxtapositioning of cultural influences – in Ghadirian’s case Iranian and Western – was something she wanted to explore in relation to her own identity.

Figure 4. Detail from Leila’s portraits.

Leila’s final studio images depict her standing and seated in various typical portrait-style poses. She wears a traditional Afghani dress in shades of red and purple, heavily embroidered all over with dense blue, green and contrasting yellow top-stitching. The bodice and cuffs are embroidered in silver and encrusted with tiny mirrors and glass beads. This highly elaborate dress is contrasted by a green silk headscarf with a paler green embroidered border and fringe. A large piece of fabric similar to the dress is used as a backdrop. In a similar way to Ghadirian’s symbolic use of the Pepsi can, in the seated poses Leila holds an Australian flag to represent the Australian aspect of her identity. All images are intensely saturated with colour, predominantly red and sharply contrasting green, and the continuity of colour and pattern between clothing and backdrop has a distorting effect on the image’s sense of depth. The photographs radiates colour to such an extent that it seems to have been altered in a computer imaging program, although no such changes were made.

Colour is an important theme in Leila’s expression of her identity. In our first discussion about her studio portrait I asked her how she might realise her desire to
express a sense of her Afghani/Australian identity visually. She told me that she had a large collection of headscarves in different colours and fabrics that she wanted to use. Through our discussions it became apparent that these scarves represent an integral part of her identity, not only because they convey her religious identity, but because they are also symbolic of the process of constructing her identity within an Australia context. Leila began wearing the scarf in Iran where she wore the regulation black or grey scarf and chador, not because she felt restricted to it by government edicts (as she observed, some Iranian women did and still do wear colourful outfits), but because she felt more comfortable: “those colours will hardly get anyone’s attention so women can go outside without being treated disrespectfully.” Upon moving to Australia she sought out brightly coloured fabric from which to sew scarves because, as she put it, “I guess when someone goes to a different place with a different culture and lifestyle, you just tend to change a bit and adopt the way of life of that place”. Her coloured scarves therefore serve as a visual motif of the transformation that, according to her, both her appearance and personality have undergone in the three years she has lived in Australia. This notion of positive personal change was similarly reflected in one of her survey responses. In response to a question regarding the positive and negative aspects of life in Australia as a young Muslim, Leila wrote: “The positive: I became more of a social person, understanding, more aware of life and other people.” She did not provide a negative response.

Also linked to the theme of colour is Leila’s love of contemporary Indian culture, particularly Bollywood films and music, which she mentioned several times in our first discussion about her portraits. This interest is clearly reflected in a close-up image of her face, in which she wears the same green scarf from the photographs discussed above. On her forehead rests a large colourfully jewelled silver disk attached to the scarf by silver chains to form a headpiece. While the end of the scarf is pulled across the lower part of her face so that only her heavily kohled eyes are visible, the decorative jewel and vibrantly coloured scarf ensure that the resulting image resembles more a Bollywood film poster rather than a niqab. In an early discussion Leila also said that she wanted to photograph a large gold Indian earring to represent this aspect of her identity. This earring is displayed in an image depicting her art and writing journals, a pen, some toy bears, two Persian novels, a clock and some necklaces placed atop a desk covered with a piece of lacework. While some of
the Afghani participants migrated to Australia via Pakistan, which would therefore explain a strong attachment to some aspects of Indian culture, Leila’s strong identification with Indian culture is interesting in that she migrated via Iran. It seems that for Leila it is the aesthetic vibrancy of Indian culture (“I love their clothes, full of beads and so colourful, I love their long wedding parties that go on for weeks”) that is particularly appealing because it is harmonious with her expressed desire to engage with the representation of Islamic femininity, a topic that will be discussed in a later section. In the context of the present discussion of ethnic identity, Leila’s identification with Indian culture adds another cultural dimension to her Afghani/Australian identity. Although Meena’s “two-sided” conception of her identity corresponds with Leila’s description of herself as half Afghani/half Australian, in the construction of her identity Leila drew upon cultural resources that clearly originate beyond the boundaries usually delineating what is “Afghan” and “Australian”.

Najwa’s discussion of her identity provides a further example of multiple cultural referencing. Najwa is an ambitious young woman who arrived in Australia three years ago at the age of 17. Born in Iraq, she migrated to Australia via Syria, where she spent her adolescence and much of her childhood. Najwa left the program before she was able to complete her portrait in order to take up a voluntary position as head of a small community-based Arabic teaching program. From the first discussions of her portrait ideas Najwa professed a desire to explore what she regularly refers to as her “multicultural identity”. This was also evident in her survey responses, where she described her identity as “V. multicultural – Iraqi/Syrian + Australian.” In order to realise this identity photographically, Najwa decided to depict herself moving through the various stages of her life towards her new life in Australia. This was to be achieved by photographing herself running against a background of merged images representing important events in her past. What these images should depict became the topic of a workshop discussion. While she was yet to decide what to include, Najwa said that she was thinking about using images of the Iraqi and Syrian flags to represent those elements of her ethnic identity.
It was interesting that Najwa did not want to use herself as the model for the portrait. This had nothing to do with shyness. Her stated reason was that she wanted the image to convey a feeling of youthfulness and colour. According to Najwa, the youthful vibrancy she wanted to portray could only be achieved by photographing a younger girl wearing brighter colours in place of herself. The resulting unfinished image (she left the program before the background could be worked on), depicts one of the girls from the Afghani group dressed predominately in white and pale pink running against a black background. The complexities involved in constructing her self-identity around multiple cultural influences resulting from migration were evident in Najwa’s response to a survey question about Australian citizenship:

*Are you an Australian citizen? What does this mean to you?*

Yes I am. It is too hard to know, my parents and my life were disturbed for the sake of a citizenship, I got it now and I am trying to c what does it mean.

“Trying to c what does it mean” clearly refers to more than simply the rights and responsibilities that the civic identity of citizenship entails. For Najwa, it means working out how official recognition of her belonging to the Australian community is to be incorporated into her self-identity. What it may mean is already somewhat evident in her reference to herself as “multicultural” and in one of her survey responses:

*How do you respond when people ask you where you are from?*
I say I am Iraqi who lived in Syria and now is living in Australia and show a big smile.

While her “multicultural” identity may be a source of pride for Najwa, the depiction of herself running in her portrait emphasises that it is an identity under construction. She may have moved through the events and stages of her life that the background images were to represent, but hers is a figure that remains in motion. Whatever events and experiences have shaped Najwa’s identity (that these may be painful experiences is hinted at in her survey response to what she likes/dislikes about herself: “[I dislike] some events that happened in my past”), this figure in motion indicates that she sees her present-day identity as continuing to evolve. In this regard it is therefore quite fitting that Najwa’s portrait remains a work-in-progress.

Male participants also created portraits exploring themes of multiple belonging.

15 year-old Ibrahim, for example, produced three striking digital images expressing his sense of ethnic identity. In the first image an Australian flag has been altered so that the largest of its six white stars appears blue against a white circular background. Ibrahim later explained that he took the star and crescent motif from the Tunisian flag and found the image of the young girl through a Google image search on “Afghan kids”. Like Najwa, when Ibrahim first discussed this idea with others in the workshop
he referred to the artwork as representative of his “multicultural identity”. Born in Australia, he also referred to his cultural identity as “mixed”:

I basically looked at how my culture is mixed. And I thought of a way of how to present that as a picture. I thought an easy way to do that would be to use the flag – change the Australian flag.

So how is your culture mixed?

Well, I was born in Australia and I was brought up in a really Afghan culture because my parents had just moved to Australia when I was born and I speak Persian at home and... yeah, I was brought up with everything to do with Afghan life. I’ve been brought up in a strong society of Afghans. Like here with Ali, we’ve known each other for ages – all our lives.

When you first showed me your photograph you described it to me as representing your “multicultural identity”. What did you mean by that?

I still see myself as Australian, but a different type of Australian. That’s why I put the flag there, ‘coz I’m still Australian but a different Australian from everyone else, where I still have something else to fall back on.

Is that important to you?

Yeah, really important.

Ali, the friend Ibrahim has “known for ages” and his collocutor in the interview, also constructed his self-portraits around his “mixed” identity. Ali is an outgoing nineteen year-old who migrated to Australia from Afghanistan at the age of two. He was an intelligent and active participant in workshop discussions and has a quick sense of humour, relating to participants and program workers alike largely through good-
natured teasing. His portraits convey this aspect of his personality. Photographing himself front-on, he wears a white Islamic skullcap beneath a baseball cap. His fashionable street wear t-shirt is partially obscured by the kefiyeh draped around his shoulders. His expression is deadpan as he holds a personalised car number-plate bearing his name across his chest. The effect is similar to US police photographs of arrested crime-suspects holding boards with their identification details, a photographic genre immediately recognisable even within Australia through its frequent use in globally distributed Hollywood films. This similarity is no accident, as the standard front and profile versions of this type of image appear in a black-and-

Figure 8. Ali’s parody of a police mugshot.
white triptych. The third of this set, depicting an amused Ali no longer capable of keeping a straight face, makes clear his intention to parody a genre that might otherwise be presented as an authentic representation of macho male youth identity, a topic broached in Ibrahim and Ali’s interview.

Another two photographs depict Ali and friends posed in front of a bronze coloured early model Holden Commodore. In the first image six young men, including Ali, are positioned in two groups of three on either side of the car, with the number plate – that which bears Ali’s name – occupying a prominent central position. The second depicts four young men, two on each side of the car at a lower angle, again with the number-plate positioned in the centre of the image. Like the portraits of Ali holding the number-plate, these images also parody macho masculinity. In the first, the laughing expression of the young man on the right gives the game away, while in the second a younger boy – far from imitating or being in awe of the tough guys to his right – smiles serenely at the camera. The same image takes on a further comic appearance with the positioning of the scarf on the young man on the right. Draped in such a way that allows him to peer at the camera with one eye only, the effect is more silly than tough or sinister.

Lots of my identity now as a teenager has been the number plates – ITS ALI – so I thought, I gotta put this in, you know? It’s a good sense of my identity in the fact that I’m proud of my name as well as not worried, not afraid to speak out so that everyone knows who I am. And then that sort of progressed into a group brotherhood sort of photo of who I’ve grown up with and that we’ve all got the same identity of, that we are Muslim Australian and, you know, having a Holden, which is an Australian car, with all the ethnic people in front of it, sort of bringing two worlds together…

Okay – so it’s a very similar theme then?
Yeah. They both started from our identity of who we are now, as well as who our parents were and how we got our identity now. Like the little hats and the scarves that we’re wearing were brought from Mecca from my parents.

_Was that this year? They did hajj just recently?_

Yeah, that’s why we all had them, coz they were presents brought back. And yeah, that had an impact on it as well. That’s an identity that our parents have passed onto us. Our families have passed it down to us, as well as growing up here and finding our own identity as well. So they’re mixed.

By wittily subverting stereotypical macho imagery and US-style mug-shots – the latter intended to convey information to satisfy the normalizing gaze of the state – Ali makes multiple statements about his “mixed” identities as a Muslim Australian. These identities encompass his sense of community (his “brotherhood” of friends and relations), his links with his parents’ culture of origin and, on a more abstract level, the place he sees himself occupying as an “ethnic” within the national community: the “ethnics” and the Australian car are two culturally distinct entities (“worlds” in his words) that he literally brings together.

Haifa used the portrait exercise to explore a similar theme of the merging of identities. Haifa, who describes her ethnic identity as “Australian Muslim (Iraqi)”, migrated to Australia eight years ago. Her portrait on this theme was not a so much an exploration of “mixed” or “multicultural” ethnic identity in a descriptive sense as characterised by the images discussed above, but an illustration of a normative conviction she considers representative of her identity:

_I took pictures of my nephews all dressed up in traditional Arabic clothes and I made them hug each other and give a flower to each other and hug the Qur’an, because I believe, I personally believe a child is born innocent, well that’s a fact, and because they’re born innocent it’s our way to… it’s our duty to grow them up with that innocence. We have the role to grow them up this way or that way, it’s up to the parents. And one of my photos that was enlarged, I really like that one because I had my older nephew – he sort of looks like an Aussie, well a little bit, not much – I dressed him up in shorts like he’s an Aussie or something with sunglasses and the other one was an Iraqi, like a pure Arab, and the Arab is giving the other non-Muslim a flower, so it’s like unite, we’re all the same, humanity…_

_So that’s important to you?_

Yeah, that’s really important. I generally think that everyone is the same but if we want harmony between us it’s not going to exist until… until we… we bring harmony to each other, coz it’s not just gonna pop out, you know?

Other explorations of ethnicity proved more difficult to realise photographically. This was particularly the case for several participants who strongly identified with their culture of origin. Badra, for example, wanted her self-portrait to illustrate, as she
said in one of the workshop sessions, “my love for my home country, Iraq.” Badra is 16 years old and migrated to Australia via Iran at 11 years of age. She describes her ethnic identity as “Iraqi”, and demonstrated a strong sense of belonging to Iraq in one of her survey responses:

> There is huge difference between Aust and Iraq culture cause people are not muslim here and in *my country* they are most muslims and there are other cultural differences. [my italics]

While Badra and I never discussed her migratory history prior to leaving Iran, it is likely that she had spent considerable time there. Most Iraqi participants had fled Saddam Hussein’s regime with their families as young children, almost all of them spending several years in Iran before migrating to Australia. It was perhaps this lack of memorable in-country experience of Iraq that accounted for difficulties they encountered in trying to express their sense of attachment to and pride in their Iraqi identity (“I’m very patriotic” said one participant). Portrait ideas put forward included photographing Iraqi maps and flags, but these came under scrutiny from the project coordinator who wanted the participants to analyse their ethnic identity more carefully and avoid a straightforward use of national symbols. While ideas continued to be discussed in the workshop sessions, none of these participants used the mini-studio to create images on this theme. From my perspective, these discussions seemed to be dominated by the unspoken absence of memories of life in Iraq. “Iraq” came to be constructed as a utopian ideal, a place of true belonging and therefore an authentic basis for self-identity. This is strikingly illustrated by Karida’s drawing of herself, in which she depicts a female face crying; a thought-bubble beside the face contains the image of an island with palm trees. The one idea on the theme of Iraqi identity that was eventually photographed (on a disposable camera) followed Badra’s observation that drinking tea is an important part of Iraqi culture. The resulting photograph depicts a table set with a teapot and cups.
Piety

Piety is a common theme in female participants’ self-portraits. Participants who sought to express a strong commitment to their religion in their portraits often did so through strategic use of the Qur’an and light. In this section I look at portraits created by Jamila, the El-Badwi sisters, Asra, Cantara and Thana.

Fifteen year-old Jamila, the younger sister of Leila, made clever use of a well known saying of the Prophet in order to articulate her strong commitment to Islam. Her image depicts a large assortment of jewellery displayed on a headscarf, including bracelets, rings, silver chains, pendants, gold hoop earrings and pearls spilling out of a mother-of-pearl jewellery box, behind which the pattern of a Persian carpet can just be made out. Above this display a pair of hands holds open a religious text. A dark vignette effect ensures the viewer’s attention is drawn to the Arabic script on the page. The image was exhibited with a caption reading: “Even if you offered me the world in one hand and all its treasures in the other, I still would remain with God.”

The intended significance of the image can only be properly understood in relation to the text. It refers to Mohammed’s determination to continue to preach Islam in the face of hostility and offers of rewards to persuade him to cease. A well-known line roughly translates as “even if they offer me the sun in one hand and the moon in the other, I would not abandon my mission.”

Jamila’s other images constitute equally strong expressions of her religious identity. Both of these depict a young girl praying. Swathed in a full pale pink patterned hijab, she is seated on a Shi’a prayer mat. Her face, framed by a white lace
underscarf, is lowered, her gaze focused intensely on the open Qur’an in her lap. The composition and theme of this image are similar to one of the many photographs produced by the four El-Badwi sisters, in which 15 year-old Nawal also depicts herself seated on the floor studying the Qur’an. Ranging in age from 13 to 19, the three younger sisters were born in Australia, while Malika, aged 19, migrated to Australia from Lebanon at the age of two. While the sisters collaborated in the construction of their portraits, during preparations for the exhibition they worked out individual ownership of the images they wanted to exhibit. In Nawal’s photograph of herself studying the Qur’an, the important role religion plays in her sense of self is emphasised by the textbooks piled beneath the Qur’an and a clock positioned beside her. During a workshop discussion of her images Nawal explained that while

Figure 12. Jamila: “Even if you offered me the world in one hand and all its treasures in the other, I still would remain with God.”

Figure 13. Jamila’s portrait: one of several depictions of prayer.
absorbing the knowledge necessary to succeed in her education is vitally important to her, religious knowledge takes precedence over this, as signified by the positioning of the Qur’an above the other books. She said that the clock represents the ever present need to make sure her time is put to good use in the pursuit of such knowledge. This conception of time-management was often referred to in the religious discussions and presentations delivered by guest speakers in the program.

Another of the four sisters, Malika, represented her sense of identity in an almost identical manner. In one image she sits cross-legged studying a Qur’an which rests on a wooden stand. Another of her portraits focuses again on the notion that the knowledge contained within the Qur’an holds greater importance than other forms of knowledge. Facing the camera, Malika holds a set of textbooks in one arm and a Qur’an with her beads, cloth and prayer stone in the other. The heightened sense of importance placed upon the Qur’an is again expressed quite literally by physically holding it higher than the other books.

Alia, the youngest of the sisters, also created a portrait expressing a notion of striving for the attainment of religious knowledge. Depicting herself climbing a set of stairs, the overhead camera position creates a visually interesting distorted sense of perspective. She explained during a workshop session that this photograph represents

Figure 14. Alia: "Climbing the stairs towards religious knowledge."
the steps she needs to climb in order to acquire religious knowledge. Another portrait, depicting Malika and Alia looking towards a dusk sky, was presented to other participants alongside several images of their younger brother and a portrait of one of the sisters standing in the kitchen with her arm around her mother’s shoulders. In the discussion that followed, the sisters said that the first photograph, like the others, represents the importance they place on family. In a public setting, however, the intended meaning of the image changed. The sisters used it to convey a further sense of their piety, adding the caption, “Oh Allah, shine your light upon us.”

The caption accompanying this last portrait is especially fitting given that the sisters’ faces, despite the darkening sky, are brightly illuminated by camera flash. This metaphoric association of Muslim identity with light was a device used in other portraits. One visually striking image, again produced by the El-Badwi sisters, depicts Alia praying in a darkened room. Seated on the floor with an open Qur’an on her lap, the sole source of illumination in the photograph comes from a narrow strip of light falling across Alia and the Qur’an. Two of the three photographs created by Asra make a similar use of light. While the first of her exhibited self-portraits depicts a silver decorative disc which she said expresses a sense of her Afghani identity, the remaining two focus on her religious identity. In the second photograph a Qur’an is held up in front of a window. The light streaming in through the window burns out the

Figure 15. Alia praying.
background so that only a hint of foliage of the garden outside is discernible through the whiteness. The intensity of this light creates a dramatic halo effect around the Qur’an in the foreground. The third photograph depicts the same window. This time a hand draws back a curtain to reveal a burnt-out triangle of light. Again the intensity of the light renders what lies outside indiscernible: the subject of the photograph is clearly the light itself.

Figure 16. Asra’s use of light as a metaphor for her religious identity.

One of Cantara’s exhibited self-portraits also uses light as a metaphor for religious identity. Fifteen year-old Iraqi born Cantara migrated to Australia at the age of eight. She created all her images at home with her own digital camera. Her portrait, one of three submitted for the exhibition, is a composite of three individual photographs merged together using digital imaging software. In one of these photographs Cantara, like many of the participants in the program, expresses her identity by photographing her bedroom. Personal space was limited for the young people involved in this study: all participants lived at home with parents and siblings, in some cases in extended family settings. The personal space of the bedroom therefore became a significant motif of individual identity. The two other photographs contained in this portrait depict a red rose placed on the pages of an open Qur’an and a sun setting behind clouds. The final merged image has a peaceful dreamlike quality evoked by the sky and enhanced by the way the pictorial elements blend into each other through a
deliberate lack of tonal contrast and a corresponding distortion of perspective. The viewer’s eye is drawn towards the main source of visual contrast in the image – the sun and surrounding clouds near its centre. The positioning of this focal point in relation to the Qur’an gives an overall effect of light emanating from the text.

Figure 17. Cantara’s merge of images depicting a sunset, an open Qur’an and her bedroom.

Thana, who describes her ethnic identity as “Iraqi”, is 17 years-old and migrated to Australia five years ago. Her portrait also uses light to express a sense of her Muslim identity by restricting the use of colour to white in one of two images displayed as a diptych. In workshop discussions Thana said that she wanted to convey the message that Islam is a religion of peace through her portraits. The first of her two portraits produced in the mini-studio set up during a workshop session depicts the top half of her face. The viewer’s attention is drawn to her eyes, because, as she explained in the workshop, “the eyes are the window to the soul.” Her original plan was to have the photograph cropped so that only her eyes were visible, but she eventually decided that the photograph should remain intact so that her headscarf is included as a visible representation of her Islamic identity. The second image is a still-life depicting an open Qur’an positioned diagonally across the frame. The top left of the frame is filled with a bunch of white roses, while a white ceramic dove, which appears to be perched on the edge of the Qur’an, occupies the top right corner. The association of Islam and
peace is clearly evoked by the dove – the immediately recognisable international symbol of peace – and the predominance of white in the image. It is an association which Thana personalises by turning the camera on her bodily self in the first image.

Thana’s decision to leave this image uncropped has interesting implications in the conceptualisation of the self. Symbolically, Thana’s eyes as “windows” are the medium through which she allows the viewer to gain access to part of her internal world. Her statement that “the eyes are the window to the soul” therefore implies a Cartesian split between the bodily self and the inner-self that is the soul. The inclusion of her scarf in the image, however, indicates that the inner world of the soul, which she wants the viewer to recognise as distinctly Islamic as the second image clearly implies, spills over onto the corporeal vessel in which (according to the imagery of the statement) it is trapped. Thus her original statement about why she wanted to include her eyes in the portrait is undermined by the image itself, for the Muslim identity she seeks to express in relation to her inner-self is also imprinted onto the surface of her body via her scarf.

**Islam and Gender**

Female Muslim identity is a central thematic concern in portraits created by Haifa, Marwah, Najwa and Leila. Each of these young women addresses negative stereotypes of female Islamic identity in their work. The hijab plays a vital important role in the expression of this identity.

The intersection of gender, national and religious identities was explored in one of Haifa’s portraits created at home with a disposable camera. While it was unable to be printed due to an exposure error, the idea had been workshopped intensively over several sessions and Haifa intended it to be one of her main contributions to the exhibition. Her description of it is as follows:

I had another one but it burnt, it didn’t show. I took one of Barbie, my cockatoo, I had him on my head. I put him on my head and it’s like he’s flying, and I’m sort of on his path, the way he is, and I’m a woman in hijab and I indicate myself as a bird. I’m free, you know, I have no limits in life, I can do whatever I want, study, educate... No-one’s gonna stop me coz this is my religion Islam. That’s what I meant. And Barbie – cockatoos – they’re on the Australian... you know your citizenship, when they give it to you, it’s got a cockatoo and a kangaroo on it so it also indicates that I’m an Australian Muslim.
When asked why she chose to construct the image around the notion of freedom, Haifa clearly indicated that she was particularly concerned with the representation of Muslim women:

Well, first of all the media is spreading, like, bad, different, you know, wrong images of Muslims. Especially ladies – like I get surprised because at school teachers ask me questions like, “Are you going to finish school?”, “Are you allowed to drive?,” stuff like that. That’s why it’s like this thing inside me that I have to show out, coz everybody just judges you by your looks. People don’t know that Muslim women are allowed to reach the rich, high levels, they are allowed to become educated and stuff. So you know it’s our duty to express that and you’re getting this bad image of us…

Having her scarf feature prominently in this photograph was important for Haifa. Her scarf forms an integral part of her identity: “when you think of Haifa, you think of her scarf”, she said. According to her original conceptualisation of the image, Haifa’s identity as a hijabi Muslim woman was to be conveyed not by including herself in the photograph but by draping the scarf over the cockatoo’s perch. She then planned to photograph the bird perched on the scarf with his wings spread in order to express her idea about hijabi identity and freedom. When she attempted to create this image, however, she found it difficult to make the bird behave accordingly. Upon discussing this setback with others in the workshop, she decided that in this context the scarf might be perceived simply as a decorative piece of fabric, thereby obscuring the important message she was trying to convey. It was this desire to express a clear and unambiguous link between her hijabi identity and freedom that prompted her to include herself in the photograph. For Haifa, therefore, her corporeal self became the most direct means through which to voice her objection to the “wrong images” of Muslim women that she said the media generates.

The scarf, which inscribes Muslim identity onto the female body, was the focal point of similar attempts to challenge dominant negative representations of female Muslim identity. Like Thana’s use of light colours to portray her religious identity in a positive manner, metaphors of light played a key role in exercising agency in this respect. This was evident in Marwah’s contribution to a workshop discussion. Describing her ethnic identity as “mainly Iraqi”, Marwah is 15 years old and arrived in Australia aged 10. In early discussions about portrait ideas Marwah said that she wanted to express her sense of Muslim identity by making her scarf the subject of her portrait. This became a point of contention for others in the workshop, as she happened to be wearing a dark coloured scarf on that day. The other participants were concerned that a dark scarf might be construed as conveying a negative image of
Islam, and asked her to remember to wear a light coloured scarf when creating the portrait.

A similar strategy was adopted by Najwa in relation to her image discussed earlier. While Najwa’s portrait focuses on her ethnic identity, when considering how to actually construct the image – that is how to photograph the young woman who was to represent her – Najwa’s religious identity came to the fore. Najwa’s primary concern was that her Muslim identity be portrayed in a positive manner in contrast to what she perceives to be problematic representations of Muslim women in the media. This was the rationale behind her conviction that her corporeal representation must be youthful and energetic and led to her decision to photograph another participant in her place. The colour of the headscarf to be worn by this girl was also deemed vitally important. Najwa found it necessary that her stand-in be dressed in a white or brightly coloured scarf and outfit, despite the fact that she herself wears mostly charcoal or black headscarves and raincoat style jackets, much like many of the other participants of Iraqi or Iranian backgrounds. It became clearly evident, through her discussion of colours and the emotions and abstract concepts they signify, that Najwa wanted her Muslim identity to be associated with energy and light, in contrast to the way she feels female Muslim identity is commonly perceived in Australia. This perception was shared by other participants, and was succinctly expressed in Amira’s comment that “people think our lives are dark.”

For at least one of the participants the strategic use of coloured headscarves as resistance to negative perceptions of female Islamic identity is part of daily life. Leila’s collection of coloured scarves, discussed earlier, is also significant because she said that wearing them helps her realise her desire to “show the true beauty of the Islamic woman.” Leila’s use of scarves can therefore be interpreted as an attempt to (re)instate, via the surface of her body, her notion of authentic – in her words “true” – female Muslim identity. Her artwork, which is the subject of several of her portraits, also highlights the symbolic importance she attaches to the scarf. Among the photographs of her artwork is a page of sketches in a large visual diary – most likely exploratory designs for a larger piece – inscribed with various Islamic motifs (a hijabi woman kneeling in prayer, a mosque and crescent moon, etc.). Alongside them is a larger sketch of a headscarf coloured in pencil, its surface a patchwork of bright colours. A photograph of another page of the sketchbook depicts a larger more
finished collage work consisting of scrunched pieces of coloured tissue-paper glued to the white sketchbook page in the stylised form of a headscarf. This large central motif is surrounded by similarly constructed red flowers. Another photograph depicts a three-dimensional work. It is a head-shaped sculpture, consisting of a predominantly red patterned fabric swathed around an unseen object in the form of a headscarf.

Leila’s consistent use of bright colours and decorative flowers clearly stands in contrast to negative representations of Islamic female identity that draw on metaphors of darkness. It is curious, however, that while her stated interest concerns the “beauty of the Islamic woman”, with the exception of the small sketch of a praying figure this woman is physically missing from the artwork. For there are no faces around which the sketched and collage scarves are wrapped and it is difficult to tell what gives the fabric its shape in the case of the sculpture. This absence is significant, for it is the form of the female body around which the scarf takes the shape that allows it to be recognised as Islamic headwear. It is this body that bestows upon the scarf its Islamic identity. As the workshop discussion concerning the placement of the scarf in relation to Haifa’s portrait of the cockatoo indicated, without its wearer the scarf is simply a square of decorative fabric. Perhaps this is the message Leila intended to express in these images – that the scarf itself is harmless, that it is something that can be

Figure 18. Leila’s collage depicting a coloured headscarf.
appreciated simply for the aesthetically beautiful object that it is; it is the wearer and the outside observer who dictate its importance. This sentiment was often expressed in workshop discussions in response to local calls to ban the hijab in schools. Participants’ reactions to that issue conveyed, often simultaneously, the importance they place on the scarf as an integral part of their identity and its material harmlessness. As Haifa asked rhetorically: “what’s my hijab gonna do? What’s it gonna do in schools, logically?”

While the female hijabi body is absent from some of Leila’s artwork, one particular photograph of her open sketchbook focuses specifically on the Muslim woman and her lifeworld. On the left page of the sketchbook is a pencil drawing depicting several women who appear to be walking in a crowded public space. All but one of the figures are clad in blue burqas. The uniform geometric stylisation of these figures is emphasised by an evenness of tone and a sparse yet confident use of line used to give a sense of movement by suggesting folds in the fabric. The remaining figure stands in contrast to this visual uniformity. Clad in black, she wears a chador and niqab. Her eyes are visible and directed at the viewer. On the page opposite is a strikingly different pencil and gouache illustration of another figure wearing a blue burqa. This time the figure is alone. In this image the shapelessness of the burqa is
emphasised to the point that it is unnaturally triangular and gives little sense of what is beneath it. Yet we do see what is beneath it, for the lower front part of it is cut away, revealing the body underneath from waist down. Dressed in a red tunic, green trousers and yellow shoes, this figure holds a doll in the right hand. The doll signifies that this is the body of a young girl who, given that she is still young enough to play with dolls, is perhaps wearing the burqa for the first time. This is how Leila intends the image to be read, for she describes it as a “memory of my childhood, when I experienced wearing that big burqa for the first time; not that I had to wear it back then, but I always wanted to seeing my cousins and mum wearing it when we were in Afghanistan.” The illustration suggests that this memory is a happy one, for the doll smiles and red flowers bloom beneath the voluminous fabric of the burqa. It is a feeling enhanced by the brightness and purity of the primary colours used. By means of the x-ray vision through which Leila renders the body beneath the burqa visible, the viewer gains some sense of the individual identity obscured by the visual conformity of the burqa wearers in the first image.

Figure 20. Leila: "A normal, beautiful life under the burqa."

This second illustration holds particular significance for Leila, for it appears again in another portrait. This time the illustration is depicted in close-up with a silver necklace placed over it. The necklace, which bears an Arabic script pendant, is similar to those that other participants also wear as a mark of their faith. By placing such a
personal symbol of her Muslim identity over the image Leila seems to be indicating that this is *her* experience of female Muslim identity. While this image may seem at odds with her corporeality in an immediate sense (Leila is older than the girl she depicts and does not wear the burqa), it constitutes a chosen corporeal representation that best expresses the difference between her lived experience and dominant representations of female Muslim subjectivity. Like Najwa, this chosen representation is a conscious demonstration of subjective agency in reaction to the negative images projected onto the bodies of young Muslim women. As Leila wrote,

> people here and mostly in Western countries make documentaries about how bad living in countries like Afghanistan is and how women are treated badly and accuse their culture and religion for it. I just wanted to show a normal, beautiful life under the burqa.

**Friendship and Leisure**

Samira, Mehri, Zhila, Yasmin, Nadia and Amira each created portraits that provide an insight into how and where they socialise. Family, school, university, organised Islamic activities and a halal fast-food restaurant were among the sites of social activity explored.

Images that concentrated on the surface of the body were not restricted to headscarves in terms of subject matter. In an image somewhat similar to Jamila’s display of personal treasures, one of 18 year-old Samira’s self-portraits depicts a display of jewellery carefully laid out on her bed. Covering the entire bedspread, the immense collection includes beaded necklaces, silver pailletted belts, thin metal bracelets and large hoop earrings, many of which are still attached to their original cardboard packaging. In the beginning of the interview about the images, Samira emphasised the aesthetic pleasure she finds in the objects themselves:

> I took pictures that meant something to me, that had some kind of value in my life or something I do everyday, I use them a lot. For example, I took pictures of my jewellery. I love jewellery, like I just love buying it, even though I don’t wear all of them it’s just something really… I don’t know, it makes me feel happy when I look at them all, they’re so pretty!

Later, when our discussion returned to the topic of her jewellery, these bodily adornments became representative of her active social life and the stereotypes that this challenges:

> I’m really amazed by the amount of jewellery you have – especially ’coz I don’t see you wearing that much. Is it mostly for collecting?
No, it’s not really about collecting. It’s just like I love jewellery and I buy it coz I’m like yeah, this will go nice with what I have, or I’ll go buy something that my sisters just get to see. Coz I wear the hijab here I don’t wear much, but I usually have like big huge earrings!

At school?

Oh no, not at school. When I’m going out. Like birthday parties and stuff like that, weddings… I have a huge collection. That wasn’t even half of it. It couldn’t fit on my bed!

So you really like getting dressed up and going out...

Yeah. People get the idea that we’re suppressed, that we’re not liberated.

Is that a problem?

People can think whatever they want. They wouldn’t stop thinking that even if you told them a thousand times oh you know, “We do this just like a normal family, we do go out, we go out for dinner, we do this” but they’re like “No, you’re Muslim, you’re not meant to do that”, you know? That kind of thing. But I’m over it, they can think whatever they want to. They’re not going to stop it so you may as well just live your life to the full.

Figure 21. Samira’s jewellery: “It makes me feel happy.”

Mehri’s self-portrait can also be related to the theme of social life. Mehri used the mini-studio studio to photograph a still-life of objects signifying important elements of her identity. The resulting image depicts a tube of fluid make-up and mascara surrounded by a mobile phone, a basketball on the right (she is the member of a local basketball team), and a ceramic plate and a painted wooden object on the left. Both this object and the plate bear the painted image of a stylised Portuguese cockerel – the
Figure 22. Basketball, chicken, make-up and a mobile phone: Mehri’s self-portrait.

The younger sister of Samira, 16 year-old Mehri migrated with her family to Australia at the age of 10. Like other participants of Afghani origin their migratory route involved a two year stay in Pakistan. While they arrived in Australia with little English, both girls now speak with broad Australian accents and, as her sister mentioned, Mehri in particular now “has all that Aussie slang.” While many of the female participants were quite shy, it was evident from the first program session that Mehri was among the most confident and outgoing of the group. This was reflected in her survey response to the question of what she likes and dislikes about herself:

Like: that I’m confident, if I believe something wrong has been said, I would immediately respond, I am motivated, I want to learn more. Also I have fun in everything I do.

Dislike: that my big mouth sometimes gets me into trouble.

The inclusion of the make-up in this image is indicative of Mehri’s self-described confidence. While playing with hair and make-up at home is a commonly referred to past-time for many of the female participants, Mehri is one of the few who wears make-up in public on a daily basis. In the context of the program, photographing her make-up was a somewhat bold step given the understanding of Islamic female modesty conveyed by program workers during workshop discussions. In the one
discussion in which the topic of make-up was broached, one of the program workers said that Muslim women could wear natural kohl eyeliner (due to its alleged health benefits), but all other forms of make-up should be avoided as it actively encourages male attention. By choosing to photograph make-up to represent an aspect of her self-identity Mehri challenges a behavioural norm established by the organisation. Her ability to do this was perhaps enabled by certain endearing eccentric personality traits, particularly her incessant talk about Portuguese chicken, which amused program workers and participants alike.

Mehri’s obsession with Portuguese chicken is also interesting in terms of the social relations among participants and their peers. During a workshop session on portrait ideas, one of the older program workers, bewildered by Mehri’s idea of using fast-food restaurant paraphernalia in her portrait, asked her why Portuguese chicken was such an integral part of her identity. Explaining that a Muslim friend had introduced her to it, she exclaimed (to the laughter of her audience of participants and program workers) that she couldn’t believe that it was both delicious and halal and had therefore instantly fallen in love with it. A younger program worker later explained to me that this chain of fast-food outlets plays a particularly important role in the way many young Muslims socialise with their peers. While there is no shortage of halal fast food in the public spaces the participants tend to frequent (e.g. kebab and falafel shops, halal pizza shops), these sorts of small family-run enterprises are most often not capable of providing the physical space for young people to meet and hang out. Perhaps more significantly, as he pointed out, they are not seen as cool places to be. Other well-known fast food chains that do provide such space offer no or very few halal menu options (whether or not the chips at one of these outlets are halal was disputed by a number of participants). The program worker said that the Portuguese chicken chain is therefore important for young Muslims because most of its stores serve halal food (the store in the Afghani participants’ local area was the only such store to be certified halal at that time), allowing it to be embraced as, in his words, “their place”.

In addition to providing some information about where some of the young Muslims involved in the study socialise, Mehri’s portrait also provides an insight into how they socialise. The inclusion of her mobile phone in the image can be read as an important signifier of the central role mobile phones play in the social lives of the
participants. Like Mehri, most of the participants brought their mobile phones to the weekly sessions. On several occasions after workshop sessions, female participants, particularly in the Afghani group, lingered behind to program other participants’ numbers into their phones, while two of the male participants regularly photographed other participants through cameras built into their phones. The phones themselves were often highly personalised items. Plastered with glittery stickers and programmed with distinctive ring-tones (usually snippets of popular R’n’B songs) they were placed prominently on the tables in front of participants and often rang during sessions. One of the participants had altered his phone’s start-up screen to replace the phone company’s moniker with “Allah 4 eva”. The extent to which these objects are inscribed with personal significance was apparent in the construction of Mehri’s portrait. When laying out the objects she intended to photograph she realised that she had accidentally left her phone in her parents’ car. While one of the other participants offered the use of his phone as a replacement, there seemed to be a lingering sense of disappointment for Mehri that the phone in the photograph was not her phone. Samira, who also photographed her phone, explains its social significance beyond its ability to convey the identity of its owner:

Oh I love my phone so much! It’s just so much fun! That’s the only way I like interact with… that’s the only way I socialise coz I’m not allowed to go out as much as my other non-Muslim friends.

*So you send text messages?*

Oh yeah text messages – oh my god! I text message to see how other people are, what they’re up to, happy birthday, occasions, stuff like that. And I talk to them sometimes as well. That’s the only way I interact.

The phone is therefore representative of her strategy of minimising potential social consequences of the Islamic norms that preclude her from physically participating, in an immediate corporeal sense, in certain social activities with her peers.

As several participants pointed out, the social life of most young Australian Muslims tends to revolve around immediate and extended family. The importance of family was a theme in several self-portraits. Zhila’s first portrait idea, for example, involved photographing herself holding her younger brother on her lap with an open Qur’an. According to her contributions to discussions in the workshop sessions, through this image she sought to simultaneously convey a sense of her Islamic identity, her fierce love for her brother and her commitment to helping him learn
about Islam. While she did not eventually create this image, she did include images of her three younger brothers. Most participant’s photographs created with the disposable cameras depicted family members; in some cases these made almost all of the portraits produced. Two participants also chose to photograph framed family portraits to represent their self-identity. Here Samira explains the integral role her extended family plays in her sense of self:

I also took pictures of my cousins who mean a lot to me. Everything I am is because of them. All the plans we have is with them, we’re just together 24/7, and so family is really important… that’s the first thing, nothing’s above it, it’s just family all the way.

You used to live with your cousins...

Yeah, we used to live together for about six months. Oh wow! That was the best time! There were like fourteen people living in the same house and it was amazing. We had like four people in each room, coz they had four bedrooms and then some people slept in the dining room, it was quite funny. It was a good time.

Haifa, whose photograph of her brother and cousin was discussed earlier, refers to the Qur’an to explain the importance of family as a central Islamic value:

We have the happiest lives Islamic people. You go to any family’s house and they’re happy, they’re talking about education, I guarantee…. I mean you might find some who aren’t that way but every other Muslim household they’re very emotional they’re very united. And the father and the mother they have the most respect, you couldn’t even say pfft to them. That’s mentioned in the Qur’an that you can’t do that. Because if the Qur’an could indicate something even less than that like [sighs softly] it would say that.

Haifa made this assertion that Muslim families are happy in the context of a discussion about negative perceptions of Australian Muslims. It is very similar in tone to Samira’s earlier discussion of how going out to weddings, parties and family dinners contradicts the image of Muslims as “not liberated”. The remarks both young women make about family are interesting in that are made in reaction to what participants perceived to be dominant understandings of Muslim subjectivity.

Peer social relations were another aspect of social life explored in some of the self-portraits. Male participants created various portraits depicting groups of friends hanging out at home. In one of a series of Ibrahim’s portraits, for example, three teenage boys are sprawled on the carpet of the lounge room of a suburban family home, apparently deep in conversation. A stereo and speakers have been set up in the middle of the room between them. Another two boys are preoccupied with a desktop computer on the opposite side of the room, while a sixth is standing behind one of the
unsuspecting trio on the rug, holding a cushion above his head as if about to strike him. Male participants also took large numbers of photographs of each other engaging in various kinds of stunts and playfights in the carpark of the program venue. Another male participant, Salim, submitted a photograph of himself standing beside his best friend for the exhibition. This was somewhat unique: all other depictions of male friendship focussed on the large friendship circles that male Afghani participants belonged to.

Although female participants also socialise in large groups of mostly immediate and extended family members, the images created by them were more concerned with close dyadic relationships. Inas explained in one of the earlier workshop sessions that her closest friends are very important to her identity and she therefore wanted to create an image expressing that. Her first idea was to photograph a red jewel to represent a red diamond, which she explained is the rarest of all jewels, as rare as a truly loyal friend. She eventually photographed this same idea slightly differently. The resulting image depicts a fresh green leaf against a background of brown autumn leaves. It was included in the exhibition accompanied by the caption; “A true friend is as rare as a green leaf on an autumn day.” A similar idea of the scarcity and value of

Figure 23. Inas: "A true friend is as rare as green leaf on an autumn day."
“true” friends was also evident in Zhila’s discussion of her identity. In one of Zhila’s self-portraits she photographed herself with a close friend. Discussion of her images in general led her to describe a friendship that developed through the shared experience of hijabi identity:

I’d just started at [a new school] there was one Afghani girl that was wearing hijab. She was a big backbone for me. Just to see her really encouraged me, you know?

Was it a school where not many people wore hijab?

Yeah, there were Muslims but none of them wore hijab. After that lots were coming in and we were, like, all backbones to each other!

School was also the setting for most of the portraits produced by Yasmin. Born in Uzbekistan to Afghani parents, 17 year-old Yasmin migrated to Australia seven years ago. One of her exhibited portraits depicts her classmates photographed through the window of their classroom; her own image is reflected on the windowpane. When I asked her if her school life was an important part of her identity, she replied:

No not really… Actually yeah, coz you’re in school most of the time. And we only go home to sleep! [laughs] But I was a bit lost… I didn’t know what to take photos of and then I thought of school… so I just took the photos.
Nadia’s self-portrait makes a more intentional statement in relation to schooling. Her image is a still-life consisting of three glasses photographed against a background of dark-blue fabric. The glasses, each filled with water, are different in shape and style: one is a triangular martini glass; one a wine glass while the other is a tumbler. Behind the glasses two bronze buttons are visible and below the glass on the right a school insignia is stitched onto the fabric, indicating that the blue fabric belongs to a school blazer. Nadia explained that the image represents how the process of changing schools has shaped her identity:

Well the one with the glasses, that was like… I’ll explain it to you. I’ve been to a lot of schools and through that experience it kind of helped me to… it helps me adjust to different situations, like it made me more confident in myself and my abilities coz then I know that I can make friends quickly, you know?… yeah, and the glass is supposed to represent, like a situation that I’ve been put in, and the water – coz water takes the form of anything that you put it into, it adapts sort of…

By illustrating how her identity is constructed through adaptation to her social environment (in this case different schools) Nadia is quite literally stating that her identity is fluid.

Figure 25. Nadia's depiction of her fluid sense of self.

Amira also situated her portrait idea within the context of an educational institution. Although she joined the program after the portrait project had been
completed, when I asked her how she would construct an image that expresses a sense of her identity she was quite clear about where she would create her photograph:

I’d probably go to my uni. I’d go to a Catholic uni, not many people know about it. When people ask me what uni I go to and I tell them it’s Catholic they go, “How could a Muslim woman go to a Catholic uni?” and I’m the only hijabi Muslim woman at that uni, I’m so noticeable! And I just love it. People love me! [Laughs] […] I haven’t been to other unis but I’d say being Catholic makes them more, I don’t know, more mature. They’re more religious so they understand me. Yeah… I just feel so easy with them.

Amira’s strong sense of belonging and acceptance among her peers at university was similar to Meena’s experience of high school. When I asked Meena what other elements of her identity are important to her, drawing again on the notion of multiculturalism she replied:

School life I suppose, coz our school’s so multicultural and there’s heaps of everyone and you don’t have to feel different.

At the same time, however, Meena infers that the multicultural inclusiveness of the school is limited, for elsewhere in our discussion she identifies it as a potential site for difficulties should she adopt hijab.

Zhila’s images also express a sense of her identity in relation to social inclusion. 19 year-old Zhila had recently passed her licence test and expressed an element of her identity through images of her car:

The first one that I made was of my car. I love my car!

_You had a few of your car... What made you choose to photograph it?_

It had the ‘P’ sign on it… it was when I’d just gotten my ‘P’s, and… well… that’s when life really starts when you have the car. You can go anywhere you want without having your parents take you there.

_So it’s the start of adulthood then?_

Yeah, that’s pretty much it. There was all this stuff happening with Islamic activities before then and my dad never took me because he was always busy and I really love to go, and now that I’ve got the car I don’t even have to ask him to take me, I just come by myself and it’s really good for me.

Zhila explained later in the interview and in program sessions that she had experienced problems with her father due to her level of religious commitment. As Zhila described it, her father wanted her to discard certain Islamic practices upon their immigration to Australia. This included his desire that she no longer wear the scarf. The independence afforded to Zhila upon acquiring a car and a licence therefore
allowed her to integrate into an Islamic social network via what she terms “Islamic activities”, including the program through which I met her.

Figure 26. Zhila’s car.
CHAPTER 4

Hybridity, Ambivalence and Belonging

Am I Australian?

I do consider myself to be an Australian. I consider myself to be an Australian because I was born here and I lived here all of my life, my home is here and I feel like I belong, all my family is here and I have made strong bonds here but I also don’t consider myself to be an Australian. I also don’t consider myself to be an Australian because my background is Lebanese and my customs and beliefs are nothing like the Australian customs and beliefs, they are on the contrary of each other and I could not blend them together to become both of them at the same time. (Nadia)

The aim of this chapter is to analyse the themes of ethnic and national belonging expressed in participant portraits and the discussions surrounding them. As outlined in the previous chapter, visual expressions of belonging ranged from positive affirmations of “mixed”, “two-sided” and “multicultural” identities to depictions of (sometimes unseen) “homelands” as idealised utopias. In this chapter I draw upon contemporary theorisations of diaspora and the closely related notion of hybrid identities to explore how participants negotiate belonging, particularly at an everyday level. While hybridity is hailed by many as a usefully disruptive force from a theoretical perspective, how is this positioning experienced from the subject’s perspective? Arguing that the dis-location associated with migration means that all the participants in this research project must negotiate this subjective positioning, I examine the feelings of ambivalence that are said to characterise it. Before embarking on this analysis, however, I want to briefly comment on the relationship between the staged identity performances of participants’ portraits and everyday experience. I therefore begin by examining one example of ethnic identity as corporeal practice in order to understand how images that do not appear to correlate with participants’ everyday lived experiences can form the analytic basis of this research.

Authenticity and the Everyday Performance of Identity

Authenticity was a concern for Leila in the construction of her portrait. This became apparent when an everyday example of Leila’s corporeal representation of her sense of ethnic identity – the way in which she shapes her eyebrows – was altered. Looking
beyond Taliban decrees banning eyebrow plucking or waxing (among other beauty practices), Afghani women have traditionally waited until engagement before shaping their eyebrows (Shalinsky 1996). Within the Australian Afghani diaspora, however, brow shaping prior to engagement seems to be a generally accepted practice. According to Afghani participants, some Australian Afghani girls maintain the cultural tradition of unplucked brows in a locally hybridised form. By shaping their brows in the same manner as other Australian women, yet leaving the hairs that grow between the brows, they reinterpret a traditional symbol of ethnic identity in a way that does not significantly challenge the locally dominant trope of the hairless female body. For Leila, the significance this bodily practice holds in terms of her sense of self was apparent in her telling of an incident that occurred during a visit to a beautician to have her brows shaped. Unfamiliar with the Afghani practice, the beautician removed not only the hairs from beneath Leila’s brows as requested, but also those in between. The incident itself was clearly very distressing for Leila, and, since it occurred several days before she was to create her self-portrait, it altered her artwork. She expressed her disappointment that there was not enough time to wait for the hairs to grow back and that her portrait would depict the altered brows, thereby compromising the authenticity of the “self” represented in the work.

Leila’s portrait also raises questions concerning authenticity in terms of research analysis. Given that I am interested in quotidian identity performance, some of the more theatrical images may seem problematic in that they do not directly represent lived realities. The scenes they depict and narratives they suggest are not literally reflective, in an immediate sense, of the participants’ everyday lived experiences; Leila does not actually wear the Afghani dress (not only is it extremely heavy, it is also several sizes too large), the Afghani boys clearly don’t pray on the road, the boys posing in front of Ali’s car are not macho tough guys, and Ali himself is obviously not an American crime suspect. What can extravagant costumes and visual jokes therefore tell us about quotidian experience? One possible answer can be drawn from a consideration of Leila’s eyebrow dilemma in relation to the work of another portrait artist, Mexican painter Frida Kahlo.

Leila recounted the eyebrow incident during a discussion about how she might adapt some of the artwork produced within the workshop to her Year 12 art assignment. The problem Leila faced was that the school assignment placed a
constraint on her work: she was not allowed to use images of her physical self in the final artwork, whereas the photographs she created in the workshop sessions consisted only of such images. In suggesting ways she could incorporate some of the elements of her identity that she said were important to her into her school assignment, I mentioned that she could, for example, make a visual reference to her encounter with the beautician by incorporating the iconic unplucked eyebrows of Frida Kahlo into her own work in some way. Later, when hanging the photography exhibition, I was struck by the similarity between Leila’s portraits and a photographic portrait of Kahlo by Nickolas Muray. Like Leila’s depiction of herself in her seated poses, Kahlo positions herself kneeling before the camera, her legs covered by the full skirt of one of her signature Tehuana dresses. The dress is of a predominantly black fabric, which off-sets a pattern of sparse white flowers. Above the hem runs a wide square-patterned border stitched in red with yellow accents. The bodice consists of plain black fabric contrasted with a very lurid yellow fabric onto which a red floral pattern has been embroidered. Directly behind Kahlo is a lacy piece of wrought iron, which is perhaps the back of what is most likely a sofa on which she is seated. Painted in glossy white, it is of a decorative grapevine design. Behind this is a flat green backdrop – most likely wallpaper – decorated in a floral pattern. Floral motifs are thus repeated throughout the image: on the dress, the iron, and the wallpaper and also in the pink flowers woven into Kahlo’s hair. With its contrasting colours, particularly the black/white and red/green combinations, along with the vibrant hues imparted by early colour photography technology, the image is, just like Leila’s self-portrait, saturated with colour and rich patterns. While Leila was not consciously referencing Muray’s portrait of Kahlo in her own portrait, the parallels between the two works are not only aesthetic. It is also possible to see similarities in the broader themes of self-identity expressed in Kahlo’s own body of work and the self-portraits created by Leila and other participants.

More than a third of Kahlo’s 143 known paintings are self-portraits, that is they depict Kahlo’s physical self. Yet, as Smith argues, all of Kahlo’s works could be considered self-portraits in that they are “picturings of the construction of a persona as a set of effects” (cited in Volk 2000: 169). The theatrical nature of this persona raises the question of authenticity: should Kahlo’s portraits be interpreted as genuine representations of her self-identity or are they more a series of masks: affectations
adopted for dramatic effect? Greer (2005) argues that both are effectively correct; the persona painted by Kahlo was the same as the character she portrayed in everyday life:

It is no small praise to say that Kahlo was the first ever true performance artist, that the performance lasted all her life long, and that she was indefatigable in presenting it, year on year, day by day. At least as much creative energy went into dressing the part as in drawing and painting it...Her devotion to this process was extraordinary. The performance was her reality.

If, however, identities are always performed, in that the beliefs, behaviours, bodily practices, tastes and even desires that constitute them are enacted and re-enacted on a daily basis (Butler 1999), then it is only the flamboyant style of Kahlo’s performance that is extraordinary. Performance is everybody’s reality. Cultural identity must therefore be understood as a “doing” word:

Although we talk about them in these terms endlessly, neither culture nor ethnicity is “something” that people “have”, or, indeed, to which they “belong”. They are, rather, complex repertoires which people experience, use, learn and “do” in their daily lives, within which they construct an ongoing sense of themselves and an understanding of their fellows. (Jenkins 1997: 14)

The images are, from the participants’ perspectives, authentic representations of their self-identities. Clothing, flags, physical features, bodily gestures and even Ali’s car operate as the symbolic markers of national, ethnic and religious allegiances. They are the visual shorthand required to signify, in the fraction of a second that the camera demands, the ongoing everyday performance of behaviours and practices that make up self-identity. In a number of instances, these symbols operate as more complex signifiers of certain Orientalist narratives about Muslim subjectivity. Participants’ engagement with these ascriptive narratives of identity will be the focus of the following chapter. This chapter is primarily concerned with the self-attributed aspects of identity, bearing in mind that they are never entirely separable from identities ascribed from outside.

**Diaspora, Hybridity and Subjectivity**

According to Vertovec’s (1999) typology of the main research themes collected under the rubric of “transnationalism”, an important area of investigation concerns individual and collective “diaspora consciousness”, stemming from dual or multiple cultural identifications. Diaspora, and the related notion of hybridity, each carry multiple significations within this area of scholarship. Overviews of the many
attempts to create theoretical definitions of diasporic social forms (Clifford 1994, Kalra et al 2005) indicate that such models are inherently problematic, because the range of defining features (e.g. dispersal from a core geographic locale, political mobilisation, desire to return to homeland, etc.) are not necessarily shared by all communities that have come to be termed diasporic. Braziel and Mannur (2003:1) recognise this theoretical dilemma, and posit that diaspora, in its broadest sense, suggests a “dislocation from the nation-state or geographic location of origin and a relocation in one or more nation-states, territories, or countries.” While essentially correct, this definition may be open to misinterpretation, however, if the terms “dislocation” and “relocation” are taken to mean actual physical prior location elsewhere at the individual diasporan level. For although diasporas are certainly the product of migration processes, individual diasporans are not necessarily immigrants themselves. While the majority of the participants in this research project experienced migration first-hand, others did not relocate to Australia: they were born there. In my own use of diaspora I do not wish to ascribe alterity by assuming that the identities of the research participants are necessarily pre-determined by the migratory experiences of their parents. For this reason I avoid referring to participants born in Australia as “second generation immigrants”.

Identification with migration long after the physical process has taken place, however, is common not only in an ascriptive sense, but also in a self-attributive sense (Papastergiadis 2000: 55). With this in mind, all participants could be described as negotiating what Clifford (1994: 310) terms “dwelling-in-displacement”. The images produced by participants and the narratives relating to them share a common theme of dislocation, even if the “original” location – what is often thought of as “home” – is largely experienced imaginatively through the narratives and cultural practices of family, friends and other diasporic community members. In the context of this study then, I define diasporic consciousness, as individuals experience it, as an affective allegiance to a geographic location outside the nation of residence, and the implicit sense of belonging to a culture that is perceived to rightfully “belong” somewhere other than the nation of residence. Diasporic consciousness is therefore premised upon a here/there conundrum (even when the “here” that is “home” may, in a geographic sense, be actually located over there).
Diaspora is a useful theoretical starting point in the analysis of subjective belonging not only because it recognises common experiences that are related to migration but not necessarily to immigrant status, but also because it is ontologically oriented towards a decoupling of space and culture:

As an alternative to the metaphysics of “race,” nation, and bounded culture coded into the body, diaspora is a concept that problematizes the cultural and historical mechanics of belonging. It disrupts the fundamental power of territory to determine identity by breaking the simple sequence of explanatory links between place, location, and consciousness. It destroys the naïve invocation of common memory as the basis of particularity in a similar fashion by drawing attention to the contingent political dynamics of commemoration. (Gilroy 2000: 123)

For Bhabha (2004), out of this disruption emerges what he terms the “third space,” a liminal space of cultural in-betweenness that is inherently hybrid. Within scholarship on diaspora, hybridity most often refers to “the process of cultural mixing where the diasporic arrivals adopt aspects of the host culture and rework, reform and reconfigure this in production of a new hybrid culture or ‘hybrid identities’” (Chambers, cited in Hutnyk 2005: 81). Hybridity denotes, writes Pieterse (2001: 221), “a wide register of multiple identities, cross-over, pick’n’mix, boundary-crossing experiences and styles, matching a world of growing migration and diaspora lives, intensive intercultural communication, everyday multiculturalism and erosion of boundaries.” Current academic engagement with the notion of hybridity is such that it has been described as overtheorised (Cieslik and Verkuyt en 2006). However, as Anthias (2001: 626) notes, much of this attention is concentrated on hybridised cultural forms and styles such as language, art and music, rather than notions of individual belonging and the delineation of group boundaries. In terms of one hybridised cultural form alone – bhangra dance music – numerous studies have been carried out in a variety of national contexts (see Kalra 2000; Maira 1998; Sharma et al 1996). Historically speaking, the notion of mixing that is central to hybridity has been expressed through various earlier terms such as syncretisation, signifying religious mixing; linguistic créolisation; and racial mixité, the dark side of which is evident in colonial preoccupations with miscegenation (Young 1995, Stoler 2002). The very notion of mixing itself immediately raises important questions concerning the assumption of anterior cultural purity (Young 1995). These questions will be addressed in the following chapter. For the moment I will adopt a less critical use of the term “hybridity”, as a conceptual frame for analysing affective notions of belonging constituting diaspora consciousness at the subjective level. Hybridity, in this chapter, refers to the process
(Kalra et al, 2005: 70) of negotiating the complexities arising from simultaneous feelings of belonging (or not belonging) to both “here” and “there”.

For the participants who were adamant in their stated allegiance to their “homelands”, and were openly antipathetic in their views about life in Australia, the concept of hybridity is nonetheless a relevant term to use in relation to the construction of their identities. In a survey question about the positive and negative aspects of living in Australia, Marwah and Inas had very similar responses about what they found difficult: “not living in my own country” (Marwah), “not your own people, not your country” (Inas). Both girls are 15 years old. Marwah migrated to Australia at the age of 10, and Inas at the age of five. Inas also proudly remarked, both in the workshop sessions and in the survey, that she is “very patriotic”. It was clear that she meant this in relation to Iraq. These and similar strong expressions of attachment to “homeland”, however, were tempered by the acknowledgement, made at the behest of the program workers, that those who had lived most or all of their lives away from “home” may very well be recognised as outsiders if they are to return. As Marwah herself, having recently visited Iran, quipped, “If you’re over there they say you’re from here, but when you’re here then they say you’re from over there!” The here/there dilemma of hybrid identity is therefore relevant to participants who do not proudly claim that their identity is “mixed” or “multicultural” because Australian identity is ascribed to them in their “home” context. This is evident in a speech presented by Badra during the program, in which she questions whether it is just citizenship that determines Australian national identity:

I don’t have my citizenship and I have lived in Australia for more than five years. Does that means I am not Australian or don’t belong here? I have just come back from overseas and when I was there mostly everyone was saying to me, “you, the Australian.” Whenever I sit with a group of people and someone wants to ask me something or wants to call me they will all say, “the Australian girl”.

Badra goes on to say being recognised as Australian when she was overseas means that she does see herself as Australian. This ascribed identity persuades her to feel that she belongs to the Australian national community, even though her affective ties to Iraq are clearly stronger, as was evident in her self-portrait as well as her survey responses; she wrote, for example: “There is huge difference between Aust and Iraq culture cause people are not muslim here and in my country they are most muslims and there are other cultural differences.” [my emphasis]
Hybridity and diaspora are, from a theoretical perspective, disruptive notions in the same sense as multiculturalism. Both call into question the relationship between culture and place – the very relationship that nation states take to be natural. At the everyday level, however, notions of culture and place tend to remain firmly fused. As one of the hijabi program workers remarked, after living in Australia for over twenty years people still often assume that she does not speak English. The perception that physical characteristics and/or cultural practices belong to certain geographic areas, however, is not the exclusive domain of members of the so-called ‘host’ culture in relation to those perceived as interloping Others. This is evident in Zhila and Yasmin’s comments about asking their peers where they are from:

Yasmin: […] when I ask people that I know are not… Australian, you know, I go, “Where are you from?” and they’re like, “I’m from Australia,” and then I go, “No, but where are you from?” –

Zhila: Yeah, coz you can see there’s something else in them and they don’t say it coz they’re like, “I was born here” –

Yasmin: – I can never get that, I just don’t get it –

Zhila: – I’ve met lots of people who are like that…

In this context, the question “Where are you from?” is premised upon presumed alterity deriving from physical appearance: “you can see there’s something else in them”, something Other. This visible difference renders the factually correct answer, “I’m from Australia,” inauthentic, and the repetition of the question becomes a demand for an authentic statement of origin. The implication is that only those who are of Anglo ethnic appearance are unquestionably Australian. Those who deliberately respond to this question literally, and stubbornly refuse to provide further information beyond their place of birth (or the suburb they live in, etc.) are acutely aware of this. Yasmin and Zhila, who were both born outside Australia and who are both hijabi, surely sometimes find themselves the object of such inquiries. It perhaps isn’t so much the logic of the response itself that they “don’t get”, but its evasiveness in this context. Having themselves experienced migration first-hand, the question has, for them, more to do with detecting shared experiences than the (conscious or unconscious) cultural chauvinism that is apparent when an Anglo-Australian asks the same thing. While much more could be said about Anglo cultural hegemony in Australia, I shall leave this for the next chapter. The point I wish to emphasise here is that people tend to think about ethnicity in primordial terms. To ask where someone is
from in this way is consistent with a strongly space bound primordial understanding of ethnic identity, one that defines ethnicity through ancestry and equates cultural and physical characteristics with geographic locale.

While my discussion of cultural reification in Chapter One implies that a primordial understanding of ethnicity is unsustainable from an analytic point of view, it is important to recognise that primordialism forms the basis of not only crude everyday ethnic chauvinism (Jenkins 1997: 48), but also everyday subjective notions of ethnic belonging. Primordial bonds may be imagined, but the emotional investment in them is undeniably real. Leila’s dress can be interpreted as visually symbolic of the strength of primordial affectivity. When Leila unpacked the dress in the workshop, the other female participants crowded around her to admire it. Vibrantly coloured and intricately decorated, the handmade dress was spectacular, and I joined in their enthusiasm. I had never seen a dress like it, and the girls were proud to show it to me; Leila described it as “a piece of art showing the Afghan girl’s talent.” Holding it to see the embroidery more closely, I was surprised by the weight of the garment. I asked Leila what it was like to wear something so heavy; she said that the weight makes it difficult to walk. She told me that the dress holds particular importance as a symbol of her “background” because one of her aunts brought it over from Afghanistan especially for her when she migrated to Australia. This struck me as a significant act, given the impracticality of taking such a heavy and bulky item on an international journey and the implication that other things might therefore need to be left behind. When I mentioned this to Leila she agreed, reiterating how special the dress is. The weight of the dress could therefore be seen as symbolic of the weight of primordial ethnic ties upon Leila’s sense of self – not in a negative sense, for Leila’s portrait is clearly meant as a celebration of those ties – but in terms of the importance they hold.

Samira, another Afghani participant, said that if someone were to ask where she is from, she would reply, “I’m from Afghanistan but I’m Australian as well.” When I asked her about the Afghani element of her identity she exclaimed,

Oh! It makes me who I am, the way I am, the way I think is because I’m Afghan, that’s the way my culture is. It just, you know, it helps me through stuff. […] The way of thinking, you know, they’re like, “You have to be patient, you have to do this, you have to do that”, you know? You have to have a strong faith.

Do you feel part of an Islamic community or any other community?
I feel part of the Afghan community coz we do everything together, we go to picnics, we have muharram majlis, we have, you know, birthdays of the Imams and stuff, so…

So it’s your main way of socialising?

Yep.

Ibrahim and Ali similarly exhibited a very distinct sense of belonging to an ethnic Afghani community, emphasising the strength of the primordial bonds that tie that community together. They proudly informed me that their fathers were childhood friends in the same small village in Afghanistan, and the two families now live less than one kilometre from each other in outer Eastern Melbourne. The boys are also distantly related, as they recently discovered when an elderly woman still living in the village died. An older member of the Melbourne Afghani community sat the boys down and drew up a complex family tree that incorporated almost the entire village in order to explain who the woman was and how she was a linked to the two families. “We just got confused, but he knew what he was talking about” (Ali). Speaking about themselves and their male Afghani peers, they said:

Ibrahim: we’ve grown up together we all like click the same way. We all have the same perception of everything.

Ali: we’re like a society within a society – most of our community knows that we are one sort of pack, and that we always go everywhere together and stuff like that. Like, when we were young we used to always play around but now they know that everywhere we do go, if they invite one of us they invite the rest of us as well, coz we all, like, we don’t really go by ourselves, it’s always in a group.

Most of the photographs created by Ibrahim, Ali and other members of their group were thematically focussed on the group itself:

Ali: […] in the summer holidays we spent a lot of time with each other… I had a photo of a little dog, made out of a car spring – just this art thing. That was something we just found on the beach. So I just kept that…

Ibrahim: Yeah we kept that all the way through. And now it’s just funny when we look at it we think “Ah, that was our holiday 2005.” And so in a sense those photos, most of them were personal, like personal jokes. Like that someone from outside the group wouldn’t really get, but we still see the humour of it.

Having outlined the important role primordial bonds play in participant lifeworlds, I will now look at how the boundaries delineating the diasporic communities imagined around these bonds are constructed.
Hybridity, Language and Boundaries

This section focuses on one form of corporeal ethnic identity practice – language – in boundary construction, and the significance of hybrid identities in relation to language and borders. In a diasporic context, when the so-called language of the diaspora may effectively be an individual’s second language, language can take on heightened symbolic importance for group members. This was the case for members of the male Afghani friendship group, who take creative measures to exercise their Persian speaking skills:

*Do you speak Persian among yourselves, when it’s just you guys?*

Ibrahim: Our Persian’s not so good but we try. We make games out of it, like we play cards and for an hour we’re only allowed to speak Persian. And if you don’t then you have to pay out $5 or something.

Ali: Or you have to get slapped!

Speaking Persian, for these participants, literally becomes a consciously enacted physical performance. Language is obviously an important marker of ethnic identity. Fishman (1996: 26) remarks that “Language as group marker has more social and psychological weight than dress does. Successful mastery of language implies learning it from birth, in the context of the kinship or primary group.” Within diasporic communities, however, individuals born in the “host” society or who
migrated there at a young age may not necessarily successfully master the diasporic language. Jacobson’s (1998) study of religion and identity among British Pakistani youth indicates that the young people’s language use and abilities sometimes caused tensions at home, and, in the case of one participant in that study, limited diasporic linguistic proficiency caused feelings of alienation in relation to the diasporic community. In an Australian context, Butcher and Thomas’ (2006: 61) research on hybrid youth cultures in Western Sydney demonstrates that young people born to migrant parents in Australia may speak their parents’ language at home but often do so with limited proficiency. There was some evidence of this in the Iraqi group when discussions were centred on passages from the Qur’an. While the majority of Iraqi and Lebanese participants spoke Arabic at home and most had at least the Arabic literacy skills necessary to read aloud from the Qur’an, program workers did not always assume that all participants were fluent in Arabic. The translation of key words in the Qur’an was routinely undertaken as a group activity and it was clear that many of the participants relied on these discussions to derive meaning from certain Arabic words, particularly those with abstract significations. Speaking Arabic took on heightened importance for participants in this group because there was also an identification with Arabic as the language of Islam. This was impressed upon me particularly strongly when discussing the pronouns used for God in Judaism, Christianity and Islam with one of the program workers. The discussion quickly became a language lesson, as the Arabic pronouns in question had no direct English equivalents. “You can understand Islam in any language,” the program worker told me, “but if you really want to go more deeply into the philosophy then you start to need Arabic.”

When I asked Ali and Ibrahim more about the language game, they told me that Mehrak, an older member of their friendship group, instigated it. Male participants’ photographs expressed the esteem Mehrak is held in by the younger group members. In some images he has been dressed up in a headscarf by the other participants, while in others he reclines in an armchair wearing a towelling beach hat and sunglasses and sipping a can of soft drink. Arms outstretched, the younger group members, all of whom are laughing, hold the chair high above their heads. Their description of Mehrak’s role in the language game was as follows:

Ali: That was all Mehrak’s attempt as an elder... like he’s in our group as a supervisor in a way, he does his best to make us speak Persian.
How does he come into that role?

Ali: He comes into that role coz we’ve grown up with him and his brothers –

Ibrahim: We’ve seen him as an older person… For me, I was always with these guys when they were teenagers and I was still a child. And Mehrak was a teenager when I was a baby so I’ve only got to know him like recently. And coz he’s been through what we’re going through now and we get the leadership and he tells us about his experiences and we work on that.

So does he have people around him who might say “Oh, you should look after those guys coz they’re young” or something like that?

Ali: I think it’s more voluntary. Maybe he sees that he was having the same fun we did or maybe something in common but he always helps us out and he was the one who brought up the game of trying not to speak English. He gives you the challenge that makes you subconsciously really think about what you’re saying.

Ibrahim: What he does is just to preserve the past and still get us into the future. He’s got a vision. Sometimes you see the next generation and you think about what they’re gonna be like. Coz we’re not very good at speaking Persian and stuff. You might think “what are my children gonna be like?”

You want them to speak Persian?

Ali: Yeah.

Ibrahim: Yeah, and especially when [a local sheikh] was here, he went to pray at some park and some guy goes up to him and said “my grandpa used to do this.” That really struck a chord with me and I started thinking about what’s going to happen to the future generations. It kinda makes you wanna get more into your background.

Mehrak’s vision for maintaining the cultural practices that are seen as an essential part of Afghani ethnic identity and the strategy he has devised to ensure this position him as what Yuval-Davis (1997) terms a group “border guard”. As pointed out in Chapter One, it is more often women, particularly mothers, who traditionally occupy this role within ethnic communities, because their position within the domestic sphere is such that they are the primary means through which children are inculcated into the community’s cultural beliefs and practices. This is why the comportment of women is so often the focus of cultural preservation projects. In this diasporic context, however, the boys’ attempts to maintain Persian speaking skills have far less sense of urgency that the reactive situations described by Yuval-Davis. For these participants, preserving the past does not mean reifying it, as their sights are still set on moving towards the future. Getting “more into your background” means valuing primordial ties in order to avoid becoming like the young man who is unfamiliar with his grandfather’s religion.
While the male Afghani friendship group at first appeared to be quite rigidly constructed around Afghani ethnic identity, its boundaries turned out to be much more fluid. Joining the program provided the male Afghani participants with an opportunity to socialise with young Muslims from other ethnic backgrounds:

Ibrahim: it was a whole new experience being around Iraqis and Lebanese. [...] I never met Iraqis. This is the first time I’ve ever met Arabs.

Both Ibrahim and Ali spoke positively about meeting Arabs for the first time, recounting how they enjoyed having dinner with the Lebanese family of one of the program workers. New friendships were also formed on the basis of shared Muslim identity, and two new members joined the Afghani friendship group:

Ibrahim: [...] if it wasn’t for religion, we wouldn’t get to know the Iraqi people here. But Tariq, since he speaks Persian we know him much better now.

Ali: So it’s less of a boundary. He doesn’t feel outside our group because of a language barrier. Like if you’re in a group and everyone’s speaking one language… like we’ll try our best to speak English if Ismail’s around, [another Iraqi participant], but sometimes someone says something in Persian, so I’ll turn around and tell him so he doesn’t feel that he’s out of the group. I don’t think it’s a barrier, but it’s a comfort zone. When you know the language, you’re not paranoid in a way. You’re not missing out on anything as well….

Shared religious identity allowed the basis for group membership to expand beyond ethnic identity. Australian researchers studying masculine identity among members of a suburban Sydney high school friendship group constructed around Lebanese identity found group borders to be equally strong yet also fluid. The boundaries demarcating Lebanese identity were extended to include a group member who identified as Lebanese, yet was of Syrian background – “Lebanese is sort of like slang for Arab,” [participant] – and others from southern European backgrounds – “Asked what they have in common, Ghassan gave a one-word answer: ‘Wogs’” (Poynting et al 1998: 79-80). Tariq, identified here as Iraqi, was born in Iran and immigrated to Australia seven years ago. The linguistic similarities between Iranian and Afghani Persian allowed Tariq to be easily integrated into the group. Although Ahmed’s religious identity meant that he was also welcome to join this close-knit circle of peers, as an Arabic speaker other group members had to make a conscious effort to include him. While religious identity therefore became a new basis for group membership, the shared language associated with a pan-ethnic Persian identity created a more straightforward means of integrating into the group. The addition of one Arabic speaker was not sufficient grounds to disrupt the group’s Persian language
skills preservation project. However, if other non-Persian Muslims continue to join the group then that project may possibly lose its potency.

Tariq and his older sister, Zhila, attended the Afghani workshop sessions because they lived close to the venue. Like most of the other Iraqi participants, Zhila was born in Iraq to Iraqi parents but migrated with her family to Iran as a baby. Tariq was born there shortly after. The program workers and other participants identified both as Iraqis. Zhila’s Iraqi identity was called into question during one session when she was asked to read a passage from the Qur’an. “I can’t,” she said, “I don’t speak Arabic.” “What? You call yourself Iraqi and you don’t even speak Arabic?”, the program worker exclaimed. This was not said reproachfully; she adopted a thick Arab accent and exaggerated tone of mock horror clearly intended to make Zhila laugh. It seemed that the worker assumed Zhila spoke Arabic at home but was embarrassed to read aloud before the group. “You could have a go”, she said encouragingly. Laughing self-consciously, Zhila replied, “I honestly can’t speak a word!” The worker rolled her eyes, again teasingly, and proceeded to read the passage herself.

Although not as outgoing as some of the other participants in the Afghani session, Zhila was nevertheless a confident participant in discussions concerning religion. It seemed out of character for her to decline to read the Qur’an due to shyness. Given that Zhila had completed most of her schooling in Iran, I assumed that the reason for her reticence was that she was a more competent speaker of Farsi than Arabic. When I later interviewed Zhila it became evident that her reluctance to read from the Qur’an was not because she had reservations about having her Arabic speaking skills publicly scrutinised. She had meant what she said about not speaking any Arabic:

*Do you see your identity as having a lot of Iranian influence?*

Zhila: Well we have a lot of Turkish in us because my dad is from the Turkish side of Iraq. We don’t speak Arabic at all…

*So you speak Turkish and Farsi too?*

Zhila: yep.

*If people ask you where you are from –*

Zhila: – Well I’d say I’m Iraqi, and then say I’m from the Turkman part… Sometimes I just go “I’m a Turk” and just leave it there…

Throughout the duration of the program Zhila’s identification as an Iraqi Turk had not been apparent to program workers or other participants. It is significant as it
undermines the perception commonly held not only by those outside the diasporic community, but perhaps even more significantly those who situate themselves within it, such as the program worker, that Iraqi diasporic identity is necessarily Arab. By drawing attention to the cultural and linguistic diversity of Iraq, Zhila’s Turkish identity destabilises the notion that there is an essential Iraqi culture that lies at the core of Iraqi diasporic identity. It becomes impossible to claim that there is one shared cultural identity on which to base diasporic identity when in reality Iraq is, at least in a descriptive sense, a multicultural nation.

While the Iraqi diasporic community envisaged by the program deliverers was linguistically homogenous, this was not a deliberate construction designed to exclude non-Arab Iraqi participants. All program information was provided to parents of Iraqi and Lebanese participants in both English and Arabic; the potential need to translate program material into other Iraqi languages was simply overlooked. Accommodating ethnic minority identities within the program was certainly consistent with its objectives. Yet even if the Iraqi diasporic community is seen to be inclusive of sub-national ethnic identities, there still remains a broader theoretical problem concerning how these communities come to be. Even if the diasporic community is imagined, to adopt Benedict Anderson’s terminology, in a way that incorporates a broader range of cultural identities, the delimitation of the borders is no less problematic. For no matter how culturally heterogeneous the diaspora is imagined to be, it is still necessary to demarcate borders determining where the host culture ends and the diasporic culture begins. Anthias (2001: 626) is critical of the very notion of diaspora, from a theoretical point of view, in this respect because it centralises “origin” as the basis of collective identity, even if this is occurring in a transnational context. Ang (2003: 142) makes an almost identical point, arguing that diasporas are “proto-nationalist” in that they are premised upon a naturalised relationship between culture and place:

While the transnationalism of diasporas is often taken as an implicit point of critique of the territorial boundedness and internally homogenising perspective of the nation-state, the limits of diaspora lie precisely in its own assumed boundedness, its inevitable tendency to stress its internal coherence and unity, logically set apart from “others”. Diasporic formations transgress the boundaries of the nation-state on behalf of a globally dispersed “people” – for example, “the Chinese” – but paradoxically this transgression can only be achieved by drawing a boundary around the diaspora, “the Chinese people” themselves.

Lowe (2003) writes about the American Asian diaspora from a similar perspective. She argues that it is imperative to think about diaspora not in terms of a hierarchised
structure in which culture is transmitted vertically from generation to generation, as is consistent with a primordial approach, but as a looser horizontal configuration where culture is negotiated between and within ethnic communities. For both Lowe and Ang, hybridity is therefore a useful conceptual tool because it problematises the very notion of ethnicity that diaspora is premised upon. As Pieterse (2001: 220) writes, “[t]he importance of hybridity is that it problematises boundaries.”

Hybridity and Ambivalence

Thinking of cultural identity as hybrid in terms of subjective identity necessitates acknowledging the feelings of ambivalence experienced in relation to the displacement associated with migration (Papastergiadis 2005). This ambivalence is illustrated in Ang’s (2003: 149) remarks about her own identity: “I would describe myself as suspended in-between: neither truly Western nor authentically Asian; embedded in the West yet always partially disengaged from it; disembedded from Asia yet somehow enduringly attached to it emotionally.” Ang’s use of “neither/nor” is significant here because, while hybridity can be evoked as a celebration and integration of multiple identity allegiances, as was conveyed through some of the images discussed in the previous chapter, it can also be conceived of as being negatively defined. Hybrid identity also implies that the subject perceives herself (and/or is perceived by others) as not fully belonging to any one culture, “neither the One nor the Other but something else besides” as Bhabha (2004: 131) puts it. Like Ang, Bhabha refers to the subjective identity forged in this liminal “third space” as ambivalent.

Further analysis of Zhila’s sense of cultural identity indicates that although she does not embrace hybridity by describing herself as “multicultural”, “two-sided” or “mixed” like other participants, her attitude towards claiming a single cultural allegiance is certainly ambivalent:

Yasmin: Well I’m Afghan, obviously, but I was born in Uzbekistan.

Did you spend much time there?

Yasmin: About five years. I never really got the thing of when you’re born somewhere you become part of that place… I don’t know… I think it’s more about your background… not where you’re born but where your parents are from and where your grandparents and great-grandparents are from… that way.

Zhila: People usually say where you were born is where you’re from…
Yasmin: I don’t think of it that way.

Zhila: If I go way back then I’m a Turk, but it’s not right, it just seems a bit weird. My mum’s from Iraq, she’s not Turkish.

Yasmin: [to Zhila] You say “I’m Iranian” coz you grew up there…

Do you think the place that you’ve spent the longest time has –

Zhila: – yeah, coz my brother, the youngest one, he wouldn’t say he was Turkish, he would say “I’m an Australian.”

So it’s different for you compared to your brother…

Zhila: Yeah, coz he was born here, he says he’s Australian. He says he’s Australian and then he says, “Yeah, I’m a Turk!” [laughs]…

So maybe, do you think, you can be all?

Zhila: I don’t know, he still says “I’m Australian.”

[…]

Do you think that it’s possible to have more than one ethnic identity?

Zhila: Yeah, why not?

Yasmin: What do you mean?

Like, sometimes people might say that you can’t be both –

Zhila: – No, you can pick wherever you want to be from, if you’re comfortable, like with my [other] brother, he was born in Iran and everything but he would never ever put the Turkish into it at all, he would just say “I’m Iraqi.” That’s it. Coz that’s what he feels comfortable saying, but me, I wouldn’t feel comfortable saying that…

The question of where ethnic identity originates is central to this discussion. When asked about her ethnic identity in the survey, Yasmin responded “Uzbeki”, while in this discussion she describes herself as Afghani. She evidently feels that Uzbeki is the “correct” response to the question because she was born in Uzbekistan, even though she does not personally relate to a conceptualisation of ethnic identity based on place of birth. Her own understanding of cultural identity corresponds with the primordial model: “not where you’re born but where your parents are from and where your grandparents and great-great grandparents are from.” While Yasmin can clearly draw upon multiple cultural resources in the articulation of her sense of identity, it is not overly problematic for her to perceive her ethnic identity as something that has been handed down to her from previous generations. Zhila’s understanding of ethnicity, on the other hand, is necessarily more fluid. The primordial model doesn’t fit (“it’s not right, it just seems a bit weird”) because her mother isn’t Turkish; she was born in
Iraq but doesn’t feel comfortable identifying herself as Iraqi in the way her brother would; and, although she grew up in Iran and is evidently seen by Yasmin as Iranian (‘you say you’re Iranian…’), she does not explicitly identify herself as Iranian. Like Ang, she is suspended in-between. This positioning is not necessarily comfortable, evident here in the way she deflects attention away from herself by talking about her two brothers. Her earlier statement, “Sometimes I just go ‘I’m a Turk’ and just leave it there”, is a similar tactic adopted to avoid the long explanation that the complexity of hybrid identity often demands.

A striking example of the ambivalence associated with hybrid cultural identity was expressed in Nadia’s consideration of whether she is Australian. Nadia’s visual articulations of the fluidity of her identity were accompanied by an image that she said was representative of her multi-facetted identity:

I took one where I used my scarves coz they’re all different colours and have different patterns and I put one of my sister’s little doll thingies in the middle. And that’s supposed to, like, mean that you know, I’m made up of all these different things – like they’re the scarves, and then the little doll – that’s me. They all come together to make me...

While this image could be interpreted as representative of Nadia’s hybrid cultural identity, in the context of her discussion of her photographs it is clear that she intended the photograph to convey a sense of her identity as a fusion of elements in terms of personal experiences and ideas. In contrast to this, Nadia’s sense of identity could not be expressed as an easy integration of disparate cultural elements. Her consideration of her national identity summons equally strong feelings of belonging and alienation. As part of a brief essay on her identity that she drafted as a speech to be delivered at the photography exhibition, Nadia wrote:

Am I Australian?

I do consider myself to be an Australian. I consider myself to be an Australian because I was born here and I lived here all of my life, my home is here and I feel like I belong, all my family is here and I have made strong bonds here but I also don’t consider myself to be an Australian. I also don’t consider myself to be an Australian because my background is Lebanese and my customs and beliefs are nothing like the Australian customs and beliefs, they are on the contrary of each other and I could not blend them together to become both of them at the same time.

Nadia’s articulation of her sense of belonging overtly evokes the existence of a national culture from which she feels excluded. For Nadia, “Australian culture” and “Lebanese culture” are two hermetically sealed entities that cannot be merged into a hybrid form of cultural identity.
Social psychologists tend to conceptualise diasporic youth subjectivity as affectively situated somewhere between the poles of ‘culture of origin’ and ‘host culture’ (see Berry et al 2006, Ryder et al 2000). While this perspective is theoretically flawed because it implies a problematic essentialised notion of culture at an epistemic level, and is dependent on methodologies that are not conducive to analysing how such positionings are negotiated on a quotidian level, Nadia’s statement is illustrative of how the same reified binary can be constructed by young people themselves. For Nadia, multiculturalism discursively destabilises this binary but does not erase it altogether:

*What about Australian culture? What do you reckon Australian culture is?*

Oh, like footy… sport, you know, cricket and stuff. Yeah, but that’s not really culture… that’s like, you know, their, I don’t know how to say it… that’s their thing… you know? I don’t know… because Australia is such a multicultural country. It’s like hard to say, coz like everywhere you go there’s like different things happening. So it’s not like all the same.

*What does that mean, “multicultural”?*

Like the word?

*To you…*

To me multicultural means, like, having all these different things, you know, coming together to make just one thing. Yeah? Sort of like that.

*Is that idea important to you?*

Yeah it is. Because I reckon multiculturalism is important because if you didn’t have that then where would you learn anything… coz like… what would make you sort of… coz like people learn different things from different people, you know? You can’t learn from a person that’s the same as you coz you know, you both like the same things, you do the same things, so if you met someone that’s different, you know, you would learn different things. You might adopt a few different habits.

*So you need that input from people who are different to you?*

Mmmm. Yeah.

Nadia’s hesitant attempt to define Australian culture is typical of the ambivalence expressed by participants when talking about Australian culture. While on one hand she envisages it as something diametrically different to Lebanese culture, her statement that Australia is “such a multicultural country” is an acknowledgement of the heterogeneity of Australian cultural practices. Nadia’s discussion of belonging is therefore premised upon an unresolved tension between Australian culture defined as a singular entity – characterised by the footy and cricket that is “their thing” – and the
visions of cultural heterogeneity evoked by the notion of multiculturalism. There is also an ambivalent relationship between Nadia’s normative idea of multicultural subjectivity and her lived experience. She does not explicitly conceptualise her identity as affirmatively hybrid because, from her point of view, the two cultures cannot be blended because they are “on the contrary of each other.” Yet, at the same time, she values quotidian experiences of other cultures because they encourage individuals to adopt elements of different cultures, something she explicitly endorses as a progressive element of identity formation.

Understanding Nadia’s sense of belonging is further complicated by the socially contingent way in which she articulates that belonging:

If I was talking to an Arab girl, and she asked me “Where are you from?”, usually I would say that I’m Lebanese-Australian, but if like a girl from school that she’s… she doesn’t know anything about Islam or my hijab or whatever, like, usually I will say that I’m Australian. So, I don’t know…it confuses me. Because I was born in Australia and I’ve never been anywhere else besides Australia, like it’s my home. But my traditions and the stuff that I believe in it’s like mainly from my parents’ culture. They were born in Lebanon, you know? So like, coz they’re my main support, you know? They’ve taught me everything I know, yeah? So, you know, I took it from them.

Nadia’s different ethnic identification according to social context is consistent with what anthropologists term situational ethnicity. According to Paden [1970], “situational ethnicity is premised on the observation that particular contexts may determine which of a person’s communal identities or loyalties are appropriate at a point in time” (cited in Okamura 1981: 452). A situational understanding of ethnic identity is particularly useful to this study because it applies to everyday social situations rather than broader societal contexts. It is at this analytical level that “the variable meanings of ethnicity, the differing criteria for ascription of ethnic identities, the fluidity of ethnic boundaries, and the varying relevance of ethnic and other social identities are most apparent for the actor and researcher alike” (ibid.). While situational ethnicity is instrumental, in Nadia’s case for the purpose of social acceptance, it is nonetheless authentic. As Haifa explains:

*How do you respond when people ask you where you are from?*

Haifa: Well I say I’m Iraqi, then I say I’m half Persian. Then I say I’m living in Australia so I’m a Muslim, it’s all, like mixed… Well if I’m living here, I say I’m Australian. If I go to Iraq I say I’m Iraqi.

*So it depends on where you are at the time…*
Haifa: Yeah, or who you’re talking to. Well it doesn’t change, like if I believe that I’m a Muslim, I’m not gonna go to a non-Muslim and say, like, I don’t like to be a Muslim so I change because I want them to, like I want to give the answer that they want to hear. I just say what I feel that’s what I am. I mean, I am an Australian, I am. I’m an Australian Muslim.

Haifa’s ethnic identity may be flexible, but her Muslim identity remains consistent.

A constant, grounding sense of Muslim identity was also present in the male participants’ discussion of their group identity. When asked why they feel it is important that future generations living in Australia continue to speak Persian, Ibrahim and Ali replied:

Ali: You don’t want to lose where you came from. Inevitably in the end people will all be the same. There won’t be any thing to split them up – well it’s not a good thing to split people up – but if we don’t follow what our parents have given us, then it’s just gonna become pointless in the end. It’s what makes different groups –

Ibrahim: – but something can also go wrong, like when people take it to another level…

Cultural group differentiation is seen as a necessary means of avoiding the homogenising forces that they believe will inevitably lead all people to be the same, but it is also “not a good thing to split people up.” The hybrid cultural identities of these young people inevitably lead them to grapple with ambivalence at this more abstract level. The language and ideas associated with Australian multiculturalism may, at least for these participants, provide a framework for embracing hybrid identity, but they do not resolve the tension between differentiation (“you don’t want to lose where you came from”) and collectivity (“it’s not a good thing to split people up”) in an abstract sense. At an everyday level, however, male participants consciously attempt to strike a balance in how they differentiate themselves, avoiding the chauvinism of those who “take it to another level”:

Ibrahim: There’s some people that are… like, we try to preserve our past. But in a more moderate way. Coz we’re very religious but you see other people who aren’t very knowledgable about Islam and they say that they’re Muslim and they use that to make gangs or something…

Ali: They make conversation and groups out of it. They use it in the wrong way. They use the word – the name – in the wrong way. And personally when I go out, and some of the guys, we don’t mention it. We don’t walk around going “Oh, we’re Muslim”, you know? If someone can tell by the way you look, fine. You don’t say anything. We don’t go out and promote it in the wrong way. We keep our quiet and if anyone asks we say, “Yeah, I’m a Muslim.”

As I will demonstrate in the following chapter, this is not the only reason these participants tend to “keep quiet” about being Muslim. In terms of the present
discussion, however, Islamic identity can be seen to represent a stabilising force that may help to counteract the feelings of confusion, as Nadia puts it, that are associated with hybrid ambivalence.

It is interesting to note that the cosmopolitanism of Islam, particularly apparent in the notion of the transnational umma, was something that participants seldom, if ever, referred to throughout the time I spent with them. Nadia comes closest to exhibiting an overtly cosmopolitan outlook on belonging, even if it is clearly undermined by some of her previously cited comments:

*What about citizenship, what does being an Australian citizen mean to you?*

It doesn’t mean that much to me really, coz I’m like, still part of the world. Just because I belong to a certain country doesn’t mean that I’m not like other people from different countries. It just means that this is my home and that’s it.

*Is that important, that idea of this being your home?*

Oh, it is in a way but not in another. Because everywhere you go there’s people that make you feel like it’s your home, they welcome you, they’re really nice towards you and stuff.

[…]

*So then what does make someone Australian?*

I reckon that… I reckon it’s the, like it’s the best thing to say, like “I belong to this”, you know, wherever, coz like, you know, the world it’s not like it’s separated. It’s all the one thing, but you know, they’re just in different places. So I don’t know… it’s like… I don’t know…

While participants may not have drawn upon the cosmopolitan potential of Islam in their narratives of self and belonging, other everyday practices participants engage in indicate that a transnational Muslim youth consciousness may be emerging nonetheless. I explore this theme later in Chapter Seven, through a discussion of online communities. In light of the present discussion, however, the absence of an everyday discourse of Islamic cosmopolitanism is significant. This is especially so given that the umma was a prominent theme within the religious instruction participants were exposed to through the program. Although participants were always quick to assert that their religious identity takes priority over any other identity (especially nationality), they never explicitly embraced the cosmopolitan umma as a means of negotiating hybrid cultural belonging. This was most likely due to the way in which this transnational moral community is imagined. Beyond participation in hajj, few objective social practices contribute to the construction and maintenance of
the umma; it exists as a community in a highly abstract sense. While ethnic communities are also imagined, the everyday social practices through which they are enacted lend them a more immediate sense of realness. In another respect, as I will demonstrate in the following chapter, participants’ efforts to differentiate themselves from an externally constructed transnational Islamic community perceived as a threat surely diminishes the appeal of the umma as a basis for collective identity, however different it may in fact be from that external construct.

As this chapter has demonstrated, the process of negotiating the dislocation that is hybridity, in its lived sense, is fraught with feelings of ambivalence. From this quotidian perspective, hybridity can also be conceived of as inherently ambivalent in a more abstract sense in that it both undermines and reinscribes primordial understandings of ethnicity and territorially defined notions of culture. I began this chapter with a comparison between the work of Frida Kahlo and the portrait created by one of the participants. It therefore seems appropriate to conclude it by drawing a parallel between Kahlo’s work and the themes of hybridity and belonging expressed in the participants’ photographic images and related discussions:

Kahlo’s choice of themes suggests a profound discussion about her relationship to the past, ancestors, and her “homeland” produced on the margins of Mexico’s emerging post-Revolutionary consensus… Kahlo’s work underscores her attempt to understand complex political and cultural identities – her own included – identities that undermine stable national narratives at the same time that they assert their roots in imagined traditions. In this sense, Kahlo can be seen as an active agent in the production of “multiple forms of national belonging”, and a creative genius in the depiction of the liminality of the modern nation space.” (Volk 2000: 169)

If hybridity is to be considered a form of multicultural subjectivity, as Ibrahim and Najwa describe their self-identity, then like multiculturalism it is premised on a problematisation (as opposed to a complete transgression) of the nation as the location of culture.
CHAPTER 5

Negotiating Ascribed Identities

You certainly do feel, you know, comfortable, coz there’s all sorts of people living here, you know, you feel comfortable. But then when stuff like you get teased or discriminated against or something happens, that does really make you think back and say, you know, “Is it really multicultural? Are they just saying that it is?” (Zhila)

Following on from the previous chapter’s focus on self-attributed identity, in this chapter I analyse participants’ sense of self more in terms of the identities that are ascribed to them. In considering how to structure this chapter, my first impulse was to graphically illustrate the alterity that is ascribed to Muslim identities in the Australian public sphere by presenting some of the many examples of discrimination experienced by participants and the numerous other young Muslims I spoke to during the course of this research. This would not be difficult, for the interview transcripts and my field notes were replete with stories of injustice experienced on the basis of being recognised as Muslim: some humorous, others disturbing, many heartbreaking. However, I felt that to do so would be to misrepresent the curious relationship between these stories and the young people telling them. For when asked directly if they had ever experienced prejudice or discrimination based on their ethnic and/or religious identity, participants consistently responded that they had not. Among a handful of exceptions was one female Afghani respondent’s description of the verbal abuse she experienced in the street shortly after September 11, 2001: “I have been called a “dirty arab”, even though I am not arab…”, she wrote. On the same survey, another female participant responded, “Yes, there is too many to mention,” while another Iraqi participant wrote, “Very heart breaking saying things about your appearance (hijab).” For the most part, however, participants responded in the negative, emphasising instead the tolerance of Australian society. I have therefore decided to present these stories in the same way they were most often told to me: as a matter-of-fact way of illustrating a point, often outside the context of discussions of discrimination or of how Islamic identity is perceived by other Australians.

I begin this chapter with an exploration of how participants experience alterity at an everyday level. I will then consider these findings in relation to an influential theoretical account of alterity – strangerhood – that leads to further exploration of
hybridity theory. This time, however, the focus is on hybridity as seen from the outside, that is, the social consumption of embodied representations of hybridity.

**Negotiating Precarious Belonging**

The precariousness of many participants’ sense of belonging to the national community was clearly evident in discussions concerning its legal documentation: citizenship. While some participants, especially those born in Australia, said that citizenship meant little to them (“It doesn’t change who I am,” wrote Nadia), for others it holds symbolic importance as official recognition of national belonging:

*So you’re both Australian citizens…*

Pareesa: Yeah, I was born here.

Meena: Yeah, I am but I wasn’t born here, I came here when I was four months old.

*What does it mean to be an Australian citizen?*

Meena: Well, we can… we belong to a country, obviously, just like that piece of paper is saying that we belong to Australia and it sort of means that if people have things like they’re trying to criticize you or something then you can tell them that you’re not different, that you’re Australian citizens just like them. Yeah, you have that to back you up.

*Is that the most important part of being a citizen?*

Meena: Yeah.

Pareesa: Yeah, just that you belong.

*What does your citizenship mean to you?*

Haifa: It’s like an advantage…

*An advantage?*

Haifa: Oh I don’t even know what that means! But it is something really good and precious to me. And it means that I have to follow the Australian laws just like any other Australian, I have to respect Australia, just like they respected me, they brought me to this country, they gave me citizenship, I have to, you know, reply back.

Amira: Send them and email!

[All laugh]

Amira: With the citizenship, when I received it, it just gave me straight away a sense of belonging to this country.

*Really?*
Amira: Yeah, it just happened straight away.

Haifa: Coz you know, if you’re not a citizen, some new law might come, you might get kicked out. And like when you get the citizenship, you’re like “I’m home”; you know, this is your home.

Amira: When you look at it, well it’s only a piece of paper but it means so much.

What is striking here is that the issue of citizenship and belonging immediately implied a need to assert that “you’re not different”, or negotiate criticism or potential physical removal from the community. Not only here, but in all discussions about belonging, there is evidence of an implicit precariousness brought about by being recognised as Other. Citizenship, for these participants, helps to ameliorate feelings of precariousness both in social terms, because it allows them to assert belonging when interacting with other Australians who stigmatise them as different, and in political terms, in that legislative change can mean that “you might get kicked out” if you don’t have it. No matter how participants negotiate their identity in relation to other Australians, their narratives of identity – and I of course mean this to include visual narratives – implicitly refer to and often actively engage with dominant perceptions of Islamic identity as profoundly Other. In the context of this study, therefore, narrating identity involves interacting with, either consciously or unconsciously and to various extents, multiple forms of ascribed alterity. Although I have chosen to separate identity into its self-attributed and ascribed forms to some extent by addressing them in separate chapters, this is merely for narrative purposes. As is evident here, the latter is deeply embedded within the former.

The sense that the attitudes of other Australians foster feelings of precarious belonging was even more marked in responses to the survey question, “how do you respond when someone asks you where you are from?” All participants understood this question to refer to ethnic origins (rather than city, suburb, etc.) and there was a clear assumption that it would be asked in a patronising or confrontational manner:

I tell them every detail possible where I come from! There’s nothing to be ashamed about. (Mehri)

I just tell them I am Afghani and if they say anything I just tell them off and start yelling at them. (Delaram)

I tell them I am Afghani and answer back. (Sayid)

The way participants interpreted the question “where are you from?” tended to be shaped by past experiences of misrecognition, to use Taylor’s term. Ibrahim and Ali
describe in further detail a typical scenario that might be played out around this question:

What about as far as other Australian go, what if someone asks you where you are from, how do you answer that?

Ibrahim: Tell them straight-up. I’m Afghan. And then they go, “Is bin Laden your uncle?” or something and you just cope with it.

Do people often say things like that?

Ali: Yeah, all the time. As a joke to click your temper off, to see how you react. Like if anyone asks me I say, “Yeah, I spoke to him on the phone the other day and he says he’s really good”, you know? Like, “keepin’ it real down in the tunnels, in his cave”, stuff like that.

[All laugh]

Then it becomes a joke. As soon as you show someone it’s a joke and you don’t take it to heart they think, “Okay, he’s alright, he’s not a psycho.”

Ibrahim: You also gotta tell them in a way that they take it seriously so that they know next time not to say it. Like if they keep saying it I’m just like, “Stop. I’ve just met you and I’ve given you this information and you’ve just spat it right back in my face.”

Ali: The first time it happens to me, yeah, you’re saying it as a joke. The second time you have to put it straight back in their face: “Look, the first time you said it it was funny, now it’s not funny.” Or you say, “Why are you using the same joke twice?” It puts them in their spot and they bite their tongue. They’re like “Oh, okay.” So you put them down for trying to put you down. That’s how it works.

Ibrahim: I reckon not to put them down, coz the resentment kind of forms. And, like, I try to give the knowledge too, like I go, “No, he’s actually from Yemen”, and they’d be “Okay, sorry.” They won’t resent you for it. They’d be like, “I was wrong, this guy told me the answer – he wasn’t rude about it and I respect him for that. I won’t say it to another Afghan ever again.” I don’t know about Yemen people, that’s another story…[laughs]

Ali: Yeah, a lot of people are seriously like, “You’re Afghan so you must know bin Laden”, but I go, “No, he wasn’t Afghan, he just lived there.” Coz everyone’s always like, “It’s all the same”, and that’s when they realize they’re wrong.

Ibrahim and Ali’s comments are representative of two strategies participants typically adopt in order to negotiate this type of everyday social stigmatisation, particularly when it is manifested in a way that is deliberately intended to “click your temper off.” One involves diffusing tense situations through ironic humour, a strategy that Ali makes use of here through his comments about “keepin’ it real” with bin Laden. Through ironic referencing of US police mugshots in his artwork, Ali applies the same strategy to stigmatisation occurring at a broader societal level (see figs 8 and 9). This ability to quickly formulate an ironic or otherwise witty “comeback” in confrontational situations was highly regarded among participants. One of the
program workers, for example, recounted an incident in which her younger brother, aged in his early 20s, was arguing with another young male driver over a parking space outside a suburban supermarket. The issue was resolved when the brother quipped, “Watch out, I’m Muslim!” The other young man misinterpreted the intended cheekiness of this comment as real threat, and left in a hurry, relinquishing the coveted space. The brother’s behaviour, which elicited raucous laughter and applause from participants, was acknowledged in the discussion that followed as probably not the best way to handle the situation because it took advantage of the other man’s fear of Muslims, rather than working towards dispelling it. Ibrahim’s attempt to “give the knowledge” is illustrative of the latter strategy. For both Ibrahim and Ali, it is important to point out the fallacious nature of stereotypes not only through cleverly executed irony, but also by providing corrective information.

Ibrahim and Ali, like other male program participants, differentiated themselves from the young Muslims they describe as the “wrong guys”: those who “aren’t very knowledgable about Islam”, and who “use [their Muslim identity] to make gangs or something” (Ibrahim). These “wrong guys” resemble the adolescent participants in Poynting, Noble and Tabar’s (1998) study, who negotiate social marginalisation through what the authors term, in reference to Raewyn Connell’s work, “protest masculinity”. The behaviour of these young men was often referred to by participants, and operated as a counterpoint within a normative discourse of how young Muslims should behave. Thus “wrong guys” were an important discursive construct, both for the program workers wanting to establish behavioural norms in the program and participants themselves, as is evident in Ibrahim’s reflection on meeting another “normal” Muslim at school:

Ibrahim: In my school there’s usually a very small number of people who come in year 10. And there was this one guy who came in and he was Afghan. And, I don’t know, by coincidence they put him in my class. And I didn’t know he was Afghan – his name’s Michael so I couldn’t tell or anything. And he heard my name and he comes up to me and goes “Are you Muslim?” and I said “Yeah”, of course. And he goes “Are you Afghan?”, and I was like “Are you serious? You’re Afghan too?”, and he was like “Yeah” and his name’s Michael. Like, okay [sounds sceptical]…

Did that feel good, meeting another Afghan like that?

Ibrahim: Yeah. He was really surprised, coz he was from Dandenong and there’s not always the best representation there, so he goes “I’m so happy to meet another Muslim that’s normal and is not like all pretty boy or macho.”

Pretty boy or macho?
Ali: Yeah, a lot of the younger generation in Dandenong are all macho now.

*What do you mean by macho?*

Ali: As in they’re walking around –

Ibrahim: – thinking that they rule the place.

Ali: They’re the sort of guys that have no idea about anything. And they’ve come from wherever they have thinking that just coz they’re in a big group of guys no-one can look down upon them. And, yeah, they’re the wrong guys… But you get that with any group.

Participants’ normative notions of proper conduct often extended beyond marking certain ways of enacting Islamic identity as deviant, to incorporate ideas of individual responsibility for how other Australians perceive that identity:

*In your experience, do people generally accept you as Australian?*

Amira: Mmmm, yep.

Haifa: Well I think it’s the way you make people accept you, like with your attitude and stuff. Because if you’re, I’ve seen some Muslims maybe they get in conflicts and stuff. That’s when other non-Muslims, like Australians and stuff, that’s when they start saying, you know, “Get out of my country”, and stuff. But if you’re nice to them and everything they have to respect you back. They’re forced to respect you back. So it’s up to the person.

Amira: It’s also a matter of mixing with them, not isolating yourself from non-Muslims. Cos as soon as you mix with them they get to know you and they find out that you’re not a very bad person and you’re not just keeping away… They find out many new things about you. So I think mixing with them is very good.

*Do you think your ethnic and or religious identity is accurately represented in the media?*

Nadia: I don’t think so, not now. Cos a lot of reporters or whatever, they get the stupidest people to come and tell them about Islam or their culture or whatever. And then they go “Okay, that’s their culture. Everyone’s like that.” That’s how it goes, you know? I reckon, I don’t know, it is in a way representing it accurately but not in another because it’s like, to me Islam is a religion of peace and harmony. But then you see those people bombing Bali and all that, the negative stuff happening, and it’s not just the media’s fault, it’s our fault as well.

*How do you mean?*

Nadia: Cos, like, the way we represent ourselves is the way that everyone sees you, not just a particular type of person. So, like, if you go around being and idiot in the street, everyone’s gonna think… say I was wearing my scarf and, you know, yelling and screaming in the middle of the road, they’d think “Oh, those Muslims!” You know? But if I walk down the street in a nice way it’s different, you know… They’ll think “What’s wrong with them? They’re just human, you know? Just coz they’ve got this thing on their head doesn’t make them different”…
These views reflect the main objective of the youth program, which is to inspire young Muslims to take responsibility for the way their identity is interpreted in the Australian public sphere.

Nadia’s reference to the headscarf in relation to representation in the comment above is important because of the significance hijab holds as an identity marker, particularly for those participants who wear it in all public social settings. While I will expand on the immutable aspects of hijabi identity in further depth in the following chapter, for the moment I want to highlight one key difference in the ways hijabi and non-hijabi participants are able to negotiate stigmatisation. Male and non-hijabi female participants are often able to adopt an instrumental approach to their identity in order to avoid imminent conflict in situations that might not be able to be diffused through humour or delivering corrective information. While Ibrahim and Ali had assured me that they had not experienced prejudice or discrimination on the basis of their ethnic and/or religious identities, their description of the photograph of the dog sculpture that represents both their friendship group and the holiday they shared led to a discussion of how they dealt with such experiences:

Ibrahim: – We were at the beach on our holiday, at Rye. And it was eleven of us walking around on the beach the day after Cronulla and we like changed our identity, like “Oh no, no, no. We’re not…” There was one guy who asked us up front, “Are you Lebanese?” and we were like, “No… We’re Moroccan.”

Ali: We avoid confrontation.

Ibrahim: Seriously, everyone was staring at us –

Ali: – Yeah, everyone. It was like we were really out of place. You know Rye?

Yeah.

Ali: Well it’s that far from Cronulla but everyone knew about it. We keep it to ourselves – no-one really discriminated against us by yelling anything out or –

Ibrahim: What about [in Persian]?

Ali: Huh?

10 Although I understood that the rationale behind this was to prevent young Muslims from feeling like passive victims and encourage them to actively challenge negative representations of Muslim identity (by writing letters to newspapers or presenting speeches at school assemblies, for example), long entries in my field notes testify to how uncomfortable this sometimes made me feel. Being desperately shy as a teenager myself, I empathised with some participants’ reluctance to talk about themselves in public and felt it was almost a double injustice for them to experience discrimination and have to take responsibility for correcting negative perceptions of Muslim identity.
Ibrahim: Well we were in the supermarket buying stuff and we were getting out of the carpark and something happened with the car and some guy yells out of his window “Respect our rules,” or “Respect our laws,” or something.

*That was also just after Cronulla?*

Ali: Yeah, But we didn’t run into that much. I actually thought we’d run into a lot more as soon as that happened. But we just kept to ourselves.

Ibrahim: The large majority are very accepting.

Ali: There wasn’t really anybody who really cared. There was actually a lot of women… and we met a lot of Greeks up there as well.

Ibrahim: That’s why it’s so accepting, because there’s multiculturalism everywhere. If you go anywhere in Australia there’s like some ethnic group there. That’s why it’s so accepting.

Ibrahim and Ali’s fluid transition from the topic of discrimination to multiculturalism was typical of the way participants narrated such experiences. Whatever the extent of its existence in Australia, racism and other forms of discrimination are seen as deviant behaviour in a multicultural society, because the “large majority are very accepting.”

It seems, however, that the multiculturalism that is referred to in this normative sense is not what I have been referring to as *normative* multiculturalism as such, but *everyday* multiculturalism. For whatever the normative claims of multiculturalism, it is the undeniable existence of everyday multiculturalism – in simple terms of cultural plurality – that fosters a sense of acceptance, because there’s always “some ethnic group there.” This point is further illustrated by Yasmin, who clearly distinguishes between the everyday multiculturalism that allows her to feel “comfortable”, and a national identity shaped around normative multiculturalism, the existence of which she questions:

> You certainly do feel, you know, comfortable, coz there’s all sorts of people living here, you know, you feel comfortable. But then when stuff like you get teased or discriminated against or something happens, that does really make you think back and say, you know, “Is it really multicultural? Are they just saying that it is?”

**Invisible “Ethnics”: Anglo-Australians as Other**

For Zhila, experiencing discrimination in Australia is a trade-off for living free from the restrictions that are placed upon Muslims in other societies:

> One example, like, Turkey that bans hijab in the universities, my friend came from there to here coz she thought that it… that she’s free to wear her hijab here, it’s better than overseas, so she can actually follow her dream of studying at university. That’s a good advantage for the Turkish people to come over for. They leave their country and come here…And yeah, well, discrimination happens, I reckon it happens in every
country, and we’re gonna have to live with it. Just live… live the way you wanna and
if they don’t like it, well… we don’t like some of the stuff that they do, but we seem
to keep it to ourselves.

“They”, in this context, undoubtedly refers to Anglo-Australians. Zhila’s comments
reinforce Hage’s (1998) description of the power relations of White multiculturalism,
where living “the way you wanna” makes the ethnic Other subject to the scrutiny of
the Anglo majority. The last part of this quote can also be read as a subversion of
those power relations, for it gives rise to the image of the non-Anglo as a tolerating
subject in her own right, which is – as Hage’s analysis demonstrates – something that
White multiculturalism precludes. Following Hage’s argument, the tolerating non-
Anglo subject is a particularly threatening prospect when viewed from the White
multiculturalist perspective: she who has the power to tolerate also has the capacity to
be intolerant.

Even a cursory glance at the vocabulary of White multiculturalism that has
become embedded into the Australian vernacular supports claims that Anglo-
Australian ethnicity is constructed as the norm. In linguistic terms, Other cultures or
ethnicities are accommodated within the national community by way of hyphens (e.g.
“Iraqi-Australian”, “Muslim-Australian”, etc.), while Anglo-Australians are referred
to by the unadulterated term “Australian”. Urban areas that are home to sizable
numbers of people of non-Anglo ethnic identities are described as “ethnic”
communities, but one would need to search hard to find corresponding references to
“White” or “Anglo” communities. This discursively constructed invisible Whiteness
is, of course, not unique to Australian multiculturalism, but could be argued to be a
defining characteristic of normative multiculturalism in any given national context.
As discussed in Chapter One, multiculturalism implies a politics of recognition that
necessitates delineating cultures in order to recognise them. This drawing up of
boundaries, whether carried out by political elites exterior to or within cultural
groups, has unavoidable essentialising consequences. Language plays a major role in
this process of reifying certain cultural identities, a process in which some remain
conspicuously unmarked. As Jenkins (1996: 14) crisply puts it, it is important to
“remind ourselves all the time that each of us participates in an ethnicity – perhaps
more than one – just like them. Just like the Other, just like the ‘minorities’."

The hegemonic dominance of Anglo-Australian culture was clearly evident within
this study when participants spoke about national belonging in general terms. This
was particularly the case regarding interview responses to questions about “Australian culture” and “Australian life”, which were almost invariably interpreted as referring to Anglo-Australians:

*What would you say are the positive and negative aspects of Australian culture?*

Samira: The positive is that they’re open-minded, they’re understanding. The negative is that they generalize too much.

*How do you mean?*

Samira: As in they put everyone in the same category. Whoever is Muslim they mustn’t be liberated, they must be restricted in what they do to just this and that… But that’s not reality.

*What is Australian culture? How would you describe it?*

Haifa: Ummm… pop music… nose piercings…

Amira: [laughs]

Haifa: What do you mean, traditions and stuff?

Amira: [laughs] [laughs] Oh, whatever you perceive “culture” to mean…

Haifa: Aussies… rugby… Okay, this is their everyday life – sport, rugby, job, girlfriend/boyfriend, mobile phones, internet. I don’t know, maybe there’s some religious Aussies, I’m not sure, maybe they pray… I don’t really know about that. But that’s the image of them to me. I haven’t really studied them or anything! [Laughs]

*What would you say are the positive and negative aspects of Australian life?*

Haifa: They’re friendly, most of them are really friendly –

Amira: – Yeah, some positives are that they accept the differences in people.

Haifa: Like our neighbours and our teachers are really friendly. You could find some that aren’t, but it’s like that everywhere. Even Muslim families, you can find one or two that are bad. It doesn’t have anything to do with religion.

Amira: The negative things are when they don’t accept our differences, when there are cultural clashes. When they don’t accept us. Like when we go to dances and we can’t dance with boys or we can’t go swimming and stuff –

Haifa: – they’ll try to force you –

Amira: – they’ll try to force you.

While many of the participants were remarkably politically astute and adept at analysing cultural relations, such unconsciously homogenising accounts of Australian
culture seemed incongruous, given that they often came shortly after positive remarks about the inclusiveness of Australian multiculturalism. This was foreshadowed in the previous chapter in Nadia’s hesitant attempt to define Australian culture as both the “footy and cricket” that is “their” thing and diverse cultures “coming together to make just one thing.” The coexistence of ostensibly contradictory conceptions of Australian culture as both homogenous and diverse indicates that it is not only participants’ notions of individual national belonging that can be described as ambivalent, but also broader conceptualisations of the national community. At this macro societal level, ambivalent conceptualisations of belonging seem to be almost inevitable. This is, I believe, largely due to the limited manner in which the discourse of multiculturalism enables the articulation of conceptions of culture and belonging. If, as Wieviorka observes, scholars tend to overlook the conceptual distinction between multiculturalism as everyday lived diversity, as policy and as normative political ideology, it is consciously articulated even less frequently outside academe. As noted above, participants most frequently use the term “multiculturalism” to refer to the visible cultural diversity inscribed onto the bodies of Australians, typically manifested in references to the physical appearances of Australians and the frequent use of words associated with the visual (“looking”, “seeing”, etc.):

Amira: It’s a multicultural country.

Haifa: So you don’t look at the religion or the way they dress or anything. You can’t say that you’re an Australian just because you don’t wear the hijab and you look like an Aussie. “Me I look Asian, I’m not Australian,” you can’t say that.

Amira: I think it’s the many cultures that makes it Australia.

So what is that then, “multiculturalism”?

Amira: The different…the different people that you have. I mean like you go out and the different people that you see – Muslims, non-Muslims, Aboriginals…

Interpreted primarily in this everyday sense, multiculturalism offers limited discursive possibilities for critiquing the clearly lopsided manner in which different ethnic groups assume or are assigned positions within national social space. It does not provide an adequate vocabulary for explaining why, if it exists in the way it is positively affirmed here, Anglo-Australians are “Australians”, while other Australians are, to adopt the term used by Ali in relation to his self-portrait, “ethnics”.

Of course, one way this inadequacy may be overcome, at least at a personal level, is to actively decentre Anglo-Australian ethnicity. While Haifa interprets the question
about Australian culture as referring to Anglo-Australian culture, she takes obvious pleasure in appropriating “their” objectifying gaze when, grinning mischievously, she proclaims with exaggerated flippancy, “I haven’t really studied them or anything!” Participants sometimes consciously corrected the Anglo-as-norm trope by making a distinction between “Australians” and “Aussies”. Not wanting to directly challenge what I interpreted to be an inherent contradiction in the way participants defined Australian culture, I tentatively asked Meena and Pareesa to define the term “Aussie”:

You said something about “Aussies” earlier, is that the same as “Australians”?

Pareesa: Hmmm… I meant, um, “other” people.

“Other” people?

Meena: I guess we mean non-Muslims, coz we call ourselves Australian.

“Aussie” in that sense means something different to Australian then?

Meena and Pareesa: Yeah.

Meena: The people who aren’t Muslims coz we don’t know the majority’s religion… I guess they’re Christian - but you don’t want to just say the Christians or the Catholics - so we just like generalise it coz we’re in Australia, so it’s Aussies.

The use of the term “Aussie” as a means of relativising Anglo-Australian ethnicity is illustrated in Ali and Ibrahim’s discussion of Australian culture. While they begin by referring to what they perceive to be standard Anglo-Australian cultural practices in relation to the question about Australian culture, they then draw on the notion of the “Aussie” as a means of reassigning Anglo-Australian culture as just one of many possible versions of “Australian” culture:

Ibrahim: You’d have to say that Australian culture really revolves around alcohol. It’s very sport orientated… very sport orientated. They’re accepting, but they also like their way of life. And they’re open to another culture to an extent, where it doesn’t interfere with them, and where they can still go on with their way of life.

Ali: I’d say Australian culture is too hard to explain, coz there’s so many different types of Australians around now. There’s your sort of “true-blue Aussie”, as people say, as in very sport orientated, have a barbeque on Sunday, sit and watch the footy with a beer. And then there’s so many diverse types of Australians.

Ibrahim: A definition of “Australians” is wrong in the first place –

Ali: – Coz no-one’s really “Australian” –

Ibrahim: Like put the “wife-beater” on and have a can of VB in your hand everywhere you go. So Australians have got it wrong themselves, we’ve got it wrong ourselves, and other nations perceive us all as Steve Irwins walking round the streets.
Ali: Like he could be perceived as an Aussie, but I don’t see him sitting watching the footy with a beer, I see him chasing crocodiles.

*Perhaps he does that when he gets home from chasing the crocodiles [laughs].*

Ali: Yeah but you don’t see it. See, that’s the thing, so much is unseen. Like… I’m trying to think if I’ve ever interacted with an actual “real Aussie” family… but everyone’s got their background. No-one has got an “Aussie-Aussie” background.

**So you’ve never met anyone who really lives up to that stereotype?**

Ali: I have, but they’ve always got some other culture from overseas.

Ibrahim: Coz Australian history, it’s only like three generations since, no five… And my Australian friends, they always go back to “we came from Irish descendents” and stuff.

Ali: There’s always some other culture.

I will follow the analytical trajectory inspired by Ali’s comments about representation and public visibility of cultural practices (“other nations perceive us all as Steve Irwins… so much is unseen”) in the following section. In the context of the present discussion, my aim has been simply to highlight the complexities and conceptual ambiguities involved in trying to consciously describe the Australian cultural landscape – a terrain participants implicitly map with precision through their narratives – from within the discursive boundaries of Australian multiculturalism.

Besides drawing on the discourse of multiculturalism in order to express abstract ideas concerning cultural diversity and individual belonging, participants also engaged with current political debates over various aspects of Australian multiculturalism. One such example was the debate over “Australian values”:

Ibrahim: Australia hasn’t been round long enough to have real values.

*It’s interesting that you bring up values because you hear a lot about that these days...*

Ibrahim: It’s not really defined. It’s very vague.

Ali: I think that all values come from other countries, because everyone else comes from other countries. Australia itself has no values, well maybe not *no* values but –

Ibrahim: – It’s too multicultural –

Ali: – Yeah, so they haven’t set a boundary of values that are acceptable or not. Like, I think in a way our politicians might say our values… well, 90%, 95% even more than that obey them, like, different cultures all have that same value of, for one example being polite to each other.

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11 For a discussion of the values debate see Johnson (2007).
So if you had to talk about Australian culture, say to your Iranian cousins, how would you describe it?

Zhila: When you want to explain that you would always want to explain footy, beer… barbeque… Really I don’t see anything similar – Oh we can have fun, with our mates, without beer coming into it, and we can go watch the footy, why not?

Yasmin: I’ve always been confused by the Australian values… I mean, what are they? Whatever they have, we have.

What do you mean exactly?

Yasmin: Like getting together. But more than that, like respect for people, you know? Being caring, compassion for your neighbours, stuff like that, you know? We have them as well. I don’t know… what is there more than that that we don’t have?

Zhila: It’s just the way we dress and that’s it. I mean, we don’t think different, it’s common sense, we say hi to each other, we smile at each other, that’s all you want from your neighbours, isn’t it? And we get that!

The disjuncture between “us” and “them” is particularly resonant in Zhila and Yasmin’s comments here. Yasmin’s need to confirm that Muslims value the same things as “Australians” is a response to the perception that there is an irreducible different between the values of Muslim Others and an Anglo “us” that is pervasive within the Australian public sphere.12

The Simmelian Stranger

I now want to take a closer look at the theorisation of alterity in order to direct this discussion back towards the themes of hybridity and multiculturalism that were raised in the previous chapter. While an obvious starting point would be to return to look in greater depth at the work of some of the theorists mentioned there, I instead want to explore a much earlier sociological account of transcultural subjective experience: Simmel’s concept of the stranger. One reason for this is that, in line with the findings presented here, Simmel simultaneously addresses the existentiality of the stranger at the micro-social level of individual experience and at the broader level of analysis in terms of where the stranger is positioned in relation to the host group. I also turn to Simmel because I find it interesting that one can see in this brief yet elegant little

12 That perception was succinctly articulated in former Prime Minister John Howard’s remark on the fifth anniversary of September 11 that “(There is) a section of the Islamic population which will not integrate… (and) does have values and attitudes which are hostile to Australia’s interests” (King 2006: 1).
essay, penned at the beginning of the twentieth century, kernels of ideas that were to take centre stage within scholarly debates in the social sciences at the end of that century and are continuing to do so into the next. For Simmel, the stranger is

the person who comes today and stays tomorrow… He is fixed within a particular spatial group whose boundaries are similar to spatial boundaries. But his position in this group is determined, essentially, by the fact that he has not belonged to it from the beginning, that he imports qualities into it, which do not and cannot stem from the group itself. (Simmel 1950: 402)

In coming from elsewhere and, most importantly, staying to “import qualities” into the community (and presumably adopting some him/herself) the stranger is particularly significant to this study as the conceptual forerunner of the contemporary concept of the cultural hybrid.

The stranger is also theoretically relevant in other ways. In speaking of group boundaries that are not straightforward spatial boundaries yet similar to them, Simmel’s concept of the group can be applied not only to geographical communities ranging in size from neighbourhood, village or city to nation, but perhaps also more abstract communities that do not necessarily correspond with geographic areas in an immediate sense. The concept could therefore refer, for example, to ethnic communities, including diasporas. The extent to which such an interpretation is viable is evident in Simmel’s discussion of soil:

The stranger is by nature no “owner of soil” – soil not only in the physical, but also in the figurative sense of a life-substance which is fixed, if not in a point in space, at least in an ideal point of the social environment. Although in more intimate relations, he may develop all kinds of charms and significance, as long as he is considered a stranger in the eyes of the other, he is not an “owner of soil. (Simmel 1950: 403)

As a consequence, as long as the stranger is recognised as such, whatever his affective allegiance to the group (and vice versa), he can never fully transcend the strangeness attributed to him. This is particularly significant where the boundaries of the group in question cohere around soil in the figurative sense Simmel speaks of. For what Simmel describes as “a life-substance” that isn’t literally of the soil, corresponds neatly with the primordial “blood-and-soil” notion of ethnicity.

In addition to his exploration of the subjective positioning of the individual stranger within a group (he goes on to say that this is premised upon a simultaneous relationship of nearness and remoteness), Simmel also looks at alterity ascribed to the stranger on a broader scale: “The relation of the Greeks to the Barbarians is perhaps typical here, as are all cases in which it is precisely general attributes, felt to be
specifically and purely human, that are disallowed the other.” In this sense Rundell (2004: 86) is correct in pointing out that the stranger is an *a priori* an abstraction because it is precisely those general characteristics which set the stranger apart from the group that structure the relationship, not the individual who bears them. Marotta (2000: 124), in a review of recent applications of the concept of strangerhood in social theory, observes the Simmelian way in which Bauman sees the identity of the Self as constituted through this oppositional relationship between self and stranger. This idea, of course, precedes Bauman, being one of the principal themes of Said’s (1979) *Orientalism*, the origins of which can be traced to earlier scholarship in anthropology.

As appealing as Simmel’s concept of the stranger may be as a theoretical basis for my present analysis, there are some limitations to its usefulness. The main problem is that if the group into which the stranger is received is a national community, the stranger Simmel is referring to can only be an immigrant. In focussing on those who come today and stay tomorrow, the strangeness ascribed to those born into the community, as many of the participants in this project were, and their specific existential dilemmas risk being overlooked. Papastergiadis (2000: 13) raises another theoretical concern: “Simmel’s construction of the stranger is embedded within a series of dichotomies, us-them, modern-traditional, insider-outsider; and while the stranger oscillates between these positions, it presupposes that these prior positions are fixed and counterposed according to a binary logic. In the current phases of global migration there is a need for a more complex framework of differentiation, one that is capable of addressing the shifting patterns of inclusion and exclusion.” Anthias (2001: 623) similarly argues that the Simmelian model cannot account for the diverse ways in which strangers are incorporated (or not) into communities, or how strangers relate to each other. While I agree with these criticisms, in terms of the way in which alterity is ascribed to participants in this research project, the dichotomous positions Papastergiadis describes still hold a significant amount of power within the Australian public sphere. In arguing this I do not mean to downplay the complexity of hybrid subjective belonging, which I earlier attended to in detail, I simply want to bring issues of representation into my sphere of analysis. For as far as the *representation* of Islamic identity is concerned, within the Australian public sphere the dichotomous binaries of us-them, modern-traditional, insider-outsider are omnipresent.
To this point my analytical focus in this chapter has been on participant conceptualisations – often articulated implicitly – of the alterior identities attributed to them and the dialectical way in which these representations are reincorporated into participant narratives of self, again often implicitly. The role the discourse of Australian Multiculturalism plays in this process has been a central element of this analysis. I now want to shift my attention away from the narratives that arose from the images created by participants back to the images themselves in order to engage with issues of representation.

**Multiculturalism and the Consumption of the Hybrid**

Drawing on earlier visual methodology texts (see Banks 2001, Rose 2001), Pink (2006:31) emphasises the necessity of considering “the contexts in and subjectivities through which images are viewed” in addition to authorial intentions. The importance of this point cannot be overemphasised. Analytical engagement with the way cultural identities (those perceived to be hybrid or otherwise) are represented is imperative because, as Hall (1994) argues, identity is constructed from *within* representation, not outside of it. The previous sections of this chapter, in which participant narratives of subjectivity reflected dominant public perceptions of Islamic youth identity, emphasises this point with particular force. In the context of this research project, a rigorous analysis of the relationship between images and audiences would entail an ethnographic study of audience responses to the self-portraits created by the participants. While such an undertaking is beyond the scope of this project, I nevertheless want to reflect on some observations of audience responses to participant representations of self in order to further expand on the relationship between Australian multiculturalism and the alterior identities ascribed to young Australian Muslims. The primary site of these observations is the public exhibition that was held at the end of the fieldwork component of the research. Here I focus on a key segment of the exhibition audience: the mediators who play a crucial role in shaping the way in which audiences consume representations of culture, and the academic audiences to whom I later presented exhibited images at various stages of this project. For the sake of brevity, I will limit this discussion to one particular image: Meena’s self-portrait.

13 Ang’s (1985) “Watching Dallas” would serve as an ideal methodological model for such a study.
In Chapter Three I briefly mentioned that Meena’s portrait attracted a significant amount of attention at the exhibition. Among the media turnout for the event was a television crew covering the exhibition for a story to be included in a pilot for a television series on young Australian Muslims. Immediately drawn to the image, the young presenters sought Meena out and interviewed her at considerable length about her photographic work and the program in general. Her image was also requested to accompany a *Jakarta Post* feature article on the exhibition, where it was described as a “prominent example” among the exhibited images “which, to those who are only exposed to what has been dished out by the mass media, may have helped break the stereotypes” (Anggraeni 2006: 19). The image was also popular in academic circles. A senior colleague included Meena’s self-portrait in his introductory sociology lectures in a week covering Australian Islamic identity, where it served as a visual counterpoint to the negative stereotypes of Islamic identity that dominate the post-September 11 Australian media landscape. When presented to peers at conferences and seminars alongside other images from the project, Meena’s portrait tended to provoke the most enthusiastic positive responses. This is hardly surprising. Aside from its arresting aesthetic qualities, the image quite obviously, as Anggraeni remarked, constitutes an important and very welcome corrective to what I can only describe as the crisis of representation of female Islamic identity in Australia.

While I see the enthusiastic reception of Meena’s portrait as an overwhelmingly positive outcome of this project, my response to the celebration of the embodied cultural hybridity that is no doubt the basis of its appeal (female/fighter, observant Muslim/proud Australian, etc.) is tinged with uneasiness. This is particularly so when I consider it alongside other images that were left out of the exhibition. One female participant’s photograph of a poster of Iranian Ayatollah Khomeini is an example of one of these censored images. Included among the participant’s other photographs depicting personal objects in her bedroom, the program workers insisted that the image of the iconic gruff looking Khomeini, photographed in profile against a black background, be replaced with one of her other self-portraits. Their reasoning, which I fully agreed with, was that the image could quite likely be misconstrued as a depiction of fundamentalist theocratic beliefs, thus undermining the program’s objectives and threatening funding arrangements. This is not to suggest that either the program workers or I were under the impression that the participant who produced the image
actually harboured militant Islamist views. Photographing the poster, as it became apparent in workshop discussion, was simply a way of simultaneously representing her Shi’ite Muslim identity and her affective ties with Iran, where, like most of the other Iraqi participants, she resided in exile before migrating to Australia. Although I am cognisant of the potential problems exhibiting this image could cause, and would be acting unethically if I was to include it in the exhibition simply based on the participant’s intended reading of it, it is precisely the benign nature of this intention that troubles me. For, as I pointed out in Chapter Three, subverting dominant paradigmatic views of Islamic female identity was not Meena’s conscious objective. Her aim was to unambiguously illustrate her Muslim identity (by wearing the scarf) along with one of her main interests – karate – and her desire to represent Australia at an international competitive level. The problem for me is that of two self-created expressions of identity intended to be taken at face value, one is openly and vociferously embraced by a liberal audience while the other, albeit for valid reasons, is deemed unfit for popular consumption. This is illustrative of a significant drawback in communicating identity – or anything else for that matter – photographically. Visual communication, like other forms of language, relies on assumptions of shared understandings. Given the highly subjective way in which images are understood, the potential for misunderstanding and therefore misrecognition is often great.

I am also concerned with the popularity of this image for another reason. While the confident and integrated way hybridity is depicted here is certainly worth embracing, I would argue that overly concentrating on such overtly positive experiences of hybridity glosses over the feelings of ambivalence that I earlier demonstrated to be characteristic of hybrid cultural identity. My concern here is that what we are actually celebrating is what Lo (2000) terms “happy hybridity”: a representation of hybridity stripped of all tension or contradiction, which she wryly equates with the quaint verse, “I love the world/the world loves me/let’s party on/interculturally” (ibid: 153). Lo argues that the celebration of happy hybridity in visual media can constitute “a form of visual fetishisation – the specular consumption of the Other – which is linked to a specific Orientalist and colonialist history in [Australia]” (ibid: 157). The use of the term “consumption” here is not accidental; she goes on to agree with the claim that “the culinary, with its economy of enrichment and incorporation, signifies the palatable and always aestheticised element of
multiculturalism precisely because it still effectively reproduces an assimilationist economy of cultural containment and control” (Perera and Pugliese cited in Lo 2000: 158). In order to further tease out the problematic of superficial celebrations of hybridity, I now want to look more closely at the relationship between gastronomy and multiculturalism.

Gastronomic metaphors are certainly not difficult to find in celebratory statements about Australian multiculturalism. In March 2007 the Gold Coast City Council (07/03/07) proclaimed that its public libraries “will serve up a cultural smorgasbord this month with an extended celebration of ‘Harmony Day’ – a national event that celebrates the social, cultural and economic benefits provided by Australia’s rich cultural and linguistic diversity.” This statement echoes the University of Southern Queensland’s (Alexander 2006) proud description of the opening of its Multicultural Centre: “The day was an international smorgasbord of culture and tradition. Those enjoying the celebrations were transported to the Middle East via the Indian subcontinent and African plains through music, dance and food.” In the same way that other discursive elements of Australian multiculturalism framed the way participants narrated their identities, descriptions of everyday experiences of multiculturalism also included metaphors of food and its consumption. Mehri, for example, described her integration into the broader Australian community in culinary terms:

In my past I have experienced friends, teachers, and fellow students kindly asking me to bring in one of the many delicious dishes in my Afghani culture that my mum makes with perfection. I have never refused to bring them a part of me and a big part to my culture. The look on their faces and how keen they are to know about every little detail about the dish is priceless! I certainly know now that the people around me have embraced my Afghani culture as much as I embraced their way of life.

Samira, in a speech scripted to celebrate Harmony Day, devised an updated version of the well-known multicultural “salad-bowl” analogy to describe the benefits of Australian multiculturalism and prescribe policy measures to better recognise it:

Let me give you an example of a cake. On one side we have the normal, plain and old-fashioned sponge cake and on the side we have the tiramisu, which also is a sponge cake. Sponge cake – plain, same colour and old fashioned, just like the laws. All different ingredients mixed into one and we are not able to tell the difference between the flavours. Tiramisu – has different layers, which represents the different cultures. Now we can the individual cultures/religions on their own and enjoy them on their own. It’s still a cake but now it’s a cake with different and unique flavours, which work perfectly in harmony with each other. They are both sponge cakes however the only difference is that its been modernised in order to enhance the taste and the combination of the different flavours and how well they all work together in ‘Harmony’. That’s what we need to do, upgrade the laws in order to enhance living in harmony.
What then is the significance of this proliferation of gastronomic metaphors within the discourse on multiculturalism? Papastergiadis (2000: 203) writes:

For the concept of multiculturalism to gain political legitimacy the constitutive concept of culture had to be stripped down to these folkloric and gastronomic elements. Hence, when multiculturalism was first promoted, the Australian government sponsored a series of advertising campaigns which showed children of all different “races” joining in a circle singing the jingle, ‘I am as Greek as a souvlaki, I am as Irish as the stew … I am an Aussie, yes I am.’ “Serving up” representations of singing, dancing, food producing migrants can therefore be seen as a way of rendering multiculturalism palatable to an Anglo majority that did not stand to gain much from it, at least in a direct material sense. The smorgasbord is an especially fitting metaphor in this sense, for it provides a socially acceptable way to take what you fancy and leave the rest: a mode of consumption that would be frowned upon in most other culinary settings, particularly the family dinner table.

There is however, nothing superficial about the genuine pleasure Mehri takes in sharing food with her teachers and classmates. Hage (1997) points out that scholarly interest in the relationship between multiculturalism and metaphors of food and consumption often overlooks the important role food plays in migrant “home building”. He uses the term “home” not in a literal sense to mean a physical place, but as a means of describing a subjective position in which one feels secure and part of a community: a place of belonging. Hage argues that, prior to the introduction of multicultural policy in Australia, majority acceptance of “ethnic” food was “a source of pride for migrants in a social setting where there was very little recognition by ‘Australians’ of ‘ethnic value’” (ibid: 112). Mehri’s equation of the food her mother produces with her sense of self (it’s “a big part of me”), and the pride she experiences when others embrace it (and therefore her) indicate that this is still the case in contemporary multicultural Australia. This image of meaningful cultural exchange occurring through food sharing corresponds to the anthropological notion of the feast or banquet, a “locus for suspending the tensions between ‘us’ and ‘them’ […] where the guest (no matter if outside this process he is the greatest of enemies) is welcomed and hostilities are suspended” (Gunew 2000: 233). This, however, should not be taken to mean that the social structure underpinning “happy hybrid” metaphors of multicultural consumption is not present in everyday intercultural encounters involving food. Rather, in light of Hage’s descriptions of some not so pleasant
culinary exchanges between Anglos and migrant Others, it points to their complex nature, “their mix of racism and tolerance, of friendliness grounded in relations of power and hints of the capacity for domination” (1997: 114).

This complexity, I believe, also characterises Anglo appreciation of embodied representations of cultural hybridity. Pieterse (2001: 237) argues that there is nothing intrinsically extraordinary about hybridity; cultural mixing is now commonplace:

> What we must come to terms with is the circumstance that nowadays we are all ‘Moroccan girls doing Thai boxing in Amsterdam’, that is we are all mixing cultural elements and traces across places and identities. This is not simply an issue of classification or of elite cosmopolitan experience; rather, the point is that this has become an ordinary experience. A Greek restaurant called ‘Ipanema’ serving Italian food in Brighton: these crossovers are now common in all spheres of life.

In one sense Pieterse is correct. For if we extend Bakhtin’s (1981) seminal work on hybridity beyond the disciplinary boundaries of linguistics, all cultural forms and subjectivities are necessarily the result of at least some sort of borrowing, intermingling and/or suppression of internal or external alternate forms. This has always been the case, at least to some extent; it is just that “nowadays” these processes tend to be more overt and occur at an accelerated pace. Thinking primarily in terms of the representation of cultural identities, however, Pieterse’s point becomes difficult to sustain, for no matter how ostensibly hybridised the cultural artefacts we consume (Pieterse’s culinary example is a particularly apt illustration here), we are not all Moroccan girls doing Thai boxing in Amsterdam, any more than we are all self-described Muslim Afghani-Australian girls doing karate in Melbourne. While Meena’s stated intention was simply to construct a literal representation of who she is, within the Australian public sphere her portrait is immediately demands attention precisely because, as a representation of female Islamic identity, it is anything but ordinary. The image firstly defies the limits of the ordinary simply by physically portraying a cultural Other in a public sphere where representations of Anglo culture are the norm. Secondly, the extraordinariness of the image is emphasised by the fact that it also stands in dramatic contrast to the norm of the representational Other, in this case the oppressed hijabi woman trope. However ordinary Meena’s subjective experience may seem to her, the extraordinariness of the image given the social context in which it was produced and is consumed cannot not be ignored. Like Pieterse’s kick-boxing Moroccan girl, the “wow” factor in the hybrid ethnic character of Meena’s portrait can be attributed to essentialist gendered and racialised
understandings of its constitutive parts. Taken as a whole, the image certainly disrupts these essentialist representations of identity. The problem emerging from the celebration of this disruption, and a further reason for my uneasiness about the attention devoted to Meena’s image, is that disruption can only be made possible by first recognising the essentialised disparate elements that are brought together to produce the hybrid.

This raises the question of what is often referred as “anterior purity”. Historical anthropologist Jean-Loup Amselle argues against the adoption of ideological multiculturalism in France based on the suspect underpinnings of hybridisation multiculturalism often celebrates:

> Although the obsession with the French nation’s purity, as it is expressed by leaders in Front National, for example, represents a racist position par excellence, the defense of métissage, as it is proposed by the supporters of multiculturalism, attests to the very same attitude, in that it presupposes an original separation that ought to come to an end. (Amselle 2003: xiv)

Although Amselle is referring to “races”, the same argument can be made for the hybridisation (or métissage) of culture. As Gilroy (1994, cited in Hutnyk 2005: 82) colourfully puts it: “Who the fuck wants purity?… the idea of hybridity, of intermixture, presupposes two anterior purities… I think there isn’t any purity; there isn’t any anterior purity… that’s why I try not to use the word hybrid… Cultural production is not like mixing cocktails.” Ang (2003), on the other hand, is not quite so perturbed by the anterior purity thesis. She argues that hybridity should displace diaspora as a useful tool for understanding contemporary cultural diversity. Although hybridity cannot erase boundaries, Ang argues that the usefulness of hybridity is that it problematises boundaries: “Hybridity is not the solution, but alerts us to the difficulty of living with differences, their ultimate irreducible resistance to complete dissolution. In other words, hybridity is a heuristic device for analysing complicated entanglement” (2003: 149). My feelings about the validity of hybridity as an analytical tool are, fittingly it would seem, somewhat ambivalent. While I agree with and have sought to demonstrate claims that it can reinscribe the bounded dichotomies it seeks to disrupt, given that many of the participants in this study self-identified as cultural hybrids and expressed their sense of identity primarily in those terms, rejecting hybridity too strongly at an analytical level might, in this case, entail overlooking the complexities arising out of that self positioning.
As the previous chapter demonstrated, those complexities are apparent in the context of everyday social interaction with the Anglo majority. The vocabulary associated with Australian multiculturalism that tended to frame those narratives also presented its own set of challenges, for it often resulted in the sharpening of the cultural borders that participants were seeking to undermine through their self-representations. The same difficulty became apparent at the analytical level in this chapter when considering the consumption of representations of non-Anglo Australian Others. The embracing of migrant foods or representations of cultural hybridity certainly cannot be equated with the violent rejection of non-Anglo Australians – and Muslims in particular – that occurred on the beaches of Cronulla in 2005; yet the former must not be interpreted as evidence of the hegemonic power of Anglo cultural identity diminishing in Australia. As I have sought to illustrate here, positive reactions to representations of non-Anglo cultural identities do not necessarily undermine the relationship of subordination existing between the Anglo Self and its ethnic Other. Within the Australian public sphere Muslims are still predominantly represented as strangers in the Simmelian sense: the Orientalist binaries that the concept of strangerhood is premised upon continue to structure the external representation of Muslim identity. This is particularly the case where female Muslim identity is concerned, as the following chapter will demonstrate in more detail.

Finally, I want to invoke yet two more visual representations of hybridity embodied in the form of young female Muslim fighters, both characters in “German-Turkish” films analysed by cultural anthropologist Katherine Pratt Ewing (2006). These are the young female protagonist of Yasemin, who is depicted practicing karate with a male peer in the film’s opening scenes, and the young German Turkish woman who progresses through the world of competitive boxing in Ein Madchen im Ring (Girl in the Ring). According to Ewing, while German-Turkish cinema is moving away from the Orientalist depictions of female German-Turkish identity that dominated it in the past, a recent tendency to embrace positive representations of hybrid identity often results in the reinscription of those same stereotypes14. What is

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14 In the latter film, for example, the protagonist’s parents support her boxing yet nevertheless decide to send her to Turkey, to attend university and ultimately find a husband (Ewing 2006: 275).
particularly relevant to my own research is that Ewing complements her analysis of hybridity in a representational sense with ethnographic fieldwork carried out among young so-called German-Turks. Her grounded approach leads her to adopt a very convincing position on hybridity:

Instead of using concepts such as hyphenated identities and hybridity as analytic tools, I suggest that scholars pay close attention to how and when such popular mythologies are actually deployed and by whom. We must consider the effects of such deployments in specific situations by examining how individuals are often classified and misrecognised, contrasting such misrecognitions with an account of how individuals, no matter where they are socially positioned, operate through multiple, contextualised identities in a wide range of social situations and manage an array of contradictions and inconsistencies in their lives. (Ewing 2006: 268)

This is precisely what I have sought to demonstrate in this chapter. Although highly sceptical of the sanitised way in which multiculturalism and hybridity are celebrated within the Australian public sphere, I nevertheless recognise that multiculturalism does provide a vocabulary, however imperfect, for articulating national belonging among participants. A close analysis of participant narratives of self has indicated that Anglo-Australian hegemonic dominance of national cultural space and negative representations of Islamic identity engender this belonging with a strong sense of precariousness. While positive representations of embodied hybridity are a welcome rejoinder to such representations, what is crucial from a scholarly perspective is that we resist buying into a Benetton-style happy hybridity, which is as Hall (1996: 106) puts it, “the kind of difference that doesn’t make a difference of any kind.” What we must ensure, rather, is that the underlying tensions associated with self-proclaimed hybrid cultural identities, which I have examined here, are not overshadowed by the brighter side of hybridity.
[...] we’d just had an accident, and we all stood around that area, around the car that had already crashed and this other car was really going fast. It was on the freeway so it was going really, really fast. And in that split second he noticed the Muslim girls and he actually thought about swearing at us. How quick was that?

So not, “Oh they’ve had an accident I’ll see if I can help them”? 

No, no, no. Just because we were wearing the scarf. Why would you swear at someone who had just had an accident? We weren’t even blocking the way or anything. How did he think as he was going past, “Oh, Muslim girls, let’s swear at them!”? That’s how quick their thought is, like let’s assault them.

Zhila’s description of a driver taunting a group of young Muslim women as he passed the scene of a car accident in which they were involved paints a very disturbing picture of public reactions to female Islamic identity in Australia. Throughout the course of this study, the conduct of the driver in question was not the only example of abuse or violence directed at Muslim women based solely on physical appearance. Participants and program workers often recounted stories of hijabi women they knew who had been verbally threatened and even physically assaulted in public areas, particularly after September 11. During the course of a car trip to one of the workshop sessions, one of the program workers described to me how, several days after the attacks on the World Trade Centre, a friend and her children were followed home from a shopping centre by another woman who happened to see them loading their shopping into the car. Upon arriving at the house the woman in pursuit began shouting racist abuse and attempted to pull off the Muslim woman’s headscarf. The hijabi woman managed to escape inside the house with her children, where she waited anxiously for her husband while the other woman screamed abuse at her from outside the front door. Similar incidents were described in the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission’s report on racism experienced by Australian Muslims and Arabs in the wake of September 11 (Poynting and Noble 2004). Two-thirds of the report’s Muslim sample said that they had experienced racism in the street after September 11; more than half of the respondents who had experienced racist attacks nominated wearing hijab as a believed cause (ibid: 6). The authors described most of
the racism experienced as “social incivility”: verbal abuse or other behaviour regarded by recipients as rude or insulting. A number of serious physical assaults were also reported. In this chapter I explore public perceptions of hijab through the eyes of hijabi participants in this study, contextualising these narratives through an examination of Western representations of the veiled body in a number of discursive contexts. In the process I address the role Australian multiculturalism plays in hijabi participants’ feelings of national belonging, and respond to Okin’s question concerning multiculturalism and “minority” women.

“A Weak Smile”: Hijabi Corporeality and Belonging

While violence (either enacted or threatened) encountered by Muslim women in Australian public space was a topic for discussion in workshop sessions, incidents such as those described above were not what participants tended to refer to when discussing discrimination experienced on the basis of their hijabi identity. Instead, less overt acts of prejudice came to the fore. Nadia, for example, when asked if she had ever experienced prejudice or discrimination based on her hijabi identity said that she had encountered problems with her next-door neighbour since she began wearing the headscarf:

When we first moved into our house, oh my god, the neighbours, every single day they’d bake us a cake or some muffins or something. You know, they were really nice. And then when they found out that I started wearing my hijab – every time we passed their house they would always wave when we went past, you know? – but now they just give you this weak smile, you know? But I guess you can’t force a person...

*So how did that make you feel, suddenly getting a weak smile?*

I didn’t really care that much. But then I saw that everyone became like that. Well not everyone, but a lot of people that I knew. And that kind of made me feel bad about myself for a little while. But then I read a couple of books about hijab, like what it’s really, really about. And then I didn’t care anymore what people thought. I only cared about what God thought of me. I just ignored them.

Nadia’s decision to begin wearing the headscarf coincided with her commencing high school. Her neighbour, originally thinking she was attending a Catholic school (the family had chosen to convert from Catholicism to Islam) was surprised to see her wearing the scarf. Upon telling him that she was attending the local state high school, where a significant number of female students wear the headscarf, he assumed that she was wearing it to fit in.
I said “No, that’s not why, it’s something that I believe that I should do”, and he said “Oh, but you can’t live religion every day of your life”, and I said, “How would you react if I said to you that I pray five times a day?”, and then he was like, “What?!” you know? It was like… people make you… they criticise you and stuff when they don’t know what’s behind your actions. Like, he doesn’t even know why I wear it but he still tells me it’s not, like, the way to be…

This particular incident was clearly very upsetting for Nadia; her voice was strained as she recounted it and her narrative was frequently punctuated by, “you know?”, and “yeah?”, as if, not being an overtly violent attack upon her, its significance in relation to her sense of self might be misconstrued. The interview was upsetting for me too; my field notes record the annoyance that I felt for not stepping outside the role of the disengaged researcher at that point, for not “reassuring her that of course I ‘get’ it, that his sudden reversion to a weak smile is cruel; that using his authority as an adult to attack the intensely held beliefs of a thirteen year-old girl is appalling” (field notes).

The self-portrait that Nadia included in the photographic exhibition, described in detail in Chapter Three (see fig 25), can be interpreted in relation to her experience of how her headscarf has been perceived by others. Throughout the interview she repeatedly asserts that while her physical appearance may have changed, her sense of self has not:

*What does it mean to you, wearing hijab?*

Oh a lot of people ask me that. I don’t really know what to tell you… To me it doesn’t really mean anything as in it sets me apart, but, like, I know the reason behind it why I wear it, but it doesn’t change me as a person. I’m still the same.

[…]

*What sort of experience did you have when you first started wearing it?*

Well a lot of people... in primary school I didn’t wear it but when I started Year 7 I started to wear it. So the people... like, at my brother’s graduation, I saw a lot of my friends from before I started wearing my hijab and they all looked at me like they didn’t know me anymore. You know? They acted differently towards me. It was like they didn’t like me the way I am now. Like I had changed in a way when I hadn’t.

In her portrait, different glasses are used to represent the different scholastic environments she has adapted to. The water within, which signifies her sense of self, is adaptive yet materially speaking remains constant (in the sense that there is always the same volume of water in the glasses), just as her sense of self does not change despite her visually altered corporeality.
While adopting hijab posed few problems for Nadia at school (given that she started wearing it at a new school in the company of other hijabi students), for Zhila school was the site of painful experiences caused by negative reactions to her hijab. Attending university during the study, she describes the sense of isolation she felt at being virtually hounded out of a state high school:

There was no-one. There were no Muslims. And trust me, it was like I was in hell. It was really bad. Not only because I felt that I was not amongst them, they made me feel I was not amongst them.

How come?

Well the laws that they had at [the school] was that they had summer clothing and winter clothing. They’re very, very strict about the uniform. And I had to wear a dress, coz it was summer […] and my mum was like, “I’m not going to make it long for you, I’ll only make it as long as it will go down”… And I’d wear long socks. I’d wear that to school and a girl or two came up to me and were like “We can see your legs”, they were teasing me, you know? They couldn’t see my legs. And they were saying like… those kinds of things. I really wanted to get out of that place. I prayed so much and I did get out and went to a better place.

For those who did not wear the scarf on a daily basis but were considering doing so, how it would be received at school played an important role in the decision. While some participants wore it unselfconsciously in public outside school hours, the prospect of wearing it at school was somewhat daunting:

Is it something you think you’ll do one day?

Meena: You just need to take that step…

Is it a big step to take then?

Meena: Yeah, it is hard, especially at school, like at my school there’s no-one.

Pareesa: Yeah.

Meena: We’d be like pioneers of the hijab or something!

Pioneering the headscarf at her new school was, for Zhila, a difficult experience that she negotiated with the support of friends:

Was it difficult to make friends at the new school?

Yeah, it was. Mostly with the girls. The boys were more… the Indian boys were really nice. I made friends with them. Maybe it was because I understood them as well…

Were they Muslim?

No – they were all Hindus. It was amazing for me just to get along with them! Yeah, it was really nice.
Zhila’s friendship with the Hindu boys is a good illustration of the social inclusiveness that everyday multiculturalism helps to generate simply by way of difference (from Anglo-Australian identity) becoming the norm. As Meena put it, “our school’s so multicultural and there’s heaps of everyone and you don’t have to feel different.”

From participants’ perspectives, the extent to which everyday multiculturalism engenders acceptance of hijabi identity in quotidian public social settings is somewhat limited, however. Asked whether other Australians generally accept their Muslim identity, Zhila and Yasmin said that most Australians do not:

As soon as they see this [points to headscarf], well it’s in the human being, they quickly judge, they don’t even want to know where I’m coming from. It’s like, “I already know”, coz they’ve heard something in the media.

Inas gave a similar response to the same question asked in the written survey: “Yes, well not ‘generally’ because when I walk down the street I just see everyone staring at me because I’m the ‘scarf girl’.” Throughout the course of this study there was an overwhelming sense that this “misrecognition” of hijabi identity is such an everyday occurrence that hijabi participants can’t help but become accustomed to it:

Yasmin: With me I have to walk a lot, because I don’t have a car. I’m always walking here and there. Coz my school bus drops me off somewhere and I have to walk home. I get a lot of cars beeping at me, coz they stick their head out of the window and scream stuff, you know, or they rev their car up beside me like [imitates the sound].

Does that sort of thing upset you?

Yasmin: Yeah, but you get used to it.

[…]

Zhila: You get sick of it, really sick of it, then you just get used to it.

Yasmin: Then you can just smile and walk away.

Zhila: You just get used to it and you say to yourself “I’m used to it.”

Yasmin: You can just go, “You sweat more so it makes you cooler!”

Being “used to” this sort of scrutiny on a quotidian basis, however, does not imply that it becomes any less harmful to individual self-esteem. Improving self-esteem, particularly among the female participants, was one of the program’s key objectives. A psychologist experienced in working with young people was called in to provide a workshop on confidence building in pursuit of this objective. One of her exercises entailed asking participants to define what personal barriers diminish their self-
confidence. Zhila said that the greatest challenges she faces did not originate within herself, but came from outside sources she could not control. She explained that she did not feel confident when shopping in public because of the way people react to her: staring at her because of her headscarf. The idea of the exercise in identifying barriers to self-confidence was designed to provoke reflection on how the participants could work to overcome these barriers through attitude change. Zhila’s point that such barriers are not always within personal control made not only a valid critique of the individualist notion of self underpinning the psychologist’s question, but also served to illustrate just how deeply destabilising negative public perceptions of visible hijabi identity can be. Her experiences also support Taylor’s claim concerning the importance of public recognition of cultural identities. For Zhila, it is clearly the misrecognition of her Muslim identity that has the greatest negative impact on her sense of self.

In a paper examining the significance of the contemporary practice of Islamic veiling in different secular societal settings - including nominally Islamic Turkey – Göle (2003) argues that hijab can be interpreted as a voluntary adoption of a stigma symbol. The negative reactions to hijabi identity described by participants in this research certainly support this interpretation. The figure of the hijabi woman is capable of evoking such intense yet unfortunately predictable reactions that her individual identity becomes irrelevant. Her hijab operates as a visible marker that, in the eyes of those who reject it, reduces the young woman to a set of preconceived ideas: “they quickly judge… they don’t even want to know where I’m coming from.” This “scarf girl”, as Ashraf calls her, is nothing more than a figment of a collective imagination: a discursively constructed image of the Other that has no grounding in reality. How is it, then, that she comes to usurp the identities of these young women in a society that professes to be multicultural? As Said (2003: 10) remarks, “it needs to be made clear about cultural discourse and exchange within a culture that what is commonly circulated by it is not ‘truth’ but representations.” In order to contextualise participants’ engagements with stereotypical representations of hijabi identity through their artwork, it is necessary to first establish how and why hijab remains such a powerful marker of stigma in not only multicultural Australia, but modern secular societies in general.
Conquering Lands and Bodies: Western Imperialist Representations of Hijabi Identity

The breadth of the literature on the representation of hijab allows me the luxury of choosing a point of entry that is very much in line with the methodological focus of this study. Whereas Said (2003) concentrated on nineteenth century literary works produced by Western sojourners to Islamic countries to explore how the “Orient” came to be represented in the West, my interest lies with a corresponding visual source of Orientalist representation: the photographic colonial postcard. I begin with an analysis of depictions of Oriental women conveyed through colonial postcards in order to demonstrate that the roots of the stigma attached to hijabi visibility lie in Western imperialist representations of veiled Islamic corporeality. These representations have historically played — and indeed continue to play — an instrumental role in imperialist military interventions into the Orient.

Enabled by the same technologies that helped facilitate nineteenth century European Imperial expansion, the production and distribution of postcards surged towards the end of the nineteenth century before gradually declining in the wake of the first world war, mirroring the parabolic rise and fall of European imperialist projects. Around the turn of the century — the zenith of the golden age of Empire — postcards accounted for approximately one-third of all postal traffic in Britain alone, and in 1909 the number of stamps sold specifically for use on postcards reached 833 million in Britain and 400 million in India (Patterson 2006: 145). The postcard is an important site of cultural analysis for, in addition to its staggering ubiquity, it played a pivotal role in the dissemination of imperialist representations of the Other to a wide and receptive audience:

Far from mere exotic throwaways, widely-collected colonial postcards contributed to imperial stereotyping by disseminating primitivist images of indigenous peoples during the most jingoistic period of England’s global dominance. Images of the native other were also imprinted onto the English imagination by domestic postcards printed for imperial exhibitions. Underlying the early-century vogue for picture postcards, as well as the concomitant resurgence of imperial romance, was a desire for authenticity attached to exotic locales. (Wollaeger 2001: 44)

Photography, with its seemingly unimpeachable claims to scientific realism, served as the ideal medium for the realisation of that desire for authenticity.

Some scholars see the colonial postcard as a technology of imperialism; it operates as a mirror, reflecting back to the colonial metropolis its own concocted
images of the colonised Other. In his influential *The Colonial Harem* (1986), Alloula argues that sexualised postcard images of North African woman provided aesthetic justifications for colonial violence predicated on the repressed sexual fantasy lying at the heart of colonial ideology. In this sense, they are a visual counterpart to nineteenth-century European male novelists and travel writers’ depictions of the Orient, in which Oriental women are “usually the creatures of a male power-fantasy. They express unlimited sensuality, they are more or less stupid, and above all they are willing” (Said 2003: 207). Alloula’s psychoanalytic interpretation of the erotic colonial postcard is supported by more recent postcolonial scholarship in which European colonial perceptions of Oriental women are seen to be founded upon patriarchal fantasies of conquest (Mohanty 1991, Ahmed 1992, McClintock 1995, Mohja 1999, Stoler 2002). According to this perspective, the image of the dumb harem-slave became the object of an imperialist rescue fantasy that consistently relied on the notion of the victimised Muslim woman, whether she was a willing participant in her oppression or escaping it with the help of Western men and reform-minded women. Ahmed (1992: 151) stresses that the rescue narrative co-opted feminist language in its crusade to liberate Oriental women from Oriental men, the rhetoric of oppressed women serving “to render morally justifiable its project of undermining or eradicating the cultures of colonized peoples.”

Today, colonial postcards hold much appeal for collectors of erotic art. They are easily found in European flea markets and antique shops, and on the internet auction site eBay, where cards tagged with descriptions such as “large breasts” and bearing images of particularly young women often sell for large sums. The postcards depicted in fig 28 are part of a larger collection of images I sourced from eBay sellers in Portugal, France and the UK. The often banal messages accompanying them indicate the ease with which they transgressed otherwise rigid boundaries governing the depiction of female sexuality, indicating how deeply entrenched such representations of Muslim women were. Most carry captions beginning with a three or four digit number, signifying that they belong to large sets. Preceded by the words “scenes and

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15 During the First World War government agencies routinely seized similar postcards depicting French women sent home by colonial soldiers stationed in the metropolis. In that context photographs of naked women were deemed pornographic and therefore subject to censorship (Stovall 2003: 299).
types”, and bearing descriptions such as “Moorish women of Algiers”, “Moorish Women at Home”, “Young Kabyle woman”, etc., the images constitute a veritable taxonomy of the female colonised Other. They bear the marks of the hierarchised classifications that formed the basis of pseudo-scientific theories of race which, positing the cultural superiority of the West, made colonial conquest appear not only morally justifiable but necessary (Mommsen 1981, Fanon 1967, Malik 1996: 114-122, Young 1995: 91-110).

Figure 28. A sample of colonial era postcards on sale on eBay.

Veiling occupies a central position in postcard depictions of Muslim women. In fitting language Alloula (1986: 7) describes how, on encountering the veiled female body, the European photographer experiences feelings of frustration at not being able to
penetrate beneath the veil: “Algerian society, particularly the world of women, is forever forbidden to him. It counterposes to him a smooth and homogenous surface free of any cracks through which he could slip his indiscreet lens.” “Dispossessed of his own gaze”, the photographer enlists models drawn from the margins of society to stage apparently everyday scenes of veiled women (usually half-dressed and often striking sexually provocative poses), thus “giving figural representation to the forbidden” and enacting “his symbolic revenge upon a society that continues to deny him any access and questions the legitimacy of his desire” (ibid: 14).

Numerous feminist scholars have argued that this fetishisation of the unveiled body also played a key role in the imperialist rescue narrative. Ahmed (1992: 151) writes:

> Veiling – to Western eyes, the most visible marker of the differentness and inferiority of Islamic societies – became the symbol now of both the oppression of women (or, in the language of the day, Islam’s degradation of women) and the backwardness of Islam, and it became the open target of colonial attack and the spearhead of the assault on Muslim societies.

Ahmed bases these assertions primarily on the British colonisation of Egypt led by Lord Cromer, whose establishment of the Men’s League For Opposing Women’s Suffrage upon his return to Britain is indicative of the sinister irony of his concern for the plight of veiled Egyptian women. Similarly, General Daumas’ mémoires concerning his time spent in the French colonial administration from 1835 highlight the central position Algerian women’s bodies occupied in French colonial policy. Clancy-Smith (1998: 164) refers to Daumas’ desire, just like his British counterpart, to “tear off the veil that still covers the morals, customs and beliefs” of Arab society. The hijab was symbolically linked to an inability or unwillingness to assimilate to Western culture, extending beyond the women who wore it to reflect upon the communities around them, and colonial policy made concerted attempts to discourage the wearing of it. Thus through the Orientalist discourse of the colonial era hijab became imbued with a singular, static definition. Taken as the visual representation of Islam and the Orient in general, it came to symbolise the counterposition to the West in the Orientalist dichotomies of West/Orient, civilisation/barbarism and modernity/retrogression.

A similar rescue narrative appeared in relation to more recent Western forays into the so-called Orient. In a precursor to the retrospective justifications of the US-led
invasion of Iraq – which Žižek (2004) pithily relates to Freud’s well-known borrowed kettle analogy (I never borrowed it / it was broken when you lent it to me / I returned it unbroken) – in the wake of September 11, 2001 it was argued that the invasion of Afghanistan would liberate oppressed Afghani women. In their analysis of the intense media coverage of the oppression of Afghani women that followed the invasion, Ayotte and Husain (2005) argue that it was the burqa itself (and very often veiling in general) that was vilified, rather than its forceful imposition by the Taliban. Through a selection of representative examples, they demonstrate the way in which the key discursive components of this coverage – the reductionist interpretation of veiling as synonymous with women’s oppression, the homogenisation of Islam and the fetishisation of “unveiling” – mirror earlier imperialist representations of Islamic female corporeality. Cloud (2004) presents a similar analysis of the photographic images of veiled Afghani women that appeared in the Western media at that time. These images, according to her interpretation, “seem to argue for intervention toward nation building, an allegedly humanitarian kind of control that is somehow worth the violence visited upon those being rescued” (ibid: 292). The narrative of freeing oppressed women was certainly not the only justification for post-September 11 US military action, nor was it the most prominent. It is, however, important here given that it parallels (and I would argue has significantly contributed to) heightened anxieties over the welfare of Muslim women living in Western nations.

Despite many feminist scholars’ (see Mohanty 1991, 2003) condemnations of the rhetoric of “saving brown women from the brown men” (Spivak 1999: 284), Orientalist stereotyping of veiled women has not disappeared from Western feminist discourse. The following extract from a paper (by Guardian columnist Polly Toynbee) on Afghani women published in Women’s History Review illustrates how easily supposedly feminist rhetoric can slide from demonising one particular form of Islamic veiling in a specific national setting, to the broader practice of veiling in any given context:

The top-to-toe burka, with its sinister, airless little grille, is more than an instrument of persecution, it is a public tarring and feathering of female sexuality. It transforms any woman into an object of defilement too untouchably disgusting to be seen. It is a garment of lurid sexual suggestiveness: what rampant desire and desirability lurks and leers beneath its dark mysteries? In its objectifying of women, it turns them into cowering creatures demanding and expecting violence and victimisation. Forget cultural sensibilities. More moderate versions of the garb – the dull, uniform coat to the ground and the plain headscarf – have much the same effect, inspiring the lascivious thoughts they are designed to stifle. What is it about a woman that is so
repellently sexual that she must diminish herself into drab uniformity while strolling down Oxford Street one step behind a husband who is kitted out in razor-sharp Armani and gold, pomaded hair and tight bum exposed to lustful eyes? (Toynbee 2001: 575)

In short, to appear veiled on the high street of a multicultural Western metropolis is to announce your oppression to the world. Such a reductionist understanding of hijab is just as damaging as the patriarchal objectification it purports to be trying to free women from, for it disallows any notion of veiling as an exercise of rational choice. The hijabi woman, according to this rationale, is a victim requiring liberation either from male coercion or her own spectacular idiocy; for what woman in her right mind would actually choose to “diminish” herself in such a way?

In this context, it is not difficult to understand why Anglo-Australian paternalistic worrying about the welfare of Muslim women was a dominant theme in workshop discussions and in each of the interviews I conducted with both hijabi and non-hijabi (including male) participants. The dehumanising nature of this concern for Muslim women is clear:

Amira: When they talk about Muslims it’s like there’s something different about us… they don’t consider us, like, a human like them…

Haifa: Especially on women. They would think, “oh my god, the poor Islamic woman, she’s gonna get an arranged marriage”, or “her husband’s gonna beat her five times a week…”

Amira: They just judge us by our appearance, they don’t care exactly what’s happening inside our lives. They don’t know…we’re happy…”

Participants also reinforced their awareness that a very specific demeaning, one-dimensional representation of identity is projected onto the bodies of hijabi women by often referring to how other forms of corporeal differentiation (tattoos; body piercings; punk, gothic and emo clothing; etc.) are received. In one workshop discussion it was pointed out that even if public reactions to those practices are often negative, they are at least recognised as visible signs of individuality. This was reflected in Zhila’s following remark:

This is me. This is the way I dress. If I go out in the street, and this other person with his hair all gelled up and coloured and with piercings on his face, and when you ask them why they do that they’re like, “I wanna be noticed”, okay? But why do you want to be noticed? Coz you pierced your face? Because you’re brave? They’re like, “Oh that’s really good, he wants to be noticed coz he’s got a piercing on his face”, and they’re like, “Oh my god! He’s doing something really different!” But when I wear the hijab, it’s not like that. They get this other message, of what they want us to be…
Whether “they” are consciously aware of it or not, “what they want us to be” clearly has nothing to do with the lifeworlds of the young women involved in this study. What Zhila’s remark also highlights is the way in which one form of visible corporeal differentiation is seen as an exercise of subjective agency, whereas veiling is not.

Agency, or rather the lack thereof, is of course the central theme here. Whether saving brown women from brown men is the rhetorical domain of political elites, feminist scholars or the media, Muslim women are consistently represented, both visually and linguistically, as victims of oppression in need of rescue. Whatever form it takes, this paternalistic quest to liberate Muslim women, and the everyday public reactions to female Islamic corporeality it inspires, systematically denies the hijabi woman’s capacity for agency. She is constructed almost exclusively as the object of public discourse, rather than a participating actor in her own right. This objectification extends into public quotidian life, where she is subjected to an alienating gaze in activities as mundane as shopping on the high street.

Governing Deviant Islamic Bodies: Outlawing Hijab

Recently, the hijabi body has become the object of paternalistic rescue fantasies within the borders of Western nation states. Alev Çınar (2005: 53), whose work examines veiling in Turkey, writes

> the building of a state and the creation of a nation involve different interventions and inscriptions upon the body, whether through the regulation of clothing, the creation of an order of bodily aesthetics, or the assignment of carefully forged roles, such as mother or soldier, all serving one way or another the formation of a sense of nationhood and the establishment of state power.

The body is equally the target of (re)affirmations of national political ideologies, as recent debates over hijabs in schools in a variety of national contexts, prompted by France’s 2004 law banning hijabs in all public schools, have demonstrated. Although the French ban also ostensibly refers also to Jewish yarmulkes, Sikh turbans and large Christian crosses, the legislation represents the culmination of fifteen years of fierce debates over the presence of Muslim headscarves in French schools. The issue extended beyond religious signs in schools because it neatly encapsulated problems

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16 That the school was the site of these debates is not incidental, however. Publicly recognised as the social institution responsible for transmitting Republican values to new generations (CDNAE 2004: 28-
concerning the management of cultural diversity that had become apparent in France
during the 1980s when Muslim immigrants, admitted under foreign labour programs
of the 1960s and early 1970s, relinquished plans of returning to their countries of
origin. The place of Islam in French society was questioned, as was the state’s ability
to continue to maintain national unity through requiring individuals to assimilate to a
universalist Republican identity (for a detailed discussion of these issues see

The French veiling law and the so-called “headscarf affairs” – controversial
expulsions of individual hijabi girls from public schools – that prompted it are
significant here for a number of reasons. Firstly, the seeds of this study were sown in
my Honours thesis which analysed the debate over the veiling law in relation to how
religious and ethnic Others have been constructed in French politics since the late
nineteenth-century push to secularise public schooling in that country. It was my
frustration over the absence of Muslim women’s voices not only in the debate itself,
but also within scholarship on the issue\(^{17}\) that led me to realise the importance of
ethnography as a means of addressing pertinent theoretical questions. Secondly – and
I will elaborate on this below – participants were thoroughly familiar with the law and
often discussed it in the program sessions where it was a source of much anxiety.
While the French debate was largely viewed as an example of Gallic eccentricity in
the Australian media, several participants were familiar with the details of it through
Islamic-themed blogs and internet forums, and to my surprise even knew the names
and histories of two girls – Alma and Lila Levy – expelled from school in the lead-up
to the introduction of the law (to my knowledge this was not covered in mainstream
Australian media representations of the issue. A Factiva search on the girls’ names
supports this). Thirdly, parallels exist between the rhetoric of the French debate and
the way hijab is represented in Australia. The broader theoretical implications of this
are important, and for that reason I now wish to explore the political debate over the
French law a little more closely.

\(^{29}\), the Republican school has historically been linked to these issues through the key role it played in
nineteenth-century debates over secularism, in which young women were similarly positioned as the
\(^{17}\) Gaspard and Khosrokhavar’s (1995) *Le foulard et la République* and Killian’s (2003) article on
French Muslim women’s views on the debate are notable exceptions.
The 2004 law was enacted in order to uphold the principle of laïcité, (literally “secularism”, yet encompassing broader notions of the Enlightenment-derived universalism underpinning the Republican political model), which is officially defined as the “cornerstone of the Republican pact”\(^\text{18}\) (Stasi 2003: 1.2.1). In the highly unusual lower house parliament session devoted specifically to debating the proposed legislation, the majority of French parliamentarians denounced the Islamic veil as a symbol of oppression and veiling as an act of coercive proselytism\(^\text{19}\). Some of the most vehement speeches came from those who were actually voting against the law. The Parti Communiste’s Jacqueline Fraysse (AN [Assemblée Nationale] 2004: 167), for example, declared the veil “the instrument of an unacceptable domination which we must fight against throughout our territory and all levels of our society.” Those who actually considered whether veiling could be an expression of agency most often declared that it is not: “What are the motivations and significance of wearing the veil? Is it really a voluntary act of emancipation as some women argue? We know from experience that this is unfortunately not the case” (Brard in AN 2004: 61). Here the coexistence of interpretations of veiling as synonymous with oppression and proselytism seems difficult to sustain, for the ability to push one’s religious views upon others suggests the exercise of agency. Curiously, however, it seems that it is the veil itself rather than the wearer that is invested with proselytising power through its equation with Islamism:

> The veil is a flag of the politico-religious combat of radical Islamism. (Guibal in AN: 200)

> The majority of specialists on Islam agree on this point: the veil, in Saudi Arabia, Iran or Europe, is not a sign of Islamic faith; it is the exclusive domain of fundamentalists. It has already been established that the current increase in veiling is occurring parallel to the major international crises affecting Islam. (Séjour in AN: 84-5)

Thus through the discourse on veiling in contemporary French society the imperialist rescue fantasy described earlier is rehashed. Yet here the rhetoric is taken one step further. Denying young Muslim women the right to wear the hijab at school, it is

\(^{18}\) All translations from French are my own.

\(^{19}\) This view has also been consistently put forward by some of France’s most prominent public intellectuals. In 1989 Elisabeth Badinter, Régis Debray, Alain Finkielkraut, Catherine Kintzler and Elisabeth de Fontenay addressed an open letter to the Education Minister. In not outlawing the hijab at school, they claimed, Jospin had given carte blanche to “the harshest patriarchy on the planet”, ending with the dire warning that “the destruction of the school will bring down the Republic” (Badinter et al 1989) This letter was extended into a petition in 2004, signed by an additional five philosophers (Babés et al 2004).
claimed, will actually restore their agency: “Strengthened by the support of the nation, these young girls will be able to remove the veil themselves, finally seeing it for what it is, the symbol of submission” (Nayrou in AN 2004: 106).

Gökariksel and Mitchell (2005: 150) argue that secularism is a technology of governance states can employ, under the guise of modernity and progress, to “discipline the wayward bodies of those defined as existing outside the cultural boundaries of the nation, particularly women and migrants.” This certainly seems to be the case here, but on closer inspection one finds that while it is female corporeality that is directly targeted by the law, it is the disciplining of the wayward Muslim man that is perhaps the state’s central objective in banning the veil:

Certain [girls] wear the veil under constraint. This is often the case for young girls indoctrinated by imams, fathers, older brothers or authoritarian tutors; in other words dangerous. The veil becomes the prelude to forced marriages, to ideas of an immature Islam of the Middle-Ages, of an Islam instrumentalised against what is most emblematic of the West: women’s liberty. (Domergue in AN: 87)

The symbolism is peculiar to say the least: beneath the hijab lies not the pious schoolgirl but the fundamentalist Muslim man (imam, father, older brother…).20 According to this rationale, in the same way that turning over rocks in the garden sends dark poisonous things running, lift the veil and voilà!, the Muslim man is exposed, writhing under the bright light of laïcité.

On the surface, the theoretical issues behind the French veiling law seem far removed from Australian multiculturalism. Following the discussion in Chapter One, in theoretical terms Republican universalism and ideological multiculturalism represent different political models for the management of cultural diversity. This view is reinforced by the way in which multiculturalism operated as a counterpoint to French Republicanism in the parliamentary debate over the veiling law. The legislation was deemed necessary by some in order to prevent an Anglo-Saxon model of multiculturalism taking hold in France (Valls in AN 2004: 213), and multiculturalism was said to have proved itself an unsuccessful method of managing cultural diversity throughout the world (Ayrault in AN 2004: 30). Positive discrimination policies were likewise described as “shocking” and “incompatible with

20 Scott (2007: 133) observes that some proponents of the law even claimed that “a veil can hide a beard”.

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Republicanism” (Gautier in AN 2004: 217) and intolerably racist (Néri in AN 2004: 203-204). However, the French law did prompt a very similar public debate (albeit on a much smaller scale) on veiling in Australian schools, and by extension, Islam in Australia.

In August 2005 Sophie Panopoulos, a Liberal Party MP, called for a ban on hijab in Australian schools. She was supported by fellow Liberal MP Senator Bronwyn Bishop, a former front-bencher, who described the hijab as “an iconic item of defiance” (AAP 28/08/2005). Echoing comments made in the French debate (particularly philosopher André Glucksmann’s bizarre association of veiling with Nazism), Bishop declared that:

It’s not about headscarves per se, it’s about a clash of cultures where there are extremist Muslim leaders who are calling for the overthrow of the laws that indeed give me my freedom and my equality as defined by the society in which I live. Now, this morning on a debate with a Muslim lady, she said she felt free being a Muslim, and I would simply say that in Nazi Germany, Nazis felt free and comfortable. That is not the sort of definition of freedom that I want for my country. (ABC radio 29/08/05).

One self-described feminist social commentator for a major daily broadsheet did not support the ban, yet expressed a desire to see one particular form of hijab outlawed:

The hijab is one thing, the burqa is quite another. The burqa — the loose, long, all-enveloping, garment that allows only a slit for the eyes — that really is confronting. It does not belong in a society like this and the women who wear it — not those who are forced to by their husbands or fathers but who freely choose to wear it — are displaying as much insensitivity as would a Western woman wearing skimpy clothes in a Muslim country. It is, simply, very bad manners. (Bone 2005: 15)

Several months later, in a well publicised speech in early 2006, the then Federal Treasurer Peter Costello denounced "confused, mushy, misguided multiculturalism", claiming that some Australian Muslims held views that are incompatible with Australian citizenship:

Before entering a mosque visitors are asked to take off their shoes. This is a sign of respect. If you have a strong objection to walking in your socks, don’t enter the mosque. Before becoming an Australian you will be asked to subscribe to certain

These statements reflect what Wieviorka (1997: 53) terms France’s “non-debate” over multiculturalism, in which multiculturalism and communitarianism are conflated. Communitarianism, he argues, has nothing to do with multiculturalism but refers to the hardening of ethnic identities into combative groups resistant to any intercultural dialogue, reminiscent of Lebanon during its civil war. Other sociological research supports this claim by demonstrating how in real social terms multiculturalism already exists within French public institutions, albeit to a limited extent, through certain programs and policies (see Wihtol de Wenden 2003, Sabbagh 2002, Amselle 2003: 115).
values. If you have strong objections to those values, don’t come to Australia.
(Garnaut 2006: 2)

These comments were endorsed by the then Prime Minister, John Howard, who added his own views on the difficulty in passing legislation on Islamic attire:

I don’t mind the headscarf but it’s really the whole outfit, I think most Australians would find it confronting. These are things that it’s very hard to lay down legislation for. I don’t believe that you should ban wearing headscarves but I do think the full garb is confronting and that is how most people feel. Now, that is not meant disrespectfully to Muslims because most Muslim women, a great majority of them in Australia, don’t even wear headscarves and very few of them wear the full garb. (AAP 27/02/06)

Thus the hijabi body has been the site of recent attempts by Australian political elites to redefine Australian national political ideology; the “mushy” multiculturalism of the past that sought to embrace difference (if often only for instrumental purposes) being superseded by a multiculturalism that emphasises the limitations of tolerance.

Both the French veiling law and these subsequent rhetorical attacks on hijab in the Australian public sphere were a frequent topic of workshop discussions. An informal yet thorough media monitoring of the issue was conducted over the course of the program, as participants and program workers regularly brought along newspaper articles and shared stories of what they had seen on television or heard on the radio during the week. The intense feelings of precarious belonging the discourse on veiling inspired in participants was reflected in the comments they made during interviews:

Haifa: What scares me is living in a multicultural country and hearing these leaders talking about Muslims and hijab, like Peter Costello. Like for me, I’m still young and I want to be a lawyer. Now to be a lawyer… I don’t know who my clients are gonna be if I’m a Muslim and they’re talking about hijab and stuff… Like, is my business gonna run? I’m scared! And you know France, that’s meant to be a free country, isn’t it? And look at the laws. You either wear the hijab you don’t go to school, or you go to school and you don’t… you know? I’m scared that this could happen in Australia. If this happens in Australia, where am I gonna go?

Do you think it could happen in Australia?

Haifa: Well it can’t easily change because you need the whole nation to vote for it. But, I’m saying… how did it change in France? Like they didn’t get… there’s heaps of Muslims in there…

Amira: There is a possibility because Muslims are becoming the target –

Haifa: – Not just in Australia, but all over the world –

Amira: – and that’s like, influencing Australia as well. So what happens in the media, you’ve just gotta believe that might happen one day in Australia as well. And the other thing is, it’s so frustrating as well, coz Australia’s a multicultural country, and Muslims are not the only ones who are different in Australia, but we are the only ones who are targeted.
Like other participants, Haifa and Amira worry that if hijab can be banned in schools in one Western democracy the same could happen in Australia, despite Australia’s official commitment to multiculturalism. In their eyes, the Western assault on Muslims carried out through distorted representations of Islamic identity transcends differing national approaches to the management of cultural diversity. Also, given that they both wear what Howard pejoratively terms “the full garb” – i.e. not only headscarves but also long, loose dresses and jackets – Haifa’s concerns about her future career are certainly justified if Howard’s claim that other Australians find her appearance confronting is correct.

Zhila and Yasmin express similar concerns in their discussion of the proposed ban on hijab in Australian schools:

Zhila: John Howard goes, “It’s too much of a risk to do that”, isn’t that what he said? I’m sure I heard him say, “It’s too much of a risk.”

Yasmin: I think he goes, “It’s too difficult”…

Zhila: I mean it’s multicultural. Whenever anyone says “Australia”, they go, “It’s multicultural”, right? You take that away, it’s not going to be multicultural.

What does that mean, “multicultural”? 

Zhila: Different cultures –

Yasmin: – Different cultures.

There are different cultures in France, too –

Zhila: But do they say France is a multicultural country? They don’t say that. Australia always claims they are a multicultural country. France doesn’t say that. People do come in, but they don’t say that. Australia always says they’re a multicultural country.

Yasmin: What really got me mad about John Howard was when he said, when he responded to the proposed law about banning the hijab [in Australia], he didn’t say, “It’s not the right thing to do”, he just said, “It would be very difficult.” He didn’t say, “It’s not the right thing to do because it’s part of the religion and it actually states in the law that anything trying to change religion… you can’t make laws against religion”… Why didn’t he say, “It’s wrong”? 

Zhila: I reckon if at some stage everything does go the way that he thinks, “Yeah”, I think he would put that law. Why not? By saying that, it gives us the message, “I would, but I can’t right now”… As soon as he does that it’s like, “Alright then, let’s kick out all the…” Like, kick us out of here…

Here a very clear distinction is made between French universalism and Australian multiculturalism at a rhetorical level (“Australia always claims they are a multicultural country. France doesn’t say that.”) Yet there is an overriding sense that
in the current political climate Australian multiculturalism doesn’t extend much further than this. In fact, Zhila and Yasmin’s interpretation of the Prime Minister’s response to the proposed ban on hijab in schools reflects the Federal Government push to move away from multiculturalism. For Zhila and Yasmin, like other program participants, this ideological change is highly destabilising. In their eyes, state withdrawal from multiculturalism threatens their membership to the national community, to the point that their literal physical removal from it (being “kicked out” of here) becomes a very real possibility.

To return to Okin’s question of whether multiculturalism is bad for women, for the female participants involved in this study multiculturalism, at least in a rhetorical sense, could be described as positive. As was also demonstrated in the previous two chapters, multiculturalism provides a vocabulary for articulating national belonging. Although this vocabulary is far from perfect, participants nevertheless view the continued existence of normative multiculturalism in Australia as fundamental to their sense of belonging. Of course, this is not what Okin had in mind when she suggested that multiculturalism may not always operate in the interests of “minority” women. For the female participants in this study, however, what is most damaging to their sense of self is not cultural constraints imposed upon them by male Muslim elites (and/or the women colluding with them) and endorsed by a multiculturalist state, as Okin suggests. It is, rather, negative perceptions of their identity based on the deeply rooted crisis of representation of Muslim women and Islam in general that exists not only in Australia but throughout the so-called Western world.

All this is not to deny the existence of oppression or crimes committed against Australian women in the name of culture or religion (although in the current Australian political climate the “my culture made me do it” plea seems unlikely to hold much sway). However, the nature of this study does not lend itself to these sorts of insights; obviously, an Islamic youth development program in which participation is self-selective is hardly the site where overt wrongdoings of this nature would be evident to a researcher. At the same time, there were clearly corporeal norms established within the cultural space of the program that female participants were expected to adhere to. In the Afghani group, where participants wearing hijab on a daily basis were in the minority, program workers held many discussions focussing on the virtues of hijab and the correct way to wear the headscarf. Invitations to events
that occurred outside the program always recommended Islamic dress for the occasion. I begin the following section with an exploration of how non-hijabi participants negotiated this covert pressure to don the hijab. My central claim is that Bhabha is correct in arguing that Okin does not address the issue of minority women’s agency, an issue which, I argue, is much more complex than liberal feminists generally tend to assume. I will then move on to an analysis of the significance of the agency exhibited in hijabi participants’ photographic representations of hijabi corporeality.

Agency: Hijab as Corporeal Resistance Strategy

Female participants exercised agency in numerous ways throughout the course of this research. Encouraged by the program workers, several sought to contribute to the public discourse on veiling by submitting letters to the opinion pages of local and national newspapers. In a letter responding to Costello’s call for Australian Muslims wanting to live under Sharia law to leave Australia for Saudi Arabia or Iran (Garnaut 2006: 2), for example, Pareesa wrote, “I follow Sharia law every day of my life.” She went on to urge the Treasurer to stick to his job of managing the nation’s finances. Here, however, I concentrate on the corporeal exercise of agency, specifically through the practice of hijab, given that the hijabi body is the focus of political debates in both national and international contexts and provokes negative reactions in Australian public spaces.

Pareesa’s commitment to Sharia struck me as interesting given the way in which she, like the majority of the female Afghani participants, negotiated her corporeal identity. The first thing I noticed about the Afghani group as a whole was that most of the girls wore the headscarf very differently to the girls in the Iraqi group. Iraqi participants’ headscarves were pinned around the face over a tighter underscarf (usually a wide elasticised headband). All but four girls in the Afghani group, on the other hand, wore their scarves draped loosely around their shoulders like shawls. The fabric of the scarves was different too. Iraqi participants tended to favour tightly woven fabrics in dark colours, whereas the scarves worn by the Afghani participants were often lacy and almost transparent. The clothing worn by both groups also differed. Iraqi participants tended to wear dark, broad-shouldered coats over loose full length dresses, while Afghani participants favoured fashionable long gypsy skirts and
brightly coloured singlets layered over tight long-sleeved jersey tops, or long, decorative jersey tops worn over slim fitting pants. The different styles of dress indicated the existence of two very different interpretations of Islamic modesty: one prescribing traditional dress consistent with ethnic origins and the other adjusting high street teen fashion for greater coverage (achieved through wearing long-sleeved jersey tops under singlets, gypsy skirts in place of mini-skirts, etc.).

The purpose of the shawl-like scarves became evident in the second weekly workshop session when a sheikh came to deliver a short talk on rationality in Islam. When the sheikh entered the room the female participants quickly pulled their scarves up over their hair. This performance was repeated in subsequent workshops whenever a religious authority figure was present during the sessions. For these participants then, their public hijabi identity was a performance intended for a very specific audience.

As the program progressed, the Iraqi program workers took issue with this and set about establishing a universal standard of acceptable dress for Muslim women. This involved various workshop presentations clearly demarcating acceptable and unacceptable forms of attire, including detailed explanations of the religious rationale behind them. As a result, the shawls-cum-headscarves soon disappeared and the Afghani participants began attending workshops wearing pinned headscarves. This adoption of a more traditional version of hijab, however, did not signify participant capitulation to the coercion of the program workers. The Afghani girls retained their fashionably tight-fitting clothes and matched their headscarves to the bright colours of their outfits and accessories. These colours often included fluorescent pink and yellow: colours that clearly defied the articulated norm discouraging conspicuously coloured clothing. While it certainly wasn’t the style of dress the program workers had in mind, these outfits provided the participants with a means of reconciling their way of performing Islamic identity with the program workers’ perception of it as less than ideal. In the cultural space of the workshop, the Afghani participants’ pinned headscarves allowed them to establish a viable position in relation to norms of bodily appearance that program workers were able to impose through their authority as religious educators.

It is important to note here that I do not interpret agency to be synonymous with resistance, for participants demonstrated great respect for the program workers and
resisting their guidance would not have been in any way consciously intended. In other words, my conception of agency here differs from the ability to subvert norms, as Mahmood (2001: 211) argues agency is generally taken to mean, including within Judith Butler’s work. Uncoupling the dominance/submission dichotomy that lies at the heart of most feminist understandings of agency – particularly those evident within the various debates concerning veiling in schools – is crucial if we are to develop a more nuanced understanding of female Muslim identity. Hijab here cannot be interpreted as an act of submission, for the way these participants practised hijab was very different to what program workers intended, nor was it strictly an act of resistance, given that they did forego their transparent scarves for the more traditional pinned headscarf. Here Mahmood’s (2001: 210) reformulation of agency as “capacities and skills required to undertake particular kinds of acts (of which resistance to a particular set of relations of domination is one kind of an act)” that are “ineluctably bound up with the historically and culturally specific disciplines through which a subject is formed” is useful. Like the participants in Mahmood’s study of the female mosque movement in Cairo, many of the non-hijabi participants in this study seek to acquire virtues of modest conduct that liberal feminism tends to equate with the patriarchal dominance of women. This is evident in Samira’s explanation of why she is waiting for the right time to wear the scarf:

[hijab] just shows other people how strong your faith is. Well that’s what I think. It shows how strong your faith is and what you believe in. And what you’re supposed to do for it. Like if you wear the scarf it’s a really huge decision and you’re just saying “Okay, I’ve taken this step, now I have to show people, through my behaviour and my characteristics, show them how a Muslim woman is”, coz they’re like the flag of Islam. So it’s a big step, and it comes with a lot of responsibilities.

What sort of responsibilities?

Like you have to act… I don’t know… nicely. Like, you can’t be an idiot. You can’t be like, screaming out, wearing the hijab. You have to be modest.

What does it mean to you, that idea of modesty?

22 Winter (2000) identifies three problematic epistemological approaches within research on gender and Islam: an orientalist approach, in which Islam is identified as the primary cause of Muslim women’s oppression; a multiculturalist approach, which in an exact reversal of the orientalist gives credibility to even the most fundamentalist elements of Islam in the name of women’s agency; and a pluralist approach, which, while it moves away from the essentialising of the Orientalist and multiculturalist theoretical approaches, neglects to critically analyse expressions of Islamic identity beyond fundamentalist forms. Mahmood’s theorisation of agency provides an important alternative to these epistemic positions.
It means a lot. It... just... it shows that you’re not cheap. Do you know what I mean? Like, Aussie girls, they do this, they do that... like they have no modesty. They don’t care about how other people see them. But in Islam, it is very important how men and women see you...

Aspiring to shyness and modesty in this way resembles the projects of individual self-improvement and self-control described by Giddens (1991), albeit enacted within what would commonly be perceived as a non-Western moral framework. As Mahmood argues (2001: 222), although such moral virtues are generally derided by Western liberalism, they do not necessary suggest an inability or reluctance to act.

The second site of corporeal agency I want to explore lends itself to a more straightforward understanding of agency as resistance. While Göle’s (1996, 2003) analyses of Islamic veiling are primarily concerned with the adoption of hijab in accordance with Islamist projects, it is nevertheless a useful basis for understanding participants’ use of hijab as a tool of resistance in their photographs. Drawing on Goffman, Göle observes that the contemporary understanding of stigma has moved away from its ancient Greek origins in “signs that were cut or burned into the body to advertise that the bearer was a slave, a criminal, or a traitor, a blemished person to be avoided in public places” (2003: 810), towards individual and group experiences of social exclusion. She seeks to reinstate a corporeal interpretation of stigma in order to “understand the ways in which social difference and public exclusion are carried out by bodily signs and practices.” In doing so, the site of analysis becomes not the scarf itself, but the “normative cultural values of class and power” determining how it is perceived. “Hence, the Islamic headscarf supplies information about the bearer, but is also subject to public perception. It communicates the individual and collective motivations of those who adopt it as much as the perceptions of those who reject it.”

Given the very corporeal way in which female participants narrated their Islamic identity through images focussing on the headscarf, the relevance here of such an embodied understanding of stigma needs no further elaboration. However, I do want to expand the last point a little, for in the case of this study the motivations of those who wear the headscarf (at least in the context of the portrait project) and the perceptions of those who reject it are interrelated.
An important area of commonality amongst participants whose portrait images focused on hijabi identity was the use of the scarf as a vehicle for altering public perceptions of that identity. As described in Chapter Three, Haifa, for example, combined the motifs of her hijab and pet cockatoo to illustrate her conviction that as a Muslim woman she is as “free as a bird”, while Leila illustrated the colourful and rich inner-world of hijabi women by cleverly depicting the body beneath the hijab in a way that does not deviate from the norms of modesty that hijab represents. Another participant said she intended to use a Barbie doll wearing hijab to represent herself in her self-portrait. She said she wanted to demonstrate her dedication to her goal of becoming a lawyer (a popular career aspiration among the female participants), despite popular conceptions of Muslim women as uneducated, by posing the doll atop a pile of textbooks. Like the Muslim women photographed wearing Australian flags as headscarves on Harmony Day (a gesture that stands in stark contrast to the flag-cum-cape worn by Anglo-Australian men involved in the Cronulla riots several weeks prior), these images signify, most often quite literally, corporeal engagement with the Australian public.

The relationship here between the hijabi individual and the public is therefore dialectical in nature: the negative public perception of hijab inspires a corporeal adjustment in the way hijabi identity is visibly enacted, the purpose of which is the (re)instatement of its intended significance within the public sphere.
Through a Veil Darkly23: Metaphors of Darkness and Light

As I pointed out in Chapter Three, light served as the primary signifier through which participants sought to challenge public perceptions of hijabi identity. Najwa’s decision that the younger girl representing her in her portrait must wear a bright coloured scarf, Marwah’s similarly motivated resolve to also wear one, and Leila’s rainbow coloured scarf and her conscious use of bright colours in her everyday attire are all examples of resistance to dominant perceptions of veiling expressed through the scarf itself. Communicating notions of identity photographically requires mastering not only the technical skills of a medium that, after all, quite literally translates to “writing with light”, but also the vocabulary of non-verbal metaphors required to establish shared understandings. This use of light colours to convey a positive message about self-identity here relies on long established universally recognised visual metaphors. Psychologists have found that the association of light colours with good and dark colours with bad is common to many cultures (Adams and Osgood 1973). Natural light carried holy significance in many ancient religions, and continues to play a strong symbolic role in each of the Abrahamic religions (for Muslims the sun represents the all-seeing, all knowing eye of Allah) (Weightman 1996: 60-64). In terms of colour, conceived of as white, yellow/gold or silver, light denotes purity and holiness in attire across many religions, from the robes of Buddhist monks to Christian wedding and baptism gowns. In Islam, the white robes of hajj pilgrims symbolise humility, unity and purity. In Islamic films, the prophet Mohammed is never represented in a corporeal form, but is often depicted via a column of bright white light. Darkness, by contrast, is considered the realm of Shatan (Satan). In the surah entitled An-Noor (light) the Qur’an states that, “God is the Light of the Heavens and of the Earth ...” [24:35] and “(the Unbelievers’ state) is like the depths of darkness in a vast deep ocean, overwhelmed with billow topped by billow, topped by dark clouds: depths of darkness, one above another: if a man stretches out his hand, he can hardly see it! For any to whom Allah giveth not light, there is no light!” [24:40]

23 This is the title of Waines’ (1982) excellent article reviewing research on women in Islamic societies. Many of the issues raised by postcolonial feminists are evident in the studies he discusses, a number of which date back to the 1960s.
After presenting some of the preliminary findings of this study at an interdisciplinary academic conference, I was approached by a young Canadian Muslim woman who said that although on the morning of the conference she felt like wearing black, she made a conscious decision to wear a cream scarf and pale clothing. For her, like for the participants in this study, the light colours seemed the best medium for visually articulating how she wants her hijab to be perceived by others: that is as a projection of her Islamic identity outwards to the world as a source of pride, as opposed to something that hides her identity as is so often perceived. Interestingly, one of the central themes of that conference involved veiling as metaphor:

Constricting academic administrations, economic and cultural imbalances, and unethical globalizing practices can serve as veils to free and critical public discourse. Those veils can harden into impenetrable walls for the voices trying to speak from behind them. Even the act of translation can leave cultures permanently veiled from each other though its intended goal is to bring them together.

This exemplifies typical use of veiling as a metaphor to signify hiding, obstruction or separation – precisely the associations these young women are trying to usurp. Likewise, to unveil metaphorically signifies revealing truth: “to lift the veil on” something.24

Metaphors of veiling and light (or absence thereof) intersect in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s well-known short story, The Minister’s Black Veil. The narrative concerns a puritan minister who, without explanation, one day begins to wear a black veil. His parishioners and fiancé, shocked and frightened by his altered appearance, demand an explanation. When none is forthcoming he is shunned by all in the community. Hawthorne describes the story as a parable – which is highly fitting in the present context of Islamic veiling. Here it can easily be read as illustrative of the wickedness of a community ostracising one of its members for nothing more than deviance of appearance. (Despite the fact that the minister’s behaviour remains constant, the community fears and rejects him, for “He has changed himself into

24 The ubiquity of that metaphor has led me to privilege the word “hijab” when referring to the way participants narrate their identities. This is consistent with their own terminology: although some participants did occasionally use the word “veil”, “hijab” was used much more frequently. I tend to use “veil” more often when referring to outside perceptions of the hijab, as the term is used more often in those settings.
something awful, only by hiding his face.”) The absence of an explicit explanation for the minister’s veil in the text has led it to become the subject of considerable academic attention among literary scholars. Ostrowski’s (1998) interpretation of the veil serving the instrumental purpose of hiding the visible symptoms of syphilis notwithstanding, scholars generally regard the black veil as what the minister himself describes it as: “a type and a symbol.” Poe saw this symbol as representative of a terrible crime committed by the minister (Voigt 1952), while Santangelo (1970: 63) draws a very different conclusion in his influential account: “The black veil is the symbol of alienation. With it [the minister] affirms that all men are sinful and in their sin are cut off from each other.” What is central to each of these and most contemporary understandings of the text, however, is the standard association of the veil with the hidden or isolated and black with sin.

The image below is a contemporary example of the metaphor of the black veil used to deliver a negative message about the status of women in Islam. Appearing on the cover of the centre-Left Nouvel Observateur, it depicts a young woman veiled in such a way that only her eyes are visible. The remainder of the image, constituting more than 90% of the complete picture, is black. We do not need to see any more than this pair of eyes staring vacantly from the otherwise covered face to understand that the subject of the image is deeply unhappy. This forlorn mood is evoked by not only the overwhelming darkness of the image, but also photographic technique. Almost certainly created in a tightly controlled studio setting using a model, it makes a very unusual technical deviation from standard portrait practice in which a reflector is used to create catch-lights in the subject’s eyes. These reflected points of light are necessary to visually convey a sense of the subject’s inner life. Here, in literally
extinguishing the light from the subject’s eyes, the photographer leaves us with the impression of sorrow and suffering. The accompanying article was not about women in Islam. However, in associating the face of a suffering veiled woman with the word “Islam” set in enormous yellow letters, it is extremely difficult to interpret the image in any way other than a visual representation of the metaphoric darkness of female Islamic subjectivity, whatever the intention.

The *Nouvel Observateur* cover could easily be the image referred to in the following poem, published in the Australian neo-conservative journal Quadrant. Entitled “The Burqa”, the author describes her reaction to a printed image of a woman wearing the burqa:

See the burqa woman
shackled by a shroud
her character blanked out.
Woman, know your place
a space more cramped
than any locked cell
for solitary confinement
for madness.
Your cries are gagged,
the gaze of your eyes fenced.

But your image escapes,
speaks of panic in the dark
silence and cruelty.
It echoes the surreal
those hooded, faceless
figures by Magritte
hinting at nightmare,
or the accused
dressed for the noose.

The printed image
leaves its mark
burnt on my mind’s eye
as I walk past
on the other side
to lie, dazzled by sunlight,
my head in the golden sand. (Edgar 2002)

Through the use of metaphors of darkness and light, Edgar sets up a binary relationship between the Muslim woman inhabiting the oppressive darkness of veiled anonymity and herself, lying bareheaded on golden sand in the sunlight. The veil operates as a border between two distinctly separate worlds: that of the oppressed (dark) and the free (light). Edgar situates herself quite literally on the enlightened “other side” of the burqa; the “other side” of the Orient in the West/Orient binary.
Metaphors of positive transformation are also often structured around movement between the binary poles of light and darkness. In Plato’s cave allegory, a move from darkness to light serves as a metaphor for the transformational effect of intellectual education upon the soul. Darkness represents the soul’s pre-existing imitative state while light signifies the end result: knowledge of the Good. In Islam, light is similarly equated with the path towards spiritual wisdom. In other examples of transformation metaphors, light and darkness operate as the stand-ins for entire religious groups, cultures or even continents. For early Christian scholars, for example, the light of Christianity was charged with vanquishing the dark forces of paganism. The same theme of positive transformation is evident in the persistence of the metaphor of the “Dark continent” in Western perceptions of sub-Saharan Africa, from early accounts of missionary and colonialist missions to contemporary media coverage of HIV/AIDS (Jarosz 1992). Nearly identical metaphors were employed in the media coverage of the unveiling of Afghani women after the Allied invasion of 2001, as evident in the title of Lui’s (2001) Newsweek article, Now I See the Sunlight. Cloud (2004: 293) describes the visual metaphor of positive transformation evident in a Time photo-essay from the same period, entitled From Shadow to Light, as follows:

In “From Shadow To Light,” there is a photograph of a lone woman, dressed head to toe in a burqa, wandering through crumbling desert ruins early in the morning with the sun rising in front of her. As in other examples from the “From Shadow To Light” compilation, she moves visually from darkness into the light of liberation promised by U.S. intervention.

Similarly, in the parliamentary debate on the French veiling law, Ayrault (AN 2004: 29) declared that “[Laïcité] is a light for women imprisoned by obscurantism, it is a hope for oppressed minorities.” Implicit in all of these metaphors of positive transformation is a teleological model of social progress. The move away from the darkness of barbarism, obscurantism, oppression, etc. is a move towards the light of modernity, envisaged throughout as Western liberalism.

This conceptualisation of modernity forms one of the central themes in the next chapter. To summarise the present discussion, participants used light in their representations of hijabi identity to assert that they are modern, agentive subjects. By

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25 The title of a recent newspaper article on forced African migration illustrates the contemporary use of this metaphor in the Australian public sphere: For Refugees, it’s Been a Hard, Dazed Journey into the Light (Jackson, 13/10/2007).
consciousness of representing themselves as enlightened they condemn Western attempts to forcibly transform their subjective state from the darkness that supposedly characterises it, to the light of modern Western identity, as Orientalists would have it. By invoking a universally understood metaphor of enlightenment they speak in terms that are immediately comprehensible from both an Islamic and an Orientalist perspective. Thus they defy Orientalist representations of Islamic identities in a manner that is consistent with the way they see themselves, and in doing so stress the commonalities that actually exist between the so called West and “the rest”.

Finally, returning once more to the question of whether multiculturalism is bad for women, I want to briefly expand on Yuval-Davis’ argument presented in Chapter One (as opposed to Okin’s) that multicultural recognition of culture can condone practices that are harmful to women. She cites examples of unjust decisions made by judicial and state welfare authorities in the UK based on multiculturalist recognition of culture (1997: 58). An Iranian woman, for example, who fled Iran on the grounds that she refused to wear the hijab was not granted her request for asylum in the UK on the basis that, in the words of the judge presiding over the case, “this is your culture.” Another young Muslim girl who fled from her parents due to the restrictions they imposed upon her, was placed by social services (against her wishes) with an even more observant Muslim family in the belief that this was culturally appropriate. Community welfare workers in Australia have described similar incidents involving Muslim women. In one disturbing case, a judge denied a Turkish-Australian woman an intervention order against her violent partner on the basis that she should be familiar with the “extreme patriarchal nature of her culture” (Assafiri and Dimopoulos 1995). Like the cases Yuval-Davis recounts, this judgement reflects what I have argued throughout this chapter to be an unjust stereotyping of Muslim women as victims of patriarchal oppression. As I have demonstrated through the analysis of the representation of hijabi corporeality in (particularly image-based) public discourse, this stereotype plays a major role in debates over national identity and past and present justifications for imperialist conquest. In both contexts it is reinforced through universally recognised visual metaphors: the same metaphors participants in this study harnessed to challenge this damaging representation (as their narratives demonstrated it to be) via the images they created. This challenge was visually enacted exactly where these discourses are played out: their bodies.
It may very well be the case that normative multiculturalism, conceived of as institutionalised recognition of cultural identities, is at times put forward as justification for overt miscarriages of justice involving Muslim women. However, the problem as I see it is not so much multiculturalism, but conceptions of multiculturalism founded upon impoverished understandings of culture. The notion that the oppression of women is an endemic part of Islam or the cultures of nations where Islam is the majority religion, whether overtly stated or implicitly conveyed through images, has a very real impact on the lives of the young Australian Muslims involved in this study. For them, it is not multiculturalism but the misrecognition of their identities both in public discourse and quotidian social situations that destabilises their sense of self and social belonging. Ayotte and Husain (2005: 112), adopting Spivak’s phrase, term Orientalist representations of Muslim women a form of “epistemic violence”. The argument I have put forward here certainly supports this.
CHAPTER 7

Modernity and Religiosity

A “conventional” view of modernity, writes Gerard Delanty (2000: 2), sees the substitution of “ecclesiastical legitimation for one of scientific certainty.” Although acknowledged to be rooted in classical Greek philosophy, the modern triumph of reason over tradition is attributed to the European Enlightenment, the French Revolution representing the political realisation of Enlightenment philosophy. In the essay “What is Enlightenment?”, Kant envisaged enlightenment to be a “mature” state of individual consciousness in which action is guided by knowledge acquired through rational inquiry, as opposed to uncritical submission to religious dogma or other forms of external authority (Kant [1784] 1996, Foucault 1984: 32-50). This normative assertion that desired forms of individual action should be based on autonomous rational thought remains central to contemporary liberalism. Said (1979, 1981) consistently argued that Islam and Muslim identities have historically and continue to be commonly constructed as unenlightened in a wide range of “Western” discursive settings. As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, claims that the Muslim woman’s agentive freedom is restricted are often a central component of such representations. This chapter deals with a conventional Western view of modernity that implicitly excludes Islam and the Muslim subject from the realm of rational thought.

This Eurocentric understanding of modernity is evident in Pope Benedict XVI’s speech on faith and reason delivered at a German university in 2006. The speech sparked outrage among Muslim leaders due to the Pope’s reference to a fourteenth century theologian’s remarks about Islam and violent conversion (BBC News 16/09/06). While the Pope was quick to apologise for his comments (BBC News 17/09/06), saying that they did not reflect his own opinions, Islam nevertheless served as a counterposition to the rationality of ancient Greek and Enlightenment philosophy in the speech. After surmising that “for Muslim teaching, God is absolutely transcendent. His will is not bound up with any of our categories, even that of rationality”, the Pope poses the question, “Is the conviction that acting unreasonably contradicts God’s nature merely a Greek idea, or is it always intrinsically true?” Looking beyond the controversial remark on Islamic violence, Tariq Ramadan (2006:
17) presents a convincing argument about why the Pope’s exploration of that question is cause for concern:

[The Pope] reminds those rationalist secularists who would want to rid the Enlightenment of its references to Christianity that these references are an integral component of European identity; it will be impossible for them to engage in interfaith dialogue if they cannot accept the Christian underpinnings of their own identity (whether they are believers or not). Then, in taking up the question of faith and reason, and in emphasizing the privileged relationship between the Greek rationalist tradition and the Christian religion, the Pope attempts to set out a European identity that would be Christian by faith and Greek by philosophical reason. Islam, which has apparently had no such relationship with reason, would thus be foreign to the European identity that has been built atop this heritage. A few years ago, then-Cardinal Ratzinger set forth his opposition to the integration of Turkey into Europe on a similar basis. Muslim Turkey was never and will never be able to claim an authentically European culture. It is another thing; it is the Other.

Ramadan goes on to argue that Muslims must reinstate Islamic scholarship on rationality into the Western narrative of modernity in order to demonstrate “that they share the core values upon which Europe and the West are founded.”

Taking up Ramadan’s call for a revisionist history of Western modernity is far beyond the scope of this study. This chapter is, rather, concerned with the significance of notions of rationality in the construction of Muslim identities. In the first section I examine the prominent discursive role rationality played both in participants’ narratives of their religiosity and the religious instruction delivered through the program. Until recently, sociologists have tended to assume that modernisation necessarily implies the secularisation of not just national societies but also the minds of their citizens. In the second section of the chapter I draw on the concept of reflexive modernity in order to explore why this is not necessarily the case. The third section sees the analytical direction change somewhat. Here I seek to problematise the image of a rationalised Islamic subject by looking at what place the nonrational occupies in regard to participant religiosity. I conclude by relating yet another influential critique of the conventional Eurocentric view of modernity – the notion of “alternative modernities” – to participant religiosity. My overall aim in this chapter is to challenge the conventional understanding of modernity outlined above by providing an ethnographic account of self-consciously modern diasporic identities.

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26 Alisdair MacIntyre (1988: 11) supports this project, not only because Islamic scholarship contributed to the Aristotelian tradition informing the Western narrative of modernity, but also because Islamic scholars have had important things to say about rationality in their own right. In that respect MacIntyre argues that we must acknowledge that there are multiple conceptions of rationality arising through different traditions of enquiry.
that do not conform to its implicit assumptions. This is significant in the context of public debate over the management of cultural diversity because, as the previous chapter illustrated, the terms of debate too often accept such assumptions as valid.

**Reason and Religiosity**

While Zhila was the only participant who said that she had experienced family problems due to her decision to adopt the headscarf, one of the program workers, Banan, recounted to me in detail her struggle for family acceptance. Born in Iraq, Banan had lived in several countries, including Iran, Libya and the UK, before she migrated to Australia with her parents and younger brother when she was in her early teens. She decided to adopt hijab in her late teens. Her decision was met with fierce opposition from her father, a university academic, who feared that it would restrict her future career options. The situation eventually escalated into an ultimatum that she either abandon the scarf or leave home. With the support of her mother and a local sheikh, Banan remained defiant and her father eventually accepted her decision. Zhila’s experience with her own father’s disapproval of the scarf was very similar to Banan’s. Here she explains how her difficulties negotiating negative perceptions of her hijabi corporeality at school were compounded by tension over hijab at home:

> That was a pretty difficult time because you want at least your family to support you and if you don’t get even that… It was pretty hard. My mum was really encouraging, I got support from her, but having my dad keep saying the same thing over and over, it was really… But now he’s proud of me, that I didn’t go with what he said.

> *What made you feel so strongly about wearing hijab?*

> I really look back and think about it so much it’s… I was so innocent! You know, for 11 years I grew up in an Islamic country and all I was taught was Islamic ways, so I kinda thought that I was betraying my religion…

Mahmood (2001: 212) argues that “agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that result in (progressive) change but also those that aim toward continuity, stasis, and stability.” This is premised upon the Foucauldian notion that a subject’s

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27 Ethnographic studies indicate that this is not an unusual situation in Muslim families in diverse national settings. Gaspard and Khosrokhavar (1995), for example, found that many young French Muslim women encounter similar familial resistance to their decision to adopt hijab, while Göle (1996: 90) writes that even within “traditional” Muslim families in Turkey the decision to veil is sometimes regarded as an “exaggerated” act. In that context it jeopardises a young woman’s chances of attaining tertiary education (due to a ban on headscarves in Turkish universities), and is therefore seen as a step towards social isolation and problems in finding a prospective husband.
capacity for agency can only be understood within the framework of the operations of power in which the subject is located, and, importantly, through which that capacity is enabled. Zhila’s struggle to remain in keeping with Islamic tradition against her father’s wishes certainly lends itself to a reading of agency aimed towards continuity rather than change. Her own articulated understanding of her motivation for her actions also seems to stress the contextual framework in which that agency was exercised (“I was so innocent!… all I was taught was Islamic ways…”). This stands in marked contrast to the context in which she enacts her religiosity today:

*Has living in Australia shaped who you are?*

Zhila: Lots.

*How?*

Zhila: Well, to compare me and my family overseas, I’m more into religion and want to find out more than them, they’re more like, Islam. I would rather sit there and think about Buddhism and Christianity and stuff like that, you know?

Yasmin: You like, compare your religion to other religions –

Zhila: – Yeah, you compare –

Yasmin: – and then you’re like, “Yeah, this is the truth”, you know?

Zhila: Yeah, so you have more strength in your own belief, and they’re just there and they were born into it and that’s it.

Yasmin: It seems to us that they are just following what their parents follow and –

Zhila: – With us it’s that we are discovering different things, and that’s, well… I’m just so proud to be here! The life here is just really amazing compared to over there and the knowledge that I’m getting, I’m so lucky… I’m so proud to be here.

Yasmin: Like you would find it really amazing and really weird, in a way, that you’d find people from, I don’t know, say Afghanistan, who are more religious over here than they are in there own country.

*Why is that?*

Yasmin: Because you come and see for yourself and then you find your way.

Zhila and Yasmin therefore consciously view their Muslim identity as the outcome of individual reflexive choice. As the above comments indicate, this understanding of individual identity is seen as desirable because it facilitates “strength in your own belief.” The context enabling it – living in Australia – likewise becomes a source of pride.
It was not just Zhila’s former “innocent” self that provided contrast to a more desirable Muslim identity based on rational choice rather than tradition. Zhila and Yasmin illustrated the point further by comparing their corporeally enacted religiosity with Zhila’s Iranian cousins:

Zhila: Especially my cousins, they’re from Iran and they just came over from Iran and the way they wear their scarf in Iran is very very different from the way that girls wear it here and when they saw the way how I wear the hijab they wear like, “You are nothing like the Islamic Republic of Iran how they’re wearing the hijab!”

Did they think it was good?

Zhila: Oh yeah, they did –

Yasmin: – Because how they wear it, their hair sticks out.

Zhila: Yeah, there’s hair sticking out here, where we wear this [points to headband]. They have their hair sticking out from every angle! [All laugh] And it’s not an accident, they want to show it. And I don’t see the reason for making yourself beautiful by having that little piece of hair sticking out.

Yasmin: Coz some people even colour their hair and you can see it…

Zhila: And they wear very thin kinds of material so things underneath can show through…

The use of language here is important. Iran is referred to throughout the transcript simply as Iran, yet here its full title is used. In pointing out the perceived faults in the way Iranian girls wear their scarves, Zhila and Yasmin are not merely claiming that they are in a way more Islamic than the young women of the Islamic Republic of Iran. They are also emphasising the fact that their Muslim identity is performed within the context of a non-Islamic nation-state and as such is necessarily the result of rational choice and struggle (in Zhila’s case involving painful clashes with her father and fellow students, but also, as for all hijabi participants, with the daily experience of misrecognition). Other participants were similarly critical of those who are perceived to practice Islam because they were “just born into it” or are “just following what their parents follow.” In the first program session Daliah, a particularly outspoken participant in the Iraqi group, was very vocal in her disapproval of the way Afghani girls wear hijab.\(^{28}\) According to her, it represents a lack of understanding of the “true”

\(^{28}\) Although this was the only time such opinions were expressed in the program sessions, one of the program workers informed me that this is a commonly held perception among observant young Muslims of Iraqi background. She said that it had been one of the factors contributing to the decision to run the program in two separate groups.
meaning of hijab. When another participant pointed out that Afghani and Iraqi traditions are quite different, Daliah was quick to respond that Islam is not about following tradition but about seeking knowledge: “Seriously, if that’s why they do it then I’d rather they didn’t wear it at all!”, she exclaimed in exasperation.

Ethnographic research undertaken in other diasporic contexts similarly emphasises the modern character of young Muslims’ religiosity. Gilliat-Ray (1998) argues that for young British Muslims Muslim identity has little to do with the superstitions or cultural traditions of ethnic origins but is instead based very firmly on rational interpretations of Islamic texts. Similarly, Klinkhammer (2003) describes the religious identity of young German Sunnis as modern and individualistic, attributing this largely to the effects of public secular schooling. Schooling no doubt plays an important role in introducing young Australian Muslims to other cultural and religious influences, particularly through the everyday multiculturalism that is encountered in the playground, as participants mentioned in previous chapters. It is also important to recognise the modern nature of the religious education delivered through the program; this was especially evident in the recurring theme of the need to reject tradition as the basis for religious practice. During the first program session, for example, the program worker spoke at length about usoul, which she defined as the core values of Islam. “Do you learn about these through imitation or do you discover these for yourself?”, she asked participants. After some group discussion, she surmised that the main purpose of the program was “to do the research ourselves.” This served as an introduction to the first of several religious speakers who were to visit the program. Speaking for over an hour, an aspiring lay-preacher (also successful businessman and parent of three of the program participants) presented a Powerpoint slideshow examining what is meant by the term “rationality” and how rational decision making processes are the necessary means to arrive at informed understandings of Islamic texts. He concluded that a dedication to rationality in religious thought is one of the defining features of the Islamic school of ahl-al’bait.29 “What is Allah’s most

29 The work of thirteenth century Shi’ite theologian Nasir al-Din al-Tusi supports this claim. In the ninth century Platonic scholarship became accessible to Islamic scholars through Arabic translations (El-Bizri 2006). A Platonic influence is evident in Tusi’s (1964) treatise on Ethics and in his theory of evolution – developed some 600 years before Darwin – in which he remarks: “the human being is placed on the middle step of the evolutionary stairway. According to his inherent nature, the human is
important gift to us?” he concluded with rhetorical fervour, “Why, rationality of course!”

Rationality was also the central theme of the talk a visiting sheikh delivered to participants in the Afghani group. Beginning with an explanation of Plato’s cave allegory, the softly spoken sheikh moved deftly between classical and modern Western philosophy (references included Jung and Freud) and Islamic texts to explain numerous key moral tenets of Islam. The sheikh’s talk on rationality followed a different talk on women and Islam presented to the all-female Iraqi group, in which he focussed more on prominent female figures in the Qur’an and how Islamic morality relates to everyday domestic life. That talk ended with a similar call for engagement with Islam through rational reflection, the sheikh urging participants to “question your religion!”30 Participants were initially too shy to enter into dialogue with the sheikh in the discussion session following this talk on gender. However, with encouragement from one of the program workers, they did eventually begin to pose questions. For those participants hoping to be accepted into law degrees, how Islam views female employment in the legal professions was of particular concern, given that under Sharia law the roles that women are permitted to adopt in the administration of jurisprudence are limited in comparison to men. The sheikh explained that the Qur’an does not suggest that women are inferior to men but recognises that they are more suited to certain roles than others. Equality of the sexes in Islam, the sheikh argued, concerns the equality of esteem in which God holds men and women, not the psychological sameness of the sexes implied by Western feminism. To illustrate this point he did not refer to the Qur’an or Islamic scholarship of any kind, but the best-selling pop-psychology self-help manual, Men are From Mars, Women are From Venus. The same issue of gender arose in the discussion session following a talk on practicing Islam in a non-Islamic country delivered several weeks later by the same parent who spoke about rationality. When one hijabi participant expressed her frustration that non-Muslim Australians tend to believe that women are viewed as inferior to men in the Qur’an, the speaker sought to reassure her via the metaphor of a

related to the lower beings, and only with the help of his will can he reach the higher development level [my italics]” (Alakbarov 2001).

30 This echoes Kant’s proclamation concerning the essence of modernity: “Sapere Aude! [dare to know] “Have courage to use your own understanding!” – that is the motto of enlightenment.”
business requiring different roles to be economically viable, “just like society needs different roles for men and women for us to live in harmony.”

My purpose here is not to engage with essentialist arguments concerning gender; instead, my concern is the manner in which Islamic gender arrangements are justified in this diasporic context. Some scholars would surely dismiss the above emphasis on rationality, breaking with tradition, equality of the sexes and metaphors of economic utility simply as modern gloss on religious doctrines that do not serve the best interests of women. It may be the case that, at least to some extent, modernity is deployed here as a discursive strategy to render Islam palatable to a generation of young people who, by way of their immersion in a multicultural society, are faced with “no choice but to choose” (Giddens 1991: 81). Whatever relations of power underlie the modern character of the religious instruction delivered through the program, what is most important here is how it can be understood in relation to public debates over multiculturalism. In the Australian context, the religiosity of participants is publicly portrayed as backward, irrational and frightening. All of the young female participants in the Iraqi group, along with a number of participants in the Afghani group are the wearers of the “full-garb” whom other Australians supposedly find confronting. They are the Muslims who believe in and follow Sharia law, despite former Federal Treasurer Peter Costello’s conviction that people who do so do not belong in Australia. They are the minority whose supposedly illiberal practices can no longer be tolerated in the name of multicultural (dubbed “mushy”) acceptance of difference. The stress on rationality within the content of the religious instruction and participant narratives of selfhood, however, paints a very different picture of their subjectivity to that conveyed through dominant representations. Whether Sharia law is really as liberating for women as it is claimed to be becomes a moot point, because the framework in which both the religious educators and participants situate issues of Islamic jurisprudence is undoubtedly modern. Evidence of this can be seen in the clear distinction made between Islam as philosophical theory and Islam as contemporary lived practice. For example, in response to one participant’s question on polygamy, the sheikh outlined how and why polygamy (or polygyny to be more precise) is theoretically acceptable under Sharia law; yet he also explained that the conditions required for its actual practice (that all parties freely consent to the
arrangement and that the husband possess the capacity to treat all his wives fairly) would be virtually impossible to come by in modern social settings.

**Secularisation, Reflexive Modernity and Religiosity**

The conventional view of modernity outlined at the beginning of this chapter raises an important question about the role of religion in modern social arrangements: does the substitution of ecclesiastical authority with reasoned enquiry result in secularisation? Sociology of religion is dominated by debate over this question (see Fenn’s [2001] collected volume). Werblowsky (1976: 20) goes so far as to argue that any sociological treatment of religion is by nature secular because “the parent model, i.e., the Western form, of modernisation has as one of its historical roots the criticism of religion.” While they did not necessarily employ the term “secularism”, numerous classical social theorists certainly viewed modernisation as a secularising process. Although their arguments differed, Comte, Spencer and Durkheim, for instance, all saw the decline of religion as an inevitable stage in social evolution (Beckford 2003: 35). The normative claim that religion ought to disappear is evident in Marx’s (2002: 171) famous proclamation, “religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.”

More explicit secularisation theories dominated the post-war sociological treatment of religion. Berger, for example, predicted that the secularisation of national polities (i.e. the decline of religious authority at a political level brought about by increased separation between church and state) would lead to a “secularisation of consciousness” (1967: 107). The relativisation of religious authority and increasing religious diversity, it was assumed, would prompt people to question religious knowledge. According to Aldridge (2000: 2-3) and Swatos and Christiano (1999), strong secularisation theories such as these tend to rely on a historically dubious notion of a past in which people were more religious31 and a flawed epistemic

31 Swatos and Cristiano claim that at least as far as Christianity in the West is concerned, the technologies required for the realisation of an “age of faith” – mass media and schooling – were exactly those that would enable its decline: “precisely as a serious attempt was made to ‘Christianize’ the entire population, a counter attempt at resistance also emerged. The “Age of Faith,” if it ever existed, did so for at most a few decades of the nineteenth century.”
understanding of religion that sees religious knowledge as fixed. In the past decade or so, in what Davie (2007) describes as a paradigmatic shift in the sociology of religion, the claim that modernisation ultimately leads to secularisation is no longer taken for granted. This shift is particularly evident in Berger’s (1999: 3) criticism of his earlier work on secularisation:

Although the term ‘secularization theory’ refers to works from the 1950s and 1960s, the key idea of the theory can indeed be traced to the Enlightenment. The idea is simple: modernization necessarily leads to a decline of religion, both in society and in the minds of individuals. And it is precisely this idea that turned out to be wrong.

Beckford (2003) observes that within contemporary social theory the secularisation debate now spans a range of views from the hard secularist position described above to the inverse claim that the decline of religion is inconceivable. Between these pole positions the meaning of secularisation is also contested: does the notion imply religious decline or the transformation of its practice?

Whether it is rightly called secularisation or not, modernisation – particularly its rationalising aspects – certainly brings about change in the way religion is practiced. Defining rationalisation as “the methodological pursuit of efficient relations between means and ends”, Beckford (2003: 48) argues that many social scientists “believe that rationalisation corrodes and erodes religious faith by calling into question beliefs and practices that are revered as values in themselves or as part of ways of life that are justified and warranted by sacred tradition.” He claims that this view is flawed because it does not reflect the ways in which religious practice is adaptive to rationalisation. Referring to groups such as Opus Dei that actively seek to influence secular institutions, Beckford argues that “this is not so much a question of resisting the rationalising aspects of secularisation as of co-opting and working with them to establish or maintain the influences of religious values in places where they may be effective” (ibid: 49). While this is a valid point, Beckford’s argument nevertheless does seem to imply that faith and reason are mutually exclusive domains. If we accept MacIntyre’s (1988) proposition that Islam has long had a scholarly tradition of philosophical rationalism, then Islam is well placed to adapt to the rationalising aspects of secularisation because it is potentially rational to begin with. The discourse

32 Not all secularisation theories reify religious concepts. Robertson (1970: 236) envisages secularisation involving, among other things, a move towards “rational religion” consisting of “an inbuilt tendency to search into and justify logically the grounds for religious belief.”
of rationality dominating the program certainly supports this notion. Irrespective of scholarly controversies, the religious beliefs and practices taught through the program were never revered “as values in themselves” or justified on the grounds of tradition; they were consistently constructed as optimal choices made through rational consideration of alternative options.

Acknowledging that religion is adaptive to social surrounds is important when considering religious practices within a diasporic context, especially where debates over group rights are concerned. As Swatos and Christiano (1999: 224) argue, sociologists must take care to recognise the essentially variable nature of religious concepts because “as ideational systems, religions are always in interaction with material culture, social structure, other cultural systems, and individual personalities.” Religion is not simply transplanted unchanged from one national context to another. Iran – the country that many of the Iraqi participants in this study migrated from en route to Australia – provides perhaps the most marked example of this. The Islam that is wielded as a technology of governance by a theocratic state still largely defining itself in opposition to US political interference of a generation ago is specific to that context. Although Iran featured as an important element in the religiosities of participants who had lived there, their Islamic identities had clearly undergone change in Australia. Zhila’s strengthened sense of religious conviction brought about by her increased knowledge of other views is an example of such a transformation. At an institutional level, religious elites must adapt to such change or risk appearing to young people with a hybrid sense of belonging as anachronistic hangovers of a life left behind. Political elites need to take heed of the local variants of religious practice that are the result of such adaptation. Those calling for Australian Muslims who follow Sharia to leave the country exhibit little understanding of what Sharia might mean in a diasporic context.

To this point I have concentrated on how participants experience their religiosities. The question that secularisation theories raise is why religion remains attractive to young people. I argue that the reflexive modernity thesis, as theorised by both Beck and Giddens, provides a useful framework for understanding the enduring appeal of religion in this context. According to Beck (1992, 1999, 2002), in the present era of late or high modernity societies are increasingly structured around the management of risks, many of which are the by-products of the modernisation processes that are in
turn called upon to manage them, given rise to the term “reflexive modernity”. Negotiating the types of spatially, temporally and socially unbounded risks Beck describes is said to engender reflexivity in individual identity because such risks “form an inevitable part of our horizon of day-to-day life” (Giddens 1991: 4). Modern subjective identity can be described as reflexive because identity is no longer conferred upon members of society according to comparatively rigid traditional social structures. Instead, in what Taylor (1992: 29) terms the “massive subjective turn of modern culture”, individuals must develop their own narratives of selfhood based upon reflexive choice. In late modernity, reflexivity is associated with feelings of doubt and uncertainty because the institutions of modernity – science and the welfare state, for example – have proved incapable of ameliorating anxieties associated with increasingly globalised risks (war, poverty, environmental disasters, terminal illnesses such as HIV/AIDS, etc.) and have in many instances created new ones. According to Giddens (1991: 195), one of the implications of such doubt and uncertainty in the absence of confidence in modern institutions is a resurgence in religious belief.

Bauman (1997: 179), however, suggests that religion is becoming redundant in a “postmodern” world as uncertainty, he claims, calls more for “identity-experts” than preachers33. Yet his observations concerning the anxiety associated with modern subjectivity nevertheless raise the spectre of an existential void that might be filled by religion:

It is not so much the co-presence of many kinds [of identity] that is the source of confusion and anxiety, but their fluidity, the notorious difficulty in pinpointing then and defining – all this harking back to the central and most painful of anxieties: one that is related to the instability of one’s own identity and the absence of lasting, trustworthy and reliable reference points which would help to render the identity more stable and secure. (ibid. 123)

If this is indeed the case, why shouldn’t religion provide this stability? A more accurate picture, at least in relation to the present study, is one of religious elites adapting to this uncertainty. As the above vignette of the sheikh with a penchant for pop-psychology illustrates, perhaps it is more likely that preachers are increasingly called upon to double as identity-experts rather than be removed from spiritual life altogether.

33 Bauman’s claims about the increasing demand for identity experts (psychologists, counsellors, etc.) and a concomitant decline in religion echo Philip Rieff’s (1966) earlier arguments about the rise of “psychological man”.
Reflecting on Bauman’s conviction that the modern individual seeks liberation from “constantly having to choose or decide”, Beck argues that “where freedom becomes a cage, many choose the freedom of a cage (new or old religious movements, fundamentalism, drugs or violence)” (2002: 163). This seemingly paradoxical idea of freedom in restriction was a recurrent theme throughout participants’ narratives. It was particularly evident in the high level of personal investment participants tended to have in boundaries and limitations on their behaviour, in terms of genuine respect for both rules and guidelines established by parents as well as more abstract religious norms. As noted in previous chapters, respect for parents was frequently referred to as being a central element of Muslim identity. The importance of restrictions set by parents was illustrated when Ali and his older brother were left at home alone for two weeks while their parents were making the hajj pilgrimage. The trip was a topic of excited discussion among some of the male participants within Ali’s friendship group who were clearly looking forward to hanging out at Ali’s house while his parents were away. When Ali was asked about the experience in one of the workshop sessions following his parents’ return, he simply shrugged and said, “too much freedom isn’t a good thing.” This comment was met with giggles from a number of other participants and program workers, who assumed he was joking. He went on to qualify his remark, saying that without the structure of familial rules he lost motivation and quickly became bored.

One participant, Samira, played down the limitations associated with her religious identity through a relativising comparison with her non-Muslim friends:

I have some Aussie friends whose parents are quite strict, like they don’t let them go out as much and stuff, even though they’re full Aussie and they’re not even religious. They just… they have strict family rules…

Other participants articulated a strong commitment to rules and restrictions, seeing them as a source of support in many situations:

Meena: People might think that being Muslim is going to restrict us but actually it’s good that there are limitations and boundaries, like you wouldn’t want… Now you know how far to go, where to stop and especially you have things like planned out for you, you gotta do this and you gotta do that and you just have a plan for your life. […] Coz like we know that we’re not gonna, you know, go out all night and party hard or stuff like that but like there are boundaries but it’s not restricting us from doing anything, it’s just a boundary that’s there and we respect it. But it’s not going to stop us from having fun or anything.

Pareesa: Going out and stuff we have limitations like we can’t do things that Aussie people can because it’s safer not to do it so…
Meena: Like drinking and stuff. Coz we can’t do it they probably think we can’t have fun but we do have fun like girls parties.

Yeah, I’ve seen you have fun!

Meena: [laughs] Yeah, we don’t need to lose control of our bodies to have fun. That’s what alcohol does to you.

Having “a plan for your life” and something to refer to in times of uncertainty was frequently referred to by both participants and program workers as one of the greatest benefits of adhering to an Islamic way of life, rivalled perhaps only by the assurance of security in the afterlife.

**Modern Islamic Identities and the Nonrational**

In the preceding sections of this chapter I have sought to challenge a crude yet widely accepted Eurocentric understanding of modernity that positions Islam and Muslim identities as retrogressive and irrational. The first part of the analysis highlighted a normalised notion of Islamic subjectivity – evident in both participants’ narratives and the content of the program’s religious instruction – that is consciously constructed as rational and therefore modern. The second part then illustrated how this form of subjecthood could be conceived of as a rational response to the uncertainties of late modern life. While I feel that this argument sufficiently fulfils my aim of subverting Orientalist representations of Muslims as unenlightened Others, it may give the misleading impression that I am suggesting that because Islamic subjectivity is constructed as rational in this context, the nonrational aspects of religiosity – faith, emotions, corporeal experience, and so on – are not relevant to my interpretation of participants’ lifeworlds. This is certainly not the case; if it were I would be guilty of invoking a Cartesian ontology that privileges reflexive rationality in the interpretation of what is essentially enacted through the body. In this section I instead look beyond the way in which the Islamic subject was discursively constructed by participants and program workers. My aim here is to interpret the significance of everyday elements of participants’ religiosity that may be rational in that they make sense, but are not necessarily enacted on the basis of rational reflection.

In bringing these everyday corporeal aspects of religious practice into my sphere of analysis I am seeking to do more than represent the way in which participants make sense of their worlds. My aim is to interpret the meaning of participants’ beliefs and
cultural practices as they relate to theoretical debates over multiculturalism. As was the case in earlier chapters where I examined the tensions underlying participants’ self-proclaimed “multicultural identities,” this entails penetrating beyond the meanings constructed by participants themselves. In this respect my study is very much aligned with the so-called interpretive turn in anthropology and cultural sociology inspired by Clifford Geertz’s (1973) stated commitment to “thick description” – the type of description that attempts to push for deeper knowledge than what is immediately apparent to either participant or researcher in an ethnographic situation. It also reflects the aims of the so-called strong program in cultural sociology as it has been recently articulated in Reed’s contribution to a themed issue of *Cultural Sociology* (2008 vol. 2, no. 2) dedicated to Geertz’s influence on strong program scholars. Reed (2008: 188) puts forward the idea of “maximal interpretation”, that is a “type of interpretive manoeuvre, aimed at social life, which is theoretically driven and epistemologically risky, and which claims to know more about human research subjects than they know about themselves.” It is a position that aims to bypass recent debate in that field over whether scholars should be striving to interpret cultural meaning or provide sociological explanation by seeing the two as inherently linked, in that “all explanations in the social sciences (including those that explicitly exclude ‘culture’) involve, at some level, the interpretation of meaning” (ibid).

Returning to the task at hand in this section, I want to first make a few remarks on my use of the term “nonrational”. To reject the ontological separation of the mind and body is to call into question simple binary distinctions made between what is rational and what is not in the ethnographic analysis of people’s actions, beliefs and/or self-attributes. In this respect it is possible to see an epistemological claim in Virginia Woolf’s remark that “One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well” (1977: 19). Yet it is not only the material needs and attributes of the body that have a bearing on rational judgement. The rhetoric that advocated the forcible removal of French students’ headscarves on the tautological grounds that the scarf is simultaneously a sign of oppression and proselytism – and the lack of engagement with young Muslim women that went along with it – seemed to be motivated much more by affect than rational consideration of facts. Likewise, the appeal of polemical attacks on religious belief (Dawkins 2006, Hitchens 2007, Onfray 2007) that have recently captured a wide readership in the West relies in large part on tapping into
readers’ feelings about religion – particularly in the wake of September 11. Little else could explain how the positivist charge of the most measured of these arguments (Dawkins’ [2006] *The God Delusion*) – that religious beliefs are irrational simply because they do not hold up under scientific analysis – could be considered a reasonable claim.

All this is to say that in making a distinction between the rational and nonrational here I am not arguing that the two can plausibly be sectioned off into mutually exclusive categories with epistemic certainty. My intention in making the distinction is to draw attention to the fact that the emphasis here is on those aspects of participant religiosity that are experienced at an almost visceral level. What is more, there is no consensus within sociology on how the rational and nonrational are defined. However, as Arditi (1996: 94) points out, most sociologists tend to see rationality and nonrationality as “attributes of action, not of persons.” Outlining, by means of example, the Cartesian logic underpinning Weber’s notion of “affectual action”, Arditi argues in favour of a reinstatement of Simmel’s conceptualisation of the nonrational:

We must pay attention to such nonrationality-bearing elements of our inner lives as emotions, faith or our ability to appreciate beauty. None of these should be considered simple epiphenomena of the intellect. Rationality and nonrationality, then, should be seen not only as attributes of action, but, first, as attributes of the *person*. To Simmel, action is not rational or nonrational because of some objective criterion of rationality, of some principle derived from the internal logic of action itself; but, rather, because of the particular elements of a person’s inner life – his or her intellect, emotions, faith, or aesthetic sensibility – that come to orient practice. According to Simmel, the nonrational is a primary, essential element of “life”, an integral aspect of our humanity. Its gradual eclipse in the expanses of a modern, highly rationalised world implies, then, an unquestionable impoverishment of being (ibid: 94-95).

Nonrationality therefore plays a very similar role in Simmell’s work to the notion of the creative self in Marx’s theory of alienation. In everyday terms, the notion of nonrationality could also be referred to by the psychobiological concept of “right brain” thinking, a metaphorical cognitive style that is often considered to be marginalised due to the modern preoccupation with rationality. In both theoretical and
popular understandings, therefore, reclaiming the nonrational through religious practice becomes a means of counteracting the alienating aspects of modernity.\textsuperscript{34}

The nonrational, as conceived of here, perhaps does not occupy such a prominent discursive role in Shi’a Islam as other Islamic traditions, most notably Sufism. The extent to which certain nonrational expressions of religiosity were regarded with uneasiness in the program became evident when another part of the venue used for the morning workshop became host to a weekly meeting of evangelical Christians. Although the building was large and the Christians used a room on a different floor, exuberant singing was often perceivable during workshop sessions. During a break between sessions one week, a group of women emerged from the Christian meeting into a large foyer area where I was chatting casually with several participants. Flushed with excitement, the Christian women were engrossed in a discussion about how uplifting their meeting had been. As they made their way outside, one member of the group exclaimed loudly to her companions, “I just love Jesus so much!” Despite her Australian accent, this young woman’s intonation and blithely loud manner seemed to me so exaggeratedly American that I found it difficult not to giggle. The rest of our small group appeared to feel the same way, for the conversation stopped and several participants blushed and appeared suddenly preoccupied with the tea and snacks they were holding. One of the program workers, seeing the women leave, immediately came over and said in a mock southern US drawl, “Hallelujah!” The group, including the program worker, erupted into laughter. Correcting herself, she gently reminded participants that it is wrong to make fun of Christian beliefs. “Jesus is, after all, our prophet too,” she said soberly. This sparked a group discussion that carried over into the reconvened session. All agreed that it wasn’t Christianity they found humorous, but gushing proclamations of love for its key spiritual figure. “You just don’t need to embarrass yourself like that,” said one participant. The program worker tacitly supported this remark, reminding participants of Islam’s requirement that its adherents behave modestly (although this could also be interpreted as a subtle rebuke – aimed not only at participants but also herself – for giggling in the first place).

\textsuperscript{34} This was Marx’s basis for criticising religion; his vehement condemnation was based not so much on atheism, but his conviction that seeking solace in religion constitutes an avoidance of the underlying cause of alienation: the capitalist mode of production.
This perception that the Christian woman’s conduct was immodest was undoubtedly the most immediate reason participants and program workers (myself included) found it amusing. However, in the ensuing discussion, the topic of rationality re-emerged. The Christian woman’s self-declared love for Jesus was perceived to be a manifestation of blind faith, as distinct from faith arrived at through rational understanding. In that sense the woman’s highly emotional religiosity (at least as it appeared to us as outside observers) served as an external counterpoint to the rational Islam advocated by the program’s religious educators, augmenting previously articulated ideas about Muslims who “have gotten it wrong” by unquestioningly following traditions.35

Despite this collective aversion to what were perceived to be nonrational expressions of religiosity, the nonrational did have a place in the program and most certainly formed an important component of participants’ sense of religious self. This was especially noticeable during discussions about hajj. At the beginning of the program, the hajj pilgrimage was the topic of several talks delivered by one of the program workers. In addition to explaining each of the rituals and their significance to participants, the program worker recounted the story of Hajar. Her version of the story went as follows: Hajar, an Ethiopian slave, was given to the Prophet Ibrahim by his wife Sara, who was unable to bear children. When Hajar gave birth to a son, Ismail, by Ibrahim, Sara was overcome with grief. Acting upon Allah’s command, Ibrahim travelled with Hajar and her infant son from Palestine to the then desert region of Mecca, where he abandoned her. When the provisions he had left her with ran out, Hajar ran back and forth between the hills of Safa and Marwa in a desperate search for water, as her baby lay dying. Finally, Hajar’s enduring faith in Allah in spite of her dire situation was rewarded. Upon her return from her seventh trip she found that a spring of fresh water had appeared at the feet of Ismail, saving them both. Over time the spring grew to become the sacred Zamzam well. Many years later Ibrahim

35 This is not to say that nonrational religious practices are necessarily irrational. As Wright and Rawls (2005) found through their micro-sociological analysis of evangelical Christian churches in the US, even practices such as speaking in tongues, which practitioners see as an abandonment of the rational self to God, are enacted within the boundaries of discernible norms particular to local congregations. They therefore argue that sociological studies of religious experience must move away from focussing on systems of belief in favour of emphasising interactional embodied practice. I wholeheartedly agree with this.
returned and after Hajar’s death, he and Ismail built a temple on the site of her grave, as directed by Allah.

This story served several purposes in relation to educating participants about hajj. Firstly, it explained how Mecca became the site for religious pilgrimage (even well before the time of Mohammed), and the important place Hajar’s plight occupies within Islamic belief. According to the program worker, the veneration of Hajar provides evidence of the esteem in which Islam holds women, particularly mothers. It is, she explained, symbolic of the Islamic notion of universal equality, for Hajar was a black slave and her grave lies within the Sacred Mosque beside the kaaba, the black cubic building that all Muslims must pray towards. Hajj pilgrims must not pass between the kaaba and Hajar’s grave. Thus in walking seven times around the kaaba, pilgrims are also paying their respects to the body of a poor black female slave – the only human remains to be buried not only within a mosque, but the most important mosque in the world. Secondly, from the individual’s perspective, Hajar’s story illustrates the importance of a nonrational personal attribute: faith. For it was faith in Allah that led Ibrahim to act against his own judgement and abandon Hajar to what seemed a hopeless situation, and faith that allowed Hajar to accept her plight without complaint and carry on when it seemed that she and her child were doomed. While following Islam through tradition was discouraged within the program, the nonrational notion of faith was certainly valued.

When this same program worker undertook the pilgrimage herself shortly afterwards, her account of the experience centred on the nonrational. These narratives of personal spiritual fulfilment focussed primarily on the body and embodied practices. She described her wonder at the atmosphere of hajj: the exhilarating experience of actually being – in an embodied sense – part of the umma, among Muslims from all social backgrounds coming from all parts of the globe united by a common spiritual purpose. She talked at length about not only the prescribed physical rituals of making the circuits around the kaaba, standing in contemplation on Mt Arafat, “stoning the devil” and sacrificing an animal, but also taking part in the vast communal meals and sharing the sleeping quarters that the accommodation of such

36 Completing the hajj pilgrimage at least once is the fifth pillar of Islam. One of its rituals – Sa’i – involves replicating Hajar’s search for water between the two hills and drinking from the Zamzam well.
large numbers of worshippers necessitates. She also described the aesthetic resonance of the visual uniformity of pilgrims’ bodies: masses of people dressed identically in simple white robes simultaneously performing the same actions. Participants found these descriptions of what actually being at hajj was like fascinating, evident in their reverent silence during the program worker’s descriptions (a background buzz of chatter was normally perceptible during workshop sessions, especially among members of the Afghani group), and the excited questions that followed. On the written survey that was distributed shortly prior to this, the majority of participants listed hajj as one of the Islamic topics they were most keen to learn about. The level of interest was particularly high among Afghani participants. This was perhaps because most of these participants rarely had the opportunity to experience large religious gatherings, there being no Persian-speaking Shi’a mosque in the local area.

Later in the program, when daylight savings time ceased, it began to get dark before workshop sessions were over. Before session times were changed to compensate, an evening prayer was held at the end of one of the sessions. Parents who had already arrived early to collect their children were able to join in, and the group consequently became quite large. This was the first time that I had participated in a group prayer, and although I quite often felt emotionally connected to the surah narratives recounted in workshop sessions, it was the first time that I was able to personally experience the uplifting feeling associated with participation in an embodied religious ritual. It was, for me, a very moving experience that the written word – particularly when constrained by the generic norms of academic writing (!) – is not particularly conducive to articulating.

In illustrating some of these embodied practices described and enacted in workshop sessions I have sought to demonstrate that the discourse of rationality dominating the program did not preclude the existence of nonrational elements of religiosity. It did, however, affect their articulation. This was particularly the case concerning hijab. In one session the program worker asked each of the Iraqi participants in turn why she wears hijab. Afterwards, on the way to the following session, she expressed her concern to me over a response that was repeated by several

37 The program worker who spoke about Hajar, for example, was a particularly gifted storyteller. Although a physically small woman, her naturally dramatic narrative style – including grand bodily gestures and exaggerated facial expressions – brought this inspiring story to life.
participants in slightly different versions: that a Muslim woman’s beauty is like a precious jewel that must be protected by the scarf from all who covet it. “Honestly, where on earth are they getting this stuff?” she asked. Most of the responses to her question, however, resembled those articulated in the interviews I conducted. For Haifa, wearing the scarf constitutes a means of overcoming the sexual objectification associated with an overtly feminine gendered appearance:

Haifa: Okay. I’ll give you an example. I don’t want to offend anybody or anything, but if you see two people in the street, one an attractive, beautiful woman with a mini-skirt and tight top and high heels and make-up. Even girls would be looking at her –

Amira: [giggles]

Haifa: Oh not like that! Just like, “How pretty is she?” And another Muslim girl, with the wide loose clothing and hijab. If there’s a young guy, 21 year-old, who would he stare at? The Muslim hijabi lady or the attractive girl? It’s obvious. And I’ve never heard of a Muslim woman getting raped. Never, ever. Have you heard of that?

Amira: Not in Australia.

Haifa: And also, the meaning of hijab in Islam is that you look at a woman as a human being, not as an object. She’s not an object, like you can’t use her. If they want to sell something quicker they’ll put a woman’s photo next to it, like even a pack of cigarettes or a magazine with the half naked… they’ll put that and they’ll run, it will sell really fast. So it’s like you’re selling yourself, you know? And in like advertisements or anything, people will get more of it coz it’s got a woman next to it. She’s attractive – they wouldn’t put a man. So this is why Islam made the hijab for a woman, so people can look at you as a human. They’ll judge me as a human, just the same as a man.

Amira said she sees hijab as a corporeal reminder of the behavioural boundaries her Muslim identity engenders:

Say, because when you’re a teenager, and you have your hormones change and all that – sometimes it’s hard talking about sexuality – but sometimes you just need someone to be with you, you just need someone to love you. And that in Islam it has to be done in the proper way, by getting married. So it protects us, like if I want to go and start a relationship outside of Islam, my hijab reminds me – no, don’t do this, this is not the right way. So, like, I see it as protecting me as well. And also at the same time it protects the family. Coz I’m married, and it’s so benefiting my family – me and my husband. I’m wearing hijab and my husband, he doesn’t go and look at other Muslim women because they’re wearing the hijab you can’t see anything of their bodies so they won’t be attractive to him. And at the same time, I won’t be attracted to any man. I won’t be able to dishonour my husband and go with anybody else. It won’t be happening. That’s the hijab that’s making families stay stable.

Like Haifa and Amira, most participants’ narratives tended to focus on the pragmatic benefits associated with wearing the scarf rather than the role it plays in their construction of self in nonrational terms. In this context, Samira’s assertion that hijab constitutes an outward display of faith and modesty, and her description of her
family’s intensely emotional reaction to her aunt’s adoption of the scarf, were somewhat anomalous:

It was like, “What the hell? Are you joking?”, coz [my cousins] were sleeping over at our house and she just came over and said, “Yeah, I’ve decided to wear it.” It was like, “What?! What are you talking about?” and then we were like, “Oh my god!” and we were really proud and my mum started crying. And we were like, “Oh my god, well done!”

Returning to the issue of the inherent problem in making a binary distinction between the rational and nonrational, I certainly do not mean to infer that Amira and Haifa actually think about their hijabi identity in rational terms while Samira’s understanding of hijab is nonrational. Participants undoubtedly have multiple understandings of and motivations for wearing the hijab. What I am interested in here is what comes to be privileged in the articulated self-representations of hijabi identities and why. Why does the emphasis consistently tend to be on the utility of the scarf as a means for achieving such desired ends as respect from men and a stable family life?

As pointed out in the previous chapter, there was certainly a discourse of piety and feminine modesty evident in the female-only discussions devoted to how and why one should wear hijab. However, this tended to be played down when comments about hijab were directed at audiences existing outside the immediate group environment. In one of the workshop activities participants were provided with A2 sheets of questions that someone with scant knowledge of Islam might ask about their religious identity. Divided into pairs, participants were asked to use the space below the question to brainstorm how they could best answer it, then share their answer with the rest of the group. Zhila and Yasmin’s question read, “why do you wear hijab?” After some discussion between themselves, Zhila wrote, “it is a religious duty”, only to almost immediately cross it out. When the group reconvened, while some participants had filled their pages with notes, Zhila and Yasmin were still discussing their question. This stands in marked contrast to an earlier session when Zhila, usually somewhat shy when speaking publicly, confidently answered the very same question. “It shows my closeness with God 24/7”, she said proudly. In that context, however, the question did not carry the rhetorical weight of an imagined non-Muslim audience and the issue of representation that implies. This fraught relationship between hijabi identity and public representation is perhaps most perceptible in Nadia’s immediate linking of a question about hijab with how it is perceived by others:
What does it mean to you, wearing hijab?

Oh a lot of people ask me that. I don’t really know what to tell you... To me it doesn’t really mean anything as in it sets me apart, but like, I know the reason behind it why I wear it, but it doesn’t change me as a person. I’m still the same.

The power of imagined audiences no doubt affected the interviews I conducted, with participants playing down what could be termed nonrational aspects of hijabi identity (faith, modesty etc. that became evident to me through participant observation) for the same reason that Zhila and Yasmin found speaking about hijab in the program activity difficult. Even though I was recognised as a member of the organisation by participants, wore hijab myself during most of the interviews and participated in learning about Islam alongside them, they were nevertheless well aware that I was conducting a research project, the results of which would be disseminated to non-Muslim audiences.

Privileging notions of rationality in the articulation of religious identities is obviously a useful strategy for participants to adopt when negotiating often hostile public perceptions of those identities. From an analytical point of view, this strategy further demonstrates the dialogical way in which subjectivity is constructed and articulated, and the impossibility of disembedding it from discourse. This becomes particularly important when considering political debates played out on the hijabi body. Mahmood (2001) argues that feminist scholars writing about Islamic veiling in Egypt tend to highlight functionalist reasons for adopting hijab (avoiding sexual harassment etc.), while often neglecting the discourse of modesty and piety that she says frames most young Egyptian women’s articulation of their hijabi identity.

Instead what is often made to stand in for “real motivations” are those authorised by the analyst’s categories (such as social protest, economic necessity, anomic, utilitarian strategy), while terms like morality, divinity, and virtue are accorded the status of the phantom imaginings of the hegemonised.” (ibid: 209)

Mahmood believes that liberal feminism provides an awkward theoretical framework for analysing the Egyptian female mosque movement because of its intertwined analytical/political intent. Within feminist scholarship, she writes, “no analytical undertaking is considered enough in and of itself unless it takes a position vis-à-vis the subordination of women.” According to Mahmood, the liberal notion of autonomous action underpinning that scholarship is assumed to exist as a universally shared understanding of the world that ultimately frames women’s decisions to wear hijab.
In the secular diasporic context, where public debate over veiling is structured around the same assumptions (most often appearing in a highly reductionist, aggressive form), it is tempting to limit a study such as this to those terms, highlighting the modern, rational way in which Muslim identity was enacted within the Islamic association. That outside the confines of the association, and in certain situations even within it, hijabi identity was spoken of in rational/functionalist terms certainly facilitates such a straightforward feminist analysis. However, to do so would gloss over the more complex picture of participant religiosity that became apparent when a non-Cartesian, embodied notion of self was brought to the analytical foreground. The most valuable contribution this ethnographic study can make to those public debates over hijabi identity that have recently become so central to the question of how cultural diversity is managed in the West is that the terms of such debates are fundamentally flawed. This does not constitute tacit support for the subordination of women within religious movements or a refusal to engage with the issues at stake, as is often the charge levelled against those who make this claim. My main contention is that a Eurocentric understanding of modernity and its concomitant conceptualisation of personhood that frames questions of multiculturalism are of limited use when attempting to understand such questions from a micro-sociological point of view.

**Modernity and Cultural Diversity: Alternative Modernities and Hybridity**

Today the very notion of modernity itself need no longer be equated with late Western civilisation. A number of theorists have recently argued that there is no singular form of (Western) modernity, but “multiple modernities” (Taylor 1999, Kaya 2004a, Kaya 2004b, Lee 2006). This approach hinges on an appreciation of the role local cultures play in modernisation processes. According to Taylor (2001), acultural and ahistorical theories of modernity see modernisation as a standardised, culturally neutral process affecting all societies in much the same way, producing the same social outcomes, that is societies resembling the West. A culturally and historically informed theory of modernisation, on the other hand, recognises that traditional

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38 This is, as Kaya (2004: 36) points out, the epistemic approach to modernity evident in Francis Fukuyama’s famous “end of history” thesis, in which he argues that Western liberalism represents the final stage in human ideological evolution.
societies are different to begin with and, once modernised, will bear the marks of these differences. According to Lee (2006: 364):

Multiple modernities are in effect arenas of symbolic differences in which one type of modernity is set off from another in terms of the cultural content organized around the meaning of identity. Thus, the Confucianized modernity of East Asia is said to represent a set of symbolic values rooted in East Asian culture that allegedly reinforce the ethics necessary for the construction of a modern society.

East Asian Confucianism is, as Lee points out, to a large extent at odds with the individualism of Western modernity. The same is often said of Islam. Two recent studies of the modernisation of Turkey (Kaya 2004a) and Iran (Kamali 2007), both of which explicitly refer to multiple modernities, dispel the persistent myth that Islamic modernities occupy some sort of transitional position on a teleological path towards Western-style modernity.

The literature on the theorisation of multiple modernities and the empirical studies mentioned above indicate that the social formations under consideration here are nation states. Lee (2004: 365) argues that multiple modernities are in fact “potentially nationalistic because it is impossible to speak of the emergence of one kind of modernity without referring to its national identity”, therefore, by “attempting to divest modernity of Western exclusiveness, the postcolonial voices of multiple modernities are likely to end up promoting different forms of nationalism to address the meaning of new cultural foundations.” Yet in speaking of alternatives to Western modernity, Schmidt (2006: 80) suggests that the theory could be interpreted as cohering around the civilisational cultures typologised by Huntington (1996). His relevant question, “how many modernities are there?” gives rise to criticism of the theory for failing to elaborate on the extent to which the cultural characteristics of any given social configuration must differ from the Western model in order to be considered alternative. Following his line of argument, the very existence of a “Western” modernity (as opposed to any other sort) becomes less certain. If a Turkish or Iranian modernity is conceivable, is it therefore also possible to speak of, say a French modernity as distinct from an Italian, US or Icelandic modernity? Further questions arise if the social formation is sub-national, and not necessarily territorially defined. Is modernity experienced the same way by different cultural groups existing within the same national society, or between different members of the same group? The delineation of cultural boundaries therefore poses much the same difficulties for the theorisation of multiple modernities as it does multiculturalism and hybridity. This
is not to say that the notion of multiple modernities should be disregarded. As Chakrabarty (2000: 43) argues, the fact remains that within contemporary “narratives of modernity” a “certain ‘Europe’” is constructed as “the primary habitus of the modern.” In attempting to provide something more empirically useful than a deconstructionist critique of Western cultural hegemony in the theorisation of modernity, the simple claim at the centre of the theory – that there are other ways of being modern – is extremely valuable.

While the national focus of theories of alternative modernities is best suited to macro-sociological analysis, this research project can be read as an attempt to map out just what an “alternative” way of being modern looks like at the individual level. For example, the hybrid belongings that I looked at in Chapter Four and Chapter Five are the product of late modernity. I do not intend this to mean that they are unique to it, but rather the increased global interconnectedness – brought about by technological advances in communication and transportation – that is characteristic of the late modern period allows them to flourish. To conclude this trajectory I now turn my attention to the ways in which modern telecommunication technologies interact with participant identities.

Continuing the thematic thread of mobile phone use begun in Chapter Three, Ibrahim and Ali explain why their phones and computers featured prominently in the photographs they created:

Ibrahim: It was basically what our lives are about, pretty much hobbies and stuff. Like, we’re always spending time with each other and are comparing our phones and stuff.

Ali: Yeah, just things that we use everyday like the computer, the phone…

As mentioned earlier, phones were important markers of identity for participants. “Comparing phones” is not only a matter of comparing makes and models, but also the creative and often distinctly Islamic ways in which individuals customise them, as described in Chapter Three. While computers, as physical objects, were not inscribed with quite the same meaning, the proliferation of them among participant photographs was most likely due to the key role they play in socialising. As Ibrahim said, members of his friendship group were in daily contact with each other over the internet. “Messaging” – that is sending real-time messages to friends and acquaintances through programs such as MSN Messenger – was a popular after-school activity for
both male and female participants. Messaging is often carried out while using the computer for other activities such as gaming and homework. Here Samira describes her daily messaging routine:

I come home at three-thirty and I might not start my homework ‘til four. Then I work until six, stop, have dinner then I go on the computer a bit, do this, do that, then I start again. When I go on the computer I message a bit, then do work, then message a bit… I get a bit distracted sometimes! I tend to do everything that needs to be done in writing first and then I go on the computer. So then I can enjoy myself and do work… [Samira]

Participants’ internet usage appears consistent with that of other young Australians. Research carried out across several national contexts indicates that 85% of Australians aged 14-17 use email on a daily basis, while 64% use instant messaging services every day. This puts the internet use of Australians only marginally behind young Britons, the most prolific users of internet in that age group (Yahoo/OMD 2005).

![Figure 31. Some of the many images of computers among participants’ portraits.](image)

This level of internet use meant that email quickly became the preferred method of communication between program sessions. Small writing tasks that were set during the sessions were required to be completed on the computer and emailed to the relevant program worker. Those participants who chose to use their own digital cameras for the portrait exercise also frequently emailed me their photographic work. Each week the project manager sent a group email to all participants containing
information about various housekeeping issues and what they might need to prepare for the coming session. Several participants were prolific group emailers, and added the list of association contacts from the weekly program email to their own. These participant-created group emails served mostly to convey information about protests (particularly against the occupation of Iraq), forward links to Islamic-themed websites and circulate petitions (one, for example, called for recipients to write to their local MP to support a popular local sheikh’s residency application). Links were often provided to information posted to Muslimvillage.net, a popular Australian-based Islamic internet forum that was also occasionally cited as a source of information in workshop sessions (in one case during a discussion about whether an Islamic community television program would be returning to air).

In addition to providing a hub for information about current issues and events, many Islamic forum threads are of a light-hearted, social nature. Whether or not participants took part in these discussions, it is likely that they would be familiar with them through their use of such sites. Assuming that the gender of an avatar matches that of its creator at least some of the time, these public forum threads are mixed-gender spaces. Presided-over by moderators who actively engage in discussions and delete comments deemed offensive, it seems that the gender segregation that applies to offline social spaces for young Muslims is relaxed in the virtual world. This is evident in the breezy way two contributors discuss a case of mistaken gender identity:

reemziez: oh lol.. for some reason this whole time i thought u were a brother sorry!! [accompanied by a blushing emoticon].

Gaybriel: hehe- yeah I know everyone thinks that! I need to put up a feminine avatar I think...

(http://forums.muslimvillage.net/index.php?showtopic=37606)

Participants were also increasingly signing up to the social networking site Myspace. Young Muslims had a strong presence on Myspace throughout the period that the program ran. The culturally eclectic and often irreverently humorous content of participant Myspace profiles is similar to that of young Muslims throughout the world. Typing the word “muslimah” into the site’s search function, for example, the first page I come upon belongs to a 20 year-old Swedish female. Beneath her profile

39 Muslimvillage.net does have a “sisters only” section that female users must first register for in order to contribute.
picture (a landscape of trees) an embedded sound file plays a *nasheed*, an Islamic-themed song usually sung *a capella*. To the right of this is a photograph of Mecca during hajj, accompanied by a Malcolm X quote: “The future belongs to those who prepare for it today.” Under musical interests she lists Swedish and French rap, nasheed and classical songs, while under films she has embedded Youtube clips from the phenomenally popular “Baba Ali”, a brash young American Muslim convert who uses comedy to deliver religious messages to a youth audience. Beneath these she has posted a poem entitled ‘Hijab’:

You look at me and call me oppressed,
Simply because of the way I’m dressed,
You know me not for what is inside,
You judge the clothing I wear with pride,
My body is not for your eyes to hold,
You must speak to my mind, not my feminine mould,
I’m an individual. I’m no man’s slave,
It’s Allah’s pleasure that I only crave,
I have a voice so I will be heard,
For in my heart I carry His word,
"O ye women, wrap close your cloak,
So you won’t be bothered by ignorant folk.”
Man doesn’t tell me to dress this way,
It’s law from God that I obey,
Oppressed is something I’m truly not,
For liberation is what I’ve got,
It was given to me many years ago,
With the right to prosper, the right to grow,
I can climb mountains or cross the seas,
Expand my mind in all degrees,
For God Himself gave us liberty,
When He sent Islam to you and me!

Attributed to Anonymous, this poem is popular within user-generated web content, adorning blogs and social networking profiles in a variety of English and non-English settings (I also found it on an Arabic social networking site profile and a Bahasa Indonesia blog). Although participant involvement in the user-generated medium of so-called web 2.0 was in its early stages during the fieldwork element of this study, the profiles of young Muslims belonging to virtual social networks reflect the often culturally hybrid nature of their identities.

The performance of identity in online worlds is a rapidly expanding area of social research that cannot be dealt with in sufficient depth here; this study is, after all, concerned primarily with embodied subjectivity. Yet even this cursory glimpse of the online lives of participants and their cyber peers is of significance here in regards to the consideration of Islamic youth identities in a much broader sense. The culturally
hybrid nature of these online representations of self is consistent with the eclecticism
of the religious resources circulating amongst young English speaking Muslims
throughout the world (Roy 2004: 169-170). Roy (ibid: 183) argues that young
Muslims' online profiles are emblematic of the individualism that characterises
Islamic practice in Western diasporic settings. He writes that

there is definitely a process of individualisation of faith and behaviour among
Muslims, specifically those living in the West. There is a stress on the self, a quest
for personal realisation and an individual reconstruction of attitudes towards religion.
Faith is more important than dogma. In short, religiosity is more important than
religion. (ibid: 181)

My study certainly supports this claim. In a secular diasporic setting where Islam has
no social or political authority, but is instead one of many spiritual options, this
individualism is perhaps inevitable.

The content of the above poem points to further shared elements of diasporic
religious experience. It neatly encapsulates much of what the young women involved
in this study had to say about their religiosity, particularly the implicit claims the
poem makes on subjective agency through references to individualism and liberty.
Ethnographic work carried out in traditionally Islamic societies indicates that this
form of Islamic religiosity is not restricted to diasporic settings, however. Göle (1996:
4-5), for example, interprets the recent resurgence of the hijab among students in
secular Turkey as a thoroughly modern phenomenon:

Veiling is a political statement of women, an active reappropriation on their behalf of
Islamic religiosity and way of life rather than its reproduction of established
traditions. In this respect veiling does not express passive submission to prevalent
community norms but, instead, affirms an active interest in Islamic scripture.
Educated lower- and middle-class women claim to know the “true” Islam and hence
differentiate themselves from traditional uneducated women; these young women
reject foremost the model provided by their mothers, who are perpetuating traditions
and traditional religion within their domestic lives without any claim to knowledge
and praxis. Paradoxically, the veiled students, who owe their newly acquired class
status and social recognition to their access to secular education, also empower
themselves through their claim on Islamic knowledge and politics.

Thus the religiosity of the participants in my study mirrors that of many educated
young Muslims around the world.

At the same time that we must recognise that this religiosity is modern in the
sense that it is individualistic, agentive and consciously constructed as rational, it
must not be seen as coterminous with the Eurocentric narrative of modernity that has
seen headscarves banned in French schools in a perverse attempt to translate Western
Enlightenment principles into public policy. I have argued that the epistemological standpoint that emerges from that narrative provides an insufficient framework for understanding Islamic practices in Western settings. This criticism does not apply simply to those who refuse to see hijab as anything other than an oppressive practice that restricts women’s agency. It equally applies to those feminists who are eager to interpret hijab primarily as a manifestation of resistance to patriarchal norms or a utilitarian means of negotiating harassment, rather than an act of faith.

The Islamic association I studied can quite easily be described as “modern” in a conventional sense. However, closer analysis indicates that participants express their religiosity in ways that may not necessarily be valued by nor apparent to those with a political agenda formulated according to a conventional view of modernity. By looking at the notion of reflexive modern identity in response to the secularism implied by the conventional view, and exploring the theory of alternative modernities, I have sought to illustrate that Islamic youth identity does not occupy a transitional phase on the path towards a secular, Eurocentrically defined Western identity. As Göle (1996: 138) argues, “Islam does not stand against modernity; rather, it acts as a compass of life and as a means of management with modern society.”

As far as the debates over the management of cultural diversity that frame this study are concerned, the religiosity of participants must be recognised as the product of the social context in which it is enacted. This means that the religious practice that is most often the focus of such debates – hijab – needs to be considered not as a cultural and/or religious phenomenon imported from elsewhere (with the implication that is either rejected or accepted in the spirit of multicultural tolerance of difference). Rather, what we must come to terms with is the fact that hijab is an Australian religious practice. In this respect the title of the exhibition of images included in this study, I am a Muslim Australian, means exactly that. It is not a claim to a Muslim identity that just happens to be enacted within Australia; it is an affirmation of a religious identity that rightfully belongs there.
Conclusion

If you walk into a bank wearing something covering your face, you can expect to start a panic. (Herald Sun 16/01/09)

Shortly after I began drawing together the diverse ideas explored in this study into a summary of its central arguments, a new row over headscarves received national media attention in Australia. The controversy was sparked when a police officer turned radio “shock-jock” broadcast his opinion that the niqab is a public safety issue and must therefore be banned. The spokesperson for the Queensland-based Retailers Association supported the call for a ban on the basis that retailers must be “able to readily identify any and all perpetrators of armed hold-ups or shop theft” (Campion and Berry 2009), and one major daily newspaper aired similar grievances against hijabi women shoppers, declaring in an editorial article that while covering one’s hair is tolerable, “a full-face hijab is a serious security matter” (Herald Sun 16/01/09). The current Federal Labor government’s response was markedly different to the previous Liberal government’s treatment of similar issues (which tended to range from ambiguous to outright Islamophobic): such a ban would never be considered. Nevertheless, this recent moral panic reinforces the immediate political salience of this study. Although a positive shift in government attitude towards Muslim Australians seems to have occurred, Muslims continue to be vilified in the Australian public sphere in increasingly bizarre ways: recent hysterical concern over public safety was certainly not prompted by any confrontations between retailers and pious female bandits, or anyone posing as such.

Public hostility towards Muslims dominated discussions of the photographic self-portraits produced by participants in this study. One of my central theoretical claims has been that identities are forged through processes of representation – both at the level of public discourse and in everyday social interaction. When asked to create their own representations of their identities for a public audience, most participants used the task as an opportunity to challenge what they perceived to be negative images of Muslim identity. This incorporation of external representations of Muslim identity into participant self-representations was not limited to their pictorial
engagements with the Australian public sphere; it was also evident in their narratives of everyday interaction. Whether it involved the witty delivery of corrective information to wags at school, or the heightened awareness of one’s own conduct in public when wearing hijab, representing one’s sense of self necessitates negotiating (either consciously or not) what others understand Muslim identity to mean. My purpose throughout has been to not merely to describe this process of identity construction, but to use it as the basis for contributing to theoretical discussions of multiculturalism. In doing so I have also sought to critically examine the relations of power in which it occurs, as questions concerning the relationships between cultural/religious collectives and nation states on the one hand, and between individuals and the groups to which they claim allegiance (or are assigned to by others) on the other, are high on multicultural theorists’ critical agenda.

The title of the study – “multicultural selves” – can be read in three ways. At the everyday level it refers to the way in which some of the young people who participated in it consciously chose to represent their identities as “multicultural”, meaning that their sense of self – as they see it – encompasses more than one culture. It also describes the important discursive role multiculturalism played in shaping participants’ narratives of selfhood and belonging, including those who did not think of their own identities as culturally hybrid. In theoretical terms the title refers to the dialogical conception of subjectivity that is central to theories of multiculturalism, and which has informed my epistemological approach. Following Foucault, the subject as conceived of here is not the autonomous individual of Enlightenment thought, but a socially-embedded actor whose capacity for agency is both constrained and enabled by the dynamics of power within which agency is enacted, and through which the agentive subject is formed. This critique of a certain Western narrative of modern subjectivity has had methodological implications, not least in the visual ethnographic methods I used. In a broader sense, this study is also representative of perceivable shift in the way questions of contemporary subjectivity are approached. As Göle observes (1996: 6), “today the epistemological pendulum is swinging from evolutionary reasoning and methodological positivism to the question of agency and the subsequent analysis of particularistic, context-bound interpretations of modernity and self.” The following is a summary of where my involvement in that
epistemological swing has led this exploration of Australian Muslim youth identities, and how we might think about Australian national identity in the future as a result.

**Ambivalence**

Participant narratives indicated that their sense of belonging to the national community could often be described as precarious. One of the factors contributing to participants’ feelings of vulnerability and insecurity – in some cases expressed as real concern that they may at some stage be forced to leave Australia – was their perception that Australia’s commitment to normative multiculturalism was in doubt. These fears were most apparent during discussions of French legislation banning hijab in public schools, where it was believed that if Australia ceased to be recognisably multicultural in the normative sense then similar legislation could be introduced. In contrast to these anxieties expressed over normative multiculturalism, participants’ narratives indicated that the existence of everyday multiculturalism in Australia – i.e. observable cultural diversity – helps them negotiate a sense of belonging to the national community. Everyday multiculturalism was said to minimise feelings of difference engendered by Anglo social dominance because, as one participant put it, there’s always “some ethnic group there.” This reassurance not only helped participants negotiate everyday social situations, it also extended beyond the level of everyday social interaction, giving form to the way Australian social space is imagined by these young people. When discussing experiences of discrimination based on their Muslim identity – described as everyday occurrences by some – participants frequently spoke of Australian society being multicultural in the everyday sense. That everyday multiculturalism was seen to have created a society that is tolerant of cultural difference, if only because of its sizable population of ethnic Others. This was so much the case that multiculturalism was often constructed as the norm against which acts of racism and/or discrimination – no matter how commonplace they were said to be – were seen as deviant.

What has therefore emerged from this study is an alternative view of multiculturalism that is highly ambivalent. The young Muslims who took part in it see Australia as a society that is tolerant of difference because difference is social reality, yet at the same time they feel they are routinely marginalised on the basis of their perceivable difference from the Anglo norm. Similar feelings of ambivalence were
also apparent when participants used the term “multicultural” to describe their own sense of self-identity. The hybrid cultural identities portrayed in the self-portraits often seemed to be the result of almost seamless merging of disparate cultural elements. Ibrahim’s doctored flag image and Meena’s depiction of herself doing karate in hijab were particularly emblematic of this. However, while boundaries delineating cultures may have appeared to be erased in participants’ photographic representations and discussions of their hybrid identities, they were just as frequently reinscribed. This was as much so at the level of everyday understandings of culture (as discussions of what constitutes Australian culture demonstrated) as at the more abstract level of normative ideas about cultural recognition (evident in the tension between coexisting desires to eradicate prejudice by not “splitting people up” on the one hand, and preserve the distinctiveness of cultures on the other). Participants drew on a vocabulary associated with multiculturalism throughout these discussions. Along with “multiculturalism” and “multicultural”, terms such as “minorities” and “the majority”, “ethnics” and “the mainstream” peppered participants’ speech, thereby lending tacit semantic support to the power dynamics of White multiculturalism, often precisely where participants were seeking to subvert them. I have argued that multiculturalism provides an inadequate vocabulary and range of concepts in this respect. Both this reinforcement of existing relations of cultural dominance and the inadvertent essentialisation of cultures within participants’ narratives reflect, at the level of everyday vernacular, the same problems identified within theoretical critiques of multiculturalism.

The ambivalence expressed by participants in relation to their self-described multicultural identities is also relevant to another area of claims made by a number of cultural theorists. Hybridity – the merging of cultures that problematises borders – is said to be inherently ambivalent (Bhabha 2004). My analysis of participants’ negotiation of the dual or multiple cultural identifications they claimed and/or had assigned to them by others certainly supports this. The hybrid identities presented here challenge territorialised notions of culture that bind culture to place (most notably the nation-state). This applies not only to various forms of nationalism, but also theories of multiculturalism in which the recognition of cultures implies the recognition of national cultures. It also challenges the way diasporic communities are imagined in this respect, particularly by diasporans themselves. This was especially
evident where one participant’s identification as an Iraqi-Turk conflicted with prevailing understandings of Iraqi diasporic identity. However, in terms of participants’ everyday experiences and understandings, these transgressions of cultural borders were only ever partial. At the same time that the hybrid identities explored here were represented as seamlessly merged, suture lines often became visible when participants spoke about the disparate cultural elements that constitute the hybrid whole. In the same characteristically ambivalent manner described above, participants frequently referred to cultures in the same spatially bound terms they were also consciously trying to undermine.

This duality is not surprising, given that the everyday practices, beliefs and dispositions that are recognised as culturally specific and function as markers of alterity are also important elements of self-identity. Certain elements of participants’ ethnic and religious identities were particularly valued for their distinctiveness in the diasporic social setting in which they are enacted. Participants tended to have, for example, high levels of personal investment in ethnic and religious behavioural norms. Islam in particular provided participants with what could be described as ontological security through its clear boundaries concerning behaviour perceived to be risky (drinking alcohol, sexual relationships, etc.), and a solid framework for making life choices. Participants also took pleasure and pride in positive external recognition of their cultural identities. Sharing food was one form of social interaction in which this occurred, indicating that in everyday terms the celebration of “ethnic” food production that is so often associated with Australian multiculturalism cannot be understood merely as a one-way objectification of the Other. However, as I demonstrated through my analysis of the reception of Meena’s image of her hybrid sense of self, celebrating difference is not rendered unproblematic simply because those who are the object of such attention often welcome it. Representations of hybridity – especially the self-representations created within this study – certainly do destabilise Orientalist representations of Muslim and Arab or “Middle-Eastern” identities. They should be valued for this. Yet as my analysis indicated, it is not the disruptive capacity of hybridity that tends to be deemed worthy of appreciation in the Australian public sphere so much as its externally perceived extraordinariness or exoticism. This has to do with underlying perceptions of prior existing cultural purity: the greater the difference between what are understood as distinctly separate cultural
entities that come together to produce the hybrid, the more appealing the hybrid seems. Thus the alterity of the hybrid is never fully overcome, nor the hegemonic power of White multiculturalism significantly challenged.

**Agency**

In addition to exploring how young Muslims negotiate their sense of self and belonging in relation to the broader national community, this study has also been concerned with questions regarding the power dynamics within cultural and religious collectives. In Chapter One I outlined some of the main arguments surrounding Okin’s (1999) claim that many theories of multiculturalism tacitly condone cultural practices that are harmful to women. My contribution to that debate in later chapters focussed largely on what I believe to be Okin’s problematic conception of culture and her failure to consider women’s agency. I agree that scholars need to pay closer attention to what goes on within cultural collectives as opposed to thinking about multiculturalism primarily in terms of relations between groups. What my study has empirically demonstrated, however, is that – contrary to what Okin implies – the social practices of diasporic cultural or religious groups are not neatly transplanted from the country of origin (and this is not to say that they are ever static or uncontested in those contexts, either). In other words, group identities are forged through continual dialogue with their social surroundings and this must be recognised. Within this study, the form of Islamic patriarchy that operated within the religious organisation I looked at (at least in terms of what its authority figures preached) had its own distinctly diasporic character due to the broader social context in which it existed. This is also the case where individual identity is concerned, especially regarding group members who were born in the so-called host country or migrated there at a young age, as the preceding discussions of hybridity have shown. The implication for broader scholarly concerns over intra-group power relations is that the sweeping generalisations resulting from macro-theorisations such as Okin’s need to be avoided by focussing analysis more on specificities. This entails conceiving of “minority women” as agentive social actors negotiating subjective positions within multiple and often complex relations of power, as opposed to victims – or indeed courageous combatants of – oppressive cultural practices imported from “over there”.
As I argued in Chapter Six, the hijabi body has long been a locus of Western anxieties over cultural difference, both at home and abroad. Contemporary debates over veiling in a variety of Western diasporic contexts – including Australia – are dominated by crude understandings of the Muslim subject as powerless victim of patriarchal oppression, and give rise to feminist crusades to “liberate” Muslim women from their scarves. The self-representations of female Muslim identity created by participants in this study subverted that trope; their use of the scarf as a corporeal strategy to challenge it can be read as an exercise of subjective agency. I also argued, however, that agency need not and should not be conceived of only as resistance. My analysis of the observed corporeal strategies of those participants who did not wear hijab on a day-to-day basis defied a straightforward interpretation of participant agency as either capitulation or resistance to coercive pressures to wear hijab. Those participants’ negotiation of the norms established by religious authority figures produced a unique take on the modesty of dress expected of them. Their agency consisted in developing corporeal strategies that did not compromise either the educators’ normative conception of female corporeality or their own sartorial practice, which was evidently important to them. I have also argued that agency can be seen as the conscious will to maintain cultural practices. This form of agency was most overtly evident in the cases of those who wore hijab in defiance of their parents’ wishes that they become “more Australian” in order to increase their employment prospects. However, following Mahmood (2001), modes of being that are aimed at continuity can still be considered agentive even where they are not enacted in the face of opposition. Those participants who were not vocal opponents of negative public representations of Muslim identities and who did not reinterpret traditional ideas of hijab to suit themselves were no more the docile dupes of Islamic patriarchy than their more gregarious counterparts. The Islamic virtues of feminine piety and modesty are not acquired through passive submission in an environment where rational enquiry rather than uninformed faith is constructed as the ideal basis for religious practice. In the context of the religious association I studied, the normative notion of Islamic feminine virtue was by no means easily realised in practice; “climbing the steps towards knowledge”, as one participant put it when describing her self-portrait, requires self-discipline and determination.
The enactment of female religiosity within the field of the religious association therefore challenges the Orientalist binaries dominating external representations of Muslim women at multiple levels. The rational modern subject to which she plays the discursive Other, however, also has hegemonic power beyond debates over hijab. The Pope’s efforts to exclude Muslims from the historical narrative of the Enlightenment, for example, discursively positions the Muslim subject outside the realm of the conventional Western view of modernity. The religious identities enacted within the field of the religious association can also be considered agentive with respect to that positioning. In this context, ideal religious practice based on detached rationality – a very Cartesian conception of agency – is more than just morally desirable in the eyes of those involved in this study: it is politically necessary. Moreover, it is an imperative that is not solely the result of the discursive construction of the Muslim subject as modernity’s Other. In a diasporic setting where other modes of being are on offer, the individual is not afforded the option of unquestioningly following tradition: one has no choice but to choose, even if “choosing” consists only of satisfying oneself of the undesirability of the alternatives. For participants in this study following Islam represented a more promising alternative to the perceived ontological insecurity facing young Australians without religious faith.

Towards Everyday Multicultural Nationhood?

Folk devils are apt to change over time, particularly within debates over immigration and cultural diversity. This study confirms a critique of Australian society that has significance beyond the context of current preoccupations with Muslims. The narratives of the young people involved in it resoundingly support Hage’s (1998) view of a society premised upon an unequal distribution of symbolic capital, where White Australians are discursively positioned as the central occupiers – and indeed managers – of national social space. It is a systemic problem with no easy solution, and one that is played out in similar variations in other immigrant receiving Western nations.

Proposing a means by which all Australians may feel an equal sense of national belonging is clearly beyond the scope of this study. However, the positive outlook shared by the majority of those who participated in it does suggest how Australian national identity might be reimagined to this end. Contrary to the popular notion that
multiculturalism holds no symbolic importance for young Australians, for participants in this study it represented a solid basis for feelings of belonging. The overall impression created here is that it is everyday multiculturalism that fosters this security. The normative vision for a just and inclusive society, then, ought not to be one in which cultural identities are formally “recognised” even in a celebratory fashion. To do so reifies cultures, resulting in the objectification of the Other rather than the erasure of this category altogether. What must be recognised, rather, is that cultures are important to people, but lived experience is not reducible to statically defined cultural norms. Nor are the cultural barriers that hamper shared understanding as rigid as they often appear in the popular imagination. This study was replete with examples of mutually enjoyable exchanges between people of different cultural backgrounds, from Zhila’s account of how she found friendship and support amongst Hindu boys to the many anecdotes involving shared meals. It is this everyday interaction that needs to occupy a more prominent place in collective visions of how Australian society is and should be.

The ordinariness of everyday multiculturalism certainly lacks the romantic appeal of the type of mythologies that generally serve as focal points for narratives of nationhood. Nor is there much in the idea of people getting on with the boring daily business of living with cultural diversity on which to base community festivals; it certainly cannot compete with solemn dawn gatherings on foreign beaches to commemorate lives lost almost a century ago, or singing, dancing migrants and their kuih kosui. What it can do, however, is challenge the present state of affairs in which the former supposedly represents a story of nationhood relevant to all Australians (including Australians of Turkish origin whose forebears courageously fought on the opposing side), and the latter merely transforms dangerous Others into manageable Others. However favourable it may seem from a scholarly perspective, the idea of a narrative of nationhood that does not try to distinguish itself from others seems unlikely to gain popular support (even if there is little real difference between one state’s “mateship” and another’s “fraternité”). But perhaps it is the very ordinariness of this vision of a multicultural Australia that is distinctive: Australian national identity could be unique for its deliberate eschewal of the drama that typifies the stories national communities like to tell themselves about themselves. Perhaps it is
time for Australians to make a decisive stand against national drama. Recent skirmishes on Sydney beaches ought to be more than enough drama for anyone.
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Appendix 1

Boat Journey to Australia

By Badra

I was sitting in my room with my sisters Ramya and Nada hearing my parents talking. I couldn’t hear exactly what they were saying but I heard a few words from them “going somewhere, Australia, ocean, dangerous, leaving us in Iran and take two of my brothers.” When my sister Ramya heard this she went running to my parents then I saw my other sister was running after her and suddenly I saw three of us next to my parents. Ramya asked my parents “what is going on? Where are you going? What do you mean in leaving us behind??” My dad said to Ramya “we are deciding to go to Australia in a boat and taking Ahmed and Ali with us and leave you and your two sisters and your older brother in Iran. The reason for all this is because I want a better future for you but I can’t take all of you simply because I don’t have enough money for all of you to go with me”. Ramya said “you seem to be serious this time”. Mum is this true what my dad is saying? My mum started crying and went to her room. After few seconds of silence Ramya blows up and starts crying. When Nada saw Ramya crying, she started crying as well then we all started crying.

Three more days till my parents leave Iran and go to Australia. We spend these three days in my Grandpa’s house. I could see my grandpa telling my dad “you can’t leave Badra here she is too young to stay here and something might happen to her if she doesn’t go with you so you should take her with you.” After a while my dad came up to me and said “I think you are so lucky because I am taking you with us to Australia.” You can’t believe how exciting I was when I heard this from my dad, I was like a bird flying in the sky. Tonight was the last night for us in Qum (a state in Iran) and we had to leave in the morning and go to Tehran. I couldn’t sleep that night because I was thinking of my sister Nada and how I could be separated from her. She’s been my best friend and the closest person to me in my life that we even used to go to school together, sleep next to each other and do everything together. After hours from thinking I went to sleep.

“Wake up; Wake up Badra you are going.” I opened my eyes and saw my Grandma waking me up. I woke up and went to dress. It was 10.30am the Taxi driver was waiting for us at the door. All my relatives were in my Grandpa’s house. The house was full of people. Some of my uncles were taking our bags in the Taxi. After they’d finished, my uncle started calling my dad “it is time to go.” Now it was the saddest time in my life having to say goodbye to all of my friends and loved ones. Everybody’s tears started coming down. I and my family were saying bye to all my relatives. After we had finished saying bye to everyone it was my mum’s turn to say bye to her children. My mum went to Nada; they hugged each other and I could see thousands of tears coming out of both pairs of eyes and everyone around them started crying. I couldn’t stop myself from crying I could feel my heart tearing apart. Then my aunty came up to my mum and took Nada from her so my mum went to Ramya and hugged her, it was the saddest part ever having to see a mother getting separated from her children. It was my turn to say bye to Nada I hugged her and kissed her one kiss and I could no longer see Nada because she went hiding somewhere so she can cry as much as she want and none sees her. The final part was my grandma hugging my dad and kissing him and she was crying as loud as she can.

I can see the beautiful blue sky from the window in the airplane while I was sitting next to my mum I could still see my mum’s tears on her face, my two brothers watching TV and my father was sitting sadly. I could hear people saying five more
minutes till we get to Malaysia, after few minutes I felt the airplane has stopped and everyone had to leave the airplane. We got out and it was a big surprise to see ladies walking around without wearing veil. Then we got our bags and went to the hotel with many Iraqi families, we stayed in Malaysia for one week; it was beautiful and then we had to go to Indonesia. In Indonesia we stayed in a small hotel and we were going from one state to another for three months. I was so shocked with Indonesian people they were sleeping in the streets with their families because they had nowhere to go and leave in. Later on we run out of food that we brought with us from Iran. Other Iraqi families also ran out of money and they didn’t have anything to eat. Each morning my dad went to buy us and them food.

After the horrible three months it was the day that we had to go on the ship to get to Australia. Before we got on the ship we went on an airplane for 12 hours then we went on a big ship for half a day, then at night we went in big buses with the Iraqi families. We stayed on the buses for twenty hours so we can get to the very last state in Indonesia and become very close to Australia. We had no rest. Everyone came down from the buses it was very dark near the beach everyone sat in silence. We were just hearing the captain of the ship telling his man to take us on a small boat to the ship because the ship was far from the beach. We couldn’t see anything but we could just hear women and kids screaming and crying.

It was finally our turn to get on the boat when I saw it I said no way I’m not going to go in this small boat it was so scary like you’re going to nearly fall in the ocean. Finally we got in the ship, there was small room for families and other smaller ones for men, the room was about 2m from each side and the height was about 130cm it very small that people were all squashed and I had just a little of place to sit in. There was about 63 people in that small ship. After everyone had got on the ship the ship start on, just in a moment everyone started vomiting from the smell of smoke no longer breath there was no air everyone slept and was nearly dying there was no air so everyone was prepared to die I went to sleep and I can no longer feel anything. After a while I waked up hearing my mum’s friend telling her that we are going back to Indonesia because big waves are coming on the ship and there was too much waves so the captain didn’t want to go any further because we might die. After all of this we went back to Indonesia I was in a shock I didn’t know if it was real or dream.

After a week or two in Indonesia we went back to the beach with the Iraqis at night to go on another ship. This time they told us we have to go in the ocean and go to the ship, people took their shoes off and went into the ocean, I didn’t took my shoes off I put my first foot in the ocean. I couldn’t feel the water it was very cold, I hold my mum’s hand and went walking in the ocean I could feel rocks, whales in the ocean and maybe fishes. The ocean got up to my mouth I was drowning a minute and another I was breathing. Then some how I found myself in the ship all wet people are frightened, everyone was sitting in the ship this time the ship was a bit bigger than the other. Everybody had a place to sleep except me then after a few minutes I was the only one awake I was looking at the ocean we saw some small sharks pass from us, there was huge waves in the ocean that you can no longer see anything it was an amazing. We stayed in the ship for a day and our water was finished there was a few bottles left they gave each family 3 bottles of 2 litres and we could no longer see Australia. Everybody lost hope the ship was getting cracked, no food, no water and the captain lost the way so we absolutely had no expectation of living and everybody was praying.

Then the next day in the morning we heard screaming from an airplane they were waving they made fire the plane was putting a red light on us and was going the opposite direction we were going, then the plane went away and we didn’t saw it anymore. We lost hope again everybody was crying, praying and kids were screaming scared from water. At the evening we saw a boat coming toward us we were so happy, which the boat came to us it had two policemen in it they told the captain can’t you see the airplane? You’re going the wrong direction to the middle of the ocean, then they got out a big rope they tied it to our ship and to their boat it was
a very big boat and fast. They got us to Australia. Everybody was thanking God. Then they took us in an airplane to Adelaide, and then they took us to the Siamese’s. We stayed there for three months then we went out from it. Then they brought us to Melbourne with an airplane, when we were in Melbourne airport, I couldn’t believe seeing people. I saw two of my uncles; they took us to my Grandpa’s house from my mum’s side. At last everything was over.