

Belonging: 'feliks
skrzynecki' 'migrant
hostel' and photo
essay 'belongings:
felt...



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Belonging is the ability of an individual to reconcile identity with their social environment. Peter Skrzynecki's poems Feliks Skrzynecki and Migrant Hostel from the anthology 'Immigrant Chronicle' explore this concept in relation to migrants during the post WWII period and are reflections of Henri Tajfel's social identity theory. The photo essay entitled Belongings; felt, presented, challenged transfers these same principles to a modern context, illustrating the enduring nature of the struggle humanity faces in the endeavour to belong.

Feliks' gardening in Feliks Skrzynecki can be seen as a response to the years of forced labour in Germany which left him at the mercy of bigger tides in the affairs of humanity. Once in Australia as part of the post WWII influx of migrants, Feliks devotes himself to creating an environment which he can control. Stanza one and two establishes a sense of comfort and familiarity within the niche he has created for himself. Feliks recognises that belonging is gained through the possession of particular socially valued and accepted criteria.

In an Australian context, uniformity is made the criteria for belonging, something which Feliks himself does not value highly, as expressed in "Did your father ever attempt to learn English?" The condescending tone employed portrays the perceived societal value of assimilation and the representation of an unwelcoming society as seen from a migrant's perspective. Henri Tajfel's social identity theory states that a person's sense of self is based on their group membership(s); that in order to increase our self-image we enhance the status of the group to which we belong (in group) and discriminate against the groups that we do not (out group).

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Peter Skrzynecki presents a contradictory self-categorisation in the poem Feliks Skrzynecki. " His (fathers) Polish friends always shook hands too violently" connotes cultural exclusivity and the affinity of the persona with a non-Polish culture. Child voice serves to highlight the generation divide between Feliks and his son as Peter seeks to strengthen his sense of belonging in his new Australian culture by establishing his father and " his Polish friends" as the ' out group'.

Conversely and simultaneously, the persona distinguishes himself from the Australian bureaucracy through the use of derogatory, stereotypical language: " A crew cut, grey haired department clerk who asked me in dancing bear grunts". This highlights the difficulty of establishing a sense of belonging when conflicted with two cultural identities. The poem Migrant Hostel (Parkes 1949-51) explores the alienation of and animosity shown towards ' newcomers' to Australian society. " Nationalities sought each other out instinctively" connotes the importance of familiarity, as expressed in Feliks Skrzynecki.

Individuals are more able to reconcile their personal identity with the inherent need to belong to a group in a known and familiar environment. The emotional and physical security provided by one's own cultural group is evidence of the pre-programmed biological need to form ' tribes'. The migrants are dehumanised through a lack of information- " left us wondering" and " unaware". The migrants pose a threat to current Australian pattern of existence and the construct of social Darwinism dictates that the new threat must be eliminated.

In order for the individuals to maintain their feelings of belonging, the two groups are in a constant state of competition; hence the hostility felt by the migrants is a result of competing identities. Consequently the perception that we must learn our right to belong permeates society. Belonging is not an inherent right of the human being, but something that is earned through socially valued criteria. Just as Feliks is denied acceptance by Australian society in Feliks Skrzynecki, so too are the migrants by “ a barrier at the main gate....

Pointed in reprimand or shame”. The migrants are made to feel prisoners, subverted to authority and “ needing its sanction” to live their lives. Due to their alternate cultural identity migrants are excluded and alienated from society, revealing that t concept of belonging is heavily based on dominant culture. Belongings: felt, presented, challenged explores perhaps the most conflicting yet thought provoking aspect of belonging; that of the struggle between society’s expectations of conformity and the individuals search for a unique sense of identity.

The photo essay is compiled of images taken by victims persecuted for choosing not to belong to the popular vision of society. In the post 9/11 context, where choosing not to belong can result in civil wars and racial persecution, this simultaneous need to belong to society and an individual’s own search for identity are harshly conflicted. Individual torment and dislocation is experienced by thousands of people as they become the casualties of an internal jihad of ethics and instinct.

The control exerted over these people is a gross exaggeration of the control portrayed in Migrant Hostel and represents the dire consequences of the inability of the individual to reconcile personal identity with their social environment. The ability is indeed affected by the nature of the individual's context. The ideas about belonging communicated in Belongings: felt, presented, challenged are such that some milieu do not foster individual thought but rely solely on conformity as a basis for belonging. Any deviance from this structure results in persecution and in extreme cases, genocide.

To a lesser extent, Peter Skrzynecki experienced these feelings of oppression and conveys the emotional isolation involved in the process of migration and assimilation. Migrant Hostel reveals the perception that we must earn our right to belong and the opposition faced by competing groups. Feliks Skrzynecki further explores this concept, looking at the effects of conflicting cultural identities on an individual and the affiliation with competing 'in' and 'out' groups. Thus belonging is determined by the ability to reconcile personal identity with social environment.