Life Stories and Sociological Imagination

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INTRODUCTION

When reading newspapers, Web sites, or other news sources originating from different places across Europe, it is difficult not to notice a growing trend of right-wing extremism and xenophobic backlash against immigrants and those of immigrant origin. As an American living in Europe, I have had a difficult time understanding the motivations behind acts such as bans on religious clothing and minarets, and the expulsion of nomadic individuals to another European Union (EU) state, particularly in light of both antidiscrimination laws and European citizens’ right to free movement throughout member states. Although it might be easy to explain or dismiss growing xenophobia as a transient consequence of the financial crisis, it would be shortsighted to write off these trends as merely a result of growing economic disparity. Rather, economic challenges appear to have exacerbated underlying negative sentiments that have been present for some time in different countries, although such sentiments are perhaps less visible to or heard about by individuals identifying as majority members of a society.

Amidst this growing social disharmony, some individuals might wonder where and how they themselves fit into larger debates about identity, especially now that members of many European countries are forced to confront the challenges brought about by neoliberal market-driven social policies and right-wing populist calls for a return to stricter border controls and limited immigration. Thus, for those individuals interested in exploring their own role in identity debates, this book offers an example of how one may connect oneself to and attempt to understand others by exercising a sociological imagination—a means of considering how individuals, no matter how far removed, are linked via the social structures or situations limiting their ability to participate as full members of a society (Lemert 2005; Mills 1959/2000).

To provide a more concrete example of how one might begin to think about how lives and experiences intersect across social and national boundaries, I will offer a glimpse into my own journey as a multicultural individual crossing state boundaries, attempting to make sense of cultural differences and what it means to be depicted as an “other”. Situating myself within this context, I shall engage with the life works of two music artists—individuals who push boundaries and, in ways both subtle and
more obvious, demand acceptance of minority viewpoints in larger debates about what it means to belong to a particular place. By connecting my own experiences with those of two public figures, this book shall offer interpretations of identity and the concept of belonging as understood vis-à-vis engagement with the life stories and texts of Faudel Belloua from France and Adam Tensta from Sweden. While it is not my goal to provide a comprehensive picture of the state of identity politics in France and Sweden, this book offers a starting point to discuss or begin to think about national identity in a more personal way, encouraging readers to critically participate in debates both within and outside of their own community/ies.

As a white citizen of the United States, I believe that I have a personal responsibility to work to raise awareness and support respectful discussion about often taboo topics such as racism, white or majority privilege, ethnocentrism, and connecting the metaphorical dots between the material one engages with in popular culture and the greater cultural tropes or narratives that systematically prevent or discourage those outside the mainstream from asserting their voices. However, because of my position of privilege as a highly educated white American, I do not pretend that my own feelings of being outside the mainstream mirror the harsh realities that many in my own country and in Europe face. I am not systematically discriminated against based upon my skin color, and my socioeconomic status also limits my ability to personally empathize with those who are discriminated against based on both of these counts. However, as a woman, I do know what it feels like to have doors closed to me on account of my gender. Further, as someone who immigrated to Sweden and is not yet a fully participating member of its society (i.e., non-citizen, unemployed), my sympathy with those who are discriminated against has deepened, as has my own feeling that more voices must be heard in the debates addressing who has a right to belong and participate in society and why.

I have been fascinated by the empowering nature of music and musicians’ life stories as a means through which one may contextualize insider/outsider dichotomies within the EU, and in the following pages of this book, I shall describe my study in a personal, more informal manner that allows for the reader to step inside the process of how the study was conceived. Chapter One details the process that led to the conception of this study and elaborates in greater context the reasons why examining how identity is negotiated in life stories seemed particularly urgent. Chapter Two is a theoretical exploration of the concept of living biography, providing insight into the importance of life stories as tools for understanding how individual struggles related to identity have wider
societal implications. Chapters Three and Four are case studies discussing the living biographies of Belloua and Tensta, respectively, exploring how identity is approached in their work. Chapter Five will revisit the concept of living biography in relation to the life works of Tensta and Faudel, highlighting how working with life stories offers the possibility of being empowered with hope in a liquid modern period of uncertainty (Bauman 2007).

The life works of Faudel and Adam Tensta were gathered and examined between fall 2006 and fall 2011. Thus, in the case of Faudel’s identity work in France, I do not touch upon events happening in the period just before and after the election of President François Hollande. Future studies considering changes in identity discussions and policy under Hollande’s presidency would be beneficial. Likewise, because my data collection for this study ended only one year after the right-wing Sweden Democrats were elected into Swedish parliament for the first time, the book does not address Adam Tensta’s more recent efforts to use both music and public appearances to provide a counter-discussion on minorities’ access to, and right to define, Swedish identity.

Unless otherwise noted, all translations from French and Swedish are my own.
CHAPTER ONE

SETTING THE CONTEXT:
FRANCE, SWEDEN, IDENTITY, AND DEBATED UNDERSTANDINGS OF BELONGING

Through the presentation and analysis of texts and other phenomena produced by and about Adam Tensta and Faudel Belloua, the aim of this book is twofold. First, I shall open a discussion on new ways of thinking about identity. I postulate that identity is too complex to be understood unidimensionally as either solely performative or merely rooted in discourse; rather, identity is defined as a rich sensory experience comprised of many social factors, physiological experiences, responses, and actions. Departing from this widened definition of identity, I argue that ongoing engagement with the material produced by Belloua and Tensta, a process which I refer to as living biography, presents a unique window into how the artists “translate private troubles into public issues” (Giroux September 28, 2010) while providing a compelling departure point for further discussion on how the notion of identity is changing in France and Sweden and beyond.

Second, in looking individually at how each artist’s life story has been constructed in the public sphere, I will offer a Millsian-inspired theoretical interpretation of how these artists attempt to negotiate alternative life stories amid popular culture narratives of national identities in their respective countries (Mills 1959/2000). Juxtaposing a widened understanding of identity against the life stories of Belloua and Tensta is a way of moving beyond existing constraints on definitions of identity while also seeing how individuals’ experiences are connected to public life and larger struggles in a “cycle of recognition” between personal testimony and public history” (Thomson 1999, 32). Effectively, the examination of life stories becomes less a focus on the individual than a way for people to see themselves in relation to the struggles of others (Mills 1959/2000). To illustrate this last point, I will share insight into how my own identity struggles as a multicultural individual have provided a departure point for connecting the personal to the public, arguing that connecting struggles
across contexts can yield remarkable awareness into how diasporic individuals make sense of the new and the old, the familiar and the unfamiliar.

Faudel Belloua and Adam Tensta’s living biographies offer a unique opportunity to understand how identity is negotiated in France and Sweden today. Unlike other singers of the same genre of music, Belloua was born and raised in France. Thus, some might argue that he, as both a raï music singer and a French-born citizen of Algerian descent, has more agency and credibility to challenge existing notions of identity in that country. Additionally, Faudel’s life works are rich in the sense that they are comprised of widely accessible pieces that transcend the world of music. Faudel is more than a musician; he is also an actor and an author who has used his role as an author as a position from which to reflect upon his life story. What I find most compelling about him as a case study, however, is how public his personal struggles have been within the context of a society where privacy is highly valued.

Adam Tensta’s life works present a fascinating study in related ways. A Swedish-born and -raised hip hop artist, Tensta grew up in a multicultural household located in a stigmatized suburb of Stockholm. Presenting himself as not only a rapper but also an activist, Tensta’s life works include the use of media such as music, Internet shows, blogs, Facebook, and Twitter. Rapping in English, Tensta addresses issues like discrimination and stereotyping in autobiographical songs and contests a right-wing monopoly on national pride in Sweden. Tensta’s efforts to make contact with his fans through the aforementioned technological channels suggest a desire to involve them in the development of his life story, opening a window into the process of his identity work.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will briefly define key terms to be used throughout the text, followed by an explanation of the motivation of this study. Then, I will situate this project in a larger EU context in which the importance of identity has become more salient, followed by an explanation of some assumptions I carry into this study as a scholar.

**Explanation of Key Terms Related to Identity**

A presentation of key terms that will be used throughout the text is instrumental to readers’ ability to understand the context of this book, especially as this study draws upon literature from across multiple disciplines in order to paint a wider picture of how discussions about identity take shape in a liquid modern world (Bauman 2007). Because disagreements over language and theories of identity are present both
across and within disciplines, explaining the framework through which the reader can understand the assumptions and goals of this study is imperative.

Identity

The notion of identity as used here is informed by the traditions of positioning theory, performativity, and by an exploration into the role of senses in understanding human identity in different circumstances. Positioning theory, which originates from Althusser’s (1971) notion of interpellation and was expanded upon by Davies and Harré (1990) and others (Harré et al. 2009; Harré and Slocum 2003; Anderson 2009), refers to how individuals “adopt, resist and offer ‘subject positions’ that are made available in discourses or ‘master narratives’” (Benwell and Stokoe 2006, 43). Viewed through a positioning theory lens, individuals are seen to have agency to “resist, negotiate, modify or refuse positions” (43) in struggles to claim or refute particular identities. The existence of dominant discourse narratives of particular subject positions (e.g., teacher, mother, carpenter) does not limit individuals’ agency in negotiating identities, as the narratives taken up by individuals who wish to occupy these positions are neither singular nor static, but are constantly subjected to changes and are challenged as societies continue and evolve though time. Assuming different subject positions goes further than merely stepping into or trying on different roles; it can also involve the disruption of “fixed identifications” (Bhabha 2004, 4), ensuring that roles do not remain static by virtue of having their legitimacy continually called into question.

Individuals, in asserting or negotiating their identities, produce texts of various forms (i.e., modes) that shed light on how identity is performed by taking up or disrupting different subject positions. It is the production of texts—an act which assumes some level of autonomy on the part of the individual—that provides new windows for shaping (and showcasing) how people see and are seen. Although identity is often viewed from a Bakhtinian perspective (Bakhtin, Holquist, and Emerson 1986) as being transmitted mainly through words or texts (see Bhatt 2008; Hyland 2010), the understanding of identity used in this book is that of a phenomenon that is also represented, performed (Butler 1999; Riessman 2003; LaPointe 2010), or felt (Seremetakis 1994; Kierans and Maynooth 2001) through a range of signifying practices beyond the textual. Identity can be performed not only through the manipulation of visual features such as body language and dress, but also in the way that particular compositional elements of diverse modes of texts (e.g., the instruments chosen to play a song; the designs, colors, or historical references drawn upon in artwork or
in activist demonstrations) are approached or selected when subjects take up or construct different identity positions.

While individuals belong to different social groups and have different roles in society (e.g., father, teacher, yoga instructor, daughter, chemist, carpenter, friend, Canadian, Balinese), within such roles and in communities of practice (Wenger 1998) there exists a wide range of possibilities of *how* to do, be, or negotiate each of these roles—never mind the ways in which these roles, groups, and ways of doing intersect (Winker and Degele 2011) with each other! Thus, identity is simultaneously dependent on one’s different roles in society yet also open to the possibility of being shaped or constructed in the way that each individual sees fit. However, positioning theory and performativity are not sufficient to describe the understanding of identity put forth here, and this is where an exploration of sensory engagement with identity can fill in what I perceive to be a missing element of discussions of what makes up one’s identity.

Although the limits of particular roles may be constrained by social mores, religious beliefs, or laws (Foucault 1972), I strongly insist on an awareness of the possibilities of experiencing identity I believe to be inherent in human beings, regardless of which space or place one is situated in or position/role one assumes or is ascribed. More bluntly, human beings, wherever we are, have tools to understand identity through ways that cannot be expressed in words: the senses. Identity is a full sensory experience, engaging not only the textual but also the visual, olfactory, aural, and tactile (Kierans and Maynooth 2001). The parameters within which the senses serve in relation to understanding/experiencing identity are excitingly broad. For example, a person’s identity can be shaped by one’s own choices of, or another person’s experience or engagement with, one’s: clothing, perfume, or hair color/style choices; posture, gait, state of health/mobility, or gesticulation; actions such as recycling, active civic participation, gambling, or growing one’s facial hair.

While some might argue that such choices constitute performing identity or exhibiting characteristics expected of certain roles (Butler 1999), the idea of performance seems to emphasize an actor carrying out a specific role combined with the presence or expectation(s) of an audience. Sensory engagement with identity can be the result of interaction between individuals, but it can also be a solitary—and perhaps less conscious—endeavor. Further, the idea of identity performance, like the concept of a performance itself, suggests a beginning and an end, effectively de-emphasizing the ongoing, developing nature of the self throughout one’s lifetime. Sensory experience of and engagement with identity, on the other
hand, highlights the connection between the physical and the emotional in a way that supports a notion of identity as ongoing and evolutionary. Acknowledging that the way we touch, smell, taste, see, or hear the world around us accepts that how we make sense of reality has some biological ground from which every human being draws; yet, such an acknowledgment enables us to celebrate our humanity without suggesting or supporting a biological determinism. We all have sensory experiences; accepting this fact neither implies nor suggests that there are specific reasons as to why this happens in relation to the social groups with whom one identifies or is identified.

Although Kierans and Maynooth (2001) reference drastically life-altering illness as the means through which individuals use the senses to negotiate their new identities, their ideas are also particularly influential beyond the realm of life-altering disease. They state, “a person’s relationship with their body is pivotal to how they explain a changing universe” (2001, 240). I argue that although life-changing illness can certainly be a cause for reflection and self-evaluation leading to new understandings of reality and self-identity, one need not experience illness to either use or view the body and the senses as tools for understanding, asserting, performing, and negotiating identity. Indeed, “[t]he senses, like language, are a social fact to the extent that they are a collective medium of communication that is both voluntary and involuntary, stylized and personal” (Seremetakis 1994, 6).

Thus, identity is a multifaceted term that is composed of individuals’ agency, how one is represented or performs certain roles, and how the senses experience and make sense of reality.

National identity

National identity here refers to the sense of belonging or having allegiance to a particular group (e.g., American, French, Swedish) that usually has official recognition as a state. National identity can thus be represented as the assumed collective identity of members of a particular country, especially when such a country is presented in the dominant discourse to be composed of people who possess some kind of unifying characteristics. However, national identity can also cross official state borders, as in the case of the Sami in Northern Europe or the Romani across Europe, and such an identity may or may not have official recognition. Although the aforementioned two groups are not homogenous in either language or origin, it can be said that a shared history, beliefs, or cultural traditions and customs function as uniting factors when language
or geographic origin vary slightly among individuals identifying as members of a particular group—whether or not such groups are internationally recognized as having nationhood. Unless otherwise specified in this book, national identity will be referred to as the (assumed) collective identity of members of officially recognized states.

National identity may be defined, symbolized, or negotiated on both personal and official levels. On a personal level, individuals, working within existing discourses of national identities to which they belong, may redefine, resist, or challenge what it means to have a particular national identity. On a broader societal level, individuals may claim to speak representatively for or define the characteristics or essence of a national identity. It is important, therefore, to keep in mind that my use of the term national identity allows for members’ fluidity of interpretation and definition of the factors that constitute membership in a particular group. On an officially recognized level, different political bodies may represent a nation’s identity in a way that suggests a wider consensus of belonging (whether or not such beliefs are entirely accepted by members), and may also assert symbolic power on behalf of the nation’s members.

Citizenship

Citizenship refers to the legal status granted to individuals (citizens) who are eligible for protections, benefits, suffrage, and other privileges associated with being a full, permanent member of a country/state. What globally distinguishes citizenship is its feature of “excluding only foreigners, that is, persons who belong to other states” (Brubaker 1992, 21), although the extent to which foreigners are excluded is variable from location to location. Individuals who are citizens of a particular country may or may not have emotional connections to the country or countries in which they are citizens, and the expectations placed upon citizens (e.g., taxes, voting obligations, military draft) vary from country to country. Expectations of citizenship can be ideological in the extent to which states demand conformity of behavior. France, for example, is viewed as having a “state-centered, assimilationalist self-understanding” (Brubaker 1992, 14) of citizenship, in which conformity and allegiance to the state are insisted upon to a higher degree than countries such as the United States, where multiculturalism and the expression of divergent viewpoints are

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1 Country and state are used interchangeably throughout the book.
more widely acknowledged and protected. In this study, the use of the term “citizenship” is contrasted with “residency”—the latter of which may confer social benefits, legal protections, and in some cases, limited suffrage, yet is not a permanent, irrevocable status.

Another facet of citizenship involves participation of some sort, although such participation may be passive by virtue of simply belonging and being present within the territory of a state. Residence in a particular society and the possession of its citizenship suggests that individuals do participate in varying degrees, whether social, labor-oriented, or other. Although residents of a country are also participants—often in similar or overlapping ways as citizens—citizenship confers additional privileges or protections upon citizens to which non-citizen residents may not be privy, namely the right to remain inside a country’s territorial borders.

Motivation of Study

Colonial Fallout and Struggles to be Heard and Treated Equally

First, we are in a time of continued unpacking of colonial baggage. This is manifested both by challenges to or leanings toward the “fixity” of national identity (Gest 2010, 19) and by widespread allegations of discrimination against those with origins in France’s former colonies. In such a climate of post-colonial tension, the question is raised about what it means when oppressed individuals insist on both having equal rights and on being heard in societies that have historically discriminated against minorities on the basis of their foreign origin.

Diverse perspectives of and action concerning the question of French identity have arisen, ranging from those of the French government to those of citizens sharing their opinions and experiences via diverse pop culture channels. To start with, after years of national policy that supported the notion of égalité by neither acknowledging nor accounting for diversity before the law (see http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/english/8ab.asp, Article 1, Preamble of French Constitution), the Sarkozy government took a turn to the ideological right in 2007 by establishing the Ministry of Immigration and National Identity. Such a move aroused suspicion among a significant portion of the French population, as discussions of national identity previously had been taboo territory broached only by those from the far right Front National (Meyran 2009)—a party known for its hostile attitudes toward immigrants and immigration. The Sarkozy Administration had also discussed the idea of revoking French citizenship from those of
foreign origin who have committed certain serious legal offenses. Drastic measures and unsympathetic responses cast a shadow upon Sarkozy’s political career, and his proposal to create two levels of citizenship threatened to further divide French society and make certain people feel unwelcome.

There is a shared sentiment of discontent over immigrant-associated and post-colonial-related issues facing French society, although the motivations of such discontent are informed by different (and perhaps opposite) reasoning. Within discussions about the historically race- and origin-blind perspective of the French government have been voices expressing frustration that Frenchness is a character trait expected of all, yet the benefits that Frenchness entails are infrequently accorded to those who are of recent immigrant origin—especially those with origins in the Maghreb (Echchaibi 2001). Issues such as social isolation, unfair popular culture representation (Hargreaves 2006), and origin-based discrimination are not disappearing, nor are they being addressed sufficiently to quiet public disapproval among some members of French society. Although discrimination is illegal, there is evidence that widespread job discrimination favors those with no recent immigrant ties (La France épinglée pour ses discriminations à l'embauche March 16, 2007; Astier November 2, 2005). The existence of plural perspectives about what constitutes national identity and access to it indicates that much remains to be understood in the realm of how individuals relate to, resist, and shape specific identities in post-colonial and—as in the case of Sweden—new-to-immigration countries.

The presence of social struggles based on ethnicity or foreign background does much to trouble the commonly held perception of Sweden as a beacon of democracy and equality—a perception in which the Swedish government invests heavily to uphold (see Pamment 2011). Although immigrants and those of foreign origin in Sweden do not live in a nation dealing explicitly with post-colonial fallout, a similar kind of unequal power dynamic suggests that individuals receive different treatment or have disproportionately limited access to certain social resources based on their status as native or non-native Swedes (Bideke and Bideke 2008; Dahlstedt and Hertzberg 2007; Discrimination: A threat to public health 2006; Lödén 2008). Regarding differential treatment, many of Sweden’s refugee immigrants—religious minorities included—face obstacles in having equal access to housing and jobs (Widespread segregation for immigrants 2009; Bideke and Bideke 2008). Education levels of foreign-born residents are comparatively lower than those of Swedish-born residents (Integration - ett regionalt perspektiv 2010), and
the difference between employment rates of foreign-born residents and Swedish-born residents is significant, with percentage gaps showing more than a 30% difference in employment of foreign-born residents in some areas of the country (Integration - analysis: Considerable regional differences in employment among foreign born persons June 11, 2010).

Challenges to the quality of life for those of foreign origin are not only restricted to the labor market. A recent survey on crime perceptions shows that foreign-born individuals or those born in Sweden to one or more foreign-born parents fear more for their safety than do ethnic Swedes, and individuals in the former group are less likely to have confidence in the justice system than are ethnic Swedes (Brå 2010). Those of foreign origin also have a higher tendency to believe that they are being racially or ethnicallyprofiled by police (Bideke and Bideke 2008). However, concern and frustration over social challenges in Swedish society do not come exclusively from those with a foreign background. In fact, growing concern about changes to the Swedish way of life has been a preoccupying issue for some ethnic Swedes. Despite fairly stable levels of crime among those with immigrant backgrounds (Martens and Holmberg 2005), public frustration over perceptions of increased crime due to the greater presence of immigrants (Trondman 2006) may, among other reasons, be responsible for the growing popularity of the Sweden Democrats, a nationalist political party known for anti-immigrant rhetoric. The Sweden Democrats achieved parliamentary representation for the first time in the September 2010 elections (New poll: Sweden Democrats heading for parliament? August 3, 2010), further highlighting the growing support received by this party since their surprising gains in the 2006 elections (Erlingsson, Loxbo, and Öhrvall 2009).

Although issues of discrimination against immigrants are addressed differently in France and Sweden, the fact remains that both countries have populations grappling with similar issues of unequal access to resources and resistance to what appears to be the dominant culture’s increasing fear of minority groups.

Concerns Related to Language and Identity

Discussions of language and its relationship to national identity have sprung up in many places, especially in societies that have experienced an influx of individuals who do not speak the country’s official language(s). Often, such conversations have included debate over the importance of having a national language (Lödén 2008), especially when social integration is a concern (see Swedish integration policy 2009; Bideke and
Bideke 2008; Määttä 2005). An indication of this trend is demonstrated by the recent changes to Swedish national policy on language rights, which, although subtle, may indicate feelings that Swedish identity is under threat by a greater presence of foreigners. Sweden, which previously did not have an official language, enacted a law in 2009 that declared Swedish to be an official language (see http://www.regeringen.se/content/1/c6/12/33/49/8f390fda.pdf). Although the policy confirms that everyone (including minority language speakers) has the right to use his/her preferred language, the timing of this provision occurs in a wider-European context of growing right-wing movements, backlash against immigrant groups, and rising Islamophobia.

In regard to linguistic and cultural debates in France, efforts have been made to use language in such a way that more clearly defines who belongs in France and who does not on the basis of conforming to specific social expectations. In the naturalization process, expectations on foreigners place a higher than previous value on linguistic and cultural assimilation. Access to citizenship via naturalization has come under government scrutiny in recent years, with a candidate’s language ability carrying a heavier weight (France approves immigration curbs September 20, 2007). In order to become a naturalized French citizen, the eligible candidate must have an interview to verify his/her assimilation and language skills (Naturalisation: Conditions de recevabilité de la demande October 2, 2006).

Beyond Sweden and France, the increasing relevance of language to debates on identity has become salient in the EU. In a broader context, the relationship of language to national identity faces increased attention during a period when national borders, including those of the European Union, become more fluid. Because individuals within the European Union are allowed to move to another member state if they have secured a job, the importance of language in a national context receives greater attention when EU states possess large numbers of immigrants (naturalized or not) who may live in areas with their fellow nationals, allowing continued use of their native language in a foreign context. The right to heritage language use within the EU², particularly in dealing with EU institutions or local government institutions if citizens live abroad, is further complicated by the fact that more than 20 languages enjoy official EU status (see http://ec.europa.eu/education/languages/languages-of-

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² When the heritage language is one of the official European Union languages.
europe/doc135_en.htm). This privileging of multilingualism at an EU level (A new framework strategy for multilingualism November 22, 2005) raises the question of who has the right to use his/her language on more local levels when the ability to speak one’s own language within the EU is, in theory, protected.

**Debated Understandings of Belonging**

Often central to debates surrounding discrimination in post-colonial societies and societies possessing an increased presence of foreign-born citizens are larger questions exploring the significance of identity and what it means to be of a certain background, namely a citizen of the particular nation in question. Although countries such as France have attempted to address this question, thus far it has seemed challenging for public identity debates to be approached sensitively and respectfully (e.g., via intercultural praxis—see Sorrels (2010). While it is not clear how many foreign-born individuals must be present in a country to suggest a crisis of identity, what is certain is that in France, Sweden, Germany, Denmark, Italy, and the Netherlands, for example, there is now a critical mass of individuals present that are viewed as outsiders—otherwise such discussions about national identity and stricter immigration controls might not occur. When struggles for resources, unequal access to education and jobs, and segregated living conditions converge with a financial crisis such as the current one, a common occurrence in several countries has been a neoliberally-framed turn against minority communities, including those populated by citizens of the European countries they reside in, placing blame on such communities when economic stability is challenged. When loud voices dominate popular culture discussions by attempting to alienate specific groups within a country’s population, the issue of fair representation becomes increasingly important in relation to national identity and civil rights.

Considering the current EU-wide backlash against immigrants or those otherwise outside of the mainstream—especially those accused of not assimilating—how can individuals living on the margins of dominant EU national groups be guaranteed representation? In regard to immigrants’ desires to feel a sense of national belonging in ways that are meaningful to them, native populations have frequently attempted to silence immigrants’ new interpretations of national identity (Grieshaber July 1, 2010). Such attempts to silence or expunge new voices and interpretations of identity narrow the space necessary for individuals living in democracies to gain a voice and claim a national identity negotiated on newly defined terms,
placing European ideals of freedom at odds with these practices occurring across the EU. While a number of politicians attempt to blame immigrants for their societies’ problems, it is rare to hear about new contributions to discussions on identity that do not involve a submissive, uncritical form of assimilation. Diverse perspectives exist on what it means to be a member of a country, and the space for new voices must be broadened in the current debates addressing concerns of or about immigrants and those of foreign origin.

**Project Relevance: The Larger EU Context**

Within the debates on national identity occurring over the past several years, public conversations, notably in France, Sweden, Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Italy, have explored the concept of national identity, often juxtaposing this topic with that concerning the presence of an increasing number of non-EU immigrants who do not submissively assimilate into mainstream culture. With regard to European immigrant populations, questions have been raised about who belongs in Europe and who does not. In Germany, complicated naturalization laws have prevented many Turkish immigrants from gaining German citizenship, which in turn has raised questions about immigrants’ real willingness to assimilate (Aktürk 2010). Switzerland recently fanned anti-immigrant flames by instating a ban on minarets (Dawson 2010). Geert Wilders, head of the Dutch anti-immigrant Freedom Party, has been orchestrating a movement to mobilize Dutch citizens against those of foreign origin, and Italian right-wing politicians, clergy, and citizens have protested the construction of mosques, sometimes using pigs or severed pig body parts as intimidation tactics. More recently, France and Belgium have instated burqa bans, despite each country having limited numbers of women who actually wear them (Visscher 2010).

Such occurrences and concerns have triggered an important need to reexamine what it means to be a member of a European state within the greater context of the changing dynamic of the EU. The current financial crisis has also helped to expose this dire need for open debate. Public perceptions of many Europeans indicate worsening economic realities (Gallup 2010), and the children of immigrants face greater obstacles to finding jobs, much like their parents (Martin 2009; Schröder 2009). Consequently, now is an important time to contribute to conversations about identity, especially in light of the growing diversity of perspectives and voices engaged in popular culture debates on what it means to name and represent oneself in the public sphere (Shannon 2000). This book
offers a starting point for such a discussion by focusing on two public figures in two of the EU’s member states.

**Assumptions**

At the heart of my research priorities is the desire to gain insight into the human condition with the hope of fostering dialogue that leads to social change. The social injustice I have read about and seen firsthand on several occasions has served as the impetus for my motivation in conducting research that I hope will lead to a deeper understanding of and greater interest in protecting individuals’ civil rights. I believe that the oppression manifested in various acts of injustice stems from the oppressors’ belief that their lives and their interests are more important than those of the people who are the targets of oppression. Although oppressors may not be conscious of the fact that they hold power over others, they willingly aim to protect the status quo that places them in a favorable position from which to exercise power over others. Freire (2008) eloquently describes how oppressors exert power in this way:

At first, the elite react spontaneously. Later, perceiving more clearly the threat involved in the awakening of popular consciousness, they organize. They bring forth a group of “crisis theoreticians” (the new cultural climate is usually labeled a crisis); they create social assistance institutions and armies of social workers; and—in the name of a supposedly threatened freedom—they repel the participation of the people. The elite defend a *sui generis* democracy, in which the people are “unwell” and require “medicine”—whereas in fact their “ailment” is the wish to speak up and participate (11).

In other words, the elite limit the power and freedom of expression of those they control or govern by redefining or attempting to redefine normality, creating a baseline ideal against which others are measured or judged. (While societies admittedly function with the assistance of laws and regulations, one must ask whether the environment in which people live encourages or discourages participation and conversation.) Inherent in the act of oppression, in whatever form it takes and whether or not it is consciously done, is a loss of respect and compassion for other human beings. This dangerous loss can spiral into a succession of beliefs, habits, and actions that continually reinforce unequal distributions of wealth and human potential, resulting in a damaged life experience for both the oppressor and the oppressed.

A way to move beyond this kind of hurtful relationship is to encourage individuals to understand the experiences of the other so that they might
recognize each other’s humanity and, in turn, care about the well-being of all people. This belief is in line with that of Freire (2000), who stated:

[The oppressor is solidary with the oppressed only when he stops regarding the oppressed as an abstract category and sees them as persons who have been unjustly dealt with, deprived of their voice, cheated in the sale of their labor—when he stops making pious, sentimental and individualistic gestures and risks an act of love (50).

By purposefully stepping outside of our comfort zones to ask how our own concerns may be common concerns across society, we can begin to discover how shared struggles develop and unfold against a web of growing economic disparity and start to think about how we can use such knowledge to disrupt the status quo.

In line with the previously mentioned goal to examine the living biographies of Belloua and Tensta to gain new understandings of how identity is manifested, this book takes up a social constructionist-informed approach (Gergen 2009). When reflecting upon my own beliefs about how debates on and claims to identity both arise and take shape, I found myself repeatedly thinking that a possible cause of social disharmony in several European countries is the existence of multiple perspectives on what it means to be a citizen or to belong to a particular community. Some tropes of citizenship are built upon the notion of assimilation, while others are sustained by the expectation of citizenship to be a cooperative or democratic coexistence. Within such existing perspectives, I seek to learn how Belloua and Tensta resist, renegotiate, and construct their identities. As such, I approach their texts and other phenomena with the aim of uncovering patterns among the lived experiences and motivations contained within. What I hope will be an exciting contribution to the field of education research is my exploration of what Richardson and Fowers (1998) refer to as the “dialectic process” (490) of identity building and negotiation in France and Sweden, as it is found in the living biographies of these two individuals.

An important aspect of my theoretical approach is what Patton (1990) emphasizes as being instrumental to studies informed by hermeneutic inquiry—the inclusion and presentation of the researcher’s perspective. Kneller (as cited in Patton 1990) notes, the researcher’s interpretations of different texts is based upon his/her “situation” (85). In other words, “the researcher’s own perspective must also be made explicit” (Patton 1990, 85) so as to illuminate how different understandings emerge from texts. Because each researcher has a unique perspective, the possibility of understandings generated from engagement with texts is innumerable. In
unpacking the materials used to build Belloua and Tensta’s living biographies, it is my aim to be as explicit as possible in explaining or providing a context for my assumptions and interpretations so as to indicate that they are my own perspective, rather than absolute truths.
CHAPTER TWO

THEORETICALLY SPEAKING: LIFE STORIES, SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION, AND MAKING THE PERSONAL PUBLIC

What Is a Living Biography?

Background

To better explain what a living biography is, I must first step back and explain what the term ‘biography’ meant to me when I began to conceptualize the theoretical framework for this study. My understanding of the word biography was that of a written “snapshot” of a life: two-dimensional and static, or at least fixed in time and thus immobile or immutable—what Hughes (June 28, 2008) refers to as “the recording of lived experience” (para. 22). I also believed that because biographies were written by specific individuals, such stories, by default, would inevitably include a perspective through which the reader would receive a filtered version of events—perhaps with some obvious bias or, more commonly, the perspective presented would be one attempting neutrality (Jensen 2009). One might argue that there is no way around this author bias; in order for a text about a life to exist, it must be created, someone must do the creating, and the text must be created in a particular context.

However, in our scientifically driven world, obvious bias is a turn-off in a text that purports to offer a historical account of someone’s life. Conceivably to avoid the obvious appearance of bias, a common perspective used in biography writing is a so-called objective lens, meaning that the role of the author is that of an omniscient storyteller who attempts to chronologically and factually present significant events occurring in an individual’s life (Lambert 1995). Ursula K. Le Guin (1989) has problematized the notion of the objective perspective used in writing, arguing that it is a perspective of exclusion widely viewed as preferential to outright subjectivity, the latter of which leaves the speaker exposed and
defenseless. However, as I will discuss later, I felt that acknowledging and embracing subjectivity in biography writing could help to widen understandings of how people relate to each other.

Shantz (2009) has addressed the issue of perspective in writing about life stories, arguing that “researchers cannot escape their position in the world by reference to objectivity or science” (117). Further, he states that the researcher becomes personally involved in the process of life story writing, noting that biographical writing becomes infused with autobiographical elements of the author. The idea of researchers becoming a part of their work is a trademark of qualitative research studies, in which Patton (1990) argues that “the researcher is the instrument of both data collection and data interpretation” (54). Although Patton may not have intended this statement to apply to research writing falling under an umbrella term of auto/biography, what one can pull from his ideas is that we cannot ignore the impact that researchers, including those writing about life stories, have on the work they do; in fact, researchers are inextricably linked to the stories in the writing they produce (Ollerenshaw and Creswell 2002; Lyle 2009; Bruner 2004).

It is interesting to consider the role of perspective with relation to life story writing, especially now that I realize that my own understanding of biography had been quite limited. Although lives have been depicted in texts of varying nature (e.g., visual, written) for hundreds of years (Hamilton 2007), the genre grew in popularity on both sides of the Atlantic during the 19th century (Podnieks 2009). During the early 20th century, scholars were discussing how the nature of writing biography had developed into an art of selection (see Podnieks 2009). The self-selection process associated with autobiography, a word that surfaced in the 1700s, has partly contributed to the genre’s discredit (see Folkenflik 1993). However, this art of selection is a liability, as more than a century later, biographical writing is still viewed with suspicion in academic circles due to what Podnieks (2009) refers to as the lack of a rubric by which to evaluate quality in a scientific manner. Biographical writing on pop culture figures is also treated with suspicion in academia, as Rollyson (2005) notes. He argues that viewing life writing as an art rather than as a factual historical account has contributed to the genre’s ill reception. It’s quite likely that my earlier belief that biography was a limited term was related to my own narrow or negative understanding of the genre’s possibilities; hence, I felt that I needed to come up with a better term to more accurately describe the phenomena of life stories that I found interesting, those being interaction and meaning making in the engagement with life stories. My general interest in life stories stems more
from what public figures mean or represent to others and how those representations and meanings come to be; thus, the word biography as I knew it felt inadequate to describe life stories, as they are both situated in a society, developed or created by individuals, and also engaged with by its members.

**Reasoning Behind Terminology: Living Biography**

The term *living biography* seemed fitting to me for a couple of reasons. First, representing the concept of biography as something evolving felt like a better way to describe a life story—especially one of someone who is still living—in light of the changing, fast-paced nature of new forms of knowledge taking shape in different modes (namely electronic or Internet-based ones). Second, and more importantly, I wanted my work on life stories to include an understanding of them as something that places emphasis on the engagement of individuals with the story in question; the act of interaction between the subject of inquiry and the individual engaging in such inquiry is significant to me. After all, an author of a biography can intend to impart a certain perspective (or none at all), yet what the reader of a biography (or any text, for that matter) understands and the meanings the reader generates or resists differ depending on who is doing the reading (Golden 1986).

Focusing on the interaction between life story and reader does more than emphasize the evolving nature of a life story; doing so also emphasizes individuals’ agency in creating, interpreting, and making new meaning of a life story. Thus, as the tasks involved in living biography work are different in the sense that each individual’s role is important to the generation and negotiation of knowledge, the ways in which we talk about those who become engaged with texts of different types must adapt as well. The description of the terms that follow is provided in order to emphasize this interactive nature and agency inherent to living biography. For the purpose of describing the ways in which individuals understand or relate to the subject of inquiry, i.e., the person whom the living biography ostensibly revolves around, I use the term *agent-persona relationship*. Agent replaces the notion of a reader, the latter of which may not only connote passivity but also is no longer adequate to describe the active ways in which one is engaged with life story paraphernalia. Persona describes the initial knowledge-creating and -disseminating individual (and his/her public representations) that the agent seeks to understand. Although the term *agent* has been used to refer to the subject of a life story (Bruner 2004), I think this word better describes the individual engaged
with a life story because it reminds one that meaning making goes in both
directions.

In addition to the aforementioned reasons, I also liked the phrase
“living biography” because it seems to better stress another evolutionary
aspect of life stories—how their significance can shift as time passes and
contexts change. After all, life stories do not cease to exist when a persona
dies; people may fall off the metaphorical radar, but the possibility exists
for their stories to continue being meaningful to others who are living. As
such, life stories continue to take on new meaning, even as more time
passes and the period in which the subject of inquiry was actually living
becomes further distanced from the present. However, what I find most
exciting about living biographies is that they are an ongoing process of
understanding between the agent and persona rather than a story with a
marked beginning and end. As long as the agent continues to engage with
objects or texts produced by and/or about the persona, the story of the
living biography—the interaction between the two—continues to grow, as
do the new meanings and knowledge produced from such interactions.

While much has been done in the investigation of reader response to
texts (Rosenblatt 1978; Chase and Hynd 1987; Benton 2005), limited work
has been done to investigate the understandings of identity generated
between agent and persona in life stories. The notion of development in
life stories has been discussed by Taylor and Littleton (2006), who have
studied the changing nature of identity in different episodes of talk.
Although such work recognizes that talk is given meaning through the
context in which it is situated and that sometimes speakers edit talk based
on what Taylor and Littleton call “imagined or previously experienced
audiences” (24), there remains a need to investigate the understandings
and meaning made during the interactions occurring in living biography
work, especially as these develop over time.

Lucy Green (2005) has addressed the interactive nature associated with
music as both a source of output and an item subject to influence by
listeners—a connection that may be related to the interaction occurring
between agents and personae. By highlighting that not only do individuals
socioculturally orient toward music in different ways, but also that music
“acts back upon us, through its capacity to influence our beliefs, values,
feelings, or behavior” (83), Green provides a way of thinking about the
interaction between an object of inquiry and those who are engaged with
it. However, such an analysis that focuses on an object or a single text
rather than on the producer of such an item limits the producer’s agency
in the meaning negotiation process found in living biography work. Although
one might argue that music can have a tremendous influence on