Introduction

In Chapter 5 I noted that the Blackhill youth regularly used the proprietary pronoun ‘my’ \(^1\) when they wanted to refer to Panjabi, Gujarati and other languages besides English, which were strongly associated with their families and communities. There was an apparent paradox between their proprietary claims and their simultaneous disavowal of a high level of expertise in the use of these languages. A similar pattern occurred when they referred to communities, both local and globally diasporic, of which they felt themselves to be a part; and also, more specifically, when they referred to the religious formations to which they were nominally attached. Consequently, with regard to these contexts, phrases like ‘my culture’, ‘my language’ and ‘my religion’, regularly occurred alongside bashful and rueful acknowledgements of their own deficient expertise in the tenets of idealised community emblematic practices,

my language [Panjabi] I- I don’t really know all of it because m- I was just when they were raising me they were just speaking English all the time and I just learned English I never really learned [Panjabi]

(Narjot (m) Panjabi Sikh)

I know I should be bothered it’s my language [Panjabi] bu[?] English just seems a bit easier for me to understand and speak ... but I – I think I – I would like to learn it more if I had the chance

(Sachdev (m) Panjabi Sikh)

When it comes to um being able to understand wha[?] my religion is about I hardly know i[?] I hardly know anythin[k] abou[?] my religion and I- I reckon that’s true with a lo[?] of my friends I- I don’t think
any of them know about their religion ... but seriously if I had to come down to if (?) I (long pause) don’t know nothin[']k about my religion ... I don’t pray I don’t I don’t really believe in a god or I question it and I don’t I don’t er know if my religion is I think our whole religion is based on a god I’m not sure

(Gurshanti (f) Panjabi Sikh)

RH: how did you feel about the [community language] classes when you were going

Rishab: they were okay I I felt yeah tha[?] I was learning more abou[?] my culture

(Rishab (m) Panjabi Hindu)

On the face of it the question of how to reconcile what appear to be competing cultural forces seems to arise. However, I have already indicated my dissatisfaction with, and rejection of, the notion that such young people are ‘caught between two cultures’. How else, then, might these phenomena be better understood and interpreted? In this chapter I suggest that the Blackhill youth inhabit a number of ethnic and cultural subcommunities which they articulate together in ways which draw both on residual traditional elements informed by diasporic influences and on emergent local elements, with different emphases dominant at contingent moments. Furthermore, that all this is accomplished in low key ways with little or no overt sign of crisis or serious discomfort. Their multifarious manoeuvrings and negotiations are experienced through the everyday practices of subcommunities organised on the basis of dimensions such as (a) community language use, (b) interactions with adolescent peers, (c) religious practices and (d) diaspora connections and continuities. In all of these dimensions factors related to language use play an important constitutive part. The constitution of new ethnicities and cultures of hybridity, can then, be imagined within the framework of two broad interlocking perspectives which challenge the ways in which members of visible minorities in Britain are customarily seen. Typically, for instance, people with origins in the Indian subcontinent are portrayed as members of a variety of tightly bounded homogeneous ‘South Asian’ cultures which allegedly contrast with so-called ‘British’ culture. People with this experience supposedly have to live with the daily anguish of having to choose between one culture or the other. The evidence from the Blackhill youth destabilises these notions. They experience mostly comfortable everyday membership of a variety of communities, some of which this chapter will describe. The second