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Thinking about Belonging in Youth Studies

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Hernan Cuervo
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Studies in Childhood and Youth

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ABOUT THE BOOK

This book interrogates the ‘turn’ to belonging in youth studies. The concept of belonging has emerged as a recurring theme in the youth studies literature, offering new alignments across previously divergent approaches. But its pervasiveness in the field has led to the criticism that ‘belonging’ is simultaneously ‘everything and nothing’, and requires deeper analysis to be of enduring value. This book does this work.

The book is organised around the question ‘what does the concept of belonging do?’. Taking a global perspective, it provides the reader with an accessible, scholarly account of how youth studies uses this concept. Chapters address its historical and theoretical underpinnings, and its prevalence in youth policy and research, with a focus on transitions, participation, citizenship, and mobility.

Readers will gain a much-needed perspective on why belonging has emerged as a key concept to understand young lives today, and its benefits and shortcomings.

Praise For *Thinking About Belonging* *In Youth Studies*

“This book is a game changer for youth studies. Offering a new and long overdue take on the turn to belonging in youth policy and research, it interrogates ideas about young people and relationality and how these are deployed particularly in settler-colonial nations. It opens up exciting new spaces for understanding how young people consider and enact connectedness in difficult times. This is an important must-read analysis from a team of leading youth studies scholars.”

—Joanna Kidman, Professor of Māori Education,
Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand

“This is a fascinating, rigorous and wide-ranging exploration of the concept of ‘belonging’ with respect to young people’s lives. It brings together scholarship from across the globe to consider how ideas about belonging impact on our understandings of transitions and participation, citizenship and mobilities. It is an important and authoritative new text for youth researchers, written by three key scholars in the field.”

—Rachel Brooks, Professor of Sociology,
University of Surrey, UK

“This groundbreaking book is a must read for anyone interested in Youth Studies. Written by three world leading scholars it not only offers new insights into the recent ‘turn’ towards belonging, drawing upon a historical and a global analysis, but also introduces new ways of conceptualising young people’s lives today. One of its unique and pleasing features is its engagement with indigenous ideas and alternative world views illustrating the important contribution they can and do make to these debates.”

—Alan France, Professor of Sociology,
University of Auckland, New Zealand

“In this thoughtful and original book, acclaimed youth studies researchers Johanna Wyn, Anita Harris and Hernan Cuervo turn a critical eye on the idea of belonging. They demonstrate how belonging, as a concept, as practice and as ways of being, can be used to illuminate the complexities of young people’s lives. It is indispensable reading for anyone wanting to understand how young people study, work and play in families, schools, communities and nation-states in late modernity.”

—Judith Bessant, Professor, *Schools of Global, Urban & Social Studies, RMIT University, Australia*

“*Thinking about Belonging* is an incisive interrogation of ‘belonging’ as an idea and as a framing device. The book shows that, as productive as ‘belonging’ has been across youth studies—on transitions, policy and citizenship—it is poorly theorised, used to ‘mean everything and nothing’. It offers a genealogy of uses of belonging and a systematic unpacking of its limitations and possibilities. The book illustrates insightfully that in a mobile, global world, we need a relational and dynamic understanding of the many faces of belonging.”

—Greg Noble, Professor, *Institute for Culture and Society, Western Sydney University, Australia*

“This innovative book thoroughly and critically addresses a compelling question circulating among youth researches today: do we really need the concept of belonging to understand young people’s new life experiences? And why? As the volume highlights, using empirical examples, for young people the notion of belonging is intertwined with that of becoming. The authors unveil the reasons for this, offering a critical and expert view on the potential and limits of the concept.”

—Carmen Leccardi, *Department of Sociology and Social Research, University of Milano-Bicocca, Italy*

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The Question of Belonging in Youth Studies

This book interrogates the ‘turn’ to belonging in youth research and in youth social policy and seeks to provide a critical analysis of the work that the concept of belonging does in youth studies. The idea for the book began with our collective observation that belonging has become an increasingly popular way to talk about young people’s lives in research and policy. But why has belonging become popular, and what does it really mean? What is its intellectual history in youth studies, youth research, and youth sociology? How is it theorised today and how is this conceptual framework elaborated and then applied? What are its analytical capabilities and its methodological affordances? How has it been produced, used and deployed in policy and research to enable and constrain ways of thinking about and acting on young people? While the concept of belonging has been widely accepted and utilised in recent youth research and youth policy, it has yet to be subjected to a critical analysis. Our project in this book is to do this work, and in so doing, to advance understanding of the different ways in which belonging is utilised, to consider its foundations and interrogate its conceptual apparatus, and to draw out its potential to transcend some of the shortcomings of previous approaches in a considered fashion. In short, we ask what does this concept *do* in and for youth studies?

To answer this question, we explore the socio-historical context in which belonging has been employed in youth sociology. We recognise that, while

it is increasingly referred to in research and policy, its meaning remains elusive. Belonging has a taken-for-granted quality, and even when it is the object of inquiry it is often left undefined. As Wright (2015, p. 391) suggests, ‘belonging itself is often considered self-explanatory’. And Noble (2020, p. xvii) notes that “‘belonging’ is a word that is frequently used but rarely with conceptual clarity... It is both theoretically and empirically underdeveloped’. However, some theorists have given this concept close analytical treatment and have undertaken important definitional work that brings its key elements to light. Their insights guide the way we explore this concept throughout the book, even while we are primarily interested in what it *does* (often by operating as an ambiguous and elusive notion) rather than in determining how it should be defined. Recognising that the multiple registers of the concept of belonging is in some ways its strength, and the ways in which its meanings are dependent on context, we resist the temptation to reify belonging through set definitions.

Yuval-Davis (2006, 2011), one of the most prominent theorists of belonging, argues that belonging is made up of the three elements of social location, identification and emotional attachment, and ethics and political values. For her, it is a series of processes and practices that manifest through these elements, and thus is not a fixed condition or status. Anthias (2006, p. 21) also usefully provides a definition of belonging not so much as an abstract state but by outlining the practices or processes that indicate what it means to belong. She argues that ‘to belong is to be accepted as part of a community, to feel safe within it and to have a stake in the future of such a community of membership. To belong is to share values, networks and practices’. Habib and Ward (2020, p. 1) similarly state that ‘At its core, belonging is about connection, membership, attachment and a sense of security’. Wright (2015, p. 393) further considers that ‘belonging is not only created by people in places, or more-than-humans in places, but actively co-constitutes people and things and processes and places’; that is, these entities come together to co-create their meanings in relational ways through belonging processes. For most theorists, belonging operates at the levels of the personal and the political. For example, Yuval-Davis (2011) differentiates between the sense of feeling ‘at home’ and the larger politics of belonging through which questions of citizenship and the civic and political community are settled. Antonsich (2010, p. 5) similarly notes that belonging refers to both the intimate sentiment of place-attachment and a ‘discursive resource’ for the enforcement of

social inclusion. While belonging is ‘multi-scalar’, the dimensions of the subjective and the political are intertwined.

Belonging is thus about membership, rights and duties, forms of identification with groups or other people and with places, and the emotional and social bonds that come of feelings of being part of a larger whole. It is about both the subjective and affective experience of connection and the social, structural processes of recognition, inclusion and exclusion. It is sometimes approached as a status or a category, but increasingly theorised as a process, a form of labour, an array of practices and capacities (Noble, 2020). Belonging also implies a form of ontological security, but there is a sense in which this has become more precarious, more ‘at risk’ in late modern times, especially for youth, as long traditions of life course patterns and taken for granted processes of transition cease to be the norm, and possibilities for identification and connection both multiply and become more fragmented.

Belonging has emerged as a recurring theme in the youth studies literature, offering new alignments across previously divergent approaches, such as political economy, youth cultures, transitions, generations and social and political ecology. The question of the relationship between individuals and communities, nations, families, places and many other dimensions of life such as gender, race and class, central to the social sciences, has taken on renewed interest in the broad youth studies field. This shift is reflected in the use of more complex research approaches that can more effectively capture the different nuances of young people’s experiences at a local level, while also accounting for the global and institutional processes and structures that shape young people’s lives. They are often underpinned by a concern with the question of how young people belong, and seek to explore and analyse the complex relationships between people; between people and institutions; places; and the flows of information and ideas that shape the place of young people. As Noble (2020, p. xvii) has argued, there is a sense of the heightened relevance and importance of questions of youth belonging in current times:

In an increasingly globalised world, an array of forces has intensified the anxious politics of belonging. Escalating flows of people, the technological mediation of social relations, separation of work and home, the growth in high density living, ecological crises which disconnect us from the environment and the spread of populist fears of the stranger: these are some of the ways in which we have less and less to do with those with whom we share

social space. These forces are often keenly felt by young people, not just because they are interwoven with transitions in the life course but also because young people are intimately connected to both the challenges and opportunities of social, economic, technological and environmental change.

The COVID-19 global pandemic has only sharpened these concerns and further centred the value of a critical framework of relationality. It has brought to light the civic, social and economic bonds that tie societies together as well as the structural faultlines that crises lay bare; the critical role of digital communications and media for participation and relationships; the importance of belonging to family, household, community, neighbourhood, social and political networks and capacity for place-making when human movement is constrained and the world must ‘shelter in place’; the direct effects of government, policy and politics on who is deemed to belong to a society and have their lives valued and rights upheld; the interconnectedness of human and non-human life; our fundamental dependency on one another in a globalised world; and the open question of what kinds of futures there will be for young people to belong to.

Belonging has many registers, political, economic, social, cultural and spatial; and the concept can act as a gauge for social change amidst complex social times; including new learning and working expectations for youth, increasing migratory processes, expanding forms of social activism and movements for rights and sovereignty, and global flows of different forms of capital. How young people are connected to their worlds has taken on new significance in a context of global social changes that mean young people are increasingly excluded from employment and housing yet also increasingly required to participate in education and comply with policies that dictate engagement in education, training or work. Interest in belonging is also heightened by young people’s unprecedented mobility within and across nations, and their engagement in information, media and communications technologies that place them in the centre of new cultural and communication flows and connections. In this context, issues of how youth establish social, civic and place-based relationships and can participate as active members of a globalised world have become increasingly pressing.

A body of important scholarly work on belonging has been produced in the field of youth studies, indicating the momentum and interest around this topic for youth researchers globally. Much youth studies scholarship

draws from broader sociological work that addresses contemporary concerns about belonging. For example, Savage et al. (2005), Yuval-Davis (2011), May (2013), and Wright (2015) explicitly take stock of the concept of belonging in relation to key concepts such as mobility, choice, citizenship, and the self. Many of the youth studies works that are engaged with these ideas have a related focus on social identity. For example, the edited collections *Identities, Youth and Belonging: International Perspectives* (Habib & Ward, 2019) and *Youth, Place and Theories of Belonging* (Habib & Ward, 2020) bring together essays that draw on the concept of belonging to explore the situation of young people in different countries and use this concept specifically to interpret place- and space-based youth identities. Swartz and Arnot's collection (2013) focuses on the role of schools in creating belonging by providing international examples in the construction of youth citizenship and identities, and Tilleczeck (2011) also explores the development of youth identities through the concept of belonging (see also Huppertz et al., 2016; and Halse, 2019, for another important edited collection on youth, education and belonging).

There is also a significant body of recent work that investigates young people's belonging with a focus on ethnic, religious and cultural identity, national inclusion and migration (see for example Abu El-Haj, 2015; Eliassi, 2013; Fangen et al., 2012; Miller-Idriss, 2009; Tanu, 2017; Ziemer, 2011). Other work that has addressed youth and belonging with an emphasis on the political nature of the concept, including citizenship and belonging as 'boundary work' focuses specifically on Muslim youth in the diaspora, identity, Islamophobia and racism. For example, Mansouri and Percival Wood (2008), Muna (2018) and Mustafa (2015) all address the issue of how young Muslims belong in contemporary Western societies. These works take a migration/ethnic studies perspective and explore belonging through the prism of cultural identity resolution and social identity construction and the challenges of national inclusion.

Other important publications have addressed the issue of belonging through youth cultures or new thinking about youth transitions. For example, Bennett and Robards' edited book (2014) focuses on how digital technologies and media generate new social networks through culture, in particular through music. More recently Robards and Lincoln (2020) have analysed the meaning and use of social network sites for young people in the UK and Australia, showing how their lives are mediated through these platforms. Some chapters in Woodman and Bennett's collection (2015) address the tensions between youth transitions and cultures through a

belonging perspective. Work by Wyn and Woodman has centred the idea of youth as belonging to a social generation (Woodman & Wyn, 2015). More recently, the question of how young people are positioned in society in generational belonging terms has been taken up from the perspective of political economy. For example, Bessant et al. (2017) provide a provocative analysis of the situation for the current generation of young people, arguing that it is time for a new ‘intergenerational contract’ to be built – one that recognises that under post-neoliberalism, the relationship between work and resources is being transformed. This approach directly confronts the question of where and how young people belong in new times. Similarly, Furlong et al. (2018) in *Young people in the Labour Market: Past and Present* argue that long-term structural change to the labour market requires new, more flexible policy responses, as the ‘new normal’ for young people becomes liminal employment. These books engage with the question of youth belonging from the perspective of economic security.

In some ways, our book is a response to this growing literature that uses the concept of belonging to explore the situation and lives of young people today. The framework of belonging appears to address many of the current issues confronting both youth and youth studies in an interconnected fashion, sometimes promising to cut across limiting empirical and conceptual foci, and providing a core organising concept for engaging with complex and interrelated aspects of young people’s lives today. Indeed, in our own individual and collaborative work (Cuervo & Wyn, 2012, 2017; Cuervo et al., 2015; Harris, 2016; Raffaetà et al., 2016; Wyn, 2013, 2015) we have found ourselves drawn to this idea, utilising it as a way into empirical investigation as well as unpacking it as a metaphor. The question ‘where and how do young people belong?’ certainly feels like an intellectually expansive and politically compelling starting point for youth studies today. ‘Belonging’ has helped to overcome some of the more rigid and categorical approaches to youth (such as ‘transitions’ or ‘self-concept’) and opened onto productive ways of thinking about the relational dimensions of youth experience in complex times, and young people’s connections to place, people, material spaces and objects.

And yet we have been aware of some of its limitations. We have found ourselves wondering about the easy take up of this term, and especially a tendency for it to be used uncritically or rather normatively; for it to be treated as a self-evident idea (and a good state to be in) rather than deeply theorised. The more belonging pops up, the less it seems to be scrutinised. Indeed, one of our avenues of inquiry is the possibly universalising

tendency of the belonging trope which may conceal and de-politicise other pressing issues for youth. Its pervasiveness in the field has led to the criticism that ‘belonging’ is simultaneously ‘everything and nothing’ and requires deeper analysis to be of enduring value. This book does this work.

Accordingly, here we do not seek to add to the large body of empirical work that already exists about youth and belonging, but rather address the need for a critical conceptual and theoretical interrogation of the concept of belonging as it is increasingly being used in both academic research and policy. We focus on belonging as a conceptual tool, exploring its provenance in the development of youth studies as well as the wide range of theoretical traditions with which this concept is aligned. We remain interested in the questions of where and how young people might belong, but this book explicitly does not follow the tradition of exploring experiences of belonging on a site by site or country by country basis, or by categorical youth identities. Rather, we take as the starting point the different conceptual affordances of the idea of belonging, and draw on examples from many different contexts to provide analysis of what the concept of belonging is doing for youth research and for youth policy in terms of framing research and delivery of initiatives for young people.

We do so as Australian researchers, undertaking youth studies in the specific context of a multicultural settler-colonial state described by Connell (2007, p. 72) as ‘a small European community parked on the edge of Asia’: a nation that is small (in population) but large (in land mass), rich, peripheral and deindustrialised, home to the peoples of the oldest living culture in the world, exceptionally culturally diverse but affiliated with the Empire and the West, geographically outside of but dependent on metropolitan power and international capitalism, and riven by racial anxieties (see also Harris & Idriss, 2021). From this perspective, we are especially interested in the meanings of belonging frames in the construction of youth research and policy in settler-colonial nation-making, the mobilisation of these approaches in the study and management of migrant and mobile youth, youth belonging in the regional context, and reflection on the importation, application and generation of Northern (and especially British) theory, concepts and approaches in youth belonging research and policy. Therefore, some of our discussion necessarily centres the Australian example: this is critical in terms of our own positionality but also promotes a youth studies approach that moves beyond the field’s tendency towards dis-located tropes and often unnamed reference points and encourages other youth studies scholars to reflect on their intellectual

foundations and consider the politics of knowledge making about youth in their contexts.

At the same time, we engage scholarship in and beyond Australia, the UK, and more broadly from and beyond the ‘WENA’ hegemon of Western Europe and North America that has claimed the centre of youth studies (Cooper et al., 2019). Our scope is not intended to be comprehensive or representative, but rather to show how the frame of belonging has shaped broader trends in youth research and policy around some key issues and agendas, with different local manifestations, as both a productive and problematic response to globally-relevant and globally-felt circumstances in which young people live and by which they are stratified. The aim therefore is not so much to show how young people in different places or circumstances belong, but to investigate the increasing popularity of a belonging approach in youth research, to bring to light the work that the concept of belonging does to construct an agenda for youth studies and policy, to understand the history and politics of the concept, and to critically interrogate this framework (including the work it does to both productively and problematically construct particular kinds of youth identities and issues in the first place).

ORGANISATION OF THE CHAPTERS

Following this first chapter that has outlined our framework for thinking about belonging in youth studies, we move to two chapters that explore the intellectual origins and context for the turn to belonging in youth research and policy. Chapter 2 offers an analysis of the historical background to this use, and Chap. 3 is a close consideration of the conceptual strands that employ belonging in very different ways. Chapter 4 then focuses on the adoption of a belonging register in youth policy. The following three chapters address key domains where a belonging approach has been taken up in a substantive sense across scholarship and policy: transitions regimes and participation; citizenship; and place and mobility. The book concludes with a chapter offering a discussion of the implications of a belonging frame for researching youth, bringing together questions of epistemology and methodology. All chapters conclude by answering the question ‘what do concepts of belonging do?’ in the areas under consideration in those chapters.

Chapter 2, called *Historical Underpinnings*, traces a genealogical analysis of youth studies within key three timeframes: post-World War 2

anxieties about youth; the challenges of post-industrial youth in the 1960s and 1970s; and the question of youth transitions and cultures that dominated youth sociology from the 1980s. This analysis shows the centrality of emerging anxieties about the nature of young people's belonging to society that are consistently invoked in periods of social change. These concerns are reflected in youth studies through the use of frameworks that reflect wider concerns and preoccupations with nationhood, the future, economies and social control. This chapter explores the historical underpinnings of interest in the ways in which young people belong, discussing the development of ideas about belonging from the early work on youth cultures of the Chicago School in the United States in the 1950s to the Birmingham School in the 1970s, the interest in youth subcultures and in youth transitions through education and work in the 1980s and 1990s, and the focus on place and mobility introduced by social geographers, rural youth sociologists and migration scholars in the 2000s. Whereas early youth studies focused on the question of social order, focusing on how marginalised and deviant young people made their lives meaningful, contemporary youth studies has turned this on its head, to explore the question of how new globalising processes are transforming the experience of youth.

Following from the historical perspective, Chap. 3, titled *Conceptual Threads*, focuses on contemporary interest in the concept of belonging, analysing a range of concepts of belonging that inform youth studies in the present. Given its breadth and widespread use, both explicitly and implicitly in youth studies, this chapter develops our argument that it is timely to conduct a critical and rigorous analysis of what the concept of belonging does, because there is the real risk that belonging simply becomes a trope. It acknowledges that the metaphor of belonging is integral to a range of conceptual approaches and is understood and used in a plethora of ways in youth studies. It is an agile conceptual formation that can cover everything from young people's personal capacities to create social bonds to the political conditions of their membership in a nation. Belonging is also at the centre of youth relationships with key institutions (e.g. different education systems, work, family) that shape their everyday experiences. The chapter opens with a consideration of the influence of Yuval-Davis' conceptualisations of the concept of belonging, given that her work is widely referenced and, in many ways, pivotal to thinking about belonging as a tool for analysis. The chapter then focuses on the way in which the concept of belonging has been employed in youth studies to

understand the everyday, making visible performances of belonging, and the power of everyday encounters and the layering of encounters, both human and more-than-human, to create belonging. This chapter also discusses the close relationship between belonging and identity in youth studies, drawing on studies from many parts of the world. Finally, the chapter draws on the interest in youth studies in approaches that reject the ontology/epistemology and the human/non-human binaries. These approaches, we argue, have opened up the contradictory, complex interrelationships of belonging in new ways. We draw particularly on Indigenous scholarship to illustrate approaches to belonging that fuse the meaning of being, belonging and place. This chapter concludes that despite the more nuanced and complex understandings about belonging that are afforded from new materialist conceptions of belonging, and the insights of Indigenous scholars, its use tends towards the normative, supporting conceptions of mainstream and risk.

We next turn to reflect on the ways in which both the historical legacy of assumptions about belonging in youth studies and contemporary uses of the concept of belonging are taken up in policies that impact on young people's lives, especially those associated with education, employment and wellbeing. Chapter 4, called *Policy Frames*, also sets the scene for the consideration of the affordances, limitations and challenges of the concept of belonging for youth studies. This chapter examines how policy contributes to shape the ways in which young people construct their lives. It explores how the treatment of belonging in youth policy is in many instances not explicit but implicitly addressed through the policy frameworks of social inclusion, exclusion and integration. It shows how the metaphor of belonging taken up by these policy frameworks can compartmentalise youth into just a single sphere of life (i.e. youth-as-student or youth-as-worker) and can individualise structural problems and solutions. It examines how the framework of social inclusion constructs a conditional belonging in society, underpinned by notions of personal responsibility and entrepreneurialism that circumscribe young people's membership exclusively to participation in education, training and employment. A failure to engage in learning and earning is then framed through a social exclusion approach that serves to individualise un-belonging by positioning youth at the margins as deficient and morally distinct from the rest of society. Focusing on Indigenous youth policy research, predominantly in Australia and New Zealand, it interrogates the way belonging has been employed through a social integration framework that continues to

normalise the idea that Indigenous youth need to be ‘fixed’. Ultimately, while examining how belonging has been taken up by policy as a normative, categorical and individualised concept, it explores how belonging can still offer useful ways of expanding policy approaches by connecting young people to other relevant spheres of life beyond education and work.

In Chap. 5, titled *Transitions and Participation*, we turn to the ubiquitous concepts of transitions and participation. This chapter draws on youth studies of Indigenous youth, gendered transitions and global transition regimes to analyse the work of different conceptual framings of transition and participation for understanding belonging. It shows how these linked concepts are mobilised to stand for very different approaches to belonging, depending on whether they are underpinned by categorical, normative and universalising assumptions of youth or on relational approaches. Categorical approaches to transition invoke the *stages and milestones* that mark trajectories from childhood to adulthood, with normative approaches to youth participation as their partner, invoking the *practices* that are seen to be appropriate for young people’s ‘expression’ or ‘voice’ through these stages. Together, this pairing of concepts covers much of the youth research landscape. The use of relational registers of transition reveals how structural developments, particularly focusing on the weakening nexus between education and work, reinscribe old divisions based on gender, location and race. The chapter draws the work of Indigenous scholars; the two-decades Australian Life Patterns longitudinal study as well as research from the Asia-Pacific region and from Europe to highlight the way in which relational approaches shift the focus to the multiplicity of individual’s subjective identifications through to institutional processes, focusing on the relationships between people, people and things, and researcher and researched.

Chapter 6, *Citizenship*, considers the ways in which the framework of belonging has been drawn on in new conceptualisations of youth civic and political identity and participation. It looks at the move from legalistic and technical to more maximal theorisations of citizenship that focus on the belonging-inflected notions of participation and membership. It addresses the interest in boundary-making and political and social inclusion in the youth citizenship agenda in an age of migration, and tensions between a focus on the nation on the one hand, and local, global and digital spaces of young people’s civic and political lives on the other. In doing so it explores the way belonging has been employed to theorise youth transnational solidarities, multiple domains of political and civic agency, and

emergent communities of membership and responsibility in conditions of mass migration, extensive youth mobility and the ongoing politics of colonisation (for example, belonging conceptualised variously through notions of urban, cultural, digital, and/or Indigenous sovereign citizenships). It evaluates the affordances that a belonging approach brings to youth citizenship studies in terms of regard for relational and multi-scalar dimensions of participation and recognition against ongoing attention to legal and formal structures of inclusion and rights.

Chapter 7, called *Mobilities*, explores the complex and often contradictory ways in which the concept of belonging is utilised to understand young people's mobilities and place making. It interrogates how a belonging frame has been applied to youth mobilities in contemporary youth studies through an analysis of the multiplicity of mobilities at different spatial scales that are produced as a result of social and economic transformations and political conflicts and cultural developments. Against this background, it questions individualised approaches to transnational transitions that neglect the relevance of a relational approach, and problematises the notion of spatial reflexivity with its tendency to reify mobility at the expense of place making. The concept of belonging is employed to interrogate the imperative of rural youth migration and how young people from autochthonous, migrant and refugee backgrounds navigate different cultures, including in digital spaces, while they forge new communities. Flows and fixities in mega-metropolitan places in the Global South are evaluated through a belonging frame to unearth the persistent production of inequalities that impact on young people's everyday (im)mobilities. It interrogates the risk in youth studies to essentialise and individualise belonging as a 'good' thing, and considers the implications when we normalise it, moralise it, construct it as a normative expectation – just as with the transitions approach – where those who do not achieve it are misrecognised, deemed to be at-risk, stuck and unbelonging.

Chapter 8, *Researching Belonging in Youth Studies* discusses how a critical approach to youth belonging produces a number of conceptual and methodological challenges and affordances for youth research. It explores some of the key methodological, epistemological and conceptual aspects of belonging research, evaluating claims that belonging as an approach can helpfully attune research to relationality, can address tendencies to reproduce limiting issues, tropes and categories for youth research, and can closely explore the structure/agency nexus in young people's lives. It weighs these perspectives against counter claims that it can individualise,

regulate, depoliticise and generalise youth experience, and lead to research tools and approaches narrowly focused on youth agency, voice and identity in ways that are disconnected from social and political systems. It also considers specific methods in belonging research to investigate the ways the turn to belonging has animated debates about empirical techniques and concludes with a reflection on the value of the question of belonging as a driver for youth research.

Belonging has multiple registers and can elude simple definition. This is common of complex, slippery, abstract concepts such as justice, or freedom. This is because their meanings are tightly associated with the socio-historical context in which they are used and the subjective ideas, beliefs, practice and uptake of individuals and social group within these contexts. Particularly pertinent for our discussion is exploring how definitions of abstract concepts can generate a norm (out of the idea of belonging for youth), which eventually constructs a norm for how (and where) youth should belong. Thus while we have opened this chapter with a consideration of meanings of belonging as the concept is commonly used, this book is not designed to tell readers the best way to define belonging, but instead offers a series of explorations and reflections for youth researchers to draw on to clarify and critically consider their position. Rather than proposing a better or most accurate definition of belonging, we are more concerned here with interrupting the persistent reification of this concept and are interested instead in exploring how and why it has become popular, how it has been constituted and taken up in youth studies research and youth policy, and with what effects. Our aim is not so much to promote a single definition of belonging, but to investigate what different definitions, ideas and uses of belonging allow youth research and policy to do, in the changing socio-historical context of youth research.

Our overall aim in this book is to consider the historical and conceptual foundations and applications of belonging in youth studies and trace its development and use as an agenda, metaphor, conceptual framework, research approach and policy orientation in transition, participation, citizenship, place, mobility and related domains. Belonging has been a way to regulate, include, exclude, stratify and manage youth, and yet also offers considerable affordances; not least in overcoming categorical, segmented and linear approaches in youth policy and research by opening onto relational thinking. At a time when belonging has become a core concern in (and beyond) youth research and policy, we argue for its considered interrogation. Rather than advocating for its take up or rejection, we explore

what the concept of belonging does in and for youth studies. We suggest that such an analysis of belonging must precede any work to mobilise a critical framework of relationality, which may be its greatest potentiality.

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