THIS IMPORTANT COLLECTION raises fundamental questions about citizenship and belonging in an historical era in which identity is even more ethnicised than it used to be, and where struggles over access to citizenship, dispossession and colonialism are heavily invested with ethnic and racial features. The book contains Australian histories of Arab (primarily, but not exclusively, Lebanese) immigrant communities and of the discrimination and exclusion they have faced at different stages in Australia. However, the most theoretical of the articles offer insights that are of value to all who seek to understand immigration, exile and minority status in relation to citizenship in the state societies of the modern West.

There are four different kinds of contribution. Three chapters by Monsour, Batrouney and Abood offer historical analysis of the immigrant experience of Arabs in Australia, the latter chapter also giving a comparative perspective on the Arab diaspora in Canada and the USA. Read together, they offer a history of the relationship of ‘Arab-Australians’ to the development of Australian citizenship from Federation to the present. The prominence of Lebanese in Arab-Australian history reflects the fact that Lebanon ‘has been the largest source country, followed by Egypt, with immigrants from Iraq becoming more numerous in recent years’. Immigrants from the Levant have come here since the 1880s. In the period between Federation and 1930, Syrian/Lebanese immigrants found that they could become British subjects (the then status of Australian citizenship) by being exempted from their official categorisation as ‘Asian’ because they were seen to be more European in appearance and culture than ‘other Asians’. After policy changes in the 1930s, Syrian/Lebanese and other immigrants from the Middle East were unlikely to gain admission into Australia if they were not sponsored by a relative already legally resident. After World War II, when the criteria for admission emphasised labour and skills needed for an industrialising Australia, the intake increased. These chapters do not record the history of immigration policy after this period of government-sponsored mass immigration, the shift to the points system and an increasingly reduced family reunion category of immigration, and they also leave untold the present story of Arab refugees both legal and illegal. The value of these chapters is to insist on the long-standing immigrant presence of the Lebanese in Australia, the discontinuities in immigration from the same places of origin arising both from changes in Australian government policy and changes in the ‘push’ factors for immigration, the discretionary nature of government immigration policy, and the readiness of Lebanese immigrants to take up Australian citizenship when they were able to do so.

Three chapters — by Collins, Noble and Tabar, and Poynting — offer different kinds of empirical social research on Arab-Australians. The first uses survey research on immigrant entrepreneurs, demonstrating family business to be the important resource it has traditionally been for immigrant communities. Noble and Tabar investigate the hybridity of Lebanese-Australian identity for Arabic-speaking youth. They bring out the strategic code-mixing these youth deploy in different ways in relation both to their tradition-conserving parents at home and the often discriminatory worlds of mainstream public institutions and places. Their claim that ‘these processes of positioning contribute to an example of what [Stuart] Hall calls “new ethnicities”, in which forms of identification involve new alignments with and against, and strategic uses of and responses to, ethnic, cultural and national belongings’ is persuasive. However, they do not reflect enough on the reactive quality of these identifications and the implied costs for individual freedom. Poynting elegantly applies the sociology of race and moral panic to the recent ethnicisation of crime in Sydney, especially the association of gang violence with the homogenised and stereotyped category of ‘Lebanese’ youth.

Abood’s chapter on Arab-Australian women’s activism, and Jureidini and Hage’s chapter on the Australian Arabic Council, constitute the third type of contribution. Both instances of activist organisation came into being to advocate for their constituencies in contexts of lack of representation, misrepresentation and discrimination. Both chapters emphasise the ‘defining moment’ of the Gulf War as a profound failure on the part of the Australian government and host society to protect Arab-Australians from racial vilification and harassment, and as a provocation to organised self-protection for Arab-Australians.

As Jureidini and Hage show, it was this provocation that brought into being for the first time a shared and organised self-identification as Arab-Australian. Their chapter elaborates on the Australian Arabic Council’s interest in the Racial Hatred Act (1995), and its complaint under this Act to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission about a speech made by a British writer at a Jewish centre in Melbourne that used offensive racial stereotypes of Arab people. The critical issue that arises in relation to practices of discrimination and harassment is how they are analysed,
for it is here that our response to these practices begins. Abood is situated within an emancipationist rhetoric of protest, and she does not want to enquire into the problematic paradox of group-based activism coming into being to contest the group-based attributions of identity that are discriminatory and oppressive in nature. Jureidini and Hage are more alert to this problem, but it is a general weakness of the collection that it skirts rather than probes the inherently unethical character of group-based identification and the categorical binarism of us/them to which it inevitably gives rise.

Chapters by Hage (on migration, participation and guilt), Humphrey (on injuries and identities for people caught in the realities of immigration and diaspora) and El-Zein (on longing and belonging) are quite wonderful, and offer very different explorations of the emotional dynamics of immigration — of guilt and nostalgia, of loss and failure, of adaptation and success, and of ‘being elsewhere’ successfully so as to be able to enjoy ‘the double life’ that aeroplanes make possible.

Hage’s and Humphrey’s chapters bring out what Humphrey calls the brittleness of what some might see as an hysterical attachment to tradition within the context-deprived and privatised world of the family household. This is a context where melancholia displaces mourning, where denial of reality holds at bay the pain of loss and separation, and where oppressive family customary relationships readily escalate into tragedy because there is so little positive and effective support connecting the family to its wider social environment.

These original and moving contributions go beyond conventional rhetoric of social construction of culture and identity. While a collection such as this, originating in a conference, always has adventitious aspects, I regret that the editor did not hold out for a deeper exploration of the dynamics of identity and selfhood in relation to the harsh, damaging and often-tragic realities of group-based identification. His own insistence on an ethics of citizenship — on what it is to honour one’s fellow citizens especially if their origins are outside the nation, and even more so if this means that they have profound connections to those with whom one’s state is at war — is important, and suggests an ethical conception of multicultural citizenship. For this to occur, we (both those who benefit from group-based identification, and those who are oppressed by it) need to be able to learn more from experience than perhaps, to date, we have been prepared to. Are the contingencies of particular histories of ethnicised identity, and the discriminations and oppressions tied to such identity, at issue? Or is it group-based identity itself? If so, how can we foster our willingness to become aware of all the different ways in which we collude with this kind of identity-formation, blocking as it does individual growth and thought?