Refugee youth seeking social belonging in the context of Australian multiculturalism

Review by Fulya Pinar

Moran, Laura. 2020. Belonging and Becoming in a Multicultural World: Refugee Youth and the Pursuit of Identity. Rutgers University Press.

Keywords: migration, multiculturalism, identity, youth, Australia.

Laura Moran presents an analysis of how young migrant and refugee people in Brisbane, Australia, make and represent their identities as they seek to belong in friend groups and networks. Moran demonstrates how the multiculturalist framework in Australia exposes refugee and migrant youth to a variety of conflicting expectations about self-representation. More specifically, while these young people are often expected to adapt and integrate into Australian society, their identities are highly racialized and fixed as outsiders with an emphasis on tolerance. Young refugees in Brisbane, then, absorb, negotiate, and respond to the competing messages about integration and tolerance and forge a sense of who they are and where they belong. Asserting that children and youth are at the center of transnational migration and multiculturalist inclusion, Moran seeks to depict a comprehensive picture of how young refugees, as both outsiders and insiders of the Australian society, form their identities and notions of belonging.

Throughout the book, Moran provides examples of how young migrants and refugees display various forms of "dynamic responsiveness" (p. 17) by engaging with the conflicting expectations and demands imposed on their lives through a level of awareness about the wider sociopolitical context of Australian multiculturalism. Making use of these examples, Moran argues that young refugees and migrants negotiate their belonging and identities through not only reacting against overt racism but also navigating multiculturalist discourses (p. 18). In doing so, she contributes to scholarship on youth as global social actors (p. 19), identity (p. 22), and migration and belonging (p. 24). Not surprisingly, Moran benefits extensively from Pierre Bourdieu's theories on social power and its impacts on agency in the book.

In Chapter One, Moran provides the methodological and theoretical foundations of the book. She conducted ethnographic research with refugee and migrant youth over a four-year period, during which she served as an after-school program coordinator for a non-profit community center in the suburbs of Brisbane. Through her employment, she designed and implemented a program that students from various backgrounds could attend. As a program coordinator, she met thirty-nine "key research participants," thirty-seven of whom were from refugee backgrounds (p. 15). Her key research participants were aged nine to twenty years and mainly came from Sudan and

Burma. Moran provides detailed background information on the key research participants in the book's appendix (pp. 151 - 158). To balance her role as researcher and as a program coordinator, she made deliberate decisions not to cross the line between a research site and a place where students come to relax and receive mentorship (p. 11-12). Moran also paid special attention to the power dynamics and chose not to seek extensive information from her informants about their refugee status or journey to Australia (p.13). Throughout the book, Moran demonstrates her conscious efforts to engage with self-reflexivity, balance potential power dynamics, and reveal shifts and transformations in her research questions.

The book's second chapter provides information on the relation between Australian immigration policies and the multicultural context. In this chapter, Moran introduces how notions of integration and tolerance emerge out of a locus of whiteness, explaining how these notions are not diversions from nationalism and racism but instead rely on them (pp. 34 - 38). Moran argues that the reflections of colonial and anti-immigrant histories of Australia can be observed in the everyday lives of young refugees. In the Australian social policies, whiteness has represented power and a requirement for national belonging, both in the context of colonialism and "White Australia Policy" during Australia's federation in 1901 (28 – 34). In the everyday encounters of young refugees with others in the contemporary multiculturalist context, integration and tolerance are often displayed through acts of downplaying the impact of race, stressing the anti-racist rhetoric, and mainstreaming diversity (p. 41).

Moran untangles the conceptual framework and theoretical background of the book in the third chapter. She argues that the ways in which young people talk about race and ethnicity are often in line with how race has been governed in the Australian context (p. 49). Analyzing identity as socially oriented assertions of sameness and difference from what is understood in the broader social context (p. 51), Moran conceptualizes young people's practices of navigating the concepts of racial "hybridity" and "essentialism" as forms of symbolic (or) multicultural capital (pp. 53-61). Through making use of these concepts, young refugees dynamically respond to the multicultural rhetoric and subtly claim belonging or not-belonging (pp. 63-64).

The fourth chapter examines how justifications of engaging with certain social relations – such as friendship, dating, and fighting – serve as platforms for young refugees and migrants to emphasize or refuse racial and ethnic identities and social belonging (pp. 65-66). Actively stressing "choice" in some social settings and subtly stressing "circumstances" in others while explaining why they were drawn towards social relations with certain racial and ethnic identities, these young people were able to navigate in between downplaying and embracing their own identities and differences (pp. 67-77). This way, they engaged with the ideals of both integration (through demonstrating plasticity and "hybridity" of identities) and tolerance (through expressing rigidity and "essentialism" towards identities), responding to and emphasizing their inclusion and exclusion in the Australian multicultural context.

Chapter Five focuses on the more self-conscious and explicit ways in which young people projected and performed their identities. Claiming that young people's performances occur not only locally but also globally in the contemporary world (p. 91), Moran analyzes how young refugees interacted with and around the global web of music and technology with specific examples on their engagement with the American hip-hop culture (pp. 96-99). She argues that in

their performances, the participants of her research often portrayed their ethnic identities and social belonging in primarily essentialized and racialized ways through claiming "authenticity," exclusion, and resilience (pp. 108-113). Demonstrating what they did not belong to and where they were excluded from served as an opportunity for them to claim a space of belonging to their local communities, Australian society, and the global networks of resistance (p. 108). Moran connects these performances of young people with their awareness of and play around race/racism in the multicultural Australian and global contexts.

In Chapter Six, Moran looks at how young migrants and refugees discussed their racial and ethnic identities while engaging with the formal political realm. She demonstrates that the young people were aware of how they were framed and managed, and they often challenged the dichotomous ways they were understood in the Australian context (pp. 117-120). She shows how young refugees often emphasized racial difference and collective belonging, displaying forms of disregard towards the importance of citizenship, national identity, and static racial categories. In so doing, Moran argues, young refugees find their own ways to reframe and manipulate the multiculturalist emphasis on their status as outsiders (pp. 122-135). Moran links these navigations of her research collaborators with the interrelatedness between their senses of inclusion/exclusion and the broader socio-political discourses surrounding their lives (p. 137).

The last chapter presents both a summary of the main themes of the book and a discussion on the potential for refugee and migrant youth inclusion in multicultural societies. Considering that the search for identity-making and belonging for youth occur as "dynamic responses" to the public discourses on their lives, Moran suggests that we need to conceptualize the reframing of multiculturalist messages by the youth as forms of participation in the politics of belonging (p. 144). Doing so would allow for multiple forms of inclusion in multiethnic societies needed by the youth (pp. 147-150).

Instead of measuring the successes and failures of the multicultural ideals by expecting refugee youth to prove their integration to society and participation in the tolerance rhetoric, the book points out the importance of understanding the perspectives and frames of youth as forms of participation. The book is exceptionally legible and accessible, is written clearly and concisely, and is available as an Open Access volume. It will appeal to scholars and students across disciplines – such as education, anthropology, sociology, geography, ethnic studies, political science, social work, and public administration – as well as to a general public that is interested in human rights, migration, youth, race, ethnicity, and multiculturalism.

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