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THE RHETORIC OF REFUGEES: LITERACY, NARRATIVE AND IDENTITY FOR SOMALI WOMEN

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THE RHETORIC OF REFUGEES: LITERACY, NARRATIVE AND IDENTITY FOR
SOMALI WOMEN

by

MARY HELEN O'CONNOR

Under the Direction of Lyneé Lewis Gaillet, PhD

And Michael Harker, PhD

ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a project in the recovery of the subjugated voices of Somali women who are living in the United States as a result of forced migration. Using a transactional, reflective, and activist methodology, I interviewed Somali women in an effort to recognize how multiples discourses of power impact assimilation and identity formation in their lives. I hope to influence how members of dominant cultures, particularly western cultures, research and write about refugees. This study considers the aspects of being Somali, a refugee, and a woman in the United States. As a contribution to academic discourse, I hope the way I approach and present my research will offer a new appreciation for refugees and their contributions to our communities.

INDEX WORDS: Refugee, Somali, Somalia, Literacy, Narrative, Women, Identity, Refugee

Women, Agency, Refugee Stories, Academic literacy, ESL, ELL, Assimilation, Identity

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MARY HELEN O'CONNOR

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2015

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College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

May 2015

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my all of my refugee and immigrant students and friends. To Zeinab, Nuru, Halima, Mowal, Faduma, and Salam for their willingness to share their experiences with me. To Abdulahi, Zahra and their entire family for being my family by choice.

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Dr. Toby Emert has been a steady supporter and friend for many years. He is responsible for introducing me to the work of Paolo Freire and Augusto Boal many years ago. As a result, my teaching philosophy as well as my personal ethics concerning my relationships with my refugee students was transformed. I was no longer concerned with telling their stories. I began to see myself as a cultural worker, in Freire's words, standing in solidarity with my refugee friends.

Many friends contributed financially to my dissertation studies including: Nancy Bankston, Dave and Mary Olson, Rex and Jan McPherson, Trey and Anna McPherson, Deanna Clark, Andy Kubis, Catherine and Andrew Kugajevsky, Jenni Junger, John Ruffier, Natalie Schulhofer, Cathy Paxton-Haines and Glenn Haines, Tracy Ediger, Kim Sisson, and Leah Halliday. In the same way that I have learned to stand in solidarity with my refugee friends, my friends stand in solidarity with me. Contributing to a cause or person is an act of faith. I will always be indebted to my family and friends for their faith in me.

Lauri Goodling and Tracy Ediger have been one text, phone call, or email away for many years. They are my best editors, best critics, and best friends.

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Finally, thank you to the women who participated in my research study. They are the hope for peace in their native country. Their irrepressible strength and resilience has buoyed me through difficult times in my own life. It is my heartfelt hope they feel this work honors them.

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1 INTRODUCTION

This dissertation project will explore the intersections of narrative, literacy, and refugee identity. I hope to influence how members of dominant cultures, particularly western cultures, think about refugees and define refugee literacy. Using a blend of research methods derived from traditional ethnographic fieldwork, literacy studies, and discourse analysis, I hope to offer a new way to study those communities on the boundaries of dominant culture. I have specifically chosen Somali refugee women living in the United States for a variety of historic, cultural, and ethical reasons. Somalia has repeatedly been recognized by a number of organizations, including Human Rights Watch, and Save the Children, as one of the worst places on the face of the globe to be a woman (Abdi). By almost any measure, mother/infant mortality, access to education for girls, or incidence of rape, being female in Somalia ranks at the top of each. As a result of civil war and UN resettlement programs, large numbers of Somalis have immigrated to the United States bringing with them many of the traditions and cultural practices that have marginalized and silenced women in public discourse. For this and many other reasons explored later in my thesis, I want to consider the aspects of being Somali, a refugee, and a woman in the United States and the ways different kinds of literacy affect their ability to participate in public discourse. I hope that both the way I approach my research and the research findings will offer a new appreciation for refugees and their contributions to our communities.

Since the enactment of more proactive international policies of the UN and the U.S. government toward resettlement for persecuted people beginning in 1990, the American public has come to know more about refugees. With the adoption of the The Refugee Act of 1980, the United States established a formal process, established a federal office, and provided federal financial assistance for the resettlement of refugees. The U.S. Department of State reports that

since 1975, they have actively resettled more than 3 million refugees in the United States. They live all around us. Refugees drive our taxis, make our food, attend our schools, yet in the minds of western governments and their citizens, refugees exist in a sort of liminal space. They are labeled “immigrant,” “illegal,” and “alien.” Refugees in the United States are contained in public housing, programs for language acquisition, courses for citizenship, ELL/ESOL classes, low-income jobs, and poor neighborhoods and communities. Although they are here in increasing numbers, they are still ‘other’. Who were these people before they became ‘refugees’? How do we get to know our new neighbors and community members as the women, men, children, doctors, teachers, and families they were before they were forced from their homes?

My personal interest in refugees began as a volunteer English teacher for an athletic program that provided intensive English instruction to refugee boys. My professional interests also include refugee educational and literacy practices in large part because the community where I work as an English professor is one of the largest resettlement locations for newly arrived refugees in the United States. As a part of a national resettlement strategy, newly arrived refugees are placed in metropolitan areas with access to housing, employment. The part of Atlanta where I live and work has received over 40,000 refugees since 1983 (Migration Policy Institute). More than eight years into my work as a teacher, volunteer, and community advocate in the refugee community, I have developed strong professional and personal relationships with many refugee families. Many of my students at the community college where I work who have had the most difficult academic struggles have been refugees. In an effort to connect with them more effectively as an English instructor and a friend, I have immersed myself in refugee literature, research, and narrative. I have read shelves of non-fiction accounts of refugee

experience including memoirs, ethnographies, and anthropological studies. I spent a year gathering and annotating research on refugee education, educational policy, literacy, language acquisition, identity, and cultural studies as a part of a grant project to develop culturally responsive curriculum for a school for refugee girls in a suburban Atlanta municipality I will call Centertown, Georgia throughout this study. Combined with my master's coursework in education and doctoral coursework in rhetoric and composition, I have been in constant pursuit of more knowledge that could somehow strengthen my ability to teach my refugee students more effectively.

Just as many of my best teachers have done for me, I often seek a particularly engaging or relevant book to offer students in my college composition classes. It is a way to connect them to the reading and writing community of the college classroom. A good book can launch a reluctant student into a new realm of success in the classroom, so I often suggest supplemental reading to my students. In a practice I learned from my own teachers and librarians, I spend a good deal of time investigating good books for my students. I have discovered over the years that there is very little to choose from for my refugee students. The majority of western accounts of refugee experience follow a formulaic trope—the trauma story. Indeed most refugees craft a story as their currency or ticket to a new life in a new land, and the extent to which they meet the UN (1st world) criteria for asylum determines their entire future – a new life in a new land or more years in refugee camp limbo. Refugees must tell a story affirming their inability to live in their home country for fear of persecution, war, or violence. Refugee stories for public distribution are typically told with the assistance of a western author for many reasons including language skills, access to public discourse, and cultural power. These stories conform to the power differential inherent in the actual process of surviving as a refugee. Stories of severe

trauma, persecution, torture, and violence make a stronger case for resettlement. Refugees also learn to shape their personal story according to the expectations of UN criteria necessary to attain asylum in a new country, a criteria developed by first-world/dominant nations. Their survival depends on stories crafted to document their inability to live in their home country for fear of persecution, war, or violence. Thus, what has been published in the west conforms to a familiar narrative of victimization – the trauma story. Western public discourse favors stories of victimization and oppression in a twisted type of re-fetishization of oppressed people. First world audiences provide a vast and lucrative market for stories of men, women and children fleeing torture, starvation, and death in foreign countries. In a nod to Spivak’s description of British attempts to abolish *sati* (white men saving brown women from brown men), popular non-fiction in first world countries often supports the misconception that white men and women are saving brown women from brown men by documenting and publicizing their oppression (Spivak). First world citizens believe by reading these types of narratives they somehow alleviate the oppression experienced by millions of people around the world. I believed it too until I began to know my refugee students in a more intimate way. Very few of my refugee students connected with the books I offered them to read.

While quite a lot of women’s refugee narrative has emanated from new settlers in North America and western Europe in the last 25 years, migrants from Africa, particularly Somalia, have produced fewer published works. Very little has been written and published by, for, and about Somali women. The UNHCR reported the number of displaced Somali citizens at more than 1 million in 2011. The U.S. alone has resettled close to 100,000 to date (UNCHR). Current surveys of the community where I live and work estimate that 7% of the population is Somali – one of the highest concentrations in the U.S., yet we know little outside the demographic data

about Somalis in the United States. Besides the privileging of trauma stories and narratives constructed to obtain asylum, Somali women face many other barriers to public discourse: access to education, language fluency, and religious and cultural practices. Schooled or functional literacy, as the west typically defines literacy, has been impossible to attain as a Somali, particularly women, until this century. Thus the window of opportunity for the evolution of a feminist literary tradition in Somalia only opened in the 1970s. What has been published in the west conforms to a familiar narrative of oppression and struggle that the west has come to expect from refugee women. My project began with an assumption: the everyday experience of the millions of displaced Somali women is very different from the published accounts in the west. This was validated by my experiences teaching Somali women and working with them in the community. As vividly described and documented in the master narratives available in English, arranged marriages, female genital mutilation (FGM), and lack of education conspire to create the threads of a stereotypical Somali narrative, but beneath the highly charged social issues associated with Somali women's identity are a rich and diverse legion of experiences, identities, and narratives waiting to be told.

Purpose of the study

Following the movement toward recovery of feminist rhetorical practices, I hope to document and contribute to the participation of Somali women in western culture. As a teacher, a woman, a refugee advocacy volunteer, and a writer, I would like their voices to be considered in public discourse in a way that honors their traditional roles, values, heritage, and identity. This research project offers a marginalized group a place in public, academic, cultural, and historic discourse and will significantly contribute to the fields of literacy studies, refugee and women's studies as well as research methods, including narrative inquiry and ethnography. To this end,

narratives of seven Somali women living in the United States were collected, transcribed, and published in this study.

The research questions guiding my study will include:

1. Given access, agency, and ability what stories would Somali women tell?
2. Do these stories resist Western narrative tropes of trauma and victimization? If so, in what ways?
3. What do these stories tell us about the everyday experiences of Somali refugee women in the west?
4. What do the literacy practices of Somali women tell us about the construction of their identity in the west?
5. What do the literacy practices of Somali women tell us about their culture?
6. How is literacy/education taught/valued in Somali culture? (for women and girls)
7. How are Somali women more able to participate in the dominant/first world culture with the acquisition of new literacies?
8. How does functional literacy in a new language allow more power in the family, society, culture?

I am not interested in documenting more dramatic stories of torture, escape, trauma, and alienation – the western trope for refugee stories. I would like refugee discourse to be transformed from one of (re)victimization and (re)oppression to one of resilience and dignity. A feminist approach to my research opens a dialogue between researcher and research subjects that will value what seems to be excluded from the dominant discourse in refugee studies.

Ultimately, this should be a recovery of women's voices resisting definition by their exceedingly difficult circumstances. My hope as a researcher and as a teacher is to understand

how women from an oral society thousands of years old, valuing the education of boys and men over women, navigate a new culture that promotes education for all. The first step in that process is to collect their experiences. I want to facilitate the contribution of a yet unheard voice to public discourse. My research can help us understand how we can be better teachers of refugees and women. I want to provide a new focus in the work of getting to know the stories of these remarkable women – not trauma, victimization, and struggle – but resilience, accomplishment, respect, and pride. I am interested in understanding what makes this community so triumphant, dignified, and resilient. If language is a means of constructing our identities personal narrative becomes the way we make sense of their connections to other individuals and other communities.

Organization of the study

I offer a brief overview of Somali history and culture in Chapter 1 as well as a review of the literary landscape that situates this collection of narratives. I include reviews of the dominant narratives in the west co-authored by Somali women and a discussion of the participation of women in Somali published discourse. Chapter 2 discusses my methodology and how I arrived at my decision to pursue this collection. I also offer a rationale for choosing literacy studies as a research lens for approaching my research subjects. This chapter also introduces and discusses key terms for exploring the landscape of refugee stories. Chapter 3 profiles my research participants. Chapters 4 and 5 present an analysis of my research findings. The concluding chapter offers my major findings and implications for future research. I have changed the names of specific geographic locations (cities and counties) as a precaution although my research participants did not request that I do so.

Somali history and culture

The history of Somalia, particularly the recent events that have precipitated the flight of so many Somalis to other countries, provides a clear picture of why women have remained on the margins of public discourse. At the bottom of the list of failed states, Somalia is a land of collapsed government, severe poverty, clan-based factionalism, and thriving fundamentalist religious fanaticism. Prior to African colonization, Somalia was a country of clan-driven coalitions based on a single ethnic group divided into five major groups: the Hawiye, Darood, Dir/Isaaq, Digil, and Mirifile (Gardner and El Bushra 7). This clan structure provided the central organizing societal structure for thousands of years until 1897 when the country was divided among the French, British, and Italians. In the 1960s a military coup led by Major-General Mohammed Siad Barre overthrew the independently governed United Republic of Somalia and set in motion events that would ultimately result in a decade-long civil war (UNDP 2012). Barre's oppressive rule sowed the seeds of corruption triggering violent periods of lawlessness after his regime collapsed in 1991. More than 300,000 Somalis died either from violence or famine and the flight of Somali refugees began in earnest (Abdi). Westerners, particularly Americans, are most familiar with the events that led to the withdrawal of UN peacekeeping operations in the country. In March 1995, 18 American troops and hundreds of Somalis were killed by Somali militiamen. Modern film portrayals of the Somali warlords, militiamen, and pirates including *Black Hawk Down* and *Captain Phillips* crystallized in the minds of westerners the violence and lawlessness of the Somali homeland.

It is important to remember that prior to African colonization, Somalis were a pastoral nomadic people where “women have been the backbone of Somali society, providing much of the labour required for the survival of the family in a harsh environment (UNDP).” Despite

customary cultural traditions limiting the rights of women, they were the economic engine of nomadic life. Thousands of years of nomadic tradition shaped women's practices and participation in society. This afforded Somali women more leeway in comparison to women in other Muslim societies. Women headed many households and often engaged in small business ventures. Somali women dressed in a traditional long piece of thin cloth knotted over one shoulder leaving part of the back and shoulders bare. Until the 1990s, they shared in public life and moved freely between the private and public spheres. The structure of Somali society demanded that women participate in public life. Nomadic life is a constant pursuit of scarce resources that places a natural egalitarian balance of responsibility for survival on both men and women (Lewis 15).

Everything from clan structure to politics in Somali society is organized patrilineally (Lewis 10). The primary alliance in Somali society is to clan. The significance of this cannot be overstated as it is even relevant to Somalis in the diaspora. Many foreign academics, historians, and politicians attribute the intractable violence in modern Somalia to this cultural characteristic, but it would be ignoring thousands of years of history to make this claim. Somali clan structure provided thousands of years of flexible governance for a primarily nomadic civilization. The politics of the colonial period and formation of a central government in Somalia are beyond the scope of this research study, but it is essential to understanding women's role to recognize the primary allegiance in their society is to the patrilineally traced clan. While all children are considered a blessing from God, boys are celebrated over girls, and pedigree is so ingrained in young children they are able to recite male lineage for generations. Men are considered superior to women, yet three prominent Somali women scholars note, "Somali women, whether nomadic

or urban, have never been submissive, either to natural calamities or to social oppression” (Hassan, Adan, and Warsame).

War, urbanization, the collapse of the state, and the influx of foreign fundamentalist versions of Islam have moved Somali women to the extreme fringes of public life. War has also subjected women to physical and psychological violence as rape has become an important weapon in the conflict. Since the 1991 overthrow of the military government, Somalia has been fertile ground for jihadists including Al-Shabaab, a radical youth resistance movement funded by foreign Islamists including those linked to Al-Qaeda (UNDP). This fundamentalist influx has imposed Sharia law throughout the country. Where for thousands of years women possessed agency and presence in Somali home and public life, they now were required by law to be fully veiled and covered and were prevented from leaving their homes. Opposed to democracy and supported by disenfranchised youth with scant means of economic livelihood, Al-Shabaab seeks to establish a fully Islamic state in Somalia with a hard-line, Taliban-style of Sharia law in the areas where it has gained a foothold. Radios are outlawed. Cinemas have been shuttered. They have forbidden dancing at weddings and watching soccer.

Millions of Somalis have also sought refuge in other countries for survival. The establishment of refugee camps in neighboring countries resulted in further marginalization of women as they became a central weapon between the warring factions. Sexual violence has become a modern weapon of war. Prior to the collapse of the state, rape in Somalia was a rarity (Abdi 190). Refugee camps became notorious in the early 1990s for sexual violence against women (UNHCR 2003). The stigma of rape in Somali culture is harsh. As women fled for their lives to camps lacking security, they literally became moving targets as former Somali refugee and sociology professor Cawo Abdi states, “The Somali civil war reduced all women to

representatives of their clans' honor. Violating their integrity and subjecting them to the extreme violence of rape and torture became a key weapon of the war"(Abdi 192). Additionally, because men perpetrated the majority of civil conflict they suffered the most loss leaving many women the sole providers for the families. Even for those men who escaped death or recruitment by a warlord, life in a refugee camp offered them no means of providing for a family. Most women were required to trade and barter for food, something men saw as beneath them. As has been observed in other patriarchal societies where law and order has disintegrated including Iran and Afghanistan, these insecurities often cause "increased regulation and scrutiny of women's behavior and practices" (Abdi 199). Kandiyoti argues that these times of crisis in patriarchal cultures result in an "intensification of traditional modesty markers" requiring women to protect themselves from further persecution and discrimination. Somali women's experiences of repressive religious and cultural practices resulting from the war and vulnerability as refugees has driven them to the hidden sectors of society behind private home doors, behind the veil, and segregated from public discourse.

Pastoral nomadism leaves little time for educational pursuits. Education as a cultural practice did not play a central role in the lives of Somalis until more recent times. Statistics published by the CIA World Fact Book place adult literacy at around 37% of the total population in 2001. Even prior to the civil war, Somalia had some of the lowest literacy rates in the world. It is estimated that approximately 17% of the adult population was literate. Generally twice as many men as women are considered literate (Gardner and El Bushra).

Whether due to domestic and economic pressures, a scarcity of resources or lack of infrastructure, at least the last 3 generations of Somali women have had severely limited opportunities for schooling. For a brief period in the 1970s and 1980s, Somali women made

significant progress in educational circles, however the civil conflict that has overcome the country since the 90s has left most women and girls little access to any schooling at all. The political and humanitarian crisis left at least two generations of Somalis without schooling (UNDP). The following years, from 1998 to the present, have seen little in the redevelopment of a civil society or functioning government. As the crisis in Somalia has escalated, the most recent generation of Somalis not only has no access to an educational system, but they have no memory of a functioning Somali government (UNDP).

While civil government is non-existent, the influx of money from oil-rich Muslim countries has fueled the proliferation of religious schools and madrassas in Somalia (UNDP). This is a practice that further promotes fundamentalist religious education primarily for boys focusing on instruction in Arabic and Islamic religious practices. Girls have severely limited opportunities for formal education. Although elementary school attendance in the country was estimated in by the UNCHR in 2003 to be approximately 3:2 (boys: girls), girls' participation in high school dwindled to around 10%. The imposition of new religious practices in Somalia has also changed the focus and content of educational practices of girls and women. Before the collapse of the state, most Somali girls did not pursue religious education as they became young wives and homemakers as well as economic providers for their families. Young women rarely pursued Koranic education, "Girls attending Koranic schools in Somalia often stopped in their very early teens without having learned the interpretations of the Arabic verses they memorized" (Abdi 197). This has provided another susceptibility for women's subjugation by men, "In communities where there has been a rise in Islamic fundamentalism since the war it is increasingly common for religious references to be used by members of the community to exert control over women" (Gardner and El Bushra 11). While little has changed for those still living

in Somalia, the diaspora will be among the most educated generations of Somalis ever. As Somalis have resettled around the globe, women and children have gained access to educational institutions. And while the path for resettled refugees remains difficult to navigate, this major difference will have a considerable impact on women's status and participation in Somali society.

The history of oral and written communication in Somalia has been researched and studied by a relatively small group of academics. B.W. Andrezejewski, Emeritus Professor of Cushitic languages and literature at the University of London and Professor I.M. Lewis known as the 'Master Ethnographer of the Somali' have published the most comprehensive accounts of Somali culture. Andrezejewski largely focuses on Somali linguistic history and politics. I.M. Lewis has published extensive and rich ethnographic accounts of nomadic life in Somalia. Study of their scholarship informs the following extremely condensed overview for the purposes of situating my current work:

For thousands of years Somalis have lived as pastoral nomads using a variety of dialects to sustain a rich oral tradition based on a prolific use of poetry to preserve and pass on cultural heritage in both public and private affairs. While written language has not been a part of Somali culture until this century, spoken language has evolved into a rich and sophisticated poetic tradition. Thousands of years of oral tradition have resulted in the creation of a revered form of poetry among Somalis observed by Sir Richard Burton in 1854. He noted, "a most striking characteristic of its inhabitants was their love of poetry...so that the phrase 'a nation of poets' became current among people acquainted with the Horn of Africa" (Andrezejewski). Under British colonial rule, Somalis were forced to use Swahili as a lingua franca in their attempt to annex Somalia to other landholdings in East Africa. Pastoral nomadism does not mesh with

colonial western educational practices instituted during British rule. As a result of this confluence of these circumstances, Somalis have maintained some of the highest illiteracy rates, particularly among women, in the world.

While the oral tradition in Somali society has been used throughout their history in all areas of life, there are prescribed forms for men and women. Naturally, the highest form is reserved for men. Andrezejewski notes, “although there have been many women poets, their poetry seldom reached the public forum; in the traditional Somali society it would have been recited within a limited circle of family and friends.” Somali culture is organized around clans, and ancestry is always traced patrilineally. A Somali child is taught to recite the names of their grandfathers for generations. Men often marry multiple wives and the large majority practice Islam. Women cover their heads although they are not considered as conservative as other Muslims. Somali women have been buffeted between the strains of nomadic life and four different colonial powers. Their role in society has been primarily in the private sphere of family life, however nomadic life demands their participation beyond the private sphere. Unlike other Muslim societies, women are responsible for building dwellings, caring for property (primarily livestock), educating children, and caring for the clan while men are off fighting war or seeking water and grazing for their herds. Somali women have thus never been considered submissive. I noticed this among my Somali friends. A Somali home is loud and vocal. Wives, sisters, aunts, and grandmothers fuss and banter with their husbands and male children. They hold a unique position in society where life ultimately depends on their resilience, industriousness, and wisdom. As new arrivals in the west they do not assume their female children will remain in the home to be wives and mothers. They encourage girls to go to school, work, and participate in

civic life. Detecting these nuances of the position of women in Somali society is difficult to an outsider.

Interestingly, a written literary tradition in Somalia effectively began in 1974 with the publication of *Ignorance is the Enemy of Love* by Faarax M. J. Cawl. I did not initially learn of this literary history from books. I was having a friendly discussion with the father of one of my students about Somali history in their home one evening. He casually mentioned that his uncle had written the first book by a Somali. Without any knowledge of the history of language, literacy, or literature of Somalis, I had a difficult time believing that his contemporary could have been the *first* Somali to publish a book. He disappeared into his bedroom and came back with a hand-illustrated original cover of the book. His son, Abdulahi, pulled out his phone and we naturally ‘googled’ the book. This began my education in the Somali literary tradition. Indeed, this is the first book published by a Somali author.

Some highlights of the history of language and politics in Somalia helped me begin to understand why so many of my Somali students struggled academically in the U.S. Somalis did not have an orthography until 1972 (Andrzejewski). Functional literacy, or the ability to read and write as the west defines it, has been impossible as a Somali until this century. For thousands of years Somalis have lived as pastoral nomads using a variety of dialects to sustain a rich oral tradition based on a prolific use of poetry to preserve and pass on cultural heritage in both public and private affairs. While written language has not been a part of Somali culture until this century, spoken language has evolved into a rich and sophisticated poetic tradition. Thousands of years of oral tradition have resulted in the creation of a revered form of poetry among Somalis observed by Sir Richard Burton in 1854. He noted, “a most striking characteristic of its inhabitants was their love of poetry...so that the phrase ‘a nation of poets’ became current

among people acquainted with the Horn of Africa” (Andrezejewski). Under British colonial rule, Somalis were forced to use Swahili as a lingua franca in their attempt to annex Somalia to other landholdings in East Africa. Literacy in the nation has also been tied to conflicting nationalist and religious agendas of various players in Somali politics (Arabs, Islamists, Somali nationalists). Hostility erupted after the introduction of written Somali in Roman alphabetic text (Lewis 275). Within a male dominant religious and cultural society and lost in the clashes of politics, schooled literacy for women has not been a prime concern. Female literacy in Somalia is estimated at just 12% (Gardner and El Bushra xi). The review of this written literature illustrates the need for expanding the participation of Somali women in published discourse especially as growing numbers of them settle outside their native country and must navigate the construction of their womanhood in new cultures and societies.

Literature Review

Three works of narrative non-fiction typify the classic Somali refugee women’s story in western public discourse. Waris Dirie was discovered as an international supermodel while still an illiterate housemaid for her uncle in London. The story of her extraordinary life, *Desert Flower*, is told in the first person but written with the assistance of a biographer, Cathleen Miller. Dirie was not even able to read the cue cards when she began modeling, thus an independent published narrative would be impossible. She received no formal schooling until she was in her teens, a refugee stranded in London, working at a McDonald’s illegally. With the assistance of her co-author, Dirie’s voice and experience have been added to the consciousness of all women speaking out against patriarchal practices that seek to intimidate, subjugate, and damage women. Her escape from a marriage to an old man arranged by her father when around 11, flight from the hands of a rapist when running from her father, refusal to follow her uncle back to Somalia, and

outrage at her genital mutilation as a young girl thrust the issues faced by most women in East Africa into the public consciousness. Women have literally not had the language to write their experience, the schooling to produce written works, and the position to be acknowledged as equal participants in public life. As most East African women have done in the written refugee experience, Dirie devotes large sections of the book to portraying the horror of female genital mutilation (FGM, female circumcision). She describes her experience as well as that of her sister in brutal detail in an attempt to outrage society into abandoning the barbaric practice. Like the Somali activist Ayan Hirsi Ali, she has also dedicated her professional life to raising public awareness to end this practice around the globe.

Aman is the biography of a Somali girl originally collected as an oral history by the anthropologist Virginia Lee Barnes. Again, the narrative of her life is fraught with escapes from arranged marriage, oppressive uncles, FGM, and lack of education. However, her story takes place before the fall of Mogadishu and the book captures the modern and cosmopolitan East African city before it is razed by warlords and their guerilla armies. Aman experiences western boyfriends, nightclubs, pregnancy before marriage, and divorce divulging a far less restricted female experience in Somali society. Her story also demonstrates the tension between traditional nomadic life and modern colonial influences. She struggles to identify as both a modern women pursuing modern desires as defined by western ideals and a traditional Somali fiercely loyal to her family and devoted to role of preserving a female Somali heritage.

Finally, the only independently written and published work is Ayan Hirsi Ali's *Infidel*. As the title suggests, Ali is resisting all forms of traditional Somali culture – political, philosophical, and religious. With the advantage of an upper-class government-employed father, Ali was educated and fully literate in multiple languages by the time she left Somalia. She is

able to articulate the shame of FGM while trying to navigate a dating relationship with a western European man. Ali poignantly portrays the plight of a refugee dancing among the narratives they have constructed to be granted asylum, escape political persecution, yet preserve their dignity. Amazingly she is elected to Parliament in the Netherlands only to be forced to leave the country because of immigration complications. Ali has pursued an international role as an ambassador for the plight of Somali women with international diplomatic organizations as well as established her own NGO to raise funds to stop FGM around the globe. Her advantageous history as one of the few educated women in Somalia permits her the participation in public discourse not available to almost any other Somali woman.

In my experience none of these narratives has struck a chord with the Somali students I have taught or Somali women I know. Each of these books conforms to the expectations of the dominant culture: refugee narratives focus on trauma and victimization. Whether crafting a story to conform to the requirements of the asylum process or for mass market publishing, these refugee narratives perpetuate the perception of Somali refugee women as uneducated disempowered victims.

Key Terms

Refugees present a host of complications to a research study of narratives based on spoken and written language as the exclusive communicative medium. In the west, these complications are often lumped into the reductive category of “functional literacy.” The ability of a refugee to navigate a new culture often depends on their ability to read, write, and speak the primary language in their new home country. Functional literacy also contributes to their ability to participate in public discourse –go to school, become a citizen, work. Issues of literacy become the focus of a refugee’s life post-migration. Educational institutions of their host nations

become the primary site of learning and acculturation for refugees. Here their abilities and identities become shaped by the categories into which they are sorted: ESL, ELL, literate, illiterate, preliterate. Fortunately, New Literacy Studies has expanded popular, limiting, ethnocentric definitions of literacy. These new interpretations provide innovative ways to understand research subjects living on the periphery of the discourses of a dominant language/culture. David Barton and Brian Street have deconstructed such ideological models of literacy and expanded what counts for literacy in a global context. New Literacy Studies defines literacy as “discourses” or “multiliteracies.” Each of these expands the scope of literacy beyond a skill measured by a reading or writing assessment or taught in a school classroom. Western notions of literacy are just one form of literacy among many. Founders of the NLS including Brian Street assert, “Western notions of schooling or academic literacy are just one form of literacy among many literacies” (Hull and Schultz 586). We use literacy “to understand the world around us” thus it is a “sociocultural phenomenon” where reading, writing, orality and other communicative means form our interpretation of the world (Cook–Gumperz 3). An examination of the literacy practices of Somali refugee women can provide a way to explore this group in a larger cultural context. This chapter expands conceptions of literacy and refugee identity to understand how a research study of Somali women’s literacy practices contributes to the broader field of rhetoric and composition.

For this research study, I want to delineate the ways I will use the terms from the fields of refugee and literacy studies. The following section will discuss the terms useful for framing a research study on refugees and refugee literacy as well acknowledge the political and cultural influences at play in the fields of refugee studies, and literacy studies as a specialization in the field of rhetoric and composition.

I will begin with an explanation of the term “refugee” which is defined for legal purposes by the UN as a status of personhood which marks an individual as eligible for humanitarian aid and protection on the global stage. The United Nations’ 1951 Refugee Convention states a refugee is someone who:

Owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence, is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it (Convention and Protocol).

Current statistics from the UNHCR report disturbing trends for displaced people across the globe. More than 800,000 new refugees sought asylum and more than 42 million ended the year as refugees under the auspices of the UNHCR in 2011 (UNHCR).

This status places a person in a sort of liminal space in the consciousness of westerners, 1st world citizenry, researchers, and other states. They exist as non-citizens, beyond the state, or between states or discourses of power. From Foucault’s theory of governmentality, the idea of ‘refugee-ness’ is derived from the power of the state to describe an individual who is state-less. A refugee is an individual who is by definition less than someone who is recognized as a citizen of a particular nation or state. In practical terms, being a refugee means being without a home, a culture, a citizenship, a place in the world order. It often means to be without a language that allows you to communicate.

It would seem refugees become instruments of multiple governments instead of a single government or discourse of power. Refugee studies scholar Peter Nyers describes the category

of refugee identity as “a power of capture” where individuals are “caged within a depoliticized humanitarian space” (qtd. in McDonald 96). The depoliticized space, however lumps all refugees into one “homogenous mass of people” bound by the lack of sovereignty, agency, and ability to access discourses of power (McDonald 96). This is dangerous and reductive for there are as many ‘refugee experiences’ as there are refugees. This research study is designed to speak back to those dominant discourses that seek to constrain the rhetorical agency of refugees by maintaining dominion over these millions of people by perpetuating the fallacy that they are perpetual victims or subjects.

Community literacy scholar Michael McDonald explains how many discourses of power shape popular attitudes towards refugees, thus refugee identity is controlled from these discourses of power including states and their players/operatives including the UN, thousands of NGOs and charitable organizations, and religious organizations (96). My research is not a theoretical exploration of what it means to be a citizen or a member of the dominant discourses of power, however it is important to acknowledge how the concept of “refugee-ness” and “refugee experience” is produced for mass consumption in the west, first world cultures, and the dominant discourses of power. These powers also shape the narrative and identity of refugees for reasons that are explained in a later section of this study. For the practical purposes of this dissertation I will refer to “Somali refugees” as those who identify as ethnic Somalis who have immigrated to the United States recognizing that the linguistic term “refugee” is only meant to denote this state of citizenship. At the intersection of refugee studies and literacy studies, I hope to find a way to allow refugees to influence their own description and definition.

This flipping of the power dynamic to afford the refugee the agency to produce the knowledge that shapes their identity in the dominant culture offers a resistance to popular beliefs

about refugee experience. A crucial piece of this popular narrative involves prevailing attitudes about what it means to be literate. Whether a person can read or write on some delineated scale or competency level is engrained in the western culture as being the definition of a functioning and contributing member of the society. Because Somali cultural heritage is based on a primarily oral system of communication, they are often described as “pre-literate” or “illiterate.” Again, the dominant discourse shapes popular conceptions of refugee identity to be that of victimhood, dependency, backwardness, and ignorance. This perpetuates the myth that it is up to First World nations to provide aid, support, and assistance. The popular rhetoric in the west maintains that it is incumbent on them to lift up refugees by educating and assisting them in the democratic, liberal, capitalistic ideals of the First World nations. It is true that educational institutions provide the primary site of acculturation to a newly refugee.

Language and literacy in a new country provide the keys to economic livelihood and cultural adaptation, however defining refugees as “illiterate” or “preliterate” ignores any literacy practices that have served them prior to their arrival in a new nation. It negates their cultural heritage and ignores other types of literacy. Not only has literacy in the west come to be defined as a school-learned skill, it is viewed as an independent factor in education that determines the viability or success of an individual in life. This theory is not restricted to the individual either. The idea that literacy will save countries from economic decline or political collapse has driven reading and writing campaigns across the globe for at least a century (Arnove & Graff). This ethnocentric definition of literacy maintains the dominion of one culture over another especially in the specific case of refugee literacy. What counts as literacy in one culture does not in another. Westerners or first world citizens deem the majority of Somalis as illiterate because they do not read or write regardless of whether or not writing was a possibility before the

codification of the language in an official alphabet in the 1970s. Thus the west's representations of refugees, in this case Somali women, becomes mediated and controlled by how they are represented in the language of the dominant culture. In this way the collective identity of Somali women are those collected, mediated, and shaped by those with access and agency to the language of the dominant culture. In the case of Somali women this has been a miniscule number of experiences included in the shaping of the popular conceptions of what it means to be a Somali woman. Whether because the literacy practices of Somali culture do not encourage women's participation in public discourse or because the west commands the discussion, Somali women have little influence over their own collective identity among discourses of power.

Expanding prevailing definitions of what counts as literacy serves as a first step to reformulating popular perceptions of refugees. As industrialization changed our cultures and society, researchers have expanded traditional, limiting, ethnocentric definitions of literacy. Less ideological and more social definitions of literacy emerged as a result of the New Literacy Studies movement of the 1970s (Heath). Researchers from a range of disciplines including psychology, anthropology, and education contributed to this sociocultural approach to literacy. Hull and Shultz provide compelling evidence for an expansion of the definition of literacy to include everyday living literacies and the literacy of social life. Barton describes family and community literacies implying literacy is also a social practice. Hull and Shultz also view literacy as a practice. Scribner and Cole explain literacy as, "not simply knowing how to read and write a particular script but applying this knowledge for specific purposes in specific contexts of use"(236). New Literacy Studies defines literacy as "discourses" or "multiliteracies." Each of these expands the scope of literacy beyond a skill measured by a reading or writing assessment or taught in a school classroom. Western notions of literacy are

just one form of literacy among many. Founders of the NLS including Brian Street assert, “Western notions of schooling or academic literacy are just one form of literacy among many literacies” (qtd. in Hull and Schultz 586). One of the fundamental issues arising from these expanded definitions of literacy concerns how literacy is taught. If literacy is seen as a school-learned skill, it is taught as a skill and measured as a skill. It becomes highly quantitative and prescriptive. It also ignores or overrides any pre-existing multiliteracies, community literacies, social literacies, everyday literacies, and even multilingual literacies already mastered by an individual.

Deborah Brandt proposes compelling theories of literacy pedagogy by asserting that “sponsors” are largely responsible for any individual’s access to literacy. This tends to be the opposite of the prevailing view of how literacy is learned or taught. The general public and even some in the fields of education and academia believe that it is the recipient of teaching, the student, who is in control of the dynamics of learning or becoming literate. Because of the expansion of compulsory public education in the west, we tend to view educational opportunities as “democratized” when in fact these interactions are frequently rife with coercion, subversion, domination, dictation, and most importantly for Brandt, economic stratification. Teachers, managers, volunteers, churches, governments, friends, all play the role of sponsors in the process of spreading literacy. Each of these sponsors has an ideological stance as well as a position of power in the relationship to the learner. As previously mentioned, many researchers view literacy as a socially constructed set of practices not limited to the skills of reading and writing (Cook-Gumperz 2). These social interactions construct every individual’s acquisition and continuing practice of literacy. We use literacy “to understand the world around us” thus it is a “sociocultural phenomenon” where reading, writing, orality and other communicative means

form our interpretation of the world (Cook–Gumperz 3). Thus from whom and how we learn literacy becomes crucial to our place in society and the economy.

The ramifications of literacy instruction become especially crucial to understanding how refugees are taught to read and write. Evidence suggests a close connection between literacy and the well-being of individuals in any particular society particularly at this juncture of history (Graff). “The world map of illiteracy is the map of poverty” (Arnové and Graff 19). If the connection is this close, then certainly literacy campaigns and teaching literacy must be central to the fight to overcome world poverty among many other modern sociological, political, and economic struggles. As Freire asserts, “To ask literacy that it overcome gender discrimination, integrate a society, eliminate inequalities, and contribute to political and social stability is certainly too much” (Arnové and Graff 27), yet literacy remains the one demonstrated condition equated with socioeconomic mobility. Arnové and Graff would argue that the dichotomy of literacy and illiteracy, or in Brandt’s case reading skills and writing skills, is flawed. They see literacy as a continuum of skills and abilities that vary from culture to culture. To posit that literacy is an “ideology of equal opportunity” one would accept how a move across the continuum of literacy would lead most to see literacy as an “ideology of empowerment” (Arnové and Graff 122). Because dominant discourses of power equate refugees with illiteracy and thus deficiency or backwardness, Graff’s work is central to understanding the connection between literacy studies and refugee studies. The ability to read and write is generally viewed as the means of empowerment, progress, and agency. This understanding of literacy limits our understanding of refugee experience. Somali women have historically had few chances to obtain the ability to read or write in any language, yet they are not backward or deficient in a society structured around thousands of years of pastoral nomadism. Gaining the ability to read or write

in the language of the dominant culture also does not make an individual's experience of greater value in popular discourse. This ability does afford agency and access to that discourse, but the lack of functional or schooled literacy does not deem a Somali woman deficient in Somali culture and should not in western society.

John Duffy's study of Hmong refugees, *Writing From These Roots*, moves the literacy conversation beyond the scope of New Literacy Studies by providing a culturally and historically situated study of literacy in a community. While NLS scholars provided the social context for literacy practices, "these same approaches too often fail to delineate the historical relationships that have shaped the very practices being described" (Duffy 9). Problems arise when literacy practices of a particular community are considered "self-generating" or a "unique cultural characteristic" as opposed to the "often violent contacts between peoples of unequal power" (Duffy 9). This research study is designed to unveil some aspect of these relationships of power so that the literacy experiences of Somali women can be placed in the context of historical and cultural clashes. I also hope to shed some light on how these clashes shape the identities of those involved.

Research at the intersection of literacy studies and refugee studies can provide new popular conceptions of what it means to be a refugee. More reflective and less ideological approaches to refugee and literacy studies will allow refugees to participate in their own identity construction in public discourse. As McDonald asserts, the practice of "community literacy research, particularly of the ethnographic variety, teaches us that very little can be generalized or concluded about literacy practice or literacy acquisition from one community to another" (95). It is incumbent on researchers to approach refugee research in a less homogenous and more specific method. Paying attention to the way refugees tell stories "of their own experience are

both personal and political, historicizing and concrete, and represent one important intersection between literacy research and refugee studies” (McDonald 96). Locating a research study at the intersection of the rhetoric of refugee studies and literacy studies will unveil relationships of power and provide agency to those who are continuously subjugated by dominant discourses of rhetorical power.

2 METHODOLOGY

In this project, I collected the literacy narratives of Somali refugee women living in the United States because as I have explained in previous chapters I am interested in exploring relationships of power, adding previously unacknowledged voices to public discourse, and investigating ways to let refugees be participants in the construction of their own identity in a dominant culture. The central guiding principal of the choices I make as a researcher of a marginalized group concern authority. A growing number of researchers question the assumed authority of researchers to tell other people’s stories (Denzin, Hooks, Ellis, Bochner). As a student and avid reader, I participate in the public consumption of what has been euphemistically labeled “poverty porn” in mass media. For many years I have devoured books, documentary films and videos, and magazine articles highlighting the victimization and trauma of refugees around the world. This began early in my academic career when a young Sudanese man named Nathaniel Nyok submitted an essay in my college composition course. His first essay in my class began, “My name is Nathaniel Nyok. I came from Sudan in Africa. I was born in a very small town called Bor. In September of 1987, my village was attacked by the Arab soldiers.

They killed the people and burnt the village to ashes. I became an orphan, and I went to live in a refugee camp in Ethiopia.” I had no idea what Nathaniel was referring to. Like so many other westerners, I could hardly tell you exactly where on the African continent Sudan was located.

Nathaniel’s presence in my life began a new chapter in my academic career and personal life. I reflexively immersed myself in research on refugee stories and ESL instruction. I quickly became identified by students as an “immigrant-friendly” instructor and my classes quickly filled up with students from virtually every site of civil conflict on the map: Burma, Nepal, India, Ethiopia, Iran, Iraq, Congo, Liberia, Rwanda, Eritrea, Sudan, Somalia, Cuba, and Afghanistan. In an effort to reach and become familiar with my students I read widely about refugee experience in the media, in mass-market published books, and in the academic research. I did not question that ethnographic, journalistic, and anthropological accounts of refugee experience in some way brought to light problems that needed solving. I was unaware, as are most westerners, of the essentializing and dehumanizing effects of this phenomenon. At this point I did not question or ask why these accounts were written, who wrote them, or who profited from their distribution.

Initially, early on in my studies, I thought I wanted to go about creating another collection of trauma narratives about refugee women, however a personal experience sharply adjusted my ethical stance on such a project. I have many students and friends whose stories have been told by writers who have profited handsomely from their publication, for example, Warren St. John (*Outcasts United*), Dave Eggers (*What is the What*), and Mark Bixler (*The Lost Boys of Sudan*). In addition to the financial success, these writers benefited in any number of intangible ways including reputation, increased opportunities, and career advancement. However, the people they have written about do not benefit in any proportional way. In one case, hundreds of children who have participated in the program portrayed in a book that has

been a New York Times best-seller, live difficult lives in terrible poverty while their coach, a white and western-educated woman, received more than \$1,000,000 for the film rights to the book. Many of my refugee friends depicted in the book reflect on this experience with sadness, regret, and helplessness as their story contributed to the wealth and success of someone else. Their victimization is perpetuated by a misleading promise of support, sympathy, and profit if they will just tell their story. A refugee student from Burma recently reminded me that her “story” is all that has not been taken from her. In an assignment for my class, she was asked to tell her “literacy story” in the form of a video. Hser’s narration begins, “When someone has lost everything, family, home, land, faith, and even their identity, the only thing left that no one can take away is their story.” Indeed, no one can take away any other person’s story, however her story can be hijacked and exploited for the benefit of someone else. For those that have literally lost everything, this is the ultimate humiliation. I see it in the refugee community where I work all the time. We read it in the press every day. I was on the verge becoming the same sort of misguided “activist” until I learned it was not my role to tell their story. It was not my role to “speak to them about my own view of the world nor impose that view on them – but to dialogue about their view” and “be transformed by them together” through this dialogic process (Freire 96).

At the same point in my teaching career, I was asked to participate in a research project developing a culturally relevant curriculum for a girls’ school in my neighborhood. This year-long project involved two professors of education at the college where I received my Master’s degree, a doctoral student in applied linguistics, and two other academics who were also volunteers working in the refugee community in suburban Atlanta. We assembled a massive annotated bibliography of all of the refugee research we could locate. This project resulted in

large amounts of research on trauma and psychosocial issues related to refugee experience but very little research related to specific teaching pedagogy or literacy studies. Canada and Australia led the way in the amount of work that has been done studying the performance of refugee children in school environments. Dr. Lynn McBrien, associate professor of education at the University of South Florida published a comprehensive review of literature concerning the educational needs of refugee students in schools. This article provided substantial justification to all of us involved that there was important work to be done in this arena. Two members of that team, including myself, have since pursued thesis projects concerning issues of refugee education and literacy in the United States.

Aware that I was participating in this educational research, I was also asked to volunteer with a soccer program that also offered tutoring and other literacy instruction to refugee boys. Finally, I volunteered to serve on the outreach committee of my church that worked with local NGOs to resettle families in new housing and assist them with assimilation in the neighborhood where I teach. Throughout this time I was pursuing doctoral studies in composition and rhetoric. This is where I began to consider questions of authority and agency. Who had the right to tell or shape a story of a member of a marginalized group? Is it ethical for someone to profit from someone else's story? How do you ethically and responsibly teach literacy to newly arrived refugees? What is literacy in an oral culture? How do refugees navigate new cultures while preserving a sense of their own cultural heritage? How does literacy in a new language shape identity? There are piles of complex questions that could never be fully explored in the scope of one research project, so I focused on ethically and reflectively adding refugee voices to public discourse. I chose Somali women in part because of the close relationship with this group discussed in the first chapter. These relationships could provide an entry into a research

community that is viewed as difficult to approach. The Somali community has even been described by researchers as the “invisible community” (Moran, Mohamed, and Lovel 145). I chose Somali women because my research also substantiated my instinct that what has been published on Somali women is representative of a very small sample and has been shaped by the ideological lens of a western author.

The specific situation of the children from my community portrayed in the New York Times best-seller is a very large and complex conflict to untangle, but I include it to specifically demonstrate how this has affected my position as a researcher. I am aware of the benefit to my career this research project could offer me, but I aim to construct a research project that will not further victimize or take advantage of my research subjects. I hope that my research offers a model for transactional, reflective, activist deconstruction of the restricting definitions of a victimized group. This research should offer a space for the contribution of self-determined rhetorical and narrative production of Somali women in public discourse. However, I don't claim this work to be neutral. My goals for the project determine the design. I hope that this research will add to the deconstruction of western ideological expectations for refugee women in general but also specifically for Somali women. I want to encourage new understandings of women who have until now been defined by dominant cultures by what they lack – a home, a nation, a language. It is important for us to learn what we can from them about survival in the most devastating circumstances. Ultimately it is my objective to contribute to the recovery of women's rhetorical and narrative history and perhaps spark some debate about the ethics motivating western privileging of narratives of trauma and victimization over the everyday experiences of individuals. In these stories, we can find mutual cultural understanding and learn what makes refugee women resilient in face of enormous difficulties.

Issues specific to refugee research

The academic literature on research with refugees points to a few areas of concern when attempting a qualitative gathering of information from this population. Refugees live in a near constant state of fear of governmental institutions. After being summarily forced from their culture by warring governments, they are always wary of being forced to leave yet again. The threat of deportation looms large in their lives. Westerners, particularly Americans, do not often have a frame of reference for this level of suspicion and fear of governmental institutions. Refugees become adept at retelling a narrative that has been shaped by governmental bodies intervening in their lives. A UN representative will need to hear how they fear for their lives in their home country. An NGO representative in the U.S. will need to hear how they have no possessions or identification. A human rights activist will want to hear the violence they have witnessed. Refugees soon realize this highly constructed version of their experience is currency for aid and assistance. It also determines where they will live, how they will survive, and what their future will hold. Their story is told over and over and over again. Many times they have learned to tell this story in many different languages whether they are conversant in that language or not. Refugees often live in a series of different camps and countries before arriving at their new homeland.

In an edited collection *Doing Research with Refugees*, Bogusia Temple and Rhetta Moran explore the numerous difficulties experienced in the process of collecting both qualitative and quantitative data on refugee communities. Throughout the chapters a wide range of researchers report the major problems experienced in their studies including:

- Difficulty with achieving random sampling
- Access to interviewees

- Issues related to the freedom to share as related to those seeking political asylum
- Ethical concerns investigating a particularly vulnerable population
- Interview or research fatigue among interviewees
- Expense and time involved with cross-language research (translation and transcription costs)
- Cynicism among research participants about usefulness of the process

They also make a general call for my academic research into refugee experience. The UK has led the way in governmental and academic research on refugee populations, yet even these UK-based researchers, in particular Kirsten Tait, have discovered a lack of academic research into “refugee experience” and “refugee voices” (136). This gap contributes to the lack of effective policy development, thus a concerted effort to study refugee communities by a wide range of disciplines could inform better public policy and practices. Tait’s experiences are especially relevant to my project as she has studied Somali communities in the UK. Her examination of the data sets resulting from research in the community parallels many of the problems I encountered. The primary issue in these studies involved access to interviewees coupled with a general mistrust of strangers, authority, and government institutions. Refugee interviewees have been subjected to a litany of interviews in the process of migration. It is difficult for many refugees, especially first generation refugees, to engage with a researcher and converse about their experience outside of this constructed conversation. They have no context for understanding why a researcher might be interested in learning about their literacy experiences, issues of identity, or cultural practices. Refugees frequently react to teachers, doctors, and civil servants in the United States with a healthy dose of suspicion for this has been their experience as they witnessed the collapse of civil institutions in their native countries.

Immigrant researchers Carola and Marcelo Suarez-Orozco assert, “Social science interviewing is a cultural practice that is simply foreign to many immigrants” (10). Sitting down to ask a refugee a series of questions will generate the story most refugees are expected to tell. Pipher agrees, “As both a therapist and interviewer, I came to the conclusion that a formal question-and-answer format is not the best way to learn about newcomers”(14). Large numbers of refugees will have no cultural referent for academic discourse and are not able to contextualize why anyone would want to discuss issues of agency, empowerment, theory, and discourse. On top of that disconnect, the majority of first world researchers or any non-refugee or non-immigrant researchers typically do not experience lives taken up by the array of issues faced by refugees. These issues range from ongoing threats to personal safety and the safety of the family to the persistent economic pressures that are often exacerbated by a lack of language skills.

Many researchers of refugee and immigrant groups (McDonald, Suarez-Orozco, Duffy, Cintron) advocate the use of a variety of tools from various disciplines to gather essential data. All of them highlight the need for building a solid relationship of trust before any research activity can take place. This is crucial for avoiding the pitfall of refugee interview subjects sharing “what they thought we wanted to hear” (Suarez-Orozco 11). Meaningful conversation requires strong interpersonal relationships. In this sense my research cannot be considered scientifically objective. I had built strong relationships over a period of eight years with members of the refugee community before I could even begin to ask for formal interviews. I have spent hours shuttling children to soccer games, collecting second-hand furniture and clothes from my neighbors, navigating the public transit system, teaching English, and discovering the tricks for acquiring food stamps and housing benefits. I spent the good part of a weekend scouring the quick marts and halal butcher shops in my community for camel milk to calm the

stomach of the mother of the Somali family I assisted in resettlement a few years ago. I learned a great deal from this experience including the fact that the largest camel milk producer in the United States is located outside of Philadelphia. I also experienced the powerlessness of my Somali friend in her adaptation to a very strange new world. Something that was so common and available in her culture was totally alien and scarce in mine. I might have experienced the same impotence looking for Tums in the Somali desert. In any case, I bring my own collection of lived experiences to the research, and my Somali friends bring their own.

Position of the researcher

As I have previously mentioned I have taught English at a community college in the refugee community where my research took place. I firmly believe in the value of teaching my immigrant students how to speak, write, and read English as citizens in the United States. I do not want to debate the economic implications of functional or schooled literacy for newly arrived immigrants. In practical terms, the ability to read and write in English in the United States quite obviously provides more opportunity economically speaking for any individual. I do want to explain my approach to teaching reading, writing, and speaking for all of my students who in addition to large numbers of refugees and immigrants also include students from socioeconomically disadvantaged and minority groups. My teaching philosophy as a new young teacher sprang from many years of watching my mother teach reading in low-income public elementary schools in Orlando, Florida. I spent many years as a youngster listening to stories of economic struggle for her students. Mom always did whatever she could to help when any of her students was struggling more than usual. I remember one of her students had reportedly had a very low IQ, but my mother was convinced he was capable of far more than the intelligence tests indicated. His family was poor and struggling. They had no ability to assist this child to secure

educational intervention or other social programs that might help him. Mom worked her contacts to be sure he had a good job at the supermarket putting rubber bands on the claws of the lobsters in the tank in the seafood department. This was remarkable because school officials felt he was not fit for school and probably could never work. It was not her ability to teach reading and writing that supported this student. It was her solidarity with him. She became a cultural broker helping this disadvantaged and marginalized student move a little closer to self-agency. She acted in a role Paulo Freire would have classified as a “cultural worker.” Through his emancipatory approach to pedagogy, the teacher becomes a humanist who helps their students overcome authoritarianism and oppression (Freire 90). Teaching is not a project of depositing information or skills into the student. That type of literacy would not have helped this student in any case. Teaching becomes an action of emancipation. Freire characterizes this type of pedagogy as emanating from a foundation of love. I am aware how foreign and even ridiculous this sounds in academic discourse, but it is the praxis of my life’s work, my personal philosophy, and ethical and moral foundation. I witnessed these experiences throughout my childhood and well into the beginning of my teaching years when my mom finally retired. My mom listened to her students and their families. She was in dialogue with them. She acted on their behalf. She stood in solidarity with them as a cultural worker who not only developed their functional literacy skills but also loved them, honored their humanity, and acted to free them from oppression in all forms. She collected clothes for families without any. She wrote grants for books for children who had none. She found private funders for scholarships to summer camps for children who would have no access to those activities. Mom got healthcare for sick kids, school supplies for struggling families, and swimming lessons for her students when too many students from poor neighborhoods were drowning because they couldn’t afford lessons. She was

much more than a reading teacher. My mother does not have any idea who Paulo Freire was or his philosophy of education. She would not know how to describe “critical pedagogy,” but her work is exactly what Freire described as an act of “courage, not of fear, love is commitment to others” (89). This is also how I learned to teach out of love for and solidarity with my students.

I wrote my first research paper in the sixth grade on immigration. It still sits on my shelf in my office. I often show it to my students when they come to office hours. The title reads, “Immigration: Yesterday and Today.” As a student at Park Maitland Elementary in the 1970’s in central Florida, this paper marked my first in-depth writing project. Looking back I recall now that I used primary sources for a portion of my research by basing most of my inquiry on interviews of my Jewish next-door neighbors who had fled Russia during the anti-Jewish pogroms. The Brechners were surrogate grandparents. We shared every Christian and Jewish holiday, weekday evening cocktails, and weekend dinners. One legendary story has my parents frantically searching the house and yard for me, a toddling 2 year-old, only to peer over the chain-link fence into window of the Brechners' house and spy me enjoying breakfast with Marion and Joe in their kitchen. Throughout all of those years they stamped my conscience with the knowledge that they had been forced to flee for their lives. As a second grader I knew the difference between immigrant and emigrant. I knew about Ellis Island before it was fashionable and easy to look up a name in their online databases. The Brechners were fierce in their devotion to many causes including the arts and education, but the First Amendment was the principle to which they were most devoted. As a result of their personal financial success from years of hard work in radio and television broadcasting, they endowed a chair at the University of Florida College of Journalism establishing the Brechner Center for Freedom of Information. I

was the undergraduate assistant for two years researching calls that came in to the center from all over the country on everything from libel to assistance with public records requests.

The Brechners were not sentimental about the American ‘melting pot’ but they were adamant about their belief in our system of government. I have felt fortunate from the time I was able to know the difference between peace and war that I lived in the United States. Woven deeply into my identity as an American was also the belief that ‘my’ home country was a place of refuge for people who were suffering in other parts of the world. It has never been a dogmatic patriotism but more of an awareness that the United States was different because people like Marion and Joe were able to escape persecution and death, find refuge, build a new life for themselves, and prosper. I have not wavered from that position. Today, I suppose it would seem natural that a large portion of my time as a teacher is spent working with immigrants, most of it with refugees. I learned very quickly how many more students in my classes were not just ‘international students’ but immigrants forced from their home countries and resettled in a suburb of Atlanta by international aid agencies and the United States government. Over the years teaching English at my community college, I have received hundreds of essays from students describing and documenting their journeys to the United States. They are stories of tragedy, triumph, heartbreak, loneliness, and survival.

These formative experiences have shaped who I am as a teacher, citizen, friend, and community member. I believe the combination of my mother’s work and the friendship with the Brechners encouraged me to see the world from a different perspective as a very young child. As I moved through formal schooling, I began to learn about theory, ideology, and philosophy. When I finally began graduate school, I began to think purposefully about my role as a teacher. My assumptions about the goals of my work as a teacher began to be challenged when I was

introduced to the work of Paulo Freire. Reading *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and practicing techniques from Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* transformed my consciousness. I began thinking of my role as a teacher as more than one of pure instruction or skill development. I could also see the role I played as a member of the dominant culture. I became conscious of my contribution to the 'othering' of my students. It was not just my job to teach students to read and write. It was my job to teach these skills in the pursuit of consciousness-raising. I wanted to teach my students to see their world, name their world, and transcend their limitations. I wanted to be sure I did not participate through my words or actions in the perpetual oppression of my immigrant and refugee students.

At this critical juncture I merged my desires to help immigrants and refugees with a healthy dose of feminist theory and critical pedagogy. My teaching looks very different from many of my peers. I work in and out of the classroom with my students. I believe it is my obligation to stand next to my students and walk the road of learning with them. I am a "cultural worker" in the words of Freire which means I am in solidarity with my students and in dialogue with them to "introduce men and women to critical thinking about their world" (Freire 104). I am a "co-investigator" (Freire 104).

While writing this thesis as I discussed in the previous chapter, I assisted with the resettlement of a family from Afghanistan as a part of an outreach ministry through my church and Lutheran Services. We work with one family a year. This is the third family I have assisted. Abdul Warris and his family of seven arrived from Kabul this week. My church provided a furnished apartment, clothes, blankets, car seats, a full refrigerator and pantry – a soft landing so to speak – as a part of our outreach program. This is far more than most families get when they arrive here. This morning I spent an hour getting to know him and his family. My children

played with his children although they could not speak one word in common. I learned that he worked for the U.S. Army as an interpreter. He was a farmer before that. He is the only one of his family or his wife's family to have left the country. He has four brothers and seven sisters. His wife is one of ten siblings. Both of their parents are still living. They packed everything they could in five suitcases and fled Kabul as it was believed Abdul's life was in danger because of his work as an interpreter. The United States issued a special immigrant visa to get them out. I brought an Afghan student with me who helped us communicate with his wife, Suheila. Abdul speaks wonderful English but Suheila does not speak any. She did not understand how to use the oven. She wondered how to use food stamps, the washer, the dryer, and the dishwasher. Abdul expressed his frustration with the refugee agency. They had left him at a health clinic with all five of his children waiting for a ride for more than an hour. And this is all so familiar. I will visit this family for a year. We will become good friends and spend many days at the park, Wal-Mart, and waiting in lines for government services. My children will be able to speak with his children in about two weeks. It generally only takes that much time for the little ones to start using a new language. I have lived this experience with many new families for the last eight years. This is how I have lived Freire's assessment of this work, "Liberation is thus a childbirth, and a painful one" (49). I will always remember one of my Somali friends telling me, "You were the first white woman who was nice to us." I believe I am just doing what I would hope others would do for me. I always maintain a focus on placing myself in the shoes of the immigrant or refugee I am getting to know.

Eight years ago I would have told you my teaching, research and volunteerism was about "uplift," a concept borrowed from the literacy debate of prior decades known as "The Great Divide" (Duffy 60). My interactions, primarily teaching language, were a way to lift up refugees

and immigrants, however I have recognized the silent racism and ethnocentrism inherent in that position. My desire is not to uplift. My refugee friends do not need lifting up. While many characteristics of society continuously categorize them as marginalized, other, illiterate, primitive or ignorant, they are quite the opposite. This subtle distinction is made clear in Mary Pipher's approach to writing about newcomers, "I have tried to write about others with the respect that I would want for myself" (15). As Pipher urges, cultural brokering is the type of advocacy refugees need and want. This has also been my experience. As I have walked alongside my refugee friends to procure vaccinations at a health clinic, sign up for ESL classes, complete a job application at a chicken factory, or learn how to use a dishwasher, I see the world through their eyes. I am learning their experience of my culture. This has brought us into a relationship of trust.

This has still been problematic. Many of the older Somali women I hoped to interview were eager to talk, but when we sat down to discuss the scope of my project and review the informed consent they immediately reacted with suspicion. Many refused to sign the informed consent. Despite the assurance I would protect their identity and they would remain completely anonymous if they chose to, many women would not agree to participate. One potential participant reported to my close Somali friend that she had heard from a Somali worker at a resettlement non-profit that I would try to convert her to Christianity by giving her children Bibles and "Christian" toys. Another potential participant was concerned that her husband living in Ethiopia would find out she had participated and be angry. Younger Somali women, however, were not as reluctant. These tend to be women born here in the United States or those who immigrated here before their school-age years. A foundation in formal schooling provides the context for understanding the research process. These women are more comfortable with

academic discourse and understand the motivations behind cultural studies. They are familiar with question and answer sessions. Indeed, I found that most of the younger women in my study were bursting with information. In what I have come to learn is typical Somali style, they will talk to you for hours. This can also be a research hazard. As I became closer to my Somali friends, I found myself sitting and listening to them discuss issues of what I can only refer to as “family drama” for hours. Prior to one of my interviews, I met with a Somali friend of mine for breakfast at Waffle House. After ninety minutes of discussing each of his family members, which typically includes six, seven or more siblings, their overall health, job status and family relations, I still left with no clear idea of when I could interview his mother. No set day, time or place. Such a large part of Somali life involves family and extended family you must also learn to follow lineages in any discussion to know who is being discussed. I have only met one Somali family in my years in the refugee community with fewer than three children. This applies to the families of father and mother couples, thus you getting to know a family involves five, six, or seven aunts and uncles on each side of a marriage as well as their six, seven, or eight children. It is endless and complicated and so foreign to westerners whose family structures average 2.5 children per couple.

These interactions and relationships not only have provided me access to the community of Somali women I have studied, but also provided what I have learned is the most valuable contribution to scholarship I can offer. As Cintron discusses in *Angels' Town*, the everyday experiences of his research subjects took his initial thesis project far beyond the scope of an investigation into functional literacy. He found his work moving to a project in “the rhetorics of public culture or the rhetorics of everyday life” (*Angels' Town* 10). By studying the subtleties of everyday communication in the communities where he was conducting fieldwork, he discovered

a way to investigate discourses of power by “reading rhetorically the minutiae of life” (Angels’ Town 10). My experiences in the Somali community have afforded me access to the everyday rhetorical practices of women and have brought me to the new perspective that my research should contribute something more nuanced than just traditional ethnographies. Cintron insists that an effective ethnographic approach requires “forming bonds of trust and on listening to the hearts and minds of people and their ways of making meaning” (“Gates Locked” 9). He also admits something totally unique to academic discourse. Cintron describes the need for “love and genuineness” which he admits seems “embarrassingly naïve and sentimental in the light of the postcolonial rebellion against sociocultural anthropology” (“Gates Locked” 9). This admission allows me to describe my relationship with my refugee students and the refugee community where I work. I have a genuine interest in their experience. I have strong relationships of friendship, admiration, respect, and empathy. I value what they have contributed to my life and the lives of my children. I honor their strength and resilience. I acknowledge and want to remedy the world circumstances that have in many cases robbed them of their safety and sense of self. I believe it is possible to research and write about Somali women ethically because of the types of relationships I have developed with them.

Research process

In the early days of the planning for this research study, I believed that language would be the biggest communicative hurdle to overcome. Theoretically this entire thesis explores issues involved in cross-cultural communication, but the practical reality of translation and cross-language communication plays a significant role in determining the success of the project. Somali is a difficult language to learn, and try as I might through the years I have not picked up more than two words. Most Somali families I know speak Somali at home. Many of the older

women speak very little English. Heeding Freire's proclamation, "Language is never neutral," I am aware that my choices concerning language use in this research study have far reaching political, social, and academic implications for the results. For ethical reasons related to informed consent, I decided to limit my literacy interviews to those women who have enough knowledge and competence of spoken English to have passed their United States citizenship test. This was deemed a reasonable delimiter for the IRB to accept that my research subjects had sufficient communicative skill to make a reasonably informed choice as whether or not they wanted to participate in the research project. Tackling the linguistic intricacies of translation from Somali to English and English to Somali would be a worthy topic for a research study in applied linguistics, but it is not going to be a question addressed in my study. I made the choice to interview my subjects in English but used a Somali translator to add additional meaning and clarification when communicating with any Somali woman that requested assistance. In every case, the assistance came from a trusted family member. My interview protocol proceeded as follows:

I. Introduction and explanation of project

II. Informed consent explanation and signatures

III. Interview prompts

1. How and when did you learn to read?
2. In what language did you first learn to read? To write?
3. Who taught you to read?
4. What was the first book you remember reading?

5. Where and when have you attended school?
6. Tell me about your experiences with different languages.

IV. Concluding statement and thanks

Although this was the framework for my interviews, I allowed them to unfold as a loose conversation. I did not want to capitulate to the standard question-answer dynamic of the typical interview. I encouraged storytelling as the transcripts of the interviews reveal.

As my methodology research suggested, I strove for a natural conversation between friends. I hoped to expose my own perspectives toward the project. I did not make an attempt to be rigorously neutral or artificially neutral. I made the commitment to conduct the research in a participatory mode fully aware of the disadvantages and general problems related to this variety of qualitative research. Temple and Moran assert, “There is no way to describe someone as a complete insider or an objective outsider in research” (9). My research experience with this particular group reaffirmed this assessment. The knowledge produced here is neither an insider nor an objective outsider’s perspective. It is mediated, interpreted, filtered and communicated as a dialogue between mutually interested parties.

As a feminist scholar and teacher, I want to understand how Somali women see themselves, not further fetishize or marginalize their ‘refugeeness’ by constructing another account of their escape from trauma and victimization at the hands of a dominant culture. As I am always reminded by the title of a book central to my research ethos, *Not Born a Refugee Woman*, no woman chooses to be defined by the circumstances contributing to the state of victimization and persecution faced by refugees. No woman chooses to be defined or subjugated by patriarchy, or religious fundamentalism. All too frequently refugees, especially women, are

pathologized by dominant discourses as needy, primitive, illiterate, and incapable (Temple and Moran 30). The research collected here will tell another story.

As female researcher I am also interested in exploring how to resolve issues concerning the legitimacy of speaking for others. As Linda Alcoff suggests in her article aptly titled “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” “There is a strong, albeit contested, current within feminism which holds that speaking for others is arrogant, vain, unethical, and politically illegitimate” (6). Feminist rhetorical practices seek to recover voices silenced by discourses of power and this frequently requires a person of privilege “speaking for on behalf of less privileged persons” (Alcoff 8). Alcoff encourages practices of “speaking with” rather “speaking for” others especially in the case of “privileged persons speaking for or on behalf of less privileged persons” often resulting in the reinforcement of the oppression of the research subject being spoken for (7). The question becomes how can research occur that allows the members of the marginalized group to speak for themselves?

Feminist researchers Selfe and Hawisher describe the evolution of their ethnographic interviewing process from one shaped by the dominant academic research discourse to a more contextualized exchange between researcher and research subject acknowledging the power relations at play (41). Using a process grounded in oral history and ethnography, their research process became more about the exchange, shaping, and interpretation of meaning than the simple extraction of information. Approaching refugee research subjects as what Mary Pipher calls “cultural brokers” instead of strictly scientists or teachers opens the research process to a mutually shared and beneficial experience of learning, teaching, and knowing one another’s (each others?) perspectives (89). This approach is designed to lead away from the dominant model or “as Haraway might characterize our efforts we become less interested in the God

stories that yield coherent narratives of complex phenomena and more interested in the coyote knowledge of individuals, which provides small but potent glimpses of the meaning people attach to the everyday practices of their literate lives” (Selfe and Hawisher 42). This approach also counteracts the dialogic construct of researcher as interrogator, which refugees have become so accustomed to in their constructed identity as one seeking refuge within a dominant culture (Pipher 14).

Other feminist research methodologists have emphasized the “ways to dismantle the notion of power-over research participants wielded by the researcher, and to attend instead to ways to work collaboratively, collegially and in an egalitarian manner with research participants” involves more emphasis on acknowledging the researchers position in relation to their research subjects (Hopkins 138). Especially in interactions with refugees, feminist refugee researcher Leckie Hopkins urges researchers to focus on positionality as opposed to the questions asked in a research exchange. She maintains this has the greatest impact on the type of interview results produced in a narrative inquiry (138). Other feminist researchers like Alcoff urge women researchers to take responsibility for the circumstances of a power-over cultural dynamic by articulating and describing the construct instead of opting for the ‘objective’ and passive voice positionality of the scientist. Using first person and speaking about the experience of both the researcher and the research subject is the first step in equalizing power relations in the research process. In addition, acknowledging ideology and the “reality of our experiential lives” is crucial to the success of meaning making in an exchange of information (Alcoff 11). It is important that Somali women be approached as equal partners in a meaning making process when most of their existence as a subjugated or marginalized person required them to tell a certain kind of story – one of persecution and victimhood. It would be an easy expectation that another white woman

(foreign aid worker, UN representative, resettlement expert, policy expert, political representative, minister, missionary, teacher, counselor) wanted to hear their terrible story of trauma which would in a sense be perpetuating the cultural violence of identifying these women by their essentialized identity as helpless victims. I also concede that all writing is political and thus there can be no claim that this work is neutral, however I also acknowledge that this work is meant to be subversive to the dominant discourse in a way that does not further victimize the women I am studying. In the way that my telling my story constructs my own experience, I believe that the telling of stories in mutual conversation with my Somali friends will construct a new experience of the dominant culture for them. The burden of responsibility to ethically and responsibly create a method of discourse then shifts to the researcher. It is critical to recognize that people see the world differently. Many researchers of refugees, especially feminist researchers, call for “open” research or ways to approach our research “so that different ways of seeing the social world are able to be articulated and demonstrated” (Temple and Moran 2003). Jennifer Scanlon, the feminist oral historian, encourages researchers to forge meaningful relationships with their research subjects (McDonald 96). I believe that each of my research participants wanted to assist me because they agreed with the premise of my project. Each of them agreed that for a wide range of reasons very little has been written about Somali women and thus they are often misperceived in western culture.

Selfe and Hawisher present a feminist model of interview-based ethnography that looks like a hybridization of oral history, interview, autoethnography, autobiography, and narrative research methods. Methodologically this approach translates into something that looks like participatory action research but is more of an emancipatory model. I have chosen interview-based literacy narratives as a way to generate research information as opposed to collecting or

extracting information. The objective is to let Somali women speak for themselves, speak back, or speak out. Freire encourages practices that break a “culture of silence” and encourage oppressed groups to practice the “naming of the world” (16). It is this methodological approach that will allow culturally appropriate, relevant, and sensitive exchange of meaningful information. From this position of shared authority, I can be a sort of midwife in the delivery of an experience of a marginalized group to public awareness without claiming the authority to speak for these women. Our dialogue creates a new story. I am not speaking for these women. I am not telling their story. Freire encourages a dialogue that creates new cultural meanings, not western or Somali, something completely new that is a meeting in the middle. We have constructed pathways for new cultural understandings. Percolated through a new language, migration, a new culture, Somali women tell a new story.

Choosing digital video recording is another crucial methodological choice. Digital storytelling, video narrative, and digital ethnography have been a growing trend especially among researchers whose stated intentions are emancipation and social justice (Riessman, Meadows) as well in a wide range of disciplines (Selfe & Hawisher). Viewed in academic circles as a method for “empowering socially marginalized people” digital stories are also an opportunity to “narrate and preserve hidden histories” and “correct incomplete or inaccurate public understandings” (Burgess, Rossiter & Garcia). Historically ethnographers, anthropologists, and linguists have also depended on audiovisual tools to more effectively capture the nuance of Somali rhetoric and narrative because the nuances communicated in their thousands of years of rhetorical practice cannot be captured by the written word (Lewis 153). Likewise, my project did not rely on the use of written language or advanced knowledge of English as these are hegemonic delimiters for sharing the experience of women who have neither

of those abilities. Digital narrative collection offers a more powerful range of communicative exchange especially in a cross-cultural environment where more nuanced verbal exchange and non-verbal expression cannot be captured by alphabetic text. In addition, because stories should be told in a research subject's own language, digital collection becomes the most reliable and versatile method for transcription and translation by a native speaker. The language abilities of Somali speakers are vastly different from generation to generation. While some newly settled and recently arrived refugees are fluent English speakers, many are not. Some young Somalis don't speak much Somali. And some older refugee women are repositories for the highly stylized poetic forms derived from thousands of years of exclusively oral culture. Literacy in both English and Somali presents challenges to the research process that can only be overcome by a collaborative exchange of teaching and learning between researcher and research subjects. I believe that my methodological choices permitted my audience to acknowledge the different ways Somali women have of seeing and interpreting the world. A feminist methodology does not assume that the researcher is the subject matter expert, but that it is the process of mutual exchange that allows the research subjects to define the world in their own terms (Temple and Moran 2006). My research acknowledges my interviewees are the only experts in their own experience individually and collectively.

As a teacher, community member, and volunteer, I, in some sense, have always been aware of my position as a white, western, educated female. I acknowledge what is now fashionably and frequently brushed off as 'privilege.' Until my graduate studies and reading Mary Pipher's *The Middle of Everywhere*, I was unaware of how this could affect my research. If my aims were good, I assumed my approach, which tends to be very direct and journalistic, would only result in good. Studying Harvey Graff's work also encouraged me to let go of my

assumptions that teaching English to my ELL and refugee students was empowering them. I began to see my work as a teacher more in the spirit of Brandt's literacy sponsor or Pipher's cultural broker. It involved creating an awareness in all of my students of the ownership, control, and power of dominant discourses in their lives in combination with teaching the functional reading and writing skills in the language of those discourses. Through deliberate study of positionality and discourses of power, I have refashioned my relationships with refugees whether my students or personal friends. I do not assume it is therapeutic or helpful to discuss their difficulties. I don't ask them to recount their trauma. While I believe in the power of storytelling and narrative to shape experience and identity, I object to imposing the expectation for the trauma narrative on my refugee students as I have learned how this perpetuates their oppression. The western fixation with memoir can be another form of cultural disenfranchisement for refugees. These stories constrain their experiences to one of victimization and marginalization as well as homogenize the experiences of millions of individuals. Unfortunately, I struggle with this ethical distinction among most of my peers and colleagues. My church, acting from a position of compassion, published a full-page account of the Afghan family that arrived recently in the monthly bulletin. Complete with a picture of all of them standing bleary-eyed and bedraggled after 48 hours of international travel with five small children in the Atlanta airport, the narrative in the St. Luke's *Shepherd's Voice* for March 2015 describes in excessive detail the harrowing details of their situation in Afghanistan. The father worked for the U.S. Army as an interpreter and was being targeted by the Taliban for this work. I was dismayed as I read the opening of the article, "Abdul and Suhalia Waris and their five children had an hour's notice before they had to leave their large extended families in Afghanistan for refuge in America. They traveled from Kabul to Dubai to Frankfurt to Newark to

Atlanta, a strange place where they have no roots, job connections, or clear expectations for the future.” Then I cringed when I read, “Abdul is an intelligent, resourceful person, with linguistic advantages that none of our previous families have had. But still the fact is that these thirty-year-old parents of five children under the age of seven come from a tribal, agrarian society.” Despite my efforts to explain why this is demeaning and exploitive, I have not been successful in persuading my very well-meaning church members to be more sensitive and considerate to the position of our refugee friends. All I could think of was how mortified I would be to have a picture of me with my boys fresh off a two week trek through a desert published in a foreign land where farming is the means of economic sustenance describing me as intelligent and resourceful but yet a city girl hailing from a tribe of folks with no practical work skills. For two years, I have encouraged the group to read and study Mary Pipher’s *The Middle of Everywhere* just to combat this type of activist thinking. I encounter the same attitudes among colleagues. Most faculty are unaware of the specific issues faced by refugee students and categorize them with all immigrant students, yet refugee students often face much steeper educational hurdles than immigrant students. The persistent view from the west is of refugees as a group to be pitied which tacitly implies a sense of shame, indignity, and misfortune. This is fodder for the western fascination with stories of aid and uplift. These become mass-produced and distributed through church bulletins, popular books, documentaries, NGO campaigns, blogs, and hundreds of other types of media, all a massive tide of public perception to turn.

I have reformulated the approach to my teaching as well as my research as a result of these ethical considerations. I have learned that refugees have as much to teach me as I have to teach them. I may be able to help them broker the cultural hazards of life in the United States, but they can teach me what they know about hope, survival, and life “in the margins of two

cultures” (Suarez-Orozco 92). I may be able to teach them how to read and write in English, but they can teach me about navigating cross-culturally, about forging a sense of identity in a foreign culture, and how the rest of the world sees the west. They can teach me how we see the world differently as well as what is universal in human experience. Only through listening and mutual sharing can we make meaning from our communicative relationships.

This interview-based approach to storytelling still honors the human impulse to narrate, to tell stories. If our literacy practices are “linked with concepts of self and the construction of identity” as many researchers suggest, stories of literacy help us understand our own lives (Street 138). Studying literacy practices of a specific group contributes to our understanding of how they learned to read and write and offers clues to the ways they have appropriated literacy in a new culture to “advance their own cultural, political, spiritual, and economic agendas” (Duffy 6). The literacy stories of Somali women will provide insight into the vastly disruptive forces of colonization, socialism, famine, civil war, and forced migration. In *Ways With Words*, Shirley Brice Heath emphasizes the point of qualitative research is not to find answers or solutions to problem. My research records the experiences of a community. It is a story, many stories that pay special attention to the social and cultural contexts of literacy for Somali women. In some sense it is a social history. It is also an ethnography of literacy practices that tell how a particular group of women experience issues of language and literacy in the midst of formidable changes in their life circumstances. My research subjects shared their hope that this project would be a beginning. It is their expressed hope that a new generation of Somali women in the west would gain agency in public discourse and provide new understandings of their lives. In this sense, this research is written both for them, for me, and for the communities where we live. It is also written for the world.

As narrative inquiry has become a legitimized form of research in many disciplines, a new turn has pointed to the power of storytelling, autobiography, and oral history experiences in the lives of new language learners as a means of empowerment. At this point it is worth pointing out that autobiography has primarily been a western tradition in narrative discourse. Other forms of the telling of life stories exist in many different genres across many different cultures (Pavlenko 214). Language and culture both shape these storytelling conventions. Choosing a form that is not a standard practice for the dominant culture can itself be considered a challenge to power structures. Deliberately opting for a narrative discourse other than autobiography speaks back to the dominant discourse. This is exceptionally important when researching with refugees. The western bias favoring autobiography generates the predominant refugee trauma narrative to the exclusion of other varieties of narrative that might be more culturally appropriate or include never disclosed information. In addition this bias actually silences other narrative conventions practiced in other cultures. It is a form of privileging practiced in western discourse across academic disciplines as well as in the media. TESOL researchers like Aneta Pavlenko encourage researchers to collect the untold narratives from refugee research subjects as well as question in public discourse why these stories remain untold. By going beyond the conventional western autobiographical narrative, researchers can “uncover multiple sociocultural, sociohistorical, and rhetorical influences that shape narrative construction and thus to understand better how the stories are being told, why they are being told in a particular way, and whose stories remain untold—or, for that matter, not heard – for a variety of reasons” (Pavlenko 217).

Other scholars of narrative discourse argue that refugee narrative can challenge or correct dominant cultural narratives of colonization. This repair of the historical record can be particularly disruptive to dominant cultural narratives like those of first world nations uplift of

third world citizens. Many scholars such as Norman Denzin argue “that using narrative in research on behalf of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups can be explicitly subversive” (Hopkins 136). Any telling of a silenced perspective in the narrative of refugee experience complicates the story told by most western accounts. Ethical and responsible research seeks the “critical personal narratives that disrupt and disturb [dominant] discourse by exposing the complexities and contradictions that exist under official history” (Denzin 455). By encouraging researchers to be accountable to their research subjects (participants) as opposed to “an institution or discipline” this type of un-silencing can take place. Narrative or storytelling has long been accepted as a way humans make sense of their own lives. It is an inherently human impulse to tell stories. While narrative forms may vary across cultures, the desire is universal. Telling stories is a principle means of identity construction.

Narrative inquiry into the literacy practices of refugees can help uncover the discourses of power at play in their construction of self in their new culture. Street and Street have argued that the primary focus in literacy research has been on western versions of “Western, formal, male, schooled aspects of communication” which has historically marginalized other literacy practices often mobilized by women in venues outside of the public sphere (146). They make a call to focus ethnographic studies of literacy more broadly in the informal and everyday domains where women use literacy. In the case of Somali women it is essential to investigate how literacy is practiced in their everyday lives as these stories will demonstrate the great divide that exists between the first generation refugee women and their children who have been formally educated in the west. Many first generation Somali women are living very private lives tied closely to home while their children are participating widely in American culture. It is important

for these narratives to tell how a particular group of women experience issues of language and literacy in a new culture.

It is my responsibility as a researcher to acknowledge the power structures and ideological barriers enforced by these categories. In a theoretical approach strongly influenced by the work of Paolo Freire and Augusto Boal, I want to structure my research to equip an oppressed group with knowledge and tools. A central tenet of this theoretical approach asserts, “With the right tools and critical thinking ability oppressed/marginalized people can undo that oppression” (Freire 28). From this theoretical position, the entire research process can be seen as a path toward education, acceptance, and community-building. Empowering the research subjects as the mediators of the information collected and disseminated has massive implications for social and political transformation in a society that has traditionally capitalized on and profited from other people’s tragedy, oppression, or victimization. I made a purposeful choice to explore identity through the lens of literacy. I tried to limit the mediation and translation that occurs through traditional ethnographic and interviewing techniques. I chose to use an interview-based literacy narrative to create an opportunity for researcher and research subject to lead us away from dominant discourse narratives.

The specific research process unfolded as follows:

- I identified 10 Somali women from the refugee community in Georgia to collect literacy narratives. I relied on personal relationships with the Somali community well-established over a period of years to gain access to this research community.
- Participants were introduced to the project and offered a copy of my dissertation proposal and the informed consent in one-on-one meetings.

- I asked women to talk about their experiences with issues of language, education, reading, and writing using the interview questions listed. This was an open-ended dialogue. I encouraged my participants to tell stories related to their experiences with language, literacy, education, and identity.
- Those that agreed to participate were video-recorded using an iPad and an external audio recorder for back up.
- All research subjects were offered the opportunity to review the recorded interviews, unedited and final transcripts, and final dissertation.
- I have only changed the names of the cities, counties, and schools where my research participants live and work in both my analysis and the interview transcripts.

I used a collaborative research process with Somali women to collect narratives to diminish issues of authorial control. I believe this methodological approach led toward a “deconstructive transformation” of the definition of a refugee woman as illiterate, marginalized, and oppressed (Hajdukowski-Ahmed 163). Our conversations were not an “exoticization” of their lived experiences as so much of what is collected and published about marginalized communities is (Freire 15). The dialogic process was not yet another collection of western or first world rhetoric about social inclusion, equality, or social justice. We focused on a specific topic that I believe served to personalize my research subjects. The resulting conversations are accessible to a wide audience avoiding the typical distance of academic discourse. My aim is to stop the objectification of refugee women in dominant culture. Eliminating some of the distance of academic discourse was essential for humanizing my research subjects. I encouraged storytelling with my interview subjects to appeal to the oral traditions of Somali culture. I

believe this work is something very different than what Priya Kisson describes as the west's "begrudging obligation to refugees" (Temple and Moran 75). I do not, in the words of Freire, "consider (himself or herself) myself one proprietor of history or of all people, or the liberator of the oppressed," but I do consider myself someone who takes the responsibility to "fight at their side" for the transformation of circumstances that discriminate and oppress (Freire 39). As a researcher I am not working toward the integration or acculturation of my Somali friends. This would be capitulating to the very systems that serve to define, control, and oppress them – whether cultural, political, gender-based, or religious. The object is transformation of these systems through discourse (Freire 74). Our interviews are a reflection on selected circumstances that frequently serve to maintain their marginalization. Language and literacy have been used to colonize and suppress by nations and religions and political groups since the development of speech. Language and literacy can also be the tool for subverting western hegemony.

Analysis

In my analysis of the research, I consider as Reissman suggests the "multilayered meanings within the narrative and the context in which the narrative is set" (qtd. in Bold 18). Each interview transcription is also accompanied by a thick description from field notes of the path that led me to meet the individual. I also recount the experience of interview in detail including descriptions of where they took place and who assisted with translation. This critical reflection and analysis is crucial for gaining insight into what is like to be a woman, a refugee, and Somali in a changing culture. In Chapter 3, I report the circumstances of how these women learned to read and write as well as where and how long they attended school. Many women offered recollections of their educational experiences in Somalia that directly refute the majority of accounts in the published research. In addition, the stories women tell about the value of

education for their children counter the common perception that Somali women are subjugated to forced marriage at a young age preventing them from pursuing secondary and higher education.

Video recordings have offered an excellent tool for reconsidering and reflecting on the dynamics of the interview that I was not able to record while participating in the dialogue. This has been important for me to consider as I seek to explore how Somali women have shaped their identities in relation to the circumstances of their new culture. Each woman dressed in a specific and intentional way. As dress is a specific “identity marker,” viewing these details as I listen to the interviews has allowed me to reflect on the ways Somali women are constructing new cultural identities in the west (Hajdukowski-Ahmed 29).

Reading a transcript is also a vastly different experience than watching a video of the same communication. The video offers a deeper communicative experience providing non-verbal cues, inflection, articulation, animation, and emphasis that are absent in a written transcript. My analytical process included: recording the interview, writing a summary of the interview, transcribing the interview, editing the transcription while watching the video recording, annotating the transcript while watching the video. This multilayered process forced me to listen more than analyze. It compelled me to listen over and over to the women speaking instead of continually speaking to them. Removed from the interviewing process and sitting just as an observer, I heard so much more than I did during the interviewing process. This sort of “digital ethnography” offers more ways of knowing my research subjects (Sandercock and Attali). The videos offer an embodied voice. They locate an individual’s story in a particular time and place and offer a broader view of the individual participant.

3 PARTICIPANTS

In this chapter I would like to consider those women that chose to participate in my study, my relationship to them, and how this has influenced my results. The story of my interest in immigrant and refugee studies provides some balance to my identity as a white, female, United States citizen, and researcher who is a participant in the dominant cultural discourse. The development of my teaching philosophy and graduate studies also has considerable implications for the approach I have chosen for this study. I believe hooks rightly points out that feminist critics “fail to interrogate the location from which they speak, often assuming, as it is now fashionable to do, that there is no need to question whether the position from which they write is informed by racist and sexist thinking” (Teaching 77). Privilege has become the fashionable position to declare in academic discourse. I hope that my approach to my refugee and immigrant students and friends accounts for my position of privilege so that I am able to write about them in ethical and responsible ways.

In *Ways With Words*, Heath elaborates on the practical applications of her research that I believe are uniquely relevant to my results. My narrative project is bounded by the social communities where I live and work, and by the social communities where my research participants live and work. This is also true for the physical communities where we live and work. They intersect and overlap in an array of ways. I present my research as a story of the experiences of these communities, how they influence one another, how they work against one another, how they work together. These stories are a multi-layered intricate history of the way a particular group of women experiences issues of education, literacy, and language in a new culture. I believe that parts of this social history have been ignored or overlooked by factions of the dominant culture.

Any researcher will consider how my relationships with my research participants influenced the results of my study. I am certain that my interviews would never have happened without the two longstanding friendships I have developed with Abdulahi and Abdiaziz and their families. Perhaps because I never befriended them with the intent to study them, they trust my motives. Abdulahi particularly is aware of my interests in refugee and immigrant issues emerging over the years. Lebbie Hopkins cautions researchers of refugees of the politics involved in refugee research. Personal is political. Language is political. Storytelling is political. The call is for researchers to be accountable to their participants. Humanize research subjects. Position yourself to “dismantle the notion of power-over research participants wielded by the researcher, and to attend instead to ways to work collaboratively, collegially and in an egalitarian manner with research participants” (Hopkins 138). I believe this is the approach achieved in my research study. These stories humanize my research subjects. The details of my extended relationships to many of the research subjects create a negotiated partnership. Their participation implicitly communicates their agreement that this is an exchange of information among friends. It is my suspicion that many of these women have never been approached to discuss the details of their schooling and education. They have rarely been asked to recount the good experiences they have had as a result of their flight from their home country. I don’t know many westerners that could offer a positive account of anything related to Somalia. In spite of this negativity, I witnessed moments of gratification as many of the women revealed their experiences with learning to read, learning new languages, and schooling they had never shared with their own children.

I also want to consider the location where the interviews took place. The transcript of each interview is included in the appendices of this thesis, but I do not want to present these

words as disembodied narratives occurring in a neutral location. I arranged each of my interviews according to what suited my research participants. I allowed them to suggest the time and place. This often changed as we communicated and other events popped up. Many interviews took multiple reschedulings. I would contend that those interviews that took place in the homes of my research participants provided comfort and agency to the women I was interviewing. The home is the nerve center of these women's lives. Here in the midst of their children is where they felt secure and in control. I interviewed all of the older women in my study in their homes. I would claim that this had an equalizing effect on the dynamics of our discourse. Interestingly, the one older woman who refused to participate did so at Starbuck's in the Kroger grocery store. The younger women were all interviewed in public places usually on a college campus or a coffee shop.

It is also essential to place these conversations in the context of the relationships that provided access to these women. They took place as a result of long-term relationships I have established with members of my research community. This web of friendships and acquaintances is vital for any researcher who is interested in ethically, responsibly, and transparently working in any marginalized community that has traditionally been silenced by the dominant culture. Reflecting on my work, I maintain that I would never have had access to these stories without the confidence I have established with key people including Abdulahi, and Mowal and Abdiaziz. It took years of building a relationship of mutual trust to approach them with my research proposal. It also took years of working in the community and learning to listen. My attitude and position toward my relationship with my refugee and immigrant friends has been turned around. I don't see myself as a rescuer. I see myself as a partner, a listener, standing in close relationship with all of my refugee and immigrant friends. I am not clear how my Somali

friends see me. I have asked. Abdulahi has told me that they laughingly call me, “the crazy white woman who loves Somalis.” If this is true, then I am honored to be that person.

In addition to situating this project in a physical space as well as in a web of relationships, it is necessary to place it in the discourse of the discipline. The narrative autobiographical style of this thesis is antithetic to the standard distant objective style of the traditional academic paper because the intent is to close the distance between the research and the research subject. Academic writing serves this purpose to lend an air of neutrality often presumed to be more truthful or accurate than personal reflection. This is in opposition to the ethos of my project. Dominant discourses in western culture sustain the invisible boundaries that keep many marginalized groups “in the borderlands” (Anzladua, Cintron). All too often one of the predominant boundaries enforcing oppression is what counts for literacy in the dominant culture. Speaking, reading, and writing English in the United States is only one way groups are excluded from participation in public discourse. The turn in academic research, particularly a narrative approach, has offered more access to a wider reading audience. This does not make it less rigorous or less objective. These stories are meant to personalize and humanize my research participants and me. I tell them to stop the objectification of refugees, women, and refugee women in the dominant culture.

Here I would like to discuss how I specifically gained access to my research subjects. I met Abdulahi when he assisted me in a summer soccer program that was designed to boost the academic skills of refugee students. I had introduced the founders of this program with my graduate school advisor at Agnes Scott College, Dr. Toby Emert. The hope was that this partnership could provide the space, access to a group of highly qualified teachers, and curriculum recommendations. Until this point, the program had been run out of the un-air

conditioned fellowship hall of a small church on the edge of a suburban area of Atlanta by a very charismatic and influential young Jordanian woman. A colleague who knew of my background recommended me as a volunteer to work with her summer literacy program for the boys playing on her soccer team. The program director and founder had no previous experience in teaching or education but was a collegiate soccer player who landed in Atlanta and was struck by the plight of immigrants and refugees living around her. A book has been written about her experiences and this thesis will not provide more space for that story here. I only mention this to contextualize how I came to know my Somali friends.

Many students who had already graduated from high school returned in the summer to assist with the camp. Abdulahi had already graduated from high school and was back from a technical college south of Atlanta to assist with the program for the summer. At this point I was not as well-versed in East African history and politics and was not completely clear on the differences between all of the countries in the Horn of Africa and their citizens. I was not sure if Abdulahi was Ethiopian or Eritrean. He was neither. He was my first Somali friend. Abdulahi quickly proved himself a very capable and dependable assistant. He seemed especially mature and this was noted by all of the other adults working with the program. We spent many hours in the classroom that served as the 'office' for the eighty students and twenty staff members caring for sick boys, supervising those who were disruptive, making copies, and distributing food and supplies. Our friendship grew as we worked alongside each other. I offered him help with college, rides to events, bought him lunch. He befriended my sons and soon was the de facto babysitter. I learned that one of my graduate school colleagues taught his sister, Ayan, in her high school ESOL class. His younger brother was in the summer soccer program. Then his older brother, Omar, came to help with a deaf child in the camp. Omar and Said are Abdulahi's

older brothers, both deaf, who have graduated from Gallaudet University. I met his mother one evening when she came to pick up Ayan who had been babysitting my boys at my house. Slowly, I met each member of his family and we began a family relationship that has lasted many years. I have paid some of Abdulahi's school fees. He watches my house when I am out of town. He hangs out with my children. I helped him get his job as a valet through a friend. He has insisted on picking me up from the train station in a rainstorm. In this give and take sort of way, we have forged a relationship that is based on respect and friendship. I hope that I have increased Abdulahi's access to opportunities and made his life better. He has enriched my life and the lives of my children innumerable ways.

Another aspect of my relationship with Abdulahi is my experience with his family and meeting other Somali friends. I have spent many hours with his father, Ali, listening to stories of Somalia. When I visit, we sit in their living room for hours discussing history and politics. I mention one particular visit we had in my introduction when I discuss how I first learned of the very recent beginning of Somali literary history. We also spend quite a lot of time talking about culture and religion. I have also become close to his mother. We share Mother's Day celebrations. She offers me parenting advice and often assures me that my sons will grow up to be responsible and successful like Abdulahi. She frequently reminds me that he was once a young "bad" boy who liked to roam and fight with his siblings.

To fully appreciate the conversations that took place in my research study, I also offer the following ethnographic descriptions of my project participants. My intention is to personalize and humanize each woman by providing attributes of their personality, physical characteristics, and details of their lives that contribute to a deeper understanding of our dialog. I consult with Zarah and Faduma as a woman, mother, and daughter. I converse with Mowal, Halima, Salam,

Hoodu, and Nura as a woman, teacher, and older sister. I include these case studies in the spirit of Ralph Cintron and John Duffy's far more comprehensive ethnographies of their research participants. Duffy refers to a "life history" method in his collaboration with Hmong people, "In the life history interview, the act of knowledge making is not reserved for the researcher but is shared by storyteller and listener" (11). Duffy asserts that this method is especially powerful for marginalized groups like women as a way for participants to speak for themselves, "recalling and interpreting their own histories of life and literacy development" (12). To this end, I provide as much detail about the women I interviewed as I feel contributes to the study of their stories but not so much that it is exploitive. To make sense of our dialogue some details about their age, family history, and family structure are necessary. I will also add that none of my research participants chose to use a pseudonym although I offered this option and explained it in very specific detail. I have chosen only to refer to them by their first names for privacy and ethical reasons related to ongoing marginalization and persecution of women in both Somalia and the western world. I will begin my narrative case studies of my research participants with my good friend. Zahra.

Zarah: "We're different than the Arabs."

Zarah is forty-three and was born in a part of northern Somalia which is now part of the unofficially partitioned Somaliland. She has six children including one daughter and five sons. Her son, Abdulahi, is my good friend and primary contact with the Somali community. I know her older sons who are both deaf. They live in Washington D.C. and have both graduated from Gallaudet University. Abdulahi graduated from a technical college in Georgia with a degree in aviation mechanics and currently works as a valet in Atlanta while he completes his testing to earn certification in his field. Zahra's other sons and daughter live at home, attend school, and

work. Her husband is a taxi driver. Zarah works second shift in a chicken slaughterhouse facility, the most common place of employment for refugees in Atlanta. She is picked up by a van and driven about an hour outside of the city to the plant. She returns home around two or three in the morning most weekdays. Zarah is very active in her community and attends a women's group at her mosque each weekend.

Their large family lives in a run-down three-bedroom apartment. It is one of four units in a stand-alone building. Their daughter occupies one bedroom while the boys all share one. The apartment is decorated with layers of rugs, a large set of chairs, a very large flat-screen television and a scattering of side and coffee tables. The kitchen includes a dining room table that is always covered in groceries, cakes, and cookies. We share meals around the coffee table in the living room. Their neighbors include families from India with young children. From time to time, Zahra has asked me to help out by providing some of the clothes my boys have outgrown for those who are often outside in cold weather barefoot and in shorts.

Zahra speaks English hesitantly yet she understands most of our conversations without any translation. Our conversations always take place surrounded by her children so that their translation assistance is woven throughout our dialogue. Her son, Abdulahi, assisted with our formal research interview. This is problematic in terms of having a conversation as free from the influence of any additional outside discourses as possible. I understand that it is not ideal to have a male translator, however in this situation and others in my research it was non-negotiable. Without the help of Abdulahi, I could not have conversed effectively with Zahra. Because he is her child, it actually added to the appeal that she was teaching him by telling these stories. They both indicated that this was a moment of passing on family history. All of her children have commented to me over the years that I know more about their family's history than they do. I

have spent many hours in that small living room in conversation with both of their parents. This family has known me for many years. We have experienced a wide range of my personal struggles including my divorce and their own struggles with health and work. I believe it has been the growth of our relationship over the years that allowed this research project to take place. If I did not know Abdulahi or his family, I doubt I could have arranged interviews with any of my research participants. I asked his mother after the conclusion of our formal interview why she agreed to do it, she told me it was because she “trusted me.” This has been a mutual feeling developing over a long period of time. I have earned her trust because of my action and participation in her life and the lives of her children. She knows my aims. She believes I will not take advantage of her because I have not in all of the years we have known each other. She has also seen me help many other Somalis and refugee families in her community. Zahra knows how this work will help me personally. She understands that it contributes to the process of my earning a doctorate. She has told me she wants to help me earn my degree.

Zahra began public school in Somalia at the age of eleven. From the age of seven until that point, she attended a religious school, the “Koran school” as she refers to it in her interview. Her instruction at the public school was exclusively in Somali. The content was primarily Somali history and mathematics. She attended school for about six or seven years. Zahra moved from Somalia first to Ethiopia and then to the United States. Her children were all born in Africa. They speak Somali at home and all of the family members know different amounts of American Sign Language so that they can communicate with their older brothers who are deaf. Both older boys also read lips but do not know any Somali. This particular aspect of their experience is yet another opportunity for research as neither brother has ever learned Somali. Zahra learned English in ESL classes offered by a church in the suburb of Atlanta where they

live. She is currently studying diligently for her citizenship test. She has told me many times that acquiring her U.S. citizenship will give her the comfort to go back to Somalia to visit her relatives. I have heard this many times in my work with refugees from all over the world. They feel this status offers them a kind of protection from the lack of security they have experienced living in other countries. All of Zahra's children have graduated from high school in the United States. Two sons have graduated from college with a bachelor's degree. One has earned a technical certification and an associate's degree. Her daughter is completing a work-school internship program. Two of her sons work full-time. Zahra values education for all of her children.

I met Zahra on a snowy day to conduct her interview. We had been trying to schedule it for many weeks. Because she works second shift, weekends offer the only time the two of us were available to talk. Zahra tries to catch up on rest on the weekend and also spend social time with her Somali women friends who study the Quran together on Sunday afternoons. She also spends time catching up with friends and family all over the country on the phone. Thanks to a late winter, early spring snow storm her work was cancelled. Abdulahi texted me to come over. We sat in her living room with my sons and three of hers. While they roughoused and played video games, we had our interview. This is how all of our conversations have taken place over the years – surrounded by hustle and bustle and family.

Mowal: "And I just remember how happy it made me, learning."

I met Mowal two years ago on a soccer field near my house where her twin brother and sister and my older son were practicing as members of the same team. That little sister, Maha, was an anomaly on the team as the only girl. This was even more remarkable because she played wearing a colorful headscarf and pants under her soccer shorts uniform. I learned from

my son that she played on the team with her twin brother, Muhsin. It was thrilling to watch Maha play because of what she represented – a Muslim girl on a boys' soccer team – which is always distracting to American parents especially in the south. She was also fun to cheer for because she was really good. She often played up front and was fast and aggressive. The boys on the team were always respectful and included her. She was yet another example of a spunky Somali girl resisting that submissive Muslim female stereotype. Eventually, I put it all together and introduced myself to the only Somali-looking family at the practices. I met Mowal and Minal at the field who are the older sisters of Maha and Muhsin. Mowal and Minal are striking young women who are well-spoken, graceful, and poised. At the soccer field they often stayed back from the throng of neighborhood parents. We became more familiar with each other and eventually I met their mother and father, Faduma and Abdiazziz. We had a familiarity with each other that was just friendly and neighborly until Muhsin and my older son joined the same club soccer team a year ago. It is extremely uncommon for kids from the neighborhood recreational team to be put on the same club team. As a result we have become closer friends and the family relies on me to carpool Muhsin to the heavy schedule required of a club soccer team. Mowal made this connection for us by sharing phone numbers at the first club soccer practice when she recognized me. I began to know much more about this family last fall at the soccer field. Their mother attends some of Muhsin's practices but she is much more limited in her ability to converse and often hovers around the younger siblings she brings to play on the playground next to the field.

Mowal is a freshman at American University. This struck me as especially uncommon for a Somali. Then I learned that her older sister is a sophomore at the University of Rochester. Most Somalis I have met are keen on their children attending college in the United States, but

sending girls away from home for school is not the usual practice. Mowal is the most outgoing and chatty of the family. She gets this from her father, Abdiaziz, who I have just recently come to know more closely as a result of this project. I will elaborate more on that connection when I discuss my interview with his wife, Faduma. Mowal and her family live in public housing in the small incorporated city next to the city of Atlanta which is also where I live. Our houses are about a mile apart. Muhsin goes to middle school with my son, the same school Mowal transferred to when they moved to a different suburb from area where they were first resettled six years ago. Most refugees first settle in one specific area of suburban Atlanta, but Abdiaziz related to me how hard he worked to find housing in another area with better schools and a smaller community. He waited on a list for five years for the apartment across the street from the high school in the area where he hoped to live. This Atlanta suburb is an enclave of progressive-minded residents who have invested heavily via a heavy property tax burden in their school system and other public services. The municipality is surrounded by a struggling county government that has seen its previous superintendent and county CEO convicted of corruption and the city of Atlanta. The school system in the area where they moved, one high school and middle school and five elementary schools, is resource-rich and can much more effectively offer special services like ELL and special education instruction than surrounding school districts. Mowal discusses in her interview the immediate difference this made in her life when she transferred from the county middle school to the smaller city-managed school district. I believe that this family provides an exemplary example of how dispersing refugee and immigrant families into more thriving communities can be advantageous for both parties. Our community is richer, more sensitive, and welcoming as a result of their presence in our neighborhood, schools, stores, sports teams, and places of worship. Abdiaziz, Mowal, and Faduma all provide

compelling testimony that living in the smaller community has had an enormous positive impact on their family. Specific evidence of this is recounted in her narrative when Mowal discusses the differences between the schools she attended.

Mowal was seven when she moved here from short stints in Somalia where she was born and Saudi Arabia and Syria where her family moved before finally arriving in Atlanta. She recalls the vast difference when she moved from the suburb where she initially settled to the smaller city and how many more “white people” surrounded her in the new school and the community. Mowal dresses conservatively in flowing dresses and skirts accompanied by a brightly colored headscarf. This is what is most commonly seen in the Somali community in the United States but I learned from her mother that this was not the typical style in Somalia before the civil war. Mowal mentioned to me in her interview that I should ask her mom about wearing capri pants back in Somalia. Mowal speaks accent-less English and fluent Somali. If not for her style of dress, she would not be recognized as Somali, Muslim, or anything other than an attractive college-age girl. She is interested in studying international relations but is early in her undergraduate work. She is easy to talk to about cultural differences and eager to offer her view. Both Mowal and her father have been tremendously helpful in finding other Somali women to participate in my research project. Interestingly her sister, Minal, never responded to my texts or email about an interview. Gaining access to this community is complex.

Halima: “Like, I wanna actually, like be the first Somali girl doctor that I know.”

I met Halima through Mowal. Mowal shared her version of what I was doing and my phone number with Halima. I received a text message from Mowal with Halima’s number. We eventually connected and met at a Starbucks inside a Kroger grocery store near her house in Stone Mountain. Halima is eighteen and was only a few months old when she came to the United

States. Unlike most of my other participants, she has grown up almost entirely surrounded by western culture. All of her schooling has taken place in the United States. She completed high school and immediately applied and entered college. Halima never attended ESOL classes, which has actually estranged her from her Somali community of friends. She mentions that this placed her in this sort of position of not being included with the kids who are most like her in school. She speaks like any other American college student although she dresses in traditional Somali attire. Confident and friendly, Halima had never met me and knew very little about what I was going to discuss with her. She came to the interview eager to talk and was a bubbly and talkative conversationalist. She came to the interview with her mother and younger brother who shopped while we sat to do the interview at a small table in a very busy and noisy store. We sat down at a small table where I showed her parts of my dissertation proposal and the ipad and audio recording equipment I would be using. She quickly agreed that she would like to help out in any way possible. We immediately began the interview. At the end of the interview, I asked to meet her mother just to be gracious and friendly. I met her mother who initially agreed to be interviewed after we discussed my project. She is a nursing student at the school where I teach. She was open and chatty until I introduced the informed consent agreement to her. She did not feel comfortable signing the informed consent, so I had to thank her for her time and for bringing Halima to the interview.

Halima is in her freshman year of studies at an urban research university. We talked about how this paper would become a part of the research produced by this university, and that a copy of the project would be available in the library. It is remarkable that Halima decided to go straight to the four-year college instead of first working on an associate's degree at the community college near her home, as this is what the majority of refugee and immigrant students

tend to do. Her strong academic performance may be related to the fact that both of her parents completed high school and attended college before they had to leave Somalia. Both of them are also pursuing higher education in the United States at the same time that their children are attending college.

Faduma: “No, I am not feeling alone.”

Faduma is the mother of Mowal, Minal, Muhsin, Maha, Mohamed, and two more young ones that I do not know. She is the wife of Abdiazziz. I discussed how we met in the narrative about her daughter, Mowal. Faduma is forty-two years old. We are the same age. Most of the older Somali women I interviewed are very close to me in age. When I reflect on how much more life it seems they have experienced, I often feel very naïve and unwise. They have all fled their home country, birthed children in foreign lands, provided for their families under dire circumstances, and successfully raised college-age children. My life experience pales in comparison.

I arranged to speak with Faduma through Mowal and Abdiazziz. Although she already knew me, it is not so easy to be familiar with each other as her English is not as fluent as her husband or children. We met one evening in the living room of their apartment in the small city where we both live. I felt very welcome taking off my shoes as I entered (a common practice in the homes I have visited) and took a seat on a plush sofa. Thick rugs covered the floors. The apartment is decorated with richly colored furniture and rugs and absolutely immaculate every time I visit. Children were playing busily in another room zooming through the living room every few minutes. It felt natural and not oppressive at all to include her husband. Abdiazziz is a garrulous, engaging, animated sprite of a man who acts around his family in a way that reminds me of a grandfather or uncle not the lord of his castle or a dictatorial patriarch. The family feels

very democratic in their engagement of and conversation with each other and with guests. Abdiuzziz graciously and eagerly deliberated everything from small issues like the grades our sons received on their recent report cards to the subtle and serious differences in the various schools of thought of Islam in our discussion that evening. He has an astounding memory for dates and numbers. He can recount the various members and their votes of the Somali parliament. He recalls all of the various historical milestones that I review in this thesis with distinct knowledge of the foreign researchers and historians that have studied Somalia. His English is excellent but heavily accented with the distinct Somali characteristic of a heavily rolled “rrrr” sound. He is a fast talker in the best sense. It seems every utterance is a lesson packed full of information and he cannot get it out fast enough. Combined with a history of colonization by the Italians, the resulting accented English often sounds very operatic to the western ear. Abdiuzziz hosts a talk radio show in suburb where most refugees live concerning the Somali community. He pays close attention to the political situation in Somalia, the United States, Saudi Arabia, and with Islamic states around the world. He is keen to educate anyone who cares to listen on the causes of the collapse of civil society in Somalia. This concern has clearly carried over to his family especially Mowal who expresses similar interests in returning to Somalia to have a hand in the return of their home country to peace and prosperity. Abdiuzziz is also eager to correct any misperceptions about Somalis and Somalia. I feel that a future project co-authored with Mowal and Abdiuzziz will soon follow the completion of this research project. He is willing and acutely knowledgeable. Because this project is focused on Somali women, I did not feel it was appropriate to include anything in our discussions that did not relate directly to his daughters or wife. I will acknowledge I was wary at the beginning of the interview of how his involvement with translation might cloud or slant Faduma’s conversation

with me. I recognize that many scholars will see his participation as compromising my interview with Faduma. I am also keenly aware that neither of the conversations I had with his daughter or wife could have taken place without his endorsement. Researching lived experience can be messy and complicated. As we waded into the interview after a good hour of conversation, I felt Abdiazziz was a fair and open-minded assistant who really wanted to help me speak with his wife in an egalitarian manner. He assisted primarily with translating my questions. Faduma was quite capable of answering in English. It is no more possible for me to mitigate the influence of his interpretation any more than I can eliminate my influence as a researcher.

Faduma attended public schools in Somalia. In addition to full-time schooling, she also attended private instruction in afternoon schools set up to supplement the coursework they had in school. Some of this private instruction included extra work in math, science, and English. These schools throughout Somalia were not separated by gender. They were also not religious schools. Faduma and Abdiazziz both asserted that all but one of their siblings completed schooling in Somalia explaining that it was standard throughout the country for both men and women to go to school together until the collapse of the government. Faduma also verified the stories Mowal had told me about her style of dress growing up in Somalia. During our interview, Faduma was covered in a colorful full-length dress with a matching head covering. When I asked about Mowal's story of her wearing capri pants back in Somalia, she smiled and nodded and Abdiazziz added that she also wore an Afro when they were in high school. Faduma lived in both Saudi Arabia and Syria before finally ending up in the United States. Because she had studied Arabic as she was growing up, language was not so difficult in these countries. In the U.S., Faduma studied English in ESL classes offered at a church in the community where they lived. Somali is the primary language spoken in their home, however the younger children

are not as fluent as the older children. Mowal laughs when telling a story about her mother asking her little brother in Somali to retrieve something from the kitchen and his returning with something completely different than what she asked for. I have also discussed this with her younger brother Muhsin. He is eleven and readily admits that he doesn't understand a lot of his parents' conversations in Somali.

Both Faduma and Abdiazziz are quite proud of their daughters attending college in Washington D.C. and Rochester, New York despite some pressure or comments from the Somali community not to let them go that far away from home for school. The expectation in this family is for all of the children to go to college and for them all to decide on their own what they would like to study. Out of both of their very large immediate families, Abdiazziz and Faduma only have one sister who did not complete high school in Somalia. It is clear from my conversations with this family that education was a priority before they left Somalia and remains a priority in their lives here in the United States.

Hoodu: "Yeah, that's what I want to do. Finish college first, then marriage later on."

I met Hoodu through a former student of mine. Yitbarek Katzentet is one of my superstar students. He is from Ethiopia and first appeared in my composition class two years ago. We have developed a strong mentoring relationship as he pursues his lifelong dream of becoming an engineer. After he completed my class, we have stayed in touch and frequently celebrate milestones by eating at Ethiopian restaurants. I have nominated him for numerous scholarships and awards. We are working hard on his transfer applications to his dream schools including Stanford and the University of Texas. Yitbarek is very active on campus as a math tutor, and math club star. He has helped me recruit Somali women for my research. These types of relationships are essential to developing trust among my immigrant students and friends. It is far

easier to trust the experiences of your friends and classmates especially those that share similar backgrounds like being an immigrant. His referral of Hoodu and Nura, who is the subject of the next case study, were a vote of confidence in my motives and my trustworthiness as a teacher, community member, and researcher.

Hoodu is the daughter of a doctor, an uncommon characteristic among my participants. Most of my immigrant students with educational or professional licensure earned outside of the United States face a long and arduous path to have those credentials honored in the states. Her father completed his schooling in Africa and works in the U.S. as a physician with the county health department. Her family belongs to the group often referred to as “twice-migrated” as they landed first in Canada before ending up in the U.S. As a result, Hoodu’s first language was French. She attended French schools in Ontario until she moved to the U.S. at the age of 5. Despite being the middle child in a family of 7, she wants to be the first to complete her study of the Quran which she started when she was 11 or 12. Her older siblings are also either currently attending university in the United States or have recently graduated. Like her father, Hoodu is pursuing a career in medicine. Her family supports this pursuit and offers their full backing of her decision-making when it comes to school and marriage.

Hoodu arrived early for the interview and was waiting for me near my office. She was dressed in a colorful headscarf, fashionable long-sleeved shirt, and matching floor length skirt. Despite being covered more than most college-students, her style is clearly her own and an expression of her individualism. Hoodu was shy and quite earnest during our conversation. She is clearly a serious student who according to Yitbarek spends a lot of time on campus at her community college studying. She is involved in many campus organizations related to the sciences as well as the club for international students. She speaks English without a hint of an

accent and admits to her limited ability to speak Somali. She believes she understands more Somali than she is able to speak. Hoodu chose to participate out of sheer interest and willingness to contribute to the goals of my research project. I do not know her family, and she would have no other way to assess my trustworthiness or reputation aside from her friendship with Yitbarek.

Nura: "I know, it's awesome."

On the other end of the spectrum of educational background is Nura. Arriving in the U.S. at the age of 11, she had never been to school and could not read or write in any language. This final interview both challenged the predominant narratives about the experiences of women and girls in Somali and supported them. Nura grew up in a small village in the northern Somali countryside, moved to Ethiopia and lived in a predominantly Somali community, and finally arrived in the U.S. Most aid agencies and NGOs report that few women and girls are able to go to school in Somalia. Nura's experience bears up this reporting, but she is the only woman I interviewed who arrived in the U.S. without any experience reading or writing in any language. Her experience with schooling and literacy was the most difficult, however she has been able to attain high proficiency with academic literacy practices in 8 years of education. She was able to attend two schools with specialized curriculums for students like her. The "World School" is a public charter school and one of the first IB schools in the county school district. Admission is lottery-based. The "Girl's School" is an accredited special purpose private middle school for refugee girls. Both of these schools were organized to serve the unique needs of refugee students arriving in the community. The public schools in the area where most refugees resettle, is overburdened with ELL students in a school district suffering severe financial and legal issues. Nura was fortunate to have an advocate in her community that placed her in schools where she could receive the additional instruction she needed.

At 19, Nura is stunning and confident. She arrived in my office for our interview in a very stylish print headscarf and color-coordinated long-sleeved shirt and long skirt. She looked like spring in the middle of a very gray winter with vivid blues, pinks, and yellows decorating the fabrics she was wearing. She speaks very clear English with only a small hint of an accent. I would never have guessed she did not speak a word of English until 8 years ago. Although she says she is studying psychology, her commitment to that is wavering. She is still very early in her college career. We discussed how common it is to change majors and not be sure about a course of study until a little further along in college. Nura relates how difficult her first semester in college was. The transition in the fall from public high school to college was tough.

Contexts and conclusions

These profiles are provided to enrich the research interviews I conducted. I have chosen to include specific aspects of each woman's lives to shed light on the way they present themselves in society. The information in each description is intended to provide some key information about family, social context, and personal history relevant to the focus of this research study. Some of the details help my readers consider their visual appearance, language ability, and level of schooling. I also include their relationship to me and to other Somalis I have interviewed to be transparent about the relationship situating our conversation. These details connect to large themes of assimilation and identity formation discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. I offer these portraits to demonstrate the individuality of each woman in an attempt to counter the more common essentialized portrayals of refugees in research and literature. Feminist research calls us to acknowledge a "multiplexity" of identities in refugee research (Hajdukowski-Ahmed 31). These profiles provide evidence that there can be no typical Somali refugee woman.

4 ASSIMILATION STORIES

“I’ve never seen so many white people.” – Mowal

Norman Denzin contends “critical personal narratives are counter narratives that disrupt and disturb [dominant] discourse by exposing complexities and contradictions that exist under official history” (455). I contend the narratives collected in this research study expose many misperceptions about refugees, women, Somalis, and what counts for literacy. They contradict or, in my view, disrupt many of the dominant discourse portrayals of refugee women reviewed and summarized in the literature review portion of Chapter 1. Instead of stories of loss, victimization, and oppression dominant in the discourses of power shaping refugee identity, the women I interviewed chose to share many stories about the process of their assimilation into the dominant culture. These narratives demonstrate how Somali refugee women are challenging discourses of power by resisting complete adoption of western cultural norms. This chapter will provide support for the contention that Somali women are exercising rhetorical agency in the dominant culture as they gain language literacy and formal schooling. This research study will not debate the legitimacy or politics of assimilation although it is a worthy debate. Assimilation is fact of life for any refugee or immigrant. It is the rhetorical, political, and economic goal of a capitalist industrialist nation like the United States to assimilate immigrants into the social contract that supports this system of government. The mythical “melting pot” of the United States metaphorically assumes that immigrants arriving on the shores of America will assimilate into a unified, homogenous national identity. While this metaphor is generally celebrated as an ideal of American nationalism and a positive feature of western culture, assimilation for refugees forces them to learn a new language, relinquish religious and political practices, and pursue new

educational and employment options. Henry Giroux writes of this type of discourse of power, “national identity is structured through a notion of citizenship and patriotism that subordinates ethnic, racial and cultural differences to the assimilating logic of a common culture, or, more brutally, the ‘melting pot’”(190). Assimilation often conflicts with the beliefs, cultural practices, and personal identity of refugees as they move from their homeland to a new a host country. The work of Portes and Zhou proposes three distinct patterns of assimilation “dependent on social, political, and economic factors” (McBrien 331). Some types of assimilation have better social and economic outcomes for refugees than others. One of these patterns called “additive assimilation” is supported by the stories in this research project. In this pattern, immigrants preserve elements of their “ethnic solidarity” yet navigate the dominant culture resulting in “upward mobility...through supportive governmental and social policies” (McBrien 331). In determining the extent to which Somali women are assimilated, it is critical to consider how assimilation is measured. Refugee integration into American culture is typically measured by reporting levels of formal schooling, language proficiency, and employment. The Migration Policy Institute suggests Somali refugees are among the least assimilated in the U.S. by these measures, “Refugees from Somalia have among the lowest levels of formal education and most difficulties integrating of an U.S. immigrant group” (1). A 2009 Migration Policy Institute study reported Somali English language proficiency at 42%, the lowest levels of formal schooling, and lowest employment and earning rates among all groups of Black African immigrants living in the United States. To what extent do these measures define successful assimilation or resettlement for the Somali women in my study? What is left out of the picture by quantifying assimilation as proficiency in English, years of formal schooling, and employment status? The historical narrative that defines Somali women in terms of deficits in

education, language, and employment is challenged by the stories of my research subjects. A comparative, nuanced, and more complete view of the lives and experiences of the women I studied suggest a different scenario. These narratives suggest Somali women are following a pattern of “additive assimilation” taking advantage of the expanded educational opportunities in the U.S. while retaining certain cultural practices and ethnic markers of their native country. The beginning of the dismantling of the characterization of Somali refugees as illiterate and resistant to assimilation begins with their experiences in school. This is important to note because the public schooling system in the United States bears the brunt of introducing newly arrived immigrants to the dominant culture. Schools and programs that teach refugees how to speak English set the overall tone of the assimilative process.

Schooling and Additive Assimilation: “I remember it being really fun. It was. That's what helped me a lot.”

To understand the role literacy and schooling play in the process of acculturation, it is essential to place these concepts in the metaphorical narrative of the American melting pot. Harvey Graff writes in the epilogue to *Literacy, Economy, and Power*, “Literacy was unreflectingly incorporated into the principal narratives of the rise of the West and the triumph of democracy, modernization, and progress” (204). Even by the measures of integration and acculturation utilized by the west, the Somali women in my study challenge the educational data suggesting Somalis in the United States are resisting total assimilation. The stories and experiences of the women in this study suggest Somali women are embracing American schooling practices as well as achieving spoken and written English language fluency at advanced levels. The fact is, Somali women offer their experiences of assimilation as a measure

of their ability to navigate the social, political, and economic systems in the United States all while preserving their national identities as Somalis and religious identities as Muslims.

Because many of the interview questions posed to my research participants touched on issues related to literacy and schooling, many of the responses they offered are connected to their experiences in schools. The bulk of the stories related to experiences with secondary schooling both before and after migration to the United States. Interestingly, the literacy statistics from governmental and NGO sources on Somali women suggest they have had severely limited access to formal schooling in their home country (UNDP, UNCHR). As a result, I was expecting few stories of formal schooling in Somalia. This was not the case. In addition, many researchers support the critical role schools play in the refugee experience. Murray suggests public schooling is the primary setting where newly arrived refugees are introduced to and trained in the new cultural practices in the United States. Murray writes: “It is also in schools that immigrant and refugee youth encounter most directly the formal and informal integrating forces of their new society, where the structured discourses of nationalism, conveyed through educational curriculum and other facets of public schooling, converge their unwieldy discourses of contemporary popular culture” (38). In school, refugees encounter a new language and a new culture. By teaching students to read and write, educational institutions play a chief role in assimilation. Literacy is a potent means of political control as is evident from the literacy experiences of my research participants in both socialist and capitalist systems. Duffy chronicles the use of literacy and schooling by eighteenth and nineteenth century educational reformers as a “means through which to instill discipline and prepare the working class, including immigrant populations, for their places in an increasingly urban, industrial society” (138). The extent to

which Somali women have resisted assimilation is an interesting facet of my research study which will become more apparent in later portions of this chapter

I will begin my analysis of these stories of assimilation and integration with the younger women participating in the research. Mowal offers many vital details of her experience of assimilation. In the following narrative, she discusses the differences in schools she attended on the levels of student demographics and teacher quality. Her experience seems to resist popular notions of the isolating and negative consequences of acculturation because Mowal indicates her satisfaction with the new school (R Middle School) where she was far more in the minority than (F Middle School). Many in the west assume that refugees choose or prefer to live in isolated communities where they feel more comfortable surrounded by a community of other immigrants. Even when the way Somali women dress is so different than the cultural norm in the west, it is easy to assume that they would feel more comfortable surrounded by those who share similar cultural practices, however this is often not the case. Mowal referred to the “whiteness” of her new community. She recognized the privilege afforded her new community in terms of “resources” and the quality of the instruction she received at school. She lends authority and experience to how our society distributes wealth among communities. Yet, even when she became even more in the minority when she moved to the new school and neighborhood, Mowal expressed her satisfaction with these changes.

Mowal: When I was in the seventh grade. Uh, yeah, I'm not sure exactly but I remember being in the seventh grade because I went to Indian Creek then I went to Freedom Middle School; I'm not sure if you know-

Mary Helen: Oh yeah.

Mowal: (Laughs) In sixth grade and then I came here seventh grade for Renfroe.

Mary Helen: Yeah. That was a big change, huh?

Mowal: It was extremely different. Like, first of all, the demographic, it was just like, I don't know, I've never, as weird as this is going to sound, I've never seen so many white people. (Laughing) So like when I was there, I don't know, it was kind of crazy for me. It was nice. It was a lot nicer. The education was a lot nicer. The resources, the, how dedicated the teachers were was so much different.

Mary Helen: Did that make you feel, even though you were in a, surrounded by all this whiteness, did you feel, uh, better at Renfroe than you did at Freedom? Or, you know, culturally, living in Edgetown as Somali you're, you have lots and lots of other Somalis, um, but you moved to, you moved, literally, physically to Centertown, which is very different; there aren't as many-

Mowal: Yeah.

Mary Helen: You know, immigrant communities around Centertown. Was that isolating or did you like it?

Mowal: Um ... At first it was slightly isolating. It was a bit difficult because being in a certain environment, it softens you up. And I was put in this whole new environment where I

didn't know these people, there was nothing we could talk about; I thought there was nothing we could talk about really. But after a little bit, I met this girl who was from Iran and she, she used to go to my elementary school, Indian Creek actually, and her family was in the same exact process; they moved to the public housing there. So I just automatically clicked with her, and then she was there a year before me so she sort of knew people and she kind of got me into the rhythm of that. But after awhile I was so happy we moved because, to be honest with you, I feel like, besides the community aspect, I did not gain much from, like, the schooling and stuff. (Appendix D)

Mowal was keen to share many of her experiences adjusting to new communities in Georgia and Washington D.C. where she is attending college. These were stories of success not defeat or disenfranchisement. Despite becoming more “othered” in her new school, she accepted the differences and learned to leverage the advantages to her own benefit. This was a recurrent theme throughout the stories these women told. Some researchers might argue that Mowal’s experience is an isolated example of her ability to negotiate the marginalization she experienced in school. In fact, some research suggests these types of experiences have more of a negative outcome on refugee student assimilation and academic performance. Theorists assert “that mismatching cultural norms between minority and majority cultures create conflicts in school that can lead to poor academic performance for minority children” (Shephard 18). The work of McBrien and the Suarez-Orozco team gleaned from the LISA (Longitudinal Immigrant Student

Adaptation) study also suggests immigrant, especially refugee, students perform better in school communities where students share similar cultural values and experiences. The stories in this research study suggest my research participants have succeeded in school academically and socially despite being in the communities where they do not share the values of the majority of their classmates. These glimpses into their individual experiences help us unravel some of the misconceptions educators and researcher have about refugee students. By listening to the stories of their school experiences, we can begin to identify those traits of resilience and adaptation that contribute to favorable academic and social outcomes for refugee students.

McBrien and other educational researchers have documented the principal role public education plays in the lives of refugees. Literacy sponsors, as Deborah Brandt describes them are “agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy – and gain advantage by it in some way” (166). Literacy sponsors, specifically teachers and volunteers, play a prominent role in the stories I collected. I discovered that many of the women have distinctly optimistic stories about teachers or tutors they encountered in their communities. Like so many people they remember their names, what they taught, how they made them feel. The pedagogical implications are significant. Literacy sponsors are crucial gatekeepers of access to the linguistic and cultural practices of the dominant culture for any immigrant student. I have heard countless negative experiences of refugees with these cultural gatekeepers both from refugees themselves and from the particular literacy sponsor involved. As I alluded to earlier, much of the literacy and educational data Somali refugee students in U.S. public schools indicates low levels of language acquisition and academic achievement (Migration Policy Institute). The work of Murray Forman and Eleni Oikonomidou specifically has highlighted the struggles of Somali youth entering the

Canadian and U.S. public school systems, characterizing their struggles to adjust as particularly difficult. In addition to the facts and figures, anecdotal evidence from teachers and administrators characterize Somali refugee students as particularly resistant to academic interventions. Compounded with damaging conventional characterizations of Somali refugee women, many teachers and volunteers presume that Somali women are particularly resistant to schooled literacy. They have been led to believe that most Somali girls are expected to marry at a young age forgoing more advanced schooling, training, or careers. The experiences of the women in my study do not conform to the stereotypical Somali woman presented in the dominant narratives and published accounts of Somali experience. Mowal chose to share her experience with the volunteers who were assisting refugees in after-school programs in the apartment complex where she lived. In this excerpt, Mowal identifies the pivotal role literacy sponsorship played in constructing a positive assimilative experience:

Mowal: Um, here, yeah, I learned to read here in preschool. Um, I grew up in Edgetown like all of the immigrants. And, um, I used to live in the area where Willow Branch was.

(Laughs) Yeah. So I used to go to after school in, um, with Willow Branch after school, and we had people who just wanted to volunteer. They came and they helped us. Then when I moved to Christopher Woods, they also had the same program. It was really, really helpful. Um, I remember it being really fun. It was. That's what helped me a lot.

Mary Helen: Why? How, how was it fun?

Mowal: Because we would come in and we would do the work but the people wouldn't just leave automatically. They would stay with us, they would hang out with us. They, they just made the whole process really fun. Like, I really enjoy growing up in Edgetown because of people like that. And that's why when I, um, when I became a senior I went back and I did the same exact thing, where I tutored kids. Because I remember it was, like, it fits. And I just remember how happy it made me learning. (Appendix D)

Mowal has repeatedly mentioned to me that she would like return to the local refugee community in Edgetown to assist newly arrived refugees in the same way she was assisted by the volunteers in the program that helped her. Her memory of this experience has evidently shaped her attitudes toward assimilation and toward representatives of the new culture. The women I interviewed volunteered many other stories that substantiate the assertion that literacy sponsorship plays a leading formative role in the adjustment of refugees to their new culture. Zahra fondly recalled her classes at the local church where refugee women receive English language instruction upon arriving in Edgetown. Halima recalled a particular teacher:

Mary Helen: So, do you remember who taught you to read?

Halima: Um, I don't remember, but I had this really one teacher that I like. Her name is Ms. Freewell and she loved parachutes. Um, I think she was like middle-aged white lady and she was just so like friendly and every time my parents would come pick me up, she was like, "Oh my God, Halima did

this in class and Halima did that in class," and she was like, "Oh, stop it," and this one when I was a little kid and then, um, I guess she was really good friends with our parents, so I think she, like, taught me more. (Appendix E)

These stories all contribute to the general understanding of the impact of literacy sponsorship on these women. McBrien's review of the educational needs of refugee students asserts "teachers become more compassionate when they became more knowledgeable about their (refugee) backgrounds" (337). In what appears to be obvious good teaching practice, she suggests instructors must be sensitive to the past experiences of students in their classrooms in an effort to understand the different political, social, and cultural backgrounds of refugee students and their families (355). These stories confirm that supportive and sensitive teachers and volunteers (literacy sponsors) have a considerable impact on the experiences of refugees as they learn to navigate a new culture. The stories also show us why developing culturally responsive literacy sponsorship is a fundamental component of successful refugee student assimilation. Teachers, volunteers and other sponsors of literacy need strong awareness and sensitivity to the cultural values of those they work with. McDonald adds it is also important that they not be "misinformed by popular representations of refugee experience" (*Emissaries of Literacy* 10). Paying attention to our own positionality and prejudices about language learning and the politics of assimilation can support a positive experience for refugee students.

Belonging in "Other" Spaces: "It was so difficult and I would come home every day and cry myself to sleep."

In an effort to accommodate the educational needs of refugee and immigrant students, public schools must provide additional language instruction and other support services. Many

researchers have pointed to the relative lack of differentiated instruction designed to meet the specific needs of refugee students (McBrien 2005, Garcia 2005, Faltis & Coulter 2008). Language learning has been the dominant focus of the research on immigrant and refugee education. For obvious reasons, students who cannot speak English pose immediate difficulties for teachers and other literacy sponsors. ESL and ELL programs offer immigrants a community of learners facing similar issues of acculturation, but even these programs can be sites of displacement and marginalization. As Duffy suggests, the rhetorics of public schooling in the United States have constructed a system to contain and assimilate immigrants by funneling them into a physical and rhetorical space separate from the mainstream community in an educational institution. English language literacy becomes the method of categorizations. Students are labeled ELL or ESL tracking them through a literacy program preparing students to read, write, and “think American” (Duffy 138). Forman characterizes these educational practices as “public high schools attempt to manage the education and cultural transformation or integration of their immigrant and refugee students through a series of suturing practices.” In these programs, students become “sutured” to not just the language but also the ideals of the dominant culture (38).

For some of the women in my study, even finding a place of belonging with other refugee and immigrant students was a struggle. Their experiences call attention to the broad generalizations made by the practice of gathering students from many different cultures and backgrounds into a learning community designed to draw them into the cultural practices of the dominant culture. Halima discussed her feeling of not belonging to either the mainstream classes at her school or the ESL classes because as a fluent English speaker she was not included with the majority of other immigrant students in ESL.

Mary Helen: Okay. All right, so I want you to tell me about your experience of learning to read.

Halima: Learning to read. Um, actually, I don't know how I started like learning English 'cause I was never in those ESL classes. I guess it was that since I was a baby and then I went to school here that I already knew the language before I got there. I have these friends, they were like, "Oh, it's an ESL, then I'd tested out of it," and I was like, "Wait. How come I wasn't in it, you know, I thought it was the cool thing," and I just never was in it and I just knew it 'cause my parents knew basic English and then I'll go to school, I feel like, "Mom, look, look," and they'd be like, "What is that?" and I'll be like, "Look, look," you know, and I just learned from my teachers. (Appendix E)

In this case, Halima was excluded from ESL with the “cool” kids. Her American classmates, teachers, and school administrators incorrectly judged Halima by her appearance. As a Somali, Halima expected to be grouped with other refugee students in a community of learners where she was more comfortable labeled as an ELL student. She was asked if she needed assistance and approached as though she could not communicate when she showed up for an Honors class. It wasn't until she spoke, in flawless accent-less English, that the teacher recognized her as a legitimate member of the class. Not only does this story convey the lack of differentiation in correctly assessing the needs of refugee students, it also illustrates the difficulty of finding a place of belonging in the school community for refugee students.

Listening to Somali women discuss their experiences in schools offers insight into identity construction in school communities where the majority of students, teachers, and administrators do not share the same cultural practices and often misunderstand or misjudge those that seem unfamiliar. Somali girls are often “adrift between cultures, as are all individuals designated as immigrants and refugees” (Forman). Some labeling of immigrants and refugees is based on their language ability. Other labeling occurs as a result of other aspects of their cultural identity such as they way they dress. All of the women in my study dressed in non-western attire. As Muslims, Somali women traditionally dress relatively conservatively in the United States. Teachers and school officials often make incorrect judgments about refugee and immigrant students based on their appearance. In the next portion of her story, Halima told me more about her experience adrift between many labeling practices in school. I highlight this aspect of Halima’s story because it demonstrates the type of stereotyping Somali women experience as result of the way they dress:

Mary Helen: You don't sound, you sound like an American kid.

Halima: Yeah (laughs).

Mary Helen: So how do, talk about that a little bit.

Halima: I don't know, I guess-

Mary Helen: Do you have any stories about that?

Halima: Yeah. Um, when I was in fifth grade, there's was this one story I remember. Um, I would come, this is before like I knew of anything about matching, like I would have different skirt, different top, you know, different color of scarf, and I would just go to class and it'd be like a normal class, it's like honor students,

you know, and they'd be like, "Sweetie, uh, you're in the wrong class," and then, and then I would talk and they'd be like, "Oh my God, like, you don't sound like you have an accent or anything, you know," and then I'm just like I would get really offended by it and wouldn't say anything, you know, and I will just show them like in my work ask questions that I can actually, like, I belong in that class, you know, and then people just like, "Oh, that's nice," so I made, like, a lot of like friends over the years for that.

Mary Helen: I bet you have some stories about people seeing you and having misperceptions about your language skills.

Halima: Yeah, um, or like, just me looking confused. I think that I have a confused face to people when I'm just walking 'cause the first day I was walking I knew where I was going. I completely knew where I was going, and there was one guy that came up to me, he's just like, "Are you lost, sweetie?" and I'm like, "No, do I look lost?" He's like, "Yeah, you look really confused," and I'm like, "No, I know where I'm going." He's like, "Oh okay," and I would see him, like, in like passing and he'd be like, "Oh okay, have a good day," you know, and I'm like, "Thank you." It was really weird.

(Appendix E)

It is not an unusual experience for most children in school settings to feel out of place. Growing up involves exploring different identities. For Somali girls in western schools, the difficulties associated adolescence more generally are magnified by the experience of

displacement. Halima's stories of assimilation suggest the persistent classification and objectification of Somali women based on dress as an identity marker. Because of the way she looked, she was judged "out of place" in mainstream and Honors classes, yet her academic literacies, her speaking, reading, and writing of English disqualified her from ESL classes where she has been coached to believe she belonged. Halima would probably have been more comfortable in a learning community where she most likely shared the same cultural background with some portion of the class. In what could have been a negative experience, Halima made the most of a difficult situation. She found the confusion humorous. In most cases, the women I interviewed effectively navigated the difficult terrain of a new culture in their schools. The stories they told did not emphasize dislocation, isolation, or failure. These were stories of successfully finding a place to belong. Again, this is remarkable because so many stories of immigrant experience recount their isolation in school. Halima's story in particular stands prominently among the other narratives as a fine example of asserting her agency. She confidently countered the rhetorical assertion that she was not linguistically capable of negotiating the culture because of the way she looked. Halima insisted that despite her skirts and scarves, she was literally in the right class.

Nura, on the other hand, offers a unique perspective among all of my research subjects. In particular her experience highlights what is often characterized in literacy research as the most difficult academic assimilative barrier to overcome. Situating her experience in literacy scholarship known theoretically as the "Great Divide" between orality and literacy, Nura is a case study in the process of an individual who is unschooled and not able to read and write acquiring alphabetic and schooled literacy. Somalis were introduced to alphabetic literacy in the 1970s, so many of those arriving in the United States have been depicted in terms associating

members of oral cultures as deficient in intelligence and knowledge. The turn in literacy studies and the work of researchers like Duffy, Scribner, Cole, Street, and Heath have changed the reductive characterizations of oral cultures and expanded sociocultural definitions of literacy. While this may be the case in the field of literacy studies, general educational research still categorizes refugee students as functionally (reading and writing) literate or illiterate.

Nura arrived in the United States at the age of 11 having never read or written a word in any language. According to the definitions of the dominant culture, she was illiterate. Her struggle to assimilate was far more complicated than many. Her lived experience more closely matches the more popular descriptions of Somali immigrants arriving in the United States. With no schooled literacy even in religious instruction, Nura is the prototypical Somali female most often portrayed by NGOs, government reports, and popular media. Leaving a small village in northern Somalia, she reported living a very contented and simple life with her family. Arriving in the United States with no literacy skills in any language except spoken Somali, her stories of acculturation disclose a different degree of difficulty than the stories told by the women who arrived as young children. It is crucial for those who work with refugees to listen to Nura's experiences to consider how communities can support refugees transitioning from vastly different literacy practices in their native cultures. As forced migration continues to disrupt the cultural practices of millions of people, listening to the stories of refugees can help us determine strategies for coping that lead to mutual understanding on the part of both refugees and members of host countries. Research suggests that resilience and strong positive attitudes contribute to way refugees experience a new culture, "While many immigrant children face serious obstacles in their schooling, their optimism, positive attitudes, and willingness to work hard in many cases act as a powerful counterforce even in less than optimal schools" (Suarez-Orozco 152). Despite

literacy and schooling statistics indicating a low level of achievement in these areas among Somalis in the U.S., a closer look at individual experiences in that group tell a different story. The story of Nura's schooling history provides insight that specialized school communities are especially beneficial to refugees arriving with little formal schooling and limited reading and writing skills:

Mary Helen: So you have a very unique experience. You were 11 when you came here. What school did you go to first?

Nura: At first I started at ... I don't remember the school name but I think I was in the 5th grade. They put me in the 5th grade and I started at a normal elementary school and I was lost.

Mary Helen: You'd never been to school before.

Nura: Yeah, it was so difficult and I would come home every day and cry myself to sleep. I would be like, "What is this? What am I doing? I cannot do this," and then thankfully there was a school called World School. Have you heard of it? Do you know?

Mary Helen: I do.

Nura: Yeah, so I started there.

Mary Helen: How old were you there? Did you do a year in 5th grade or did you immediately go over to World School?

Nura: Yeah, after a while, maybe a month after being here. It was an amazing experience up there, even though it was still difficult but it was easier because there were a lot of immigrants there and they

had ESL classes that could help you more and the teachers were awesome.

Mary Helen: I have a lot of friends who teach there.

Nura: Really? Yeah, they were amazing.

Mary Helen: So it was a big difference?

Nura: Mm-hmm (affirmative). At the beginning I was not able to talk. I would just sit there and smile but within 6 months, I started talking, saying some stuff, saying hello to my teachers.

Mary Helen: How old are you now?

Nura: I'm 19.

Mary Helen: So in 8 years, you learned how to read and write, you made up for all that lost time in elementary school, and you're in college now?

Nura: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mary Helen: That's pretty amazing.

Nura: I know. It's awesome. (Appendix I)

Again, although we find the recurrent theme of profound adjustment, Nura's experience demonstrates something unique among the women in my study. Nura had to negotiate arriving at an American school with no reading or writing skills and no ability to speak English at the age of 11. Salam, Halima, Mowal, and Hoodu received instruction in reading and writing from the time they were very young. It is difficult to imagine her isolation and feelings of helplessness. She mentioned crying after school everyday, yet with the help of a family member who works as a case worker for a refugee resettlement agency, Nura was able to locate community resources that provided more than what is typically available to the majority of refugee students. Both

World School and Girls' School are charter schools focused on providing specialized instruction to ELL students, however they are only able to serve a small percentage of the immigrant and refugee students in the community. Even within these highly specialized and responsive educational institutions, assimilation was a mighty undertaking. Nura assessed her accomplishments by proclaiming the "awesomeness" of her achievements. She could certainly have chosen to focus on the struggles, difficulties, and setbacks. I'm sure there were many. The choice Nura made to share the extent of her struggle to assimilate as well the encouraging resolution of this experience suggest both extraordinary aptitude and resilience. Nura was not a passive participant in her struggles. Her experience helps us understand what is needed to support the development of literacy skills in refugee students arriving from predominantly oral cultures.

Language and Identity: "You need to learn Somali. What about when you get married?"

My conversations with my research participants revealed fluency in spoken Somali as a key component of their identity. They told many stories supporting the contention that this is another strong connection to their ethnic and cultural heritage. Language research with immigrants asserts, "While on the surface language is about communication, it is also a marker of identity and an instrument of power" (Suarez-Orozco 135). Because all of the women in my research study are multilingual, I asked many questions about what languages they use at home as well as languages used for religious study. The women in my study frequently discussed the use of the Somali language at home at among first and second-generation immigrants in their family. They reported their use of Arabic for religious study, English for school and work, and Somali for family and community. Investigating the ways speaking Somali anchors these women to their culture is essential for understanding their hybridized identities as Somali women

in the United States. Especially significant are the ways families use Somali to keep the next generation connected to their ethnic and national identity. Hoodu discussed the emphasis her mother placed on her learning Somali:

Mary Helen: So you know French, read Arabic.

Hoodu: A little Somali.

Mary Helen: Native English speaker, really. All right, talk to me about your Somali and how it's used at home.

Hoodu: Sometimes my mom will speak to me in Somali, and I know what she's saying. I can understand it and sometimes I'll say it back to her in Somali. I only know a little bit, not really that much, but I'm still learning a little bit. My mom's like, "You need to learn Somali. What about when you get married? Your husband is going to leave you if you don't." I'm like, that's not going to happen.

(Appendix H)

This gap in language ability between parents and children post-migration has been a frequent topic of many of conversations with my Somali friends. It also came up in my research interviews. The younger women often told me that Somali is spoken at home by their parents and some of them admitted their limited ability with the language. Mowal joked about the extremely limited spoken Somali ability of her younger siblings by telling a story about her mother asking her younger brothers and sister to retrieve something from the kitchen only to have them bring her something totally unrelated to what she requested. Mowal's little brother joked about this with me over lunch at a soccer match as well. Musin told me doesn't understand

a lot of the spoken Somali among his parents and older siblings at home. Mowal related this circumstance in her family:

Mary Helen: So, if I were going to ask you the language you first learned to read, would it have been Arabic or Somali or-

Mowal: Yeah.

Mary Helen: What would it have been?

Mowal: It was Arabic, and the first language I spoke was also Arabic, because we were raised in Saudi Arabia. But when we moved here, we started to forget Arabic and we started learning English. My parents thought, you know, we should bring in Somali because we are originally from Somalia. So they started speaking to us in Somali, and so learning English and Somali at the same time ...

Mary Helen: Your little brother and sister don't understand very much Somali.

Mowal: I know, it's kind of sad to be honest with you. (Laughs)

Mary Helen: I think they pretend like they know, but they don't. Musin admitted to me, he's like, "I don't know what she's talking about."
(Laughing)

Mowal: Like, my mom tells him to go grab something and they think they know and they go and they grab it but it's the wrong thing.

Mary Helen: (Laughs)

Mowal: That happens all the time. (Appendix D)

The use of Somali at home indicates another aspect of additive assimilation practiced by the women in my research study. For these women, English proficiency provides educational

and economic capital in the dominant culture, but speaking Somali preserves vital ties to their cultural heritage. McBrien writes, “Researchers find that retaining one’s native language helps to maintain family and cultural ties that are important to psychosocial well-being” (355). Both the previous excerpt of Mowal’s story along with the following passage from Halima’s interview provide keen insight into one of the essential ways Somali women have retained aspects of their culture. Communicating with other Somalis in their native tongue provides a key connection to their identity.

Mary Helen: So you probably first learned to read and write in, in English?

Halima: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mary Helen: Do you speak Somali?

Halima: Um, see, that's a sad part. I think I learned English before I learned Somali.

Mary Helen: So you don't know-

Halima: So, like, I don't, I know basic, I, I can hold a basic conversation like my parents, but then what I mean like relatives and they would have like full-on conversation about my life, I'd be like, "Ohhh. I don't know, can I go to my room now? I don't know what to say."

Mary Helen: Oh really?

Halima: Yeah.

Mary Helen: So is it still that way?

Halima: Yeah, it is. And my mom's like, "You need to learn. What if you go back to your country one day, you know." I gotta learn.

(Appendix E)

The use of a native language at home also preserves continuity of the family structures that serve as the predominant social unit in the Somali family. Speaking Somali with parents, older relatives, and community elders is essential to the preservation of a strong family. I also believe the stories of how Somali is used in the families of these women suggests the powerful interconnection of language and national identity. Halima emphasizes the need to learn Somali so that she can go back to Somalia one day.

Maintaining ties to their national, ethnic, and cultural identity is facilitated by their use of spoken Somali. Research in immigrant and refugee adjustment by Portes and Rumbaut suggests that bilingual fluency in a native language and English “related not only to academic achievement but also to their success with acculturation and a sense of continuity with their parents and others from their native country”(quoted in McBrien 343). The stories shared by my research participants support the contention that speaking Somali is an important contribution to their individual and collective identities in their assimilation experiences.

Education and Literacy: “You wanna go to school? Go ahead.”

It is not helpful for teachers, policy makers, volunteers, or anyone speaking for Somali women to assume that there is a widespread lack of cultural value assigned to education or schooled literacy for girls and women in their culture. This view is a consequence of authoritarian powers presuming a conflated view of Somali women as conservative Muslims and members of a predominantly oral culture. Few westerners are aware of the history of literacy in Somalia or the variations of Islam practiced by Somalis. A critical statistic widely referenced in Somali demographic data and one I included in Chapter 2 to justify this project reports current literacy rates for adult Somalis at around 37% up from a previously reported statistic of 17% prior to the civil war. These are among the lowest in the world. Based on this data, assumptions

about Somali women are made by policy-makers, educators, NGOs, and governments. It is critical to know more about the specific historical and political events in Somalia that contribute to the gap in literacy skills of the women who have migrated to other countries. I learned from Faduma and Zahra's interviews that shared, free public schooling was available throughout Somalia as Siad Barre's socialist agenda expanded throughout the country. In fact, the stories of the younger generation in my study confirm that perhaps what has happened is the continuation of cultural literacy practices here in the U.S. that were disrupted by the war in Somalia. Before Barre's literacy campaign was launched in 1973, the Somali government reported a 5% literacy rate, whereas after the campaign literacy rates were reaching 75% across the country (Andrzejewski). Those who work in partnership with Somalis need to understand the history of their literacy practices in order to understand how formal schooling and literacy have come to be valued in their culture. These stories demonstrate the relationship between literacy and nationalism as well as how predominantly oral cultures transform as a result of national literacy campaigns.

By listening closely to the stories of how these women gain and utilize various literacy practices, we understand the impact of literacy on the shaping of their identity and their agency in the west. Reading and writing at a basic level is a requirement for citizenship, licensure, and for economic agency in the west. Faduma and Zahra have acquired enough basic literacy to navigate as a parent, an employee, a licensed driver, and a citizen. Their daughters and the younger women in my study are subscribing to the American rhetorical narrative of the value of higher education or advanced academic literacies. To me, this is also a strong indicator of the level of Somalis assimilation into the dominant culture. Schooling and education are having huge impact on how these women participate in society. The stories these women have told all

resist the common accounts of traditional practices for Somali women including early marriages and lives constrained to housekeeping and childcare for the majority of women. The women I interviewed valued education and careers. Each of the younger women expressed their parents' support of their education. They also indicated that their families did not pressure them to marry.

Placing the experiences of these women in the context of the historical and political discourses shaping them assists in understanding the way schooling and education mediate agency in public life. Education has played a prominent role shaping the identity of all of the women in my study. Halima explained the priority education is given in her family. Her story also provides some evidence that religion is not the determining factor in relegating Somali women only to lives of marriage and domestic work.

Mary Helen: Do you want stay in the United States?

Halima: Uh, I think so. Right now I do, but I don't know, maybe like in the future years ...

Mary Helen: If things got better in Somalia, would you want go there?

Halima: Uh, I want to actually go. My parents, we've been talking about that, but, like, we have to all go when we have like time, you know, like when our schedules don't mess up.

Mary Helen: Well, if you, if you think about it in terms of, um, broader Somali culture in the community of millions and millions of Somalis and you'll probably be some of the first women that would go to medical school outside of ...

Halima: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah.

Mary Helen: The country for sure, right?

- Halima: Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Mary Helen: I mean, how does that make you feel in terms of your identity?
- Halima: I don't know, I think, like-
- Mary Helen: And how you fit into traditional Somali culture?
- Halima: I kinda, I kinda like 'cause it breaks like the actual like norm of Somalia and like most people say, like, I'll have friends, they're like, "Oh, I'm gonna be a doctor." I have like aunties, they were like, "Oh, yeah, I wanted to become a doctor," but they would always stop at like the nursing stage and they wouldn't actually like go through. Maybe I think they got married and have kids or something happened. Like, I wanna actually, like be the first Somali girl doctor that I know, like my generation.
- Mary Helen: There's another one I met! (laughs)
- Halima: Really?
- Mary Helen: So, um, you've got some competition (laughs). She's not from ...
- Halima: From?
- Mary Helen: She's from Washington. I met her ...
- Halima: Oh?
- Mary Helen: Yeah, last summer, but I think it's really interesting and, um, how does your family feel about ...
- Halima: They're like, "Yeah, go for it." They're like they're really into education, like my parents would come home and they're like, "Oh,

just do your homework, just read your books," you know, like it's always education first before we actually play.

Mary Helen: And how does that fit in with, um, religion and identity in terms of your role as a woman?

Halima: Religion, I think like most people are into like the whole, uh, stereotypical, like Somali women or Muslim women generally have to be at home and can't, like, really do anything like towards education. Our parents teach us like, "Yeah, you wanna work? Go work. You wanna go to school? Go ahead." (Appendix E)

I focused a lot of my interview questions around the perception in the west that characterizes the cultural identity of Somali women as primarily wives and mothers. All of the school-age women in my study are college students which in and of itself refutes the common portrayal of Somali girls being offered in early arranged marriage restricted to limited agency outside the home. This characterization may be a result of widespread ideological mischaracterization of Muslim women or a result of racist attitudes toward African immigrants. Either way, the stories my research participants shared debunk the archetype of the passive Muslim or disempowered African refugee woman. Listening to these women talk about their own attitudes towards education and their aspirations for the future help clarify how education is valued in Somali communities. I believe Halima's story rehabilitates a misperception in the minds of most westerners who work with Somali women. In all of my interviews, the expectation was for these women to pursue formal education and careers. They are expected to go to school and pursue careers. In addition, this seems to fulfill an expectation that existed before their migration as opposed to a wholehearted embrace of American educational and

economic rhetoric of progress. To unravel the misperception that education is not valued for Somali girls and women, it is critical to note that the political instability in Somalia began in earnest at the point in the lives of these women when they had to choose to pursue higher education or not. According to both Faduma and Zahra, college was available and free for any Somali woman that chose that route before the collapse of the government. This is one reason why both Faduma and Zahra have supported their daughters going to college. The collected stories of Halima, Hoodu, Nura, Mowal, and Salam all indicate they are shaping their personal identity around the cultural expectation of pursuing a profession. I did not see any evidence that they are pressured to marry and care for a family as their primary pursuit as women. Even the stories Faduma and Zahra shared indicated an expectation for women to pursue education and careers in Somalia before the collapse of the government.

Mother-daughter pair Faduma and Mowal provided substantiation of this observation from both perspectives. As I have discussed in previous chapters, this family is the first I've met that has allowed their daughters to go so far away to attend college. I wanted to find out if this was a change in attitudes about sending girls away from home for education and whether or not the family felt criticism or pressure from the larger Somali community and/or their immediate family for the decision. When I have discussed it with Mowal and Minal in the past, they have acknowledged that it is indeed an uncommon practice, but they both express confidence that they are supported by their family in their pursuit.

Mary Helen: Did your parents, your mother and your father, they valued education. They wanted you to go to school, right?

Faduma: Yeah.

Mary Helen: Are your parents still living?

- Faduma: My mom is here.
- Mary Helen: What does she think about Mowal and Minal being in college?
- Faduma: She like it.
- Mary Helen: She does?
- Faduma: Yeah, she's happy. She wanted they take it.
- Mary Helen: What would you hope for your daughters for a career? Do you want them to be doctors, or whatever they choose for a profession?
- Faduma: Whatever she want it I want it.
- Mary Helen: Yeah?
- Faduma: Whatever you like it.
- Mary Helen: If she wants to go out and be a business woman or whatever she wants to do?
- Faduma: Whatever she like it, I like.
- Mary Helen: Even Maha, she can do that too?
- Faduma: Yeah, all my children, whatever they like it, I like.
- Mary Helen: How do you think you all are different as from other Somali parents in that regard? I think most Somali, every Somali I met, values education.
- Abdiaziz: Mm-hmm (affirmative)
- Mary Helen: You all are more comfortable saying, "Yes, I want my children to go to college." Is that because you all got to do that? Do you think it's because you got to go to high school, because you're educated so you want them to have that?

Faduma: Yeah, because I know every people they're learning. They go in school. They make a good life. They not go in school, nothing.

(Appendix C)

Faduma was emphatic in her statement that without school her children will be “nothing” and that school will help them make a “good life.” These stories and experiences suggest that Somali women are successfully negotiating western-schooled literacy practices to gain social and economic agency. This social mobility provides new ways to construct the concept of being a Somali woman both in the west and within the Somali community. Mowal offered some insight into how college can be a place for Somali women to transform their identity as it often is for westerners. In this excerpt, Mowal offered a story of her experience away at school as well as one of another Somali woman who chose a different route:

Mary Helen: Well I think, uh, it's really amazing that my, most of the Somali women I know, even though you're away from home and you've gone away, which is not traditional, to go school, that you guys retain so much of your culture and your identity.

Mowal: Yeah.

Mary Helen: And you were little when you left Somalia.

Mowal: Exactly. Um, are you talking about, like, the Somali culture and retaining it here?

Mary Helen: And throughout the whole thing, you know? I mean, look at you: You are a completely educated, liberated woman off at college and you still retain those cultural values. I think that's amazing.

Mowal: Yeah, I think, um, just the way my parents raised me, I think, because I know some are not like that. I actually have an example: There's, um, there's a girl who goes here at American, and I saw her one time and she looks Somali, but, like, she doesn't wear a scarf, she dresses very Western and stuff like that. And then I spoke to her and she was, like, "Oh, no, I don't speak Somali anymore. I don't really consider myself Somali." And she's, like, your typical, sort of, like, she's in a sorority, she's very Western, very American. So I know people like that and then I think back to how I was raised and how my parents raised me, because here she talks about how she traveled a lot, mom works for the U.N. and stuff like that. But, like, my mom was strict on that early on. When we were young, she was strict on, um, I don't know how, just, like, going out and things like; she was really strict on that. We stayed home more, she spoke Somali to us and then my dad would, like, tell us all about Somalia, and how at the end of the day, no matter what we do, there are two things we need to remember: We are Muslim and Somali. So no matter what we do with life, those are two things he wants us to remember. (Appendix D)

Mowal and Faduma's stories provide an uncommon viewpoint allowing the exploration of the subject at hand from both the perspective of the daughter as well as the mother. Mowal reveals how her mother and father both supported her educational endeavors but also preserved her national, ethnic, and religious identity. Keeping Mowal geographically close was not a

requirement for keeping her connected to her Somali identity. Her story offers another facet in her process of assimilation. Mowal has constructed a new hybrid identity in the United States as Muslim, a Somali, a woman, a college student, and a participant in public discourse.

Conclusions

Total assimilation and adoption of western liberalism and secularism is often the expressed fear of many of my Somali friends. It is a difficult road to resist the persuasion of the dominant culture when you are relentlessly defined as a lesser person because of your ethnicity, literacy, language, and religion by the rhetorical practices of the dominant culture. Despite this burden, the stories in my research study support the assertion that many Somali women in the United States are constructing a unique new identity through additive assimilation leveraging the economic and social advantages offered by education all the while preserving their national, ethnic, and religious identities. I believe this is a significant contribution to the study of refugees and their participation in and resistance to western cultural practices. These stories move the focal lens of public discourse stuck on the marginalization of refugees to their lived experiences accumulating cultural capital and gaining agency in both the public and private spheres.

I constructed this research project to elicit stories that might be lost to or overlooked by discourses of power. I discovered, among many things, clear connections between literacy and identity that demonstrate how formal schooling and academic literacy are being used by Somali women to construct new identities in west. I collected stories that represent the social, economic, and personal accomplishments of a group defined in terms of deficit by the dominant discourses of power. Somali women are countering those portrayals in the quiet lives they are leading in the midst of continuing global migratory displacement, a collapsed homeland, and persistent patriarchy. The overall tone of the stories from my research participants is optimistic. They are

stories of struggle but not of perpetual victimization, trauma, or oppression. They contradict the tone of dominant discourses of power characterizing refugee women as needy victims of political, religious, and patriarchal oppression. These are not stories told to obtain asylum, economic aid, or citizenship. I believe they are stories told to share experiences and validate identity. I was struck by the general mood of satisfaction characterizing the experiences of these women. Despite tremendous difficulties, these women communicated a sense of pride and fulfillment in the experiences they chose to share with me. I fully expected to collect stories of distress and difficulty particularly when I asked my research participants outright if they were happy in the United States or happy with the choices their children had made to pursue education. This was not the case in my research experience. The collected stories told by my research participants are predominantly optimistic in their outlook.

5 IDENTITY

“Why don't we just drop Ebola on the whole country?”

–Egyptian college student at American University

When I began formulating this project one of the principal questions guiding my inquiry concerned what types of stories my research participants would choose to tell. In my conversations over the years and in these specific interviews, the refugees I know most often choose to tell stories of their journey to America. They rarely discuss the traumatic circumstances that uprooted them from their former lives. My Somali friends also do not discuss the specifics of the war in their country unless directly asked about those details. I have heard some of these stories. Many of my English composition students have chosen to share these harrowing details with me. Zahra has told me many stories of her flight from Somalia to Ethiopia on foot with three small children including a young Abdulahi who disappeared for two days. These types of narratives were not what the Somali women in my study chose to share. I purposely sought other stories to avoid what Murray Forman has described as a discursive practice of the dominant culture “reminiscent of the colonial condition in which the voice of the subjugated subject is contained within the authoritative structures of the dominant class, directed toward conversations of nation and identity that are already framed within unequal and unbalanced power relations” (44). These types of narrative immobilize refugees into an identity solely recognized as a “refugee” where they become “discursive prisoners” of their own histories and stories of flight. These stories maintain the oppression and marginalization of people who do not conform to a political, economic, militaristic, or religious agenda of a dominant culture.

My research participants did tell many stories that serve to amend the dominant narratives circulated among discourses of power to subjugate and marginalize groups. The stories of these women add characterizations of both their homeland as well as the experience of adjusting in the west from the majority of western accounts of Somalia and

migration to the west. Somalia today is very different from the Somalia many of my research participants knew and loved before they left. Other than these stories I have documented here, I have found little in modern public discourse to counter the popular narratives of Somalia as a haven for terrorists and a land gripped by civil war. In a long-standing tradition of colonial domination of Africa, western narrative accounts persist in their portrayal of Africa as a continent populated with primitive people ravaged by war and famine.

To address the original questions posed for this project, I want to call attention to the stories of my research participants that counter or amend their portrayals constructed and disseminated by political discourses of power. These stories help us understand how Somali women construct new identities in the dominant culture. This chapter will review the portions of the interviews I collected that offer critical insight into the way these women consider themselves, describe their own experiences, and tell their own history. The stories capture the ways Somali women are constructing new hybridized ethnic, national, and religious identities in response to the experience of forced migration and widespread discrimination in the United States. In support of using narrative research with refugees, Leckie Hopkins writes, “Most importantly perhaps, narrative, through engaging our senses as well as our rational intellect, can provide the context within which our imaginations can fly to the space of the other, to glimpse the world that the other inhabits” (137). This chapter offers those glimpses into the world of Somali women that reveal the way they are responding to the rhetorical practices of the dominant culture. For refugees, discourses of power emanate from overlapping and intersecting political, historical, and cultural agendas. As a result, forced migration and resettlement complicate the way individuals identify with political, religious, nationalist, and ethnic ideologies. The stories in this chapter illustrate how Somali women are balancing their ethnic and national identities

amidst strong currents of anti-Islamic rhetoric and characterizations of their homeland as a breeding ground for terrorists and pirates. Mosselson writes, “Refugees are a product of conflicts in international, and regional politics, and the reception of refugees in host countries is also influenced by international, national, and regional politics” (20). Some of the stories presented here are counter-narratives to the dominant political discourses fraught with the legacy of colonization and domination. Then I will highlight stories demonstrating how Somali women are generating agency in the west by resisting the way they are represented by more powerful patriarchal, political, and religious ideologies. Throughout this chapter, it is intended the reader “listen to the voice of the subjugated subject” as a means of understanding how these women are negotiating identity formation in the United States. The lived experiences described in these narratives highlight the ways ideological oppression cuts across race, class, gender, culture, and language (Macedo qtd. in Freire 15). Although it might be difficult for some Americans to comprehend, many refugees led satisfied lives in countries that do not share the same sociopolitical and cultural values as the United States. These stories demonstrate how Somali women maintain connections to their ethnic and religious heritage while confronting negative attitudes held by Americans about Somalia, Islam, and terrorism.

Narratives of nationalism: “I just remember the people were always happy.”

In this section I would like to consider three different stories offering a glimpse of life in Somalia before the war. For Somali refugees, the story of their homeland is often fraught with ethnic and political conflict, violence, and alienation. The personal history of each refugee is deeply woven into the narrative of their migratory experience impacting the way they choose to recollect their homeland. Forced to flee because the collapse of the national government threatened their physical safety, the Somalis I know still strongly identify with their national

identity. They shared many positive recollections of their lives in Somalia. This is significant to because the way refugees characterize life in their homeland impacts the way they construct a national identity in a new nation. Instead of dissociating from their Somali national identity despite being abandoned by their government, the women in this study reaffirm their national identity as Somalis.

In most western accounts, Somalia is another African country suffering corruption, famine, and civil strife as has been seen most recently in Liberia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Sudan. Westerners are barraged with stories in the press or popular culture about Somalia typically conveying a barren urban landscape of bullet-riddled buildings, vacant streets and markets, roamed by bands of Kalashnikov-bearing, turbaned men riding in the back of battered and stripped down pick-up trucks. A look back at the media coverage of events unfolding in Somalia in the 90s evoke a landscape of savage violence: “The clans of Somalia have regularly battled one another into a state of anarchy” (Time 1992); “ancient clan enmity pursued with the modern weapons that are so abundant in Somalia is at the root of the country’s conflict” (Washington Post 1993); “there is nothing left of civil society, only anarchy and the rule of the gun” (CNN 1992). The failed military intervention by the United States in Somalia in 1993 ended in violent images of a U.S. helicopter crew-member being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu by an angry mob. As a result, Somalis arriving in the United States face a tide of ideological discrimination, “In North America, then, Somalia has become a national symbol of embarrassment, humiliation, and failure. Forced to flee their country, Somalis arriving in North America have subsequently entered a social terrain that “constitutes a complex emotional and political minefield” (Forman).

The Somalia I have heard about from my Somali friends and my research participants amends the narrative of the country depicted in the west. The stories of the Somalia that existed before the collapse of Siad Barre's dictatorship are quite different from the Somalia westerners hear about in the press and popular media. In the western imagination, Somalia is equated with oppressive religious practices forcing the separation of men and women in public and covering of women from head to toe, and a land of famine, poverty, and violence. Some of the stories of Somalia my research participants shared bear up these portrayals of violence in the southern part of Somalia, primarily in the capital city of Mogadishu, but not in the rest of the country nor do they necessarily apply to the Somalia that existed prior to the collapse of Siad Barre's regime.

This comparison of life before and life after migration is a recurrent theme in my research interviews with older women. The drastic changes in life circumstances demand a reflection on how things could have been very different. Besides comparing the before and after of their everyday lived experiences, the stories these women told frequently referenced before and after comparisons of the political circumstances of their homeland. This is important to note because for the women in my study their Somali national identity is one of the strongest components of their personal identities.

The first historical recollection worth noting came when Zahra and Faduma described the large public events where Somalis would wait in line for hours to hear famous Somali poets and speakers. Professor Andrezejewski, the eminent Somali language scholar, wrote in his anthology of Somali poetry of Sir Richard Burton's findings upon visiting Somalia in 1954, "a most striking characteristic of its inhabitants was their love of poetry...so that the phrase 'a nation of poets' became current among people acquainted with the Horn of Africa. I was aware of the highly valued tradition of oral poetry in Somali culture, however before my research interviews I

had never heard of any of my Somali friends discuss it. I also could not have imagined the prominent cultural role it played in Somali public life. Faduma and Abdiazziz offered an invaluable glimpse of this practice and life before the war. In addition to their narratives recounting the widespread co-educational public schooling in Somalia, they shared stories of men and women participating in public life attending and acting together in public theatrical performances. This story of their lived experience resisted most recent narratives of Somali public life where men and women are separated and any form of theater or public performances are outlawed. Faduma concludes the story with a brief comment on the state of affairs today.

Mary Helen: Do you read to your children in Somali or tell them stories?

Faduma: Sometimes, I'm telling stories for mine.

Mary Helen: Do you know any of the poetry, the Somali poetry that is traditional?

Abdiazziz: Very well.

Mary Helen: She knows?

Abdiazziz: Very well, she's the one [crosstalk]

Mary Helen: Do you know how to do it?

Faduma: No, I'm not even close to it.

Abdiazziz: One of the... in Somalia, we have a one theatre. In the whole city, we have a one big theatre. The theatre is coming all the time like comedian or the what they call like life movie, like one day making a Fox, like here in Atlanta.

Faduma: A drama, a play.

- Abdiaziz: A drama play alive, we do all the time in Somalia that. It's in the theatre. The people need to go in the theatre as a large line of people. People was going 3:00 afternoon to line to get a ticket.
- Mary Helen: Because there's only one.
- Abdiaziz: Only one.
- Faduma: Yeah.
- Abdiaziz: 3:00 might start the program 7:00.
- Mary Helen: They go at 3:00?
- Abdiaziz: Four hours line.
- Faduma: They stay outside.
- Abdiaziz: They stay outside on the line out in the sun.
- Mary Helen: People who were the actors, what did they do mostly?
- Abdiaziz: It's normal like here because they're making a story about all. We have ..
- Faduma: Like comedy or something like that.
- Abdiaziz: ... a male and, yeah, a comedian, a female and a male. There's a lot. That time was very good because, never ever Somali people be in a leader like what they are today.
- Mary Helen: It's so wrong what's happened.
- Abdiaziz: Exactly.
- Mary Helen: All that, it was right at the very best part ...
- Abdiaziz: See, on that ride ... On that ride, you waiting for a ticket girls, boys ...

Faduma: Boys together.

Abdiaziz: ... women, men.

Faduma: Talking together.

Abdiaziz: All of the line.

Faduma: Eating together, sitting together, all, no problem together as well.

Now, it's separate. (Appendix C)

Faduma's story helps those with little knowledge of Somali history imagine a country before the collapse of the government. In a country now ruled by Islamic fundamentalists, there is no theater and certainly no mixing of genders in public as "Al-Shabaab has instituted many of the same harsh practices as the Afghan Taliban in the territories under its control" (UNDP 24).

Faduma's recollection is not how Somalia has been ingrained in the public consciousness in the west. This has widespread ramifications for all Somalis living away from their homeland. On one hand, these women are compelled to portray Somalia as a place of imminent danger so that they may receive asylum. On the other, I discovered a strong nostalgia for a civil and peaceful country in the stories my research participants chose to tell. In many ways, this complicates the identity of these women as victims of a political crisis that overwhelmed the country. For Faduma, Zahra, and Nura, Somali national identity is associated with positive memories of home, yet their national identity as American citizens is an inescapable reality. Mosselson suggests "that the identity constructions of refugees can be better understood in terms of their attitudes to their country of origin and their diasporic community in the U.S., rather than in terms of their relationships with hegemonic U.S. society" (22). Faduma, Zahra, and Nura's recollections clarify how they construct their identities as Somali-Americans in the face of the persuasive national rhetoric of American assimilation. This is crucial as so many of the

narratives of refugee assimilation focus on the rejection of their native cultural practices as I outline in the review of these published accounts in Chapter 1. Somali women especially among refugee groups face vast changes in the United States in terms of cultural attitudes toward women and their role in society. These narratives relate how some Somali women are blending national identities.

In the next example, Zahra offers an example of how she reconciles her desire for U.S. citizenship with her desire to return to Somalia. For a refugee, U.S. citizenship provides powerful agency to move across national borders. Her story demonstrates how the acquisition of citizenship can be a ticket back home. Without it, she is not able to move across international borders. Her story helps us understand the transnational hybridization that combines her self-identification as both a Somali and an American. Zahra has shared with me many fond memories of her homeland over the years I have known her. Her recollection of her life there is enticing. We have used an iPad to map the city where she lived near the coast. We have frequently looked at pictures on the internet of the beautiful coastline and architecture in the northern portions of the country that have been relatively untouched by the violence and decay prevalent in the south. Zahra frequently discusses how different her life would be back in Somalia. Her work now as a second shift employee in a chicken slaughterhouse in north Georgia is grueling work. In Somalia, her life would consist of caring for her elder family members and her children. She would probably run a small storefront in the city on the side. If they were back home, her husband would reclaim his high prestige in the family and tribe managing large stretches of land where they would grow crops and manage herd animals. Instead, he struggles to make ends meet as a taxi driver. Abdi has survived being shot in his taxi for his cash, but the stress and health issues endemic in modern society are taking a heavy toll on their family. Zahra

has shared all of these details of their life here and back in Somalia over the years of our friendship. For this interview, she relates the differences in the state of affairs in the northern and southern portions of her country.

Mary Helen: Okay, so before the war in Somalia, if there had not been a war, you as children could have gone all the way through college in Somalia because there are public schools there right?

Abdulahi: [Somali translation] Before the war happened it was a different country. Even, there was colleges for free.

Mary Helen: Yeah, so now it's so divided the people who are still there ...

Zahra: [Somali]

Abdulahi: Even if somebody had a little amount of money, they could still survive and then ...

Zahra: [Somali]

Mary Helen: So the big question, does she want to go back?

Abdulahi: [Somali translation]

Zahra: Yes, I like but can't ...

Mary Helen: What? Wants to go back to Somalia?

Abdulahi: Yep.

Mary Helen: Yeah, and with the whole family?

Abdulahi: [Somali translation] Yeah, with the family.

Mary Helen: She's talked to me before about how her life would be different if they were back there.

Zahra: [Somali]

Abdulahi: She says once I become a United States citizen then I would love to go there. [Crosstalk]

Mary Helen: What hope does she have for Somalia as a country becoming peaceful and being back to ...

Abdulahi: [Somali translation] She said I never seen war and dying [Crosstalk] There's no war, there's [inaudible] The war started from Saudi and the people there are not, they don't want the peace in South. Most of North is peaceful, there is some parts they're moving up to war, but most of where I'm from is peaceful.

(Appendix G)

The salient point here is that the Somalis I know and the women I interviewed for this project regard Somalia as a country in turmoil from the invasion of a foreign influence as opposed to a prolonged civil conflict. Many of them have told me they never witnessed violence or fighting. While poverty and scarcity are certainly prevalent in their experiences, the stories also suggest they previously led lives of simplicity and satisfaction. This is a crucial addition to the narrative

of collective refugee experience because it contradicts the persistent characterization of Somalia as a country dominated by civil conflict rooted in clan and ethnic-based warlordism. Catherine Besteman provides a potent summation of the portrait of Somalia's collapse imprinted in the collective imagination of the west, "Somalis became cartoon-like images of primordial man: unable to break out of their destructive spiral of ancient clan rivalries, loyalties, and bloodshed"

(4). Many policy and political analysts agree that a confluence of history and politics contributed to the collapse of the Somali government, "from civil war in the 1980s; to state collapse, clan factionalism and warlordism in the 1990s; to a globalized ideological conflict in the first decade of the new millennium. The Somali state failed as a result of internal and external factors" (UNDP). This research project is not a political exploration of the complex causes of the collapse of the Somali government, but I believe paying attention to the viewpoints of the women in my study is an important in a way of "speaking back" to the hegemonic discourses of power that ultimately forced the migration of these women from their homeland. These women would not have chosen to be refugees. They would not have chosen to flee their homeland, their culture. Many of them have maintained in their stories that they led contented, satisfied, and largely peaceful lives before they left Somalia. These stories shape how they have reformulated their hybridized post-migratory identities as new members of a new nation. Being Somali from the perspective of westerners is equated with primitiveness, illiteracy, poverty, and war, but these stories augment what we know about Somali life before the war. These affirming narratives provide a context for understanding the why many Somalis stay so closely connected to their nation despite their current dislocation.

I also believe the stories Faduma, Zahra, and Nura shared of their lives in Somali challenge the "notion that rapid and total assimilation to becoming an American is the best

possible outcome for the individual” (Shepard 240). Even after the turn toward multiculturalism in the 1970s, most Americans (62%) still believe that immigrants to the United States should take on “basic American culture” when they arrive (Kennedy School of Government 2009). This ideological attitude impacts the way refugees structure their new identities and redefines the way perceive their personal histories.

One of the most powerful changes those that work with refugees can make is to acknowledge the value of their lived experiences without placing biased worldviews on their stories. Being culturally responsive means being culturally appreciative. It is possible to lead a fulfilling and gratified life in countries considered Third World or lacking the modernity of the First World. The stories of Faduma and Zahra bear up this perspective, but I believe Nura’s summation of her life in Somalia most closely relates what I have heard from other Somalis in the recollection of their homeland:

Nura: I haven't really had any bad experiences in Somalia. I just remember the people were always happy. They don't have a lot of things like people do here. They may not work, they may be homeless, but at the end of the day, they get a meal from somebody, so nobody's starving in the streets. People give each other stuff even though they don't know each other. So that's what I really remember is just people being kind to one another.

(Appendix I)

Each of the women I interviewed arrived in the United States with their individual personal histories. They arrived with their own viewpoints and opinions on the lives they had led before leaving Somalia. In the United States, they encountered the way Americans view Somali history

and Somali refugees as a result of the media and public discourse. Massey and Sanchez point out, “Foreigners arrive with their own aspirations, motivations, and expectations about what the host society will be like. Over time, they learn about the stereotypes that natives have about their group.” These stories help us understand how some Somali women are responding to characterizations of their homeland, attitudes about refugees, and stereotypes of Somalis in the United States. When the overwhelming majority of the public discourse on the African continent and specifically from Somalia concerns violence and misery, I want to add Nura’s recollection of her community in Somalia as “being kind to one another” to the public consciousness of what it means to be Somali.

Stereotypical encounters: "So tell me about Al-Shabaab."

The interviews with my research participants offer a disconcerting overview of how Somalis are regarded in the minds of the Americans. Often the discourses of power that shape our daily experiences also define who we are to the general public. Massey and Sanchez have suggested that when immigrants experience the stereotypes natives have about their groups “they embrace those that advance their interests in the host society and resist those that serve to justify their exploitation and exclusion” (ch. 1). Three stories in particular from my research interviews illustrate the way the west categorizes, prejudices, and marginalizes Somali refugees, and they way the women in this study have responded. The first story comes from a long-running conversation I have had with my Somali refugee friends, students, and some of my research participants. Humor is often a powerful tool in the deconstruction of discriminatory discourses like racism. Abdulahi and I often tease about him being a “Somali pirate” even to the point that he entered his contact information on my smartphone as “Abdulahi the Terrifying Pirate.” The image of the Somali pirate has been emblazoned on western minds by movies like *Captain*

Phillips and Blackhawk Down as well as combat video games like *Call of Duty*. This, along with the 24-hour news cycle broadcasting the violence of Al Shabaab, becomes the only cultural referent for westerners to identify with Somalia. Murray Forman asserts, “In North America, then, Somalia has become a national symbol of embarrassment, humiliation, and failure” (36). My Somali students and friends tell many stories of their encounters with Americans who have very limited conceptions of “Somali-ness.”

I have found directly confronting the discriminatory rhetorical practices in our culture has been an effective way to disempower them. In an effort to confront these dangerous discriminatory discourses, I discuss them directly with Somali students in my classes. I also asked my research participants about their experiences with these practices in their everyday lives. Most of the women in my study acknowledged often being reflexively asked about Al-Shabaab or pirates by someone they have just met who learns they are Somali. Research with Somali students in Canada affirms this practice comes as a surprise to most Somali immigrants, “The Somali students did not enter the US with a framework of understanding how their religion could influence the way they were being perceived by their peers and teachers. It was shocking to them to be considered by others as associated with terrorist acts and leaders that had nothing to do with their background” (Oikonomidou 23). Mowal’s encounter with these rhetorical practices at American University exemplifies the way a discriminatory discourse of power is used to silence marginalized groups. In this case, an Egyptian male, who was also her peer at university, delivered the message. I believe Mowal expected more sensitivity and acceptance at an American college that touts itself as a leader in global education. She indicates that she at least expected more awareness and insight into Somali politics. Instead, she ran head on into bias and prejudice.

Mowal: Like, yesterday, this was really, it was so odd to me, I went to the human resource office here to, I was helping a friend with something. I was there, I met this guy, he asked me, "Where are you from?", and I said, "Somalia." And then the first thing he said, "So tell me about Al-Shabaab."

Mary Helen: (Laughs)

Mowal: I'm like, "What?"

Mary Helen: Do you know any pirates?

Mowal: Exactly, like, what do you want me to, what is there to know about this. He's like, "Oh, I heard they turned the whole country upside down. There's so much turmoil." I was like, "Yeah, it is, it is kind of sad situation." He was like, "You know, I have the solution to get rid of them." "No, okay, tell me." "You know, we'll just drop bombs on the whole country." I was like, "Wow, that sounds so familiar. I'm pretty sure that happened before."

Mary Helen: (Laughs) I'm pretty sure that's why they're still having problems.

Mowal: Exactly. Look where that's taking us, like, it hasn't done anything. I told him what, um, from my own personal perspective, I think what's important is fixing the government and changing the local mind because that's the only thing that can help. And then he had

the nerve to say to me, he was like, "Oh, I have a better idea: Why don't we just drop Ebola on the whole country?" I was like-

Mary Helen: Where, do you know anything about him? Like, what kind of guy is this? Is this like a-

Mowal: He was Egyptian!

Mary Helen: Oh (Laughs).

Mowal: I was like, "What is he doing?" (Laughs)

Mary Helen: Oh, that's so sad.

Mowal: I was like, "What a joke," and I literally turned around and walked out and he was like, "Oh, I'm just kidding. I'm just, sorry, blah, blah, blah." I was like, "Goodbye."

Mary Helen: Do you feel like you get, you get that a lot? Do people make assumptions about you just by looking at you or know you're from Somalia?

Mowal: Um ... Well, a lot, I do get a lot of questions about Al Shabaab-

Mary Helen: (Laughs) They're like a foreign presence in your country, pretty much. (Laughs)

Mowal: Exactly. It's, like, I'm pretty sure they just like other organizations doing what they're not supposed to be doing. Like, I'm the expert about Al Shabaab.

Mary Helen: (Laughs).

Mowal: That's usually the first - Like, while I've been here AU, every time Somalia's mentioned, the second thing, like, Somalia and then failed state. Like, every time we talk about states and state sovereignty, if we're talking about an example of failed state, Somalia always comes up. And that's why I kind of have an issue with, like, um, American University on Africa. There aren't really that many classes, and the ones that there are focus on, like, West African literature and stuff like that.

Mary Helen: Hmm.

Mowal: Which is great from what I've heard, but for me, I feel like what would help people like me are classes on development, the politics of the countries within Africa. (Appendix D)

Mowal's story also reveals two important ways her identity is mediated by dominant discourses of power. In one way, she is confronted by the power of the pervasive Somali stereotype equating her nationality with terrorism and unresolvable conflict. In other ways, the ability to access information about her homeland is mediated by the university where she is a student. By both classmates and curriculum, she is consistently reminded that her home country is a "failed

state.” Her story demonstrates what westerners continue to hear about Africa is a constant and controlled refrain depicting a land of deficit – famine, illiteracy, violence, disease, and poverty. Raynel Shephard’s study of cultural adaptation suggests these damaging stereotypes are very common for many Somali youth in U.S. schools:

American educators often gloss over religious differences because of the secular nature of public schools and the democratizing ideal that frames the educational and social agenda, which is seminal to American cultural ideology. Not recognizing differences, while laudable in avoiding prejudice, does a certain disservice to these students. In the outside world Somalis, Muslims, people of African descent, are treated differently. The increasing anti-Muslim discourse and the continual threat of terrorist attacks shape the way these youth are perceived and treated by others (Shepard 239).

These interactions are the critical moments shaping immigrant identity in the west. They provide insight into why some groups choose to maintain their national, ethnic, and religious identities in the face of persistent bigotry and prejudice. As Mowal has experienced these attitudes, she has made choices about whether or not to publicly identify as a Somali. Massey and Sanchez argue these interactions forge the construction of immigrant identity, “Through this two-way encounter, immigrants actively participate in the construction of their identity: they broker the boundaries to help define the content of their ethnicity in the host society, embracing some elements ascribed to them and rejecting others, while simultaneously experiencing the constraints and opportunities associated with their social status” (ch. 1). Mowal does not hide aspects of her Somali ethnic and national identity. Her response to her classmate, “I think what’s important is fixing the government and changing the local mind because that’s the only thing that

can help” demonstrates the way she responds his ideological discrimination. Faduma, Nura, Zahra, and Hoodu all shared similar stories of encounters with the Somali pirate and Al-Shabaab stereotypes in their interviews. Research suggests the social forces at play in these situations catalyze the development of ethnic solidarity (Yancey, Ericksen, and Juliani 391). As the women in this study demonstrate, these confrontations have not dissuaded them from publicly maintaining their national and ethnic identities.

Religion and identity: "Do you sleep with your scarf?"

In addition to national and ethnic identity, religious identity emerged as an important feature of the identity hierarchy in the lives of the women in my research study. For Somalis in the U.S., religion is an “anchor of cultural identity” holding together families as they buffer the “conflicting cultural values” in the United States (Shephard 18). The stories my research participants shared supported the importance of Islam in the formulation of their assimilative identity. Religion and the central role that it played in the lives of this group of Somali women was clearly a crucial factor in their development of their identity. In order to understand Islam from the perspective of a Somali, it is crucial to dispel the misconception that Islam is a universal monolithic religion lacking diversity or degrees in practice in various regions in the world. In actuality many variations exist in different regions and countries across the globe. Cawo Abdi’s work unravels the damaging stereotyping of Muslims and misinformation about the Islam practiced by the majority of Somalis. She discusses the relatively moderate dress practices for women, limited participation of girls in religious schooling, and strong economic participation of women in Somali society before the collapse of the government. In the wake of war, “this vulnerability has facilitated and continues to facilitate the rise in prominence of the religious right and its ongoing project of re-Islamizing Somali women” (Abdi 203). Women’s roles have

changed in Somalia as fundamentalist Muslims from the military wing of the Union of Islamic Courts, Al-Shabaab (which means youth in Arabic) have instituted Sharia law (UNDP). These misunderstandings common in the United States often present difficulties for Somali women who identify as practicing Muslims. This is evident throughout the stories shared by my research participants. Here Salam discussed how religious identity impacted her self-awareness in elementary school and later as an older student.

Mary Helen: So for you how is that change? I mean, [State U] is a big place.

Salam: Yeah. So when I was in home school it was, it was difficult because there was only like six people there and it was just like me and my sister, my neighbor, her sister, that's already four, and then two other girls. It was like six or seven people there. And then in my grade, um, there was only one girl that was the same grade as me. So it was difficult because, I mean, it was easy because like everyone there, they're like the, were all the same, like we're all Muslim. We all um, were going to school, so it's like you're not the different one but like when you're at public school you kinda, you have, you're different than everyone else because you don't you know blend in. But, um, at home school, I felt like I didn't learn, like, I mean, as much as I did in public school because it's one person trying to teach all the subjects and you're not mastering every single subject.

Mary Helen: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Salam: So maybe that was maybe a flaw from there. And, um, we used to wear abayas, I, do you know what that is?

Mary Helen: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Salam: It's like the long, black thing.

Mary Helen: Yes.

Salam: Every single day. We couldn't wear...that's all we wore everyday with a scarf. Like, um, I think it was, it didn't really matter what color scarf, but everyday we used to wear and abaya. So when I trans...like when I was trying to transition back to public school, it was hard because like everyone there would wear like, um, they would wear like you know, shorts, pants, whatever and I didn't, it wasn't comfortable for me because it's like I went from being in elementary school, you know, I was a wild child,

Mary Helen: (laughs)

Salam: To being like trying to, like, you have to be a certain way, in, like homeschool to be better, a better Muslim, a better, like, a more proper person. And then going back to middle school, people would say, "Oh what happened? You used to be like the old Salam." And I'm like no. (laughs)

Despite negative interaction with her peers, Salam's story provides an example of the ways she is negotiating different degrees of Islamic conservatism both within her own religious community as well as mainstream culture. As a homeschooler she was concerned with fitting in among other Somali girls and being "a better Muslim" dressed in an abaya like the others in the group. This struggle changed when she moved to middle school where she was back in public school. Both Hoodu and Salam's stories demonstrate the tricky terrain Somali girls navigate as obviously Muslim girls in an American public school. Both stories support the central assertion of this section, being Somali and being Muslim are the predominant identity markers for these girls. Hoodu reported that she did not experience as much stereotypical misinformation about Somalis as she did about Muslims:

Mary Helen: I think it's interesting because I was sort of trying to make some kind of connection in my research between the speaking Somali at home and keeping Somali culture intact, but you don't fit that mold because you still are traditional in your dress and your approach to things and your religious practices, but you don't speak very good Somali. (laughs)

Hoodu: Not that much.

Mary Helen: So it's not necessarily the language. It has to be something else about culture that helps you retain that identity.

Hoodu: I'm in International Club right now, and I really enjoy getting into that because I also did it in high school. We did International

Night, and notifying people about Somalian culture, and I really enjoyed doing that.

Mary Helen: Do you get a lot of people who have misperceptions or wrong ideas or misunderstandings about Somalia?

Hoodu: Not really, to me.

Mary Helen: What do most Western students or people here in the United States, what do they ask you about Somalia?

Hoodu: It's mostly about Muslims than actual Somalis, so they ask those random questions, like "Do you sleep with your scarf or do you take a shower or do you," so those questions like, come on.

Mary Helen: So they ask about religious practices.

Hoodu: Yeah, religious practices, more like that. They hear all this stuff and they ask you that, like, what? Where are you getting your information from? (Appendix H)

Ultimately, Hoodu is constructing her identity in the west as a Somali and a Muslim despite misunderstanding of her religious and cultural values. She exemplifies the opposite of a passive recipient of discrimination at the hands of a dominant discourse. She takes action by participating in International Club. Hoodu's response is in line with other research affirming the ways Somali girls in U.S. high schools are exerting agency in the dominant culture, "They did not surrender to the idea that they would never belong because of the multiple levels in which

they were different from their classmates. They did all that they could in order to successfully participate in the social and academic life of their school” (Oikonomidou 25). Mowal also shared a story that explored this concept of dress as an identity marker for the devoutness of a Muslim woman. Her story confirms Faduma and Zahra’s memories of life in Somalia before the war. As we discussed her experiences studying African policy in college, I asked her about what she knew of Somalia before the war. I was shocked to hear Mowal describe a photo album with pictures of her mother from her earlier years in Somalia;

Mowal: Yeah. Um, we have a photo album at home and most of the pictures are from the 80s, 70s, and the way they dressed compared to the way they dress now is completely different. Like, it was very Western, it, like, there are pictures of my mom with Capri pants, a button-down, like, no scarf, nothing. And then now it's super fundamentalist, like, super make sure you're covered from head to toe, this, that, like, enforcing that I have a problem with; that's another story. Um, but yeah picture-wise, just looking through pictures, I can totally see that. (Appendix D)

Hearing this little story was one of the most intriguing discoveries in my research. When I asked her mother about it during her interview, her face instantly lit up. Her husband, Abdiaziz, chimed in that not only did she wear pants, she also wore an afro! This was an especially vivid and distinctive story that I will always carry with me. It demonstrates so much about the ways these women have constructed and reconstructed their identities in the midst of cultural, religious, and political uncertainty. I asked many of my research participants why Somali women dress more conservatively in the United States despite the more relaxed customs in

Somalia before the war and the freedom to dress any which way in the United States. Faduma's explanation most clearly accounts for the change:

Mary Helen: I talked to Mowal about this. Why do you think when you moved to the United States you're still more conservative?

Faduma: Because we have to. We are the Muslim. I know because we culture.

Abdiaziz: Or until you say we have to keep our culture.

Faduma: Our culture, yeah.

Mary Helen: No, I think that when you go through a very hard civil war, you go back to the traditional.

abdiaziz: Exactly, exactly.

Mary Helen: Do you go to mosque every week?

Abdiaziz: No, she don't have to, now women. She go when she want to sometimes.

Faduma: No, sometimes, it's only once, like in you know Ramadan?

Mary Helen: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Faduma: In Ramadan, only my time bring.

Abdiaziz: Yeah because we have a special break on the Ramadan.

Mary Helen: Do you send the kids to? Do they learn Koran? Do they do any of that?

Abdiaziz: Yeah, yeah.

Faduma: Yeah.

Abdiaziz: Yeah, all four now they learn Koran, even the young one also. We have a teacher in here, in our apartment a lady teacher. They go Saturday and Sunday.

Mary Helen: That's right Musin told me that.

Abdiaziz: Yes, Saturday and Sunday.

Mary Helen: The little ones.

Abdiaziz: Yeah, they go Saturday. She's my neighbor.

Mary Helen: Did you cover up completely when you were in Somalia in high school, cover your head?

Faduma: No, no.

Abdiaziz: She wore Afro when I left!

Mary Helen: No! I want to see a picture.

Abdiaziz: Yeah.

Faduma: No, I'm wearing the long and short scarf.

Mary Helen: Why don't you change? You're in America now.

Faduma: Before America. When you get up you have to covering.

Mary Helen: Always?

Faduma: Yeah.

Mary Helen: Even in Somalia?

Faduma: Yeah.

Mary Helen: When you are here now and your English, you have good English skills, do you feel still isolated from others?

Faduma: No, it's the same one.

Mary Helen: No, you're okay?

Faduma: Yeah, I'm okay now.

Mary Helen: It doesn't make you feel isolated, alone?

Faduma: No, I am not feeling alone.

Mary Helen: Are you happy here in the United States?

Faduma: Yeah, I'm happy.

Mary Helen: You like it?

Faduma: I like it. (Appendix C)

Abdi's research suggests that Faduma's experience may be the norm in the communities of the Somali diaspora as migration to the west has resulted in a more conservative turn in religious practice (197). In the west this could be interpreted as a sign of further disempowerment and oppression of women, but it can also be interpreted as an act of resistance amid the Islamophobic ideologies rampant in the United States. Either way, these stories and other in my interviews reveal the ways Somali women negotiate the competing ideological variations of Islam they experience both in their homeland and in the west. Religion serves as a focal point in the lives of refugees as a way to remain connected to the value systems of their native culture (Shepard 18). As Muslims, they face misinformation and religious prejudice in the United States, but the women in my research study affirm their connection to Islam as vital facet of their identity.

Conclusions

The most important theme connecting the stories shared by my research participants is the way they contradict their portrayal in western culture as passive victims. Whether countering the dominant historical narratives of their homeland or confronting discriminatory stereotyping in the west, these stories offer specific evidence of the ways Somali women are asserting

themselves in a dominant culture. They are constructing multifaceted ethnic, national, and religious identities in a country that in many ways does not value or affirm differences in cultural ideology. It has always been my hope that the work I presented in this project would deconstruct the dominant and derogatory representations of Somalis in the U.S. I believe these stories counter representations of Somalia as a haven for terrorists and a land populated with primitive and illiterate people. These stories help unlock refugee women from the rhetorical narratives that contain and commodify their experiences. These stories offer critical insight into the way racist, imperialist, and fundamentalist discourses of power oppress those who do not support their ideological agendas. By listening closely to the voices of Somali women in this research project, we gain insight into the way cultural boundaries are established and maintained. The stories also call us to consider how American attitudes toward refugees contribute to their conceptions of self.

6 CONCLUSIONS

“Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim.”

-Elie Wiesel

As I was adding the final revisions to this dissertation, news broke of a lawsuit filed by the group popularly known as “the Lost Boys of Sudan” against a group of Hollywood producers of the movie *The Good Lie*. This movie was advertised as a narrative of the story of an aid worker played by Reese Witherspoon who assisted the Lost Boys in the acclimation to new lives in the United States. From my perspective, the primary narrative is the story of the three men and one woman who survived the Sudanese civil war and the pitfalls and triumphs of their lives immigrating to the United States. In typical western fashion, the film portrays the horrific circumstances of their flight from a ferocious war across the bleak East African countryside out of the desperation of the Kakuma refugee camp to the glory of life in the United States. The film does explore the more difficult struggles of newly arrived refugees, but it is yet another example of the rhetorical essentialization of refugee experience holding them captive to their own narrative of trauma and victimization. It is the story of the cultural domination euphemistically called “assimilation” in the west.

One of the central premises of my thesis has been validated by these refugees who were assured compensation for “telling their story” to the producers and screenwriters of this film. A group of 54 Sudanese refugees and their educational foundation is suing the producers of the film including Ron Howard. The lawsuit, filed in the federal district court in Atlanta states, “neither the refugees nor their foundation have been compensated in any fashion for sharing their traumatic personal stories and assisting in the creation of the script for *The Good Lie*.” This

news echoes the ethos of my arguments in the opening discussion of this project. I personally know many refugees who have shared the agonizing details of their personal struggles for the benefit of others including movie producers, authors, academics, publishers, anthropologists, journalists and others.

In addition to the experiences of refugees I know who have been exploited in this way, I also was led to this work from my experiences researching refugee issues as I explain in the opening chapter of this study. Considering the number of refugees living in the United States as well as the rest of the world, there is a lack of research on refugee issues and a very specific lack of research on Somali women and their lives before and after migration. Most academic research on refugees can be found in social science research and examines the refugee phenomenon from the perceived objectivity of quantitative analysis. My personal relationships with my Somali students and my Somali friends did not match what I was reading in the research especially as it related to the experiences of the Somali women. The research data suggests that they were the most marginalized in my community – by most measures – economics, employment, language, and this thing we call ‘literacy’ – personal experiences with my students suggested they had a tougher time than my other refugee and immigrant students with school, assimilation, and finding work. I wanted to know why. The approach to my work necessitated locating it at the intersection of many disciplines English, refugee studies, cultural studies, literacy studies, and rhetoric and composition. I wanted to explore how the west perpetuates the oppression and victimization of Somali refugee women by how we write, read, talk, and think about them. Rhetoric and composition and community literacy scholar Michael McDonald frames the work stating, “perspectives of refugees have only been given cursory attention” in the fields of refugee studies and rhetoric and composition.

For me the central question leading my work became, “How do you ethically and responsibly share important stories of the marginalized and oppressed?” In order to avoid the sweeping generalizations made in research and literature about refugees and Somalis, developing my methodology became a key component of my project. I chose feminist research practices because ultimately I was working toward the deconstruction of the concept of “Somali refugee woman.” I crafted a methodology to ethically and responsibly include their voices in public discourse. For me, ethics and responsibility in research meant my research participants would not be left with a feeling of exploitation. It also meant that my research participants would feel the work was contributing to their lives in a positive way. This ethos guided all of the decisions I made in the work of recovering the subjugated voices of these women. As I discuss in Chapter 2, I sought transparency in all of my interviews. Transparency means many things. I wanted the women I interviewed to be very clear about the work, how it would be used, and how it would benefit me. They needed to control the conversation. They knew the questions we would discuss before the interview started. They had the option for anonymity. They were free to read any of my writing resulting from the interviews. I believe these decisions more equally balanced the dynamics of our dialogue.

I also modeled my research on the participatory approach of the work of Ralph Cintron and John Duffy. Their immersion in their research community clearly demonstrated the need for building strong relationships of trust. I first learned that gaining access to these groups is hard work. It has taken me years to cultivate my relationships with refugees and specifically with Somalis in my community. It took a trusted member of their community to validate my truthfulness and reliability before they would meet me. Ethical research requires a dialogue based on more than good intentions. If researchers and teachers want to know more about the

disadvantaged and marginalized, then a Freierian approach of becoming a “cultural worker” is necessary. It took my standing in solidarity with the Somali community as they navigate life in a new culture. Whether collecting clothes for a newly arrived family, visiting halal markets to find camel milk, or attending a citizenship ceremony, these experiences built the relationship of trust that allowed me to dialogue with my research participants. Unethical exploitation of these groups perpetuates their isolation and intensifies their mistrust of those who are sincere in their motives to work alongside them.

Broad strokes for complex issue

I believe if my reading audience pays close attention to the content of these narratives, they will have a more accurate and complex rendering of what it means to be a refugee, a woman, a Somali refugee woman living in the United States. This is important for scholars of all disciplines but especially those in refugee studies as “it is important that we researchers work to endure that it is the refugees’ voices and experiences that are at the forefront of our work and the cornerstone of our research methodology...the incentive is to engage refugee women at every level of the research process” (Loughry 172). The voices and stories volunteered by these Somali women complicate popular perceptions of Somali culture especially as it relates to literacy and education. One significant finding that resists or contradicts what we hear in public discourse about Somali refugee women concerns the high rates of illiteracy and lack of schooling in the community. The narratives in this study suggest that Somali women in the United States have embraced formal schooling and academic literacy. They communicated a collective appreciation for education and careers for women. Far from illiterate by any definition, the women in this study all speak, write, and read multiple languages. Salam, Hoodu, Mowal, Nura, and Halima graduating from college and pursuing professional careers will have far-reaching

implications on the role of women in the culture of the Somali diaspora and perhaps the culture in their homeland if they are able to return at some point. How will women with established careers and professional lives impact the traditional Somali family structure? Can a diaspora with advanced education and western cultural experiences challenge fundamentalism in Somalia? Will the way Somali women experience private and public life change?

This research study is also helpful in rectifying western stereotypes of Somalis as radical Muslims and fundamentalists because of their close-knit communities and conservative dress. These stories teach us important lessons about how Islamophobia and prejudice impact individuals. I will never forget Mowal's story of a fellow college student suggesting Ebola and bombs as effective resolutions to the problems in Somalia. These stories confirm what my Somali friends share with me about the prejudices they experience in the United States. They expressed dismay over being identified with Al-Shabaab or pirates. Their experiences call us to reimagine how the west has represented the causes of the prolonged conflict in their homeland. Without these critical insights into a community often viewed as a haven for the radicalization and recruitment of terrorists, we run the risk of misjudging innocent people.

This research adds important details to Somali history often excluded or overlooked in the west. Details of Faduma and Zahra's lives in Somalia give us a more nuanced look at gender relations prior to the civil war and the way fundamentalism has transformed their homeland. I will never forget the story Faduma and Abdiuzziz told about the tremendous gatherings of men and women waiting in line to watch public theatrical performances in Somalia. I had never imagined free public schooling and coeducational classrooms throughout the country. I would never have envisioned any of the women I interviewed in capri pants or an afro. These vivid personal details of lived experience help us deconstruct what we assume to be true about groups

of people. They dismantle broad generalizations and damaging typecasting of Somali women as passive victims of religious and patriarchal oppression. They also suggest that public discourse about Somali women relies on a few popular accounts that emphasize trauma and victimization.

The stories in this project contribute to our understanding of the role Islam plays in the lives of Somali women. Studying the Quran, religious schooling, and Islamic cultural practices are central pillars of their identity. Many of the women discussed the how their identification as both Muslims and Somalis is deeply intertwined. Mowal shared this guidance she received from her father, “We are Muslim and Somali. So no matter what we do with life, those are the two things he wants us to remember.”

Pedagogical implications

The research presented here also highlights the role literacy sponsorship and supportive school environments play in the assimilative experiences of refugee students. The women in this study chose to include many of their experiences with teachers and English language program volunteers as examples of people who helped them through the adjustment to a new culture. Anyone who works with refugees must be aware of the considerable impact of their interactions in forging a positive and productive relationship. Educators, advocates, teachers and volunteers must educate themselves not just about the regions and conflicts that forced the flight of the refugees with whom they are working, but also on the rhetorics shaping and influencing the refugee assimilative process. Eight years after I taught my first refugee student, I have changed my approach. I don't ask my refugee students to recount the trauma of their life stories. I focus on resilience. I work to recognize, honor, and value their cultural values and life experiences. I have also learned to confront racism and discrimination head-on both in the classroom and in my work in the community. I ask my students to define and explore the meaning of literacy and

power in their lives. We celebrate differences and diversity by openly naming and exploring our languages and cultures. Before each semester starts, I am excited to study my rolls and poll how many countries and cultures will be represented. I read extensively on the conflicts around the globe that have sent these students to my community. After many years of studying the conflicts in Africa, I am now learning more about the political and ethnic conflicts in Burma, Bhutan, and Nepal. So many of my students express surprise when I reveal some awareness of these situations in class, even just an awareness of the languages spoken in their homeland. I work hard all semester to correctly pronounce and spell their names instead of opting for the nickname they frequently adopt to ease the discomfort of the American tendency to mangle their birth names. In individual conferences, I remind my ELL students that they are accomplishing what I could not if I had to abandon English and suddenly have to speak, write, and read in Tigrinya, Amharic, Somali, or Nepali.

These stories also tell teachers how a particular group of women experience issues of language and literacy in a new culture and in a new language. The narratives teach us to reflect on how our own experiences and practices influence our attitudes toward our refugee students. Our work in the classroom is not neutral or objective. Teachers must be cognizant of the ideologies both visibly and invisibly at play in our classrooms. In academic circles we hear so much rhetoric about multiculturalism, but we must acknowledge that specific types of literacy are valued in the west. We must construct pedagogical approaches to refugee education valuing their lived experiences, language and literacy practices. We must insist on respect for all students in our classrooms and welcome the cultural diversity refugee students bring to our schools in a way that creates mutual understanding and an appreciation for all individuals and their experiences.

Implications for future research

As I begin to consider what direction my research will take next, I want to acknowledge the limitations of this study so that they are addressed in the formulation of my next project. Sample size is always an issue in qualitative studies. I would like to continue adding narratives to this collection so that I can include more experiences and viewpoints to produce a more comprehensive study of the Somali diaspora in the United States. Ralph Cintron's summation of the limits of this kind of work represents what I feel is the limitation of my this study, "This way to imagining ethnography – as something that tries so hard to be exact and complete but remains always a failed expectation and a target for the sweetness of critique – is very humbling, yet it contains, finally so very much that is worthwhile" (232). Refugee literacy, narrative, and identity are broad concepts involving many disciplines. Cintron's expansion of his initial studies of literacy in the Hispanic community where he lived became a larger and longer study into what he calls "the rhetorics of public culture" (10). I believe my project effectively began a conversation on how discourses of power are specifically related to the educational experiences of Somali women in the community where I work and live. I want to expand what we know of refugee experiences in the west by studying the everyday experiences of their lives. Borrowing a theoretical lens from Michel de Certeau as Cintron does in his book *Angels' Town*, I want to study how discourses of power shape refugee identity and where refugees are contesting this authority in their daily experiences of work, family life, and community.

To the extent that academic research includes very little specifically about literacy, narrative, and identity for Somali women, I have contributed in an important way to what we know. I am eager to move this discussion along in the areas of refugee studies and critical pedagogy. I would like to pursue two specific threads of my research in the future. First, I

would like to expand this specific study to include the lived experiences of more Somali women I want to know how the new generation of college-educated women will impact their culture. I would like to find out where my research participants go next. Accessing the community proved to be so much more difficult than I had imagined which prevented me from traveling to communities outside of my own for research interviews.

There is an urgent need for more research and work to understand how we can ethically and responsibly support the needs of the refugees. The UNHCR reported 45.2 million people were forcibly displaced from their homelands in 2012. Afghanistan, Somalia, and Iraq produced the highest number of refugee populations. The U.S. State Department accepted 70,000 refugees in 2013 with the largest numbers accepted arriving from Iraq, Burma, and Somalia. As globalization and forced migration profoundly change our local communities, we are called to respond to the needs of the individuals arriving here. This project is not neutral. In the spirit of Freire, I believe it is the obligation of those in a position of power to work for the emancipation of the oppressed. The most important advice I can offer my audience is to read the entire transcript of each of my interviews. Without situating each of my conversations in a physical space, time, and relationship, they come across as disembodied voices. I hoped to offer a rich rendering of these women. The analysis offered in Chapters 4 and 5 cannot include all of the fascinating particulars contained in hundreds of pages of transcription and hours of interviews. Above all, I believe the full transcripts also reveal the resilience, intelligence, and optimism of the women I interviewed. Their stories have so much to teach us about what it means to lose a home, a language, a family, and a culture. These stories speak back to the discourses of power that perpetuate the conditions that disrupt the lives of millions of individuals across the globe. These stories can help us reach a mutual acknowledgement of the plight of

refugees living among us and find mutual understanding of the humanity and dignity of every individual's story.

The concluding moment of this work for me came when Abdulahi recently came by my house. I thought he was just dropping in for a catch-up visit and to play with my kids. After a lot of chit-chat, he slyly dropped the astounding and long-awaited news that he had passed his final oral and written examinations for his aviation mechanics license. We hugged and I cried a little bit. He has been working for many years to save the money for the licensing exams. This was a major milestone for both of us. That night, I was making final edits to my dissertation, so I asked him if he would read what I had written about him and his family. He read it all. I continually interrupted him asking, "That's how it was, right?" Abdulahi assured me that I had it right. When he finished, he looked at me and asked, "But will it help?" This exchange bestowed on me the validation I sought throughout this entire project. I got it right. It was a critical moment. I believe this project will help in many ways. I believe I have helped my Somali friends help themselves.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Georgia State University
Department of English

1. Informed Consent

Title: The Rhetoric of Refugees: Literacy, Narrative, and Identity for Somali Women
Principal Investigator: Dr. Lyneé Gaillet, Professor of Rhetoric and Composition, GSU
Student Principal Investigator: Mary Helen O'Connor, Assistant Professor of English, GPC

I. Purpose:

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of the study is to collect stories of literacy, narrative, and identity in the population of Somali refugee women living in the United States. These narratives will be video recorded. You are invited to participate because you are member of the group of refugee Somali women and girls living in the United States. You will be asked to discuss your experiences learning to read, write, and speak in your native and other learned languages. A total of 10 participants will be recruited for this study. Participation will require approximately 2 hours of your time during one digitally recorded interview session and one follow-up meeting to review the transcript of the interview.

II. Procedures:

If you decide to participate, you will read and sign this consent form. The student principal investigator will interview you for approximately one hour at the campus of Georgia Perimeter College or in your home or another location during a time that you have designated as convenient for you. You will be asked to share your experiences learning to read and write and speak Somali, English, and other languages you use. The interviews will be video recorded. You will have the option to use your real name or a fake name for the purposes of identifying you in the study. You will have the option to view the completed interview on videotape and as well as read the transcript of the interview and make any changes or corrections before the interviews are presented in this study.

III. Risks:

In this study, you will not experience any more risks than you would in a normal day of life.

IV. Benefits:

Participation in this study may or may not benefit you personally. You may benefit from the published findings of this study. Overall, we hope to gain information about the ways Somali women have used literacy practices to advance their own lives and establish their identity in the United States.

V. Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal:

Participation in research is voluntary. You do not have to be in this study. If you decide to be in the study and change your mind, you have the right to drop out at any time. You may skip questions or stop participating at any time. Whatever you decide, you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

VI. Confidentiality:

We will keep your records private to the extent allowed by law. Mary Helen O'Connor and Dr. Lyneé Gaillet will have access to the information you provide. Information may also be shared with those who make sure the study is done correctly (GSU Institutional Review Board, the Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP)). You can choose whether or not to use your real name or a fake name (pseudonym) on the study records. The information you provide will be stored on a computer in the student principal investigator's office. No other person has access to this computer. The final edited transcripts and recordings of your interviews will be destroyed at the completion of the research.

VII. Contact Persons:

Contact Dr. Lyneé Gaillet of Georgia State University at 404-413-5842 or lgaillet@gsu.edu or Mary Helen O'Connor of Georgia State University at 678-891-3966 or maryhelen.oconnor@gpc.edu if you have questions, concerns, or complaints about this study. You can also call if you think you have been harmed by the study. Call Susan Vogtner in the Georgia State University Office of Research Integrity at 404-413-3513 or svogtner1@gsu.edu if you want to talk to someone who is not part of the study team. You can talk about questions, concerns, offer input, obtain information, or suggestions about the study. You can also call Susan Vogtner if you have questions or concerns about your rights in this study.

VIII. Copy of Consent Form to Subject:

We will give you a copy of this consent form to keep.

If you are willing to volunteer for this research and be video recorded please sign below.

Participant

Date

Principal Investigator or Researcher Obtaining Consent

Date

Appendix B

Research Interview Protocol

The Rhetoric of Refugees: Literacy, Narrative, and Identity for Somali Women

I. Introduction and explanation of project

II. Informed consent explanation and signatures

III. Interview prompts

7. How and when did you learn to read?
8. In what language did you first learn to read? To write?
9. Who taught you to read?
10. What was the first book you remember reading?
11. Where and when have you attended school?
12. Tell me about your experiences with different languages.

IV. Concluding statement and thanks

Appendix C: Interview transcript Faduma

Mary Helen: Tell me [crosstalk 00:00:04] your name and how old you are.

Faduma: My name is Faduma and I'm old, 42.

Mary Helen: You're 42?

Faduma: Yeah.

Mary Helen: We're the same age. Tell me about your education experiences. How old do you think you were when you started going to school?

Faduma: I am 7 years.

Mary Helen: You were 7?

Faduma: Yeah.

Mary Helen: What kind of school was it?

Faduma: Our school is a [bened 00:00:36]

Mary Helen: Was it a religious school when you were little?

Faduma: Religious? No.

Mary Helen: No.

Faduma: It was not a religious school.

Mary Helen: What were they teaching you?

Faduma: It was a public school.

Mary Helen: It was a public school?

Faduma: Yeah.

Mary Helen: You can help.

Abdiaziz: Yeah, yeah [crosstalk]

Mary Helen: It's a public school.

Faduma: Yeah.

Mary Helen: In Mogadishu.

Faduma: In Mogadishu, yeah.

Mary Helen: It's like preschool, like how kids go to school here.

Faduma: Yeah, I'm start first grade.

Mary Helen: What do you remember learning?

Faduma: I'm learning in ...

Abdiaziz: [Somali]

Faduma: Yeah, first I am learning in Somalia, I'm sorry, in like ABC.

Abdiaziz: Somalia language.

Faduma: A Somalia language like ABC.

Abdiaziz: Studying alphabet, Somalia alphabet.

Faduma: Yeah [foreign language 00:01:17]

Mary Helen: The Somalia alphabet starts with what?

Abdiaziz: Somali [AH, BAH]

Faduma: [AH, BAH] yeah.

Mary Helen: Then, what kind of things did you remember about school? Did you have books or what did it look like? Did you learn by talking and reciting?

Faduma: Sometimes reading. Yeah, like this school, they have board, a blackboard. We have teacher.

Mary helen: Did you like it?

Faduma: Yeah, I like it.

Mary Helen: You liked it?

Faduma: Yeah.

Mary Helen: It was fun?

Faduma: Yes, sometimes it's fun.

Mary Helen: Did you go to school all the way through high school?

Faduma: Yeah.

Mary Helen: Then, what was it like as you grew up? What kinds of subjects did you study? Do the girls go to school with the boys? Is it separate?

Faduma: No, it was not separate.

Mary Helen: It was all together.

Faduma: Together with them.

Mary Helen: All public schools?

Abdiaziz: All Somalia [crosstalk]

Faduma: All public schools are together.

Abdiaziz: We don't have a private school at that time. We have all public. Government was controlled the schools. No boys and girl separate is like our parents no way.

Mary Helen: It was together.

Abdiaziz: We are together and to sit even side-by-side because we used to have a form when classes sit in. We have a form. The three student in the form. It doesn't matter even that time two girls, one boy, two boys, one girl. It's very normal. Even inside the class was no separation at all.

Mary Helen: Wow, that's very different ...

Faduma: Yeah.

Mary Helen: ... than what you imagine. Did you walk to school everyday?

Faduma: Yeah.

Mary Helen: What did you do after school?

Faduma: After school, I'm more I have homework, then homework home.

Mary Helen: Did you study any other languages in Somalia high school anything?

Faduma: Arabic.

Mary Helen: Arabic.

Faduma: Yeah.

Abdiaziz: English, too. We have a subject in high school, every high school, English as a language, but was not that high quality because in the first the teacher himself is not a full English teacher. Government does not have the money to pay other people can teach. The Somalis graduate education college there was English teachers.

Mary Helen: Teachers.

Abdiaziz: At the time, they need to improvement their own English. Arabic, Arabic language and religion, first grade to twelfth grade was going with you.

Mary Helen: Now, you can help fix this. In some of the history I've read, it says that most Somali girls would only go to the mosque or to houses for religious instruction. They did not really go to public school. Is that unusual that she got to go or ...

Abdiaziz: No, that is not [crosstalk 00:04:48]

Mary Helen: That's not accurate.

Faduma: No, no, no, no.

Abdiaziz: Yeah, because for example now, my sisters, now my sister, my sisters I have five and three, eight and one girl with us nine.

Mary Helen: If you lived in Mogadishu, your sisters, your family, if you lived there until 1990, chances are you went to school all the way through.

Abdiaziz: Nine sisters I have only one, the oldest one, the one is now 70-year-old. That is the only one never went to the school. All other eight they went to school.

Mary Helen: Not religious school.

Faduma: No.

Abdiaziz: No.

Mary Helen: They went to public school.

Abdiaziz: We don't have a religion school at all.

Mary Helen: See, you need to correct the record.

Faduma: Yeah.

Abdiaziz: Yeah, we have in Mogadishu, three schools that is the Arabic related. Gamal Abdel Nasser that is Gamal Abdel Nasser is the leader of the Egypt when school he name was. Another one was [Sahowadi 00:05:48] one of the Somali's leader, another one [Shefsouvi 00:05:52] This is [Jeff Souvi 00:05:54] was under high school most of the people going there, yes there was religious people.

Mary Helen: That is small.

Abdiaziz: Even very small in Mogadishu. Even the Arabic language and the religious subject in the schools even was not that.

Mary Helen: Would you say that that's true in places like Hargeisa or other smaller places when most girls living there go through high school ...

Abdiaziz: Absolutely.

Mary Helen: ... or only in the big cities ...

Abdiaziz: No.

Mary Helen: Everywhere?

Abdiaziz: Everywhere, because that's what I'm saying, 83 cities in Somalia, we had before 1991 close to 80 or 79 cities ... High schools there and also opportunity was that time boys and girls is the very same I tell you.

Mary Helen: That's been misrepresented.

Abdiaziz: My niece same age, when we go in the school, we go in together.

Mary Helen: The same.

Abdiaziz: Until we finish high school, I go college. She go college, too. She live in Hargeisa now. She's the mother of nine. Other side, now, live here in [Alula 00:07:26] sit a girl. She was together in their own home, finish high school and go to college.

Before she finished the college, the government collapse. Now she live here in
[Rodan .00:07:38]

Mary Helen: You learned to read and write in Somali.

Faduma: Yeah.

Mary Helen: The first language was Somali.

Faduma: Yeah.

Mary Helen: What was the second that you learned to read and write?

Faduma: Second language, we were able. I write in Arabic, and reading and writing.

Mary Helen: You can read and write a little bit in Arabic?

Faduma: Yeah.

Mary Helen: Third was English?

Faduma: Yeah.

Mary Helen: That's your third language. Talk about that. Talk about that a little bit. Tell me a story or tell me about when did you first have to learn English? Was it when you came here or before?

Abdiaziz: Before, way long away.

Faduma: Before, sometimes, I am studying. I'm going a bit back to the school.

Abdiaziz: We have in Somalia on that time private schools. When we say a private school, it's not a private school yet in America. Like very close to the after-school program.

Mary Helen: Like additional.

Abdiaziz: You go additional.

Mary Helen: Extra school.

Faduma: No.

Abdiaziz: What's private some people do.

Mary Helen: For extra learning.

Abdiaziz: Yeah, that is what they most of time do in its three subject. English was most of it, then Arabic and math.

Mary Helen: Why math?

Abdiaziz: They needed student tutoring for math.

Mary Helen: They needed more help.

Abdiaziz: More help for the math. Some teachers they make this ...

Mary Helen: Private instruction.

Abdiaziz: ... private schools on afternoon to the area overtime populated the people. She was going that. Beside that is when you high school is first grade you got an English subject all your four year. That's why I'm saying even the teacher does not have any quality.

Mary Helen: You have to be that great.

Abdiaziz: Exactly.

Mary Helen: Do you remember the first book you learned to read?

Faduma: In English or ... ?

Mary Helen: Anything, do you remember what it was about?

Faduma: I remember a Somali book.

Mary Helen: What was it about?

Abdiaziz: "The Arab's Revolution."

Faduma: It's a book.

Abdiaziz: Yeah.

Faduma: Yeah.

Mary Helen: That's the first book you read?

Abdiaziz: Yeah, yeah, because that time ...

Faduma: That's when [crosstalk]

Abdiaziz: ... Somalia government on that time we have Siad Barre was socialist.

Mary Helen: That is so amazing.

Faduma: Yeah.

Abdiaziz: Siad Barre was socialist.

Mary Helen: Yes, I know. That's the first book you read?

Abdiaziz: Our young generation that time we seem a very modern when you know something about the socialist, Marxist all that to start because the revolution was something people they are seem like, "Okay, if you know something about that wow."

Mary Helen: Yes, it was sophisticated.

Abdiaziz: Exactly, all the life in Somalia. One of the very famous books of that is either they wrote Somalis translate from the Russian one of the like Lenin story, like Kim Il-sung ...

Mary Helen: Oh, my.

Abdiaziz: ... his story, yeah.

Mary Helen: That's amazing.

Abdiaziz: Yeah, even one I kept but that's okay. It's another history. We, Arab countries, Arab politicians say Somalia the only country goes socialist deeply even no Iraq, no Syria, no Egypt, no Yemen. All were socialist. Nobody get well Somalia get socialist.

Mary Helen: What did they treat you like in Saudi Arabia? What was it like? As a woman, in Somalia, you were pretty, equal and liberated. Then, to go to Saudi Arabia, it's much more conservative.

Faduma: Some people it's nice. Some people it's not nice now. Then, it's no.

Abdiaziz: Here, what it is, what I believe, in Saudi Arabia. The Islamic religion and the culture when they mix it becomes something on their own vertical side. Women in Saudi Arabia, every ten years if you go back, you can see more and more and more religion when you go back, when you come here, less and less and less. The time we live in that time, it was 1990s until 1998-99. Normally, at that time, women working unless the schools the special girls' school because Saudi Arabia they had a girl ...

Mary Helen: They were separate.

Faduma: Yeah, girl and boy.

Abdiaziz: ... girl and boys' school. The girls' school is by work women yes. Every ten women working on that side, you might see one Saudis. All others mostly was Egyptian.

Faduma: Egypt yeah, most of them are.

Abdiaziz: Yeah, Egyptian.

Faduma: Yeah.

Abdiaziz: Most of them.

Faduma: And Syrian.

Abdiaziz: Syrian, too.

Faduma: Syrian people.

Abdiaziz: The teachers, women teaching women. Then, other side is.

Mary Helen: You lived in Saudi Arabia for how many years?

Faduma: Eight years.

Mary Helen: You had babies there.

Faduma: Yeah, my daughters and Mohammed.

Mary Helen: All right, tell me about your daughters, and their education and how valuable it is and you letting them go away to college. It's very different. As a mother, how do you feel about that?

Faduma: I feel happy. I like it.

Mary Helen: Do your relatives or do you have sisters or anybody who criticizes you or says you shouldn't let them do that, you shouldn't let them go away to college?

Faduma: No, some people they say, "No, don't she don't go far away. You have to stay here." Some people they let you and good you make your job, you make job. It's different people I see.

Mary Helen: Did your parents, your mother and your father, they valued education. They wanted you to go to school, right?

Faduma: Yeah.

Mary Helen: Are your parents still living?

Faduma: My mom is here.

Mary Helen: What does she think about Mowal and Minal being in college?

Faduma: She like it.

Mary Helen: She does?

Faduma: Yeah, she's happy. She wanted they take it.

Mary Helen: What would you hope for your daughters for a career? Do you want them to be doctors, or whatever they choose for a profession?

Faduma: Whatever she want it I want it.

Mary Helen: Yeah?

Faduma: Whatever you like it.

Mary Helen: If she wants to go out and be a business woman or whatever she wants to do?

Faduma: Whatever she like it, I like.

Mary Helen: Even Maha, she can do that too?

Faduma: Yeah, all my children, whatever they like it, I like.

Mary Helen: How do you think you all are different as from other Somali parents in that regard? I think most Somali, every Somali I met, values education.

Abdiaziz: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Mary Helen: You all are more comfortable saying, "Yes, I want my children to go to college." Is that because you all got to do that? Do you think it's because you got to go to high school, because you're educated so you want them to have that?

Faduma: Yeah, because I know every people they're learning. They go in school. They make a good life. They not go in school, nothing.

Mary Helen: Do you read to your children in Somali or tell them stories?

Faduma: Sometimes, I'm telling stories for mine.

Mary Helen: Do you know any of the poetry, the Somali poetry that is traditional?

Abdiaziz: Very well.

Mary Helen: She knows?

Abdiaziz: Very well, she's the one [crosstalk 00:22:53]

Mary Helen: Do you know how to do it?

Faduma: No, I'm not even close to it.

Abdiaziz: One of the [UK 00:22:59] in Somalia, we have a one theatre. In the whole city, we have a one big theatre. The theatre is coming all the time like comedian or the what they call like life movie, like one day making a [Fox 00:23:20] here in [Atlanta 00:23:21]

Faduma: A drama, a play.

Abdiaziz: A drama play alive, we do all the time in Somalia that. It's in the theatre. The people need to go in the theatre as a large line of people. People was going 3:00 afternoon to line to get a ticket.

Mary Helen: Because there's only one.

Abdiaziz: Only one.

Faduma: Yeah.

Abdiaziz: 3:00 might start the program 7:00.

Mary Helen: They go at 3:00?

Abdiaziz: Four hours line.

Faduma: They stay outside.

Abdiaziz: They stay outside on the line out in the sun.

Mary Helen: People who were the actors, what did they do mostly?

Abdiaziz: It's normal like here because they're making a story about all. We have ..

Faduma: Like comedy or something like that.

Abdiaziz: ... a male and, yeah, a comedian, a female and a male. There's a lot. That time was very good because, never ever Somali people be in a leader like what they are today.

Mary Helen: It's so wrong what's happened.

Abdiaziz: Exactly.

Mary Helen: All that, it was right at the very best part ...

Abdiaziz: See, on that ride ... On that ride, you waiting for a ticket girls, boys ...

Faduma: Boys together.

Abdiaziz: ... women, men.

Faduma: Talking together.

Abdiaziz: All of the line.

Faduma: Eating together, sitting together, all, no problem together as well. Now, it's separate.

Mary Helen: I talked to Mowal about this. Why do you think when you moved to the United States you're still more conservative?

Faduma: Because we have to. We are the Muslim. I know because we culture.

Abdiaziz: Or until you say we have to keep our culture.

Faduma: Our culture, yeah.

Mary Helen: No, I think that when you go through a very hard civil war, you go back to the traditional.

abdiaziz: Exactly, exactly.

Mary Helen: Do you go to mosque every week?

Abdiaziz: No, she don't have to, now women. She go when she want to sometimes.

Faduma: No, sometimes, it's only once, like in you know Ramadan?

Mary Helen: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Faduma: In Ramadan, only my time bring.

Abdiaziz: Yeah because we have a special break on the Ramadan.

Mary Helen: Do you send the kids to? Do they learn Koran? Do they do any of that?

Abdiaziz: Yeah, yeah.

Faduma: Yeah.

Abdiaziz: Yeah, all four now they learn Koran, even the young one also. We have a teacher in here, in our apartment a lady teacher. They go Saturday and Sunday.

Mary Helen: That's right Musin told me that.

Abdiaziz: Yes, Saturday and Sunday.

Mary Helen: The little ones.

Abdiaziz: Yeah, they go Saturday. She's my neighbor.

Mary Helen: Did you cover up completely when you were in Somalia in high school, cover your head?

Faduma: No, no.

Abdiaziz: She wore Afro when I left!

Mary Helen: No! I want to see a picture.

Abdiaziz: Yeah.

Faduma: No, I'm wearing the long and short scarf.

Mary Helen: Why don't you change? You're in America now.

Faduma: Before America. When you get up you have to covering.

Mary Helen: Always?

Faduma: Yeah.

Mary Helen: Even in Somalia?

Faduma: Yeah.

Mary Helen: When you are here now and your English, you have good English skills, do you feel still isolated from others?

Faduma: No, it's the same one.

Mary Helen: No, you're okay?

Faduma: Yeah, I'm okay now.

Mary Helen: It doesn't make you feel isolated, alone?

Faduma: No, I am not feeling alone.

Mary Helen: Are you happy here in the United States?

Faduma: Yeah, I'm happy.

Mary Helen: You like it?

Faduma: I like it.

Appendix D: Interview transcript Mowal

Mary Helen: So how, so how are you doing?

Mowal: I'm good! How are you? How's the kids?

Mary Helen: The, everything's good. Halima was great. Did she tell you what I, what we talked about?

Mowal: No, she hasn't actually. I'm happy it worked out.

Mary Helen: Um, I don't think you understand how helpful this is, because it's pretty difficult to get Somali women to talk about things.

Mowal: Yeah, I, I agree. Just, this is a tight community and they're not a big fan of letting outsiders in.

Mary Helen: I know that. So all it is is for my dissertation, and I take the interview and I ask you these questions about reading, writing, literacy, stories that you want to tell me about that, and that's the only information that's included in the dissertation.

Mowal: Okay. So, I don't know how helpful I would be because I wasn't really raised there.

Mary Helen: You're so helpful. Do you realize that, for three generations, because of the civil war in Somalia, there has been no schooling. So you guys are a part of the fourth generation since the civil war and you will create a whole new level of literacy and education among all Somali women; it's pretty impressive.

Mowal: Aw. I didn't know that (Laughs).

Mary Helen: Yeah, I know a lot of other stuff you probably don't know about (Laughs).

Mowal: (Laughs) Oh, I'm pretty sure.

Mary Helen: Okay. Well, I'd love to know a story about what you remember about learning to read. Do you remember?

Mowal: Um, here, yeah, I learned to read here in preschool. Um, I grew up in Edgetown like all of the immigrants. And, um, I used to live in the area where Willow Branch was. (Laughs) Yeah. So I used to go to after school in, um, with Willow Branch after school, and we had people who just wanted to volunteer. They came and they helped us. Then when I moved to Christopher Woods, they also had the same program. It was really, really helpful. Um, I remember it being really fun. It was, that's what helped me a lot.

Mary Helen: Why? How, how was it fun?

Mowal: Because we would come in and we would do the work but the people wouldn't just leave automatically. They would stay with us, they would hang out with us. They, they just made the whole process really fun. Like, I really enjoy growing up

Edgetown because of people like that. And that's why when I, um, when I became a senior I went back and I did the same exact thing, where I tutored kids. Because I remember it was, like, it fits. And I just remember how happy it made me learning.

Mary Helen: How old were you?

Mowal: Um, I remember, I may have been eight, nine?

Mary Helen: So were you born here or were you born in Somalia?

Mowal: I was born in Somalia but we moved to Saudi Arabia for a little bit and then we lived in Syria and I moved here when I was seven.

Mary Helen: Oh okay. So you were like your little brother's age when I met him. That's-

Mowal: Yeah.

Mary Helen: You were about seven.

Mowal: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mary Helen: Do you remember, um, any of the reading or anything you did in Syria, Saudi Arabia or Somalia?

Mowal: Um, not really. I just remember in Syria we took this one class where we would, like, "supposed to teach us English," but all I remember is we just learned one song-

Mary Helen: (Laughs)

Mowal: Where it's, like, one, two, buckle my shoe-

Mary Helen: (Laughs)

Mowal: Three, four, like, we learned that the whole year.

Mary Helen: (Laughs)

Mowal: It was enough English, I guess? Like, that's the only thing I knew when I came to the U.S., like, that was the only sort of English I knew. And that's really the only thing I can remember. Because when I heard the song here I was like, what?

Mary Helen: (Laughs)

Mowal: Like, it was interesting.

Mary Helen: Did you go to any any school at the Mosque or any kind of religious schooling or anything before you were seven?

Mowal: Back in Syria and Saudi Arabia and such? Yeah, actually.

Mary Helen: Like pre, preschool or anything like that?

Mowal: No, but just as a culture, in Muslim countries kids go to, like, Quran school. That type of thing. It's not really a school. It's just someone's house and a bunch of kids learning about Islam. And that was, like, I guess, my first education. That was it.

Mary Helen: Right. Yep, that's very common. That's typical. And then so you came here when you were seven and you started to go to elementary school at, uh, Indian Creek?

Mowal: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah.

Mary Helen: (Laughs) When did you, when did your family move to Centertown?

Mowal: When I was in the seventh grade. Uh, yeah, I'm not sure exactly but I remember being in the seventh grade because I went to Indian Creek then I went to Freedom Middle School; I'm not sure if you know-

Mary Helen: Oh yeah.

Mowal: (Laughs) In sixth grade and then I came here seventh grade for Renfroe.

Mary Helen: Yeah. That was a big change, huh?

Mowal: It was extremely different. Like, first of all, the demographic, it was just, like, I don't know, I've never, as weird as this is going to sound, I've never seen so many white people. (Laughing) So like when I was there, I don't know, it was kind of crazy for me. It was nice. It was a lot nicer. The education was a lot nicer. The resources, the, how dedicated the teachers were was so much different.

Mary Helen: Did that make you feel, even though you were in a, surrounded by all this whiteness, did you feel, uh, better at Renfroe than you did at Freedom? Or, you know, culturally, living in Edgetown as Somali you're, you have lots and lots of

other Somalis, um, but you moved to, you moved, literally, physically to Centertown, which is very different; there aren't as many-

Mowal: Yeah.

Mary Helen: You know, immigrant communities around Centertown. Was that isolating or did you like it?

Mowal: Um ... At first it was slightly isolating. It was a bit difficult because being in a certain environment, it softens you up. And I was put in this whole new environment where I didn't know these people, there was nothing we could talk about; I thought there was nothing we could talk about really. But after a little bit, I met this girl who was from Iran and she, she used to go to my elementary school, Indian Creek actually, and her family was in the same exact process; they moved to the public housing there. So I just automatically clicked with her, and then she was there a year before me so she sort of knew people and she kind of got me into the rhythm of that. But after awhile I was so happy we moved because, to be honest with you, I feel like, besides the community aspect, I did not gain much from, like, the schooling and stuff.

Mary Helen: It's a very different level, you know?

Mowal: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mary Helen: Completely different.

Mowal: Yeah. Things were, exactly, things were a bit harder, too. Like, certain things that they would talk about in class, like, these people already knew, these students grew up in Centertown already knew about that stuff. So I felt so behind, but thank God I caught up.

Mary Helen: Can you think of a funny example or something that you didn't know, like, you know, when you were in school in Centertown that you weren't prepared for, that your other friends knew?

Mowal: Um, I'm not sure exactly an instance, but I remember the Holocaust was new to me when I went to Renfroe.

Mary Helen: That's huge! I love that story. Wow.

Mowal: Yeah. So, I remember it being new and who knows? They may have taught it to us back then, I may not have paid attention, but not until I got to Renfroe did I realize the impact, the history, who was involved, like, going in-depth about the Holocaust. So that was, that would be the first time in seventh grade.

Mary Helen: That's kind of a big one. (Laughs)

Mowal: Yeah. (Laughs)

Mary Helen: So, if I were going to ask you the language you first learned to read, would it have been Arabic or Somali or-

Mowal: Yeah.

Mary Helen: What would it have been?

Mowal: It was Arabic, and the first language I spoke was also Arabic, because we were raised in Saudi Arabia. But when we moved here, we started to forget Arabic and we started learning English. My parents thought, you know, we should bring in Somali because we are originally from Somalia. So they started speaking to us in Somali, and so learning English and Somali at the same time ...

Mary Helen: Your little brother and sister don't understand very much Somali.

Mowal: I know, it's kind of sad to be honest with you. (Laughs)

Mary Helen: I think they pretend like they know, but they don't. Musin admitted to me, he's like, "I don't know what she's talking about." (Laughing)

Mowal: Like, my mom tells him to go grab something and they think they know and they go and they grab it but it's the wrong thing.

Mary Helen: (Laughs)

Mowal: That happens all the time.

Mary Helen: Well I think, uh, it's really amazing that my, most of the Somali women I know, even though you're away from home and you've gone away, which is not traditional, to go school, that you guys retain so much of your culture and your identity.

Mowal: Yeah.

Mary Helen: And you were little when you left Somalia.

Mowal: Exactly. Um, are you talking about, like, the Somali culture and retaining it here?

Mary Helen: And throughout the whole thing, you know? I mean, look at you: You are a completely educated, liberated woman off at college and you still retain those cultural values. I think that's amazing.

Mowal: Yeah, I think, um, just the way my parents raised me, I think, because I know some are not like that. I actually have an example: There's, um, there's a girl who goes here at American, and I saw her one time and she looks Somali, but, like, she doesn't wear a scarf, she dresses very Western and stuff like that. And then I spoke to her and she was, like, "Oh, no, I don't speak Somali anymore. I don't really consider myself Somali." And she's, like, your typical, sort of, like, she's in a sorority, she's very Western, very American. So I know people like that and then I think back to how I was raised and how my parents raised me, because here she talks about how she traveled a lot, mom works for the U.N. and stuff like that. But, like, my mom was strict on that early on. When we were young, she was strict on, um, I don't know how, just, like, going out and things like; she was really strict on that. We stayed home more, she spoke Somali to us and then my dad would, like, tell us all about Somalia, and how at the end of the day, no matter what we do, there are two things we need to remember: We are Muslim and Somali. So no matter what we do with life, those are two things he wants us to remember.

Mary Helen: I, but I don't know many Somalis who are not that way, who don't think the same that your, your parents do. I really, I mean, I, I look at cultures in Minnesota and Maine and the people that I know around the country, and they do retain so much more than many other refugee groups that I know and teach. You know, most, most become Westernized pretty quickly.

Mowal: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mary Helen: And you guys take all the good stuff from Western culture, but you retain the stuff that makes you unique to your homeland. I think that's really interesting. And a lot of that's-

Mowal: Yeah.

Mary Helen: A lot of that's linked to language so I think it's interesting, like, what were your little brother and sister be like? Because they don't really speak Somali.

Mowal: Yeah, that's, that's what I'm a little worried about, but, like, if you ask them, "Where are you from?", they'll say they're Somali. But when they speak, obviously not Somali-

Mary Helen: (Laughs)

Mowal: They don't really know that much about Somalia.

Mary Helen: They don't know anything. I know a lot more than they do (Laughs).

Mowal: And they were born here, too, so (Laughing) ... [Inaudible 15:55].

Mary Helen: It's hilarious.

Mowal: It's a little worrisome.

Mary Helen: Although I will tell you this: They, they have very particular ideas about what they like to eat; Musin does. Like, he doesn't-

Mowal: Yeah.

Mary Helen: He doesn't like American food. (Laughs)

Mowal: Yes. He'll eat my mom's rice all day.

Mary Helen: Mm-hmm (affirmative). So tell me: Do you remember the first book you read? And it can be in any language.

Mowal: The first book, um ...

Mary Helen: It could've been the Quran. You know, you were probably reciting passages from that when you were tiny.

Mowal: Yeah, technically speaking, that's definitely the first book. For a lot of Muslim kids, that's definitely the first book because my little brother he's four years, five years old and goes to like the religious schooling during the week. So he doesn't know, like, how to read properly, but he's, like, learning Arabic through the Quran. He reads, like, little chapters that he can recite. So that would technically be the first book ... School-wise, I think it was David, something about a kid named David who was really good at school.

Mary Helen: (Laughs) All right, tell me about your life now. You're at college, away from home.

Mowal: Yeah.

Mary Helen: That's pretty unusual in your culture.

Mowal: Yeah, it's, like, a lot of people were shocked when they heard my mom would let us go this far. Like, I don't know, a lot of people weren't nice about it and that is because, you know, they're not used to letting the girl, especially the girls, go this far from home. But I'm so happy my parents did because even though I'm here, like, I still have a lot of my values, you know? There are times when people are like let's go, like, let's go to the club, which is normal for a lot of college people. But because of the way I was raised and the values that I have, I can easily say no without worrying about anything. I think, I think if my mom knew that she would be so happy, she would be, like, she's made the right decision. Because, like, the way she raised me, I think twice about certain things, and just the opportunities here are ten times greater than back home in Georgia. But I want to do good, I'm so happy I'm here.

Mary Helen: Which is what? What do you want to do?

Mowal: Well, I want to do international relations so I've been getting a lot involved with, like, um, like, clubs that have to do with my politics, so a lot of politics classes. I've met people. I've been to embassies. I've met people who are with, like, non-profit organizations. And I feel like if I was back home, I would not be able to do

that, especially if I was supposed to commute. I feel like that wouldn't even come to mind at all.

Mary Helen: No, you'd be studying nursing at [State U]. (Laughing)

Mowal: Oh my God, yes.

Mary Helen: No, I'm-

Mowal: Nurse, no, I'm not about that life.

Mary Helen: I think you'd made a wise, wise decision, and I think your parents did, too. Do you think that you'll use that work to go back to Somalia someday?

Mowal: Yes, definitely. Like, um, the classes that I want to take, especially next year, I want them to be more about African development and African politics, especially East Africa, not just Somalia but, like, Ethiopia and Kenya and all that. So hopefully in the future I can be useful to my country, half way. That's what I want.

Mary Helen: I, that's, you know, that we have the same kind of goal. My sister does public-policy stuff and I'd love to be in East African policy person.

Mowal: Yeah.

Mary Helen: All this history of political stuff and mo- It's more about, um, cultural practices of women. You know, in Somalia in the 80s, right before the civil war-

Mowal: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mary Helen: Women became very involved in politics and government.

Mowal: Yeah. Um, we have a photo album at home and most of the pictures are from the 80s, 70s, and the way they dressed compared to the way they dress now is completely different. Like, it was very Western, it, like, there are pictures of my mom with Capri pants, a button-down, like, no scarf, nothing. And then now it's super fundamentalist, like, super make sure you're covered from head to toe, this, that, like, enforcing that I have a problem with; that's another story. Um, but yeah picture-wise, just looking through pictures, I can totally see that.

Mary Helen: That's so amazing that you've had that experience, that you can see pictures of your mother, right?

Mowal: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mary Helen: But you guys are pretty conservative in your dress here in the United States.

Mowal: Exactly.

Mary Helen: So why do you think that is? Why didn't they go back to kind of how they were in the 80s? Your mom.

Mowal: Well, I think, at the end of the day, if you're raised in a Muslim, like, household, your identity as either Somali, Arab, Filipino, does not matter; that comes before your religion.

Mary Helen: Right.

Mowal: So religiously what they were doing was wrong, but also what is happening now is also religiously wrong. So they're like two extremes, you know?

Mary Helen: Yeah.

Mowal: And I think the best solution for everyone is a middle ground. So, I don't think it has to go back to the way that was, because Islamicly speaking it's not the best, but what it is now is just completely terrible and, again, Islamicly that's also ...

Mary Helen: It's not. Yeah, it's not accurate in, according to most religious scholars (Laughs).

Mowal: Yeah.

Mary Helen: That's not how it's you know, portrayed, it's not read or interpreted in the Quran or Hadith. I think that's interesting so ...

Mowal: Yeah.

Mary Helen: Anyway, I think that's amazing that you have picture evidence of that because I actually write about it in my dissertation. (Laughing) About the dress, exactly what you were, so what you just said sort of validates what I said in my, in my paper about that even the dress started to change, and the way that, you know, women couldn't even walk down the street anymore. You know, it was, like, they became completely closed off. And so that's why I decided to do this project because you, women in Somalia should have a way to push against that discourse

of power, and I think that when you're a refugee it takes so much energy just to change cultures and to keep your family together. You aren't going to go write a book about it (Laughs) so-

Mowal: Yeah. Exactly.

Mary Helen: Right, so, you know, this could be a beginning that, that experiences of people who have succeeded and been successful navigating everything, that that's the first step towards, you know, getting another story out there. Not the awful, awful, awful trauma story; I hate, I'm kind of tired of all that stuff so ...

Mowal: There's so many years of that, too.

Mary Helen: Well, and that's what my, if you read, another chapter of my dissertation it's about the, that Westerners kind of thrive off that stuff. They love that; they call it "poverty porn." You know, they like to hear the bad stories about, you know, female genital mutilation or women that have been stoned for adultery or whatever.

Mowal: Exactly.

Mary Helen: They love that stuff. But, you know, that's not, that's not the experience of every single person.

Mowal: Yes.

Mary Helen: So it's important.

Mowal: Like, yesterday, this was really, it was so odd to me, I went to the human resource office here to, I was helping a friend with something. I was there, I met this guy, he asked me, "Where are you from?", and I said, "Somalia." And then the first thing he said, "So tell me about Al Shabaab."

Mary Helen: (Laughs)

Mowal: I'm like, "What?"

Mary Helen: Do you know any pirates?

Mowal: Exactly, like, what do you want me to, what is there to know about this. He's like, "Oh, I heard they turned the whole country upside down. There's so much turmoil." I was like, "Yeah, it is, it is kind of sad situation." He was like, "You know, I have the solution to get rid of them." "No, okay, tell me." "You know, we'll just drop bombs on the whole country." I was like, "Wow, that sounds so familiar. I'm pretty sure that happened before."

Mary Helen: (Laughs) I'm pretty sure that's why they're still having problems.

Mowal: Exactly. Look where that's taking us, like, it hasn't done anything. I told him what, um, from my own personal perspective, I think what's important is fixing the government and changing the local mind because that's the only thing that can help. And then he had the nerve to say to me, he was like, "Oh, I have a better idea: Why don't we just drop Ebola on the whole country?" I was like-

Mary Helen: Where, do you know anything about him? Like, what kind of guy is this? Is this like a-

Mowal: He was Egyptian!

Mary Helen: Oh (Laughs).

Mowal: I was like, "What is he doing?" (Laughs)

Mary Helen: Oh, that's so sad.

Mowal: I was like, "What a joke," and I literally turned around and walked out and he was like, "Oh, I'm just kidding. I'm just, sorry, blah, blah, blah." I was like, "Goodbye."

Mary Helen: Do you feel like you get, you get that a lot? Do people make assumptions about you just by looking at you or know you're from Somalia?

Mowal: Um ... Well, a lot, I do get a lot of questions about Al Shabaab-

Mary Helen: (Laughs) They're like a foreign presence in your country, pretty much. (Laughs)

Mowal: Exactly. It's, like, I'm pretty sure they just like other organizations doing what they're not supposed to be doing. Like, I'm the expert about Al Shabaab

Mary Helen: (Laughs).

Mowal: That's usually the first - Like, while I've been here AU, every time Somalia's mentioned, the second thing, like, Somalia and then failed state. Like, every time

we talk about states and state sovereignty, if we're talking about an example of failed state, Somalia always comes up. And that's why I kind of have an issue with, like, um, American University on Africa. There aren't really that many classes, and the ones that there are focus on, like, West African literature and stuff like that.

Mary Helen: Hmm.

Mowal: Which is great from what I've heard, but for me, I feel like what would help people like me are classes on development, the politics of the countries within Africa.

Mary Helen: Yeah. Have you looked at Georgetown?

Mowal: No, I haven't.

Mary Helen: Look it, check it out. And, you know, you, you're just doing your undergrad, and to get really focused on East African issues and things like that, it may be that you need to find a graduate program that would get you in, like, in-depth in that, you know? Just, like, get your four-year done and then look for where - I don't know where the experts on East African studies are. There used to be a really amazing historian, he's, like, the guy who wrote all of the history of Somalia who, uh, was at Cambridge. So, um, and he was the first one to, to do a translation of Somali poetry.

Mary Helen: You know, like, the, which is a big cultural thing. But, um-

Mowal: Huge.

Mary Helen: Pretty sure he's dead now. (Laughs) So-

Mowal: (Laughing) Okay. I'm like, "What's his name?"

Mary Helen: His name I can't pronounce. I'm going to send you my dissertation so you can have all that because there's a lot in there. You might even be able to get a paper out of it, right? Like, you can find something that you could use for your class. His name is, like, Polish; it's Andrzejewski. And you're right though, there's not a lot of scholarship. But the good news about that, Mowal, is that somebody needs to create that scholarship, and if you are interested in that, I mean, there you go; that's how you make your mark. As a young person who's so articulate, you can even start producing that stuff as an undergraduate. You and I could write an article together and you could be published before you ever got out a, of, um, your undergraduate studies; I'm not kidding, because-

Mowal: That would be great!

Mary Helen: There's not anything. Here, I'll show you. There's, um, a collection, this edited collection and it's about, not just Somali, it's about refugee women. There is the three, there are the three books I told you about.

Mowal: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mary Helen: Ayaan Hirsi Ali's book, "Infidel," so you can kind of guess what it's about, right?

Mowal: Yeah.

Mary Helen: Um, "Iman," and those are mostly written by white anthropologists about Somalis. So there's nothing.

Mowal: Yeah.

Mary Helen: So you need to think about that. You can make a whole career out of it.

Mowal: I'll definitely look into it. If you're, um, interested you could talk to my dad, he's he's really, really interested in stuff like that. Um, I don't know if you know but he, like, runs a radio show in Edgetown.

Mary Helen: No!

Mowal: Yeah.

Mary Helen: I didn't know that. No.

Mowal: Okay, it's every Sunday. He's been doing it for the past, like, seven years or so.

Mary Helen: Does he do it in Somali or English?

Mowal: It's all in Somali. I can help you with translation if needed. But, um, he talks about Somalian politics. He also writes a lot for, like, some websites about Somalian politics and such.

Mary Helen: What does he go by for his first name?

Mowal: It's Abdiaziz.

Mary Helen: It's the whole thing?

Mowal: Yeah.

Mary Helen: Okay.

Mowal: Or you can just call him "Abdi."

Mary Helen: No, but it's, I know, I like to be formal so it's the whole thing together.

Mowal: Yeah, Abdiaziz.

Mary Helen: Okay. That's how it's in my phone. I thought so.

Mowal: Okay (Laughs).

Mary Helen: And what does your mom, how, what's your mom's first name?

Mowal: Her name is Faduma.

Mary Helen: Mm-hmm (affirmative)..

Mary Helen: All right, they're going on my list this week so definitely, I'll, I will definitely do it. Um, so that was pretty much, I could talk to you for probably five hours and we could write a book, but that'll be next; I have to do my dissertation first. So I need to send-

Mowal: Good luck with that.

Mary Helen: I need to send this to you and I'm going to send you a copy of my dissertation proposal because I think there's stuff in there that you want to read.

Mary Helen: Okay. Awesome. You are, I'm so impressed. Are you making all A's?

Mowal: Oh. Yes!

Mary Helen: Oh no!

Mowal: Surprisingly, I am! (Laughs)

Mary Helen: I don't believe it. That's amazing.

Mowal: Oh, I just keep, like, what my dad told me is that if he's going to let me go this far-

Mary Helen: (Laughs)

Mowal: Far away from home, I need to do well in school.

Mary Helen: So my 11-year old brought home B's and C's from Renfroe this week. I'm not happy.

Mowal: Yeah.

Mary Helen: He shouldn't be making B's and C's.

Mowal: I need to look at Maha and Mussin's report card. I need to see what they're doing.

Mary Helen: Oh, your sister, your little sister is so - She is like A, A, A, A, A, A.

Mowal: (Laughs)

Mary Helen: She, like, won't even do activities because she wants to spend time on her schoolwork. (Laughs)

Mowal: Exactly, that's what she keeps telling me!

Mary Helen: I know.

Mowal: Okay.

Mary Helen: She's, like, all serious. No, Musin I don't think so. (Laughs)

Mowal: Yeah, I need, I need to have a conversation with him.

Mary Helen: Yeah, well we, um, we're getting ready to go back into soccer season with them and I got to take Musin to a lot of practices and games. I'm happy, so make sure your parents understand that I never mind doing it. It's never a problem. It's hard for them to get kids all over town so for us it's no problem. And we enjoy it. And we will not be a corrupting influence, I promise.

Mowal: (Laughs)

Mary Helen: I absolutely support all of his Somali-ness.

Mowal: (Laughs) They'll be happy to hear that.

Mary Helen: It's important. In fact I, I was going to ask our friend Abdulahi to talk to your dad about it, because one day Musin came over here to play for a long time and I think

your mom was a little bit freaked out about it, like, that it was, you know, whatever. But my kids are pretty, and I was like, "Maybe Abdulahi should have a conversation with her," because he's known my kids for, like, six years. (Laughs)

Mowal: Yeah.

Mary Helen: So she would feel more comfortable about it. I just don't want her to be-

Mowal: Yeah.

Mary Helen: You know, I don't want her to feel uncomfortable about it at all. But anyway-

Mowal: Oh, it's definitely not you.

Mary Helen: I know that. I, I know that. I, I accept that and understand that. I just want to do everything I can to make her feel like it's all good.

Mowal: Okay, that's good.

Mary Helen: So when you go to graduate school you could write a master's thesis about this.

Mowal: Wow, that would be amazing. I would actually really love to read your dissertation.

Mary Helen: Yeah, you will. Don't worry. I'll send it to you. I'm about 50 pages in, so ...

Mowal: Wow.

Mary Helen: I've got to get it done. Done, done, done. This helps a lot, though. I really appreciate it. All right, I'm going to go feed my children.

Mowal: All right.

Mary Helen: All right. Take care. Have a good night.

Mowal: Thank you.

Mary Helen: Okay, bye-bye.

Appendix E: Interview transcript Halima

Mary Helen: Okay. Let me put that right there and okay. So just tell me your name.

Halima: Halima Abdi.

Mary Helen: Okay. Tell me how old you are.

Halima: I'm nineteen.

Mary Helen: And how long-

Halima: No, wait! I'm not nineteen yet, eighteen.

Mary Helen: (Laughs).

Halima: (Laughs).

Mary Helen: How long have you lived in the United States?

Halima: Um, since that was a couple of months, I think.

Mary Helen: A couple of months.

Halima: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mary Helen: Okay. All right, so I want you to tell me about your experience of learning to read.

Halima: Learning to read. Um, actually, I don't know how I started like learning English 'cause I was never in those ESL classes. I guess it was that since I was a baby and then I went to school here that I already knew the language before I got there. I have these friends, they were like, "Oh, it's an ESL, then I'd tested out of it," and I was like, "Wait. How come I wasn't in it, you know, I thought it was the cool thing," and I just never was in it and I just knew it 'cause my parents knew basic English and then I'll go to school, I feel like, "Mom, look, look," and they'd be like, "What is that?" and I'll be like, "Look, look," you know, and I just learned from my teachers.

Mary Helen: I think you might be the first Somali immigrant I met that didn't have to go to ESL classes (laughs).

Halima: (Laughs) Yeah. I'm like, "No, that's not cool!"

Mary Helen: So that kinda makes you feel other?

Halima: Yeah, I was like, "I wasn't in those classes," like they will, like it would be groups of like Somali girls. I would just go to this one class and I was like, "Hey, you're like the cool people class? So I'm not in it." I was never in it.

Mary Helen: So you got-

Halima: Even high school, I wasn't in it.

Mary Helen: You totally got left out?

Halima: Yeah!

Mary Helen: (Laughs).

Halima: And I was like, "What?"

Mary Helen: So you probably first learned to read and write in, in English?

Halima: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mary Helen: Do you speak Somali?

Halima: Um, see, that's a sad part. I think I learned English before I learned Somali.

Mary Helen: So you don't know-

Halima: So, like, I don't, I know basic, I, I can hold a basic conversation like my parents, but then what I mean like relatives and they would have like full-on conversation

about my life, I'd be like, "Ohhh. I don't know, can I go to my room now? I don't know what to say."

Mary Helen: Oh really?

Halima: Yeah.

Mary Helen: So is it still that way?

Halima: Yeah, it is. And my mom's like, "You need to learn. What if you go back to your country one day, you know." I gotta learn.

Mary Helen: So, do you remember who taught you to read?

Halima: Um, I don't remember, but I had this really one teacher that I like. Her name is Ms. Freewell and she loved parachutes. Um, I think she was like middle-aged white lady and she was just so like friendly and every time my parents would come pick me up, she was like, "Oh my God, Halima did this in class and Halima did that in class," and she was like, "Oh, stop it," and this one when I was a little kid and then, um, I guess she was really good friends with our parents, so I think she, like, taught me more.

Mary Helen: Do you remember the first book you learned to read?

Halima: No, I don't.

Mary Helen: No idea?

Halima: No.

Mary Helen: So was there a lot of reading at home or books?

Halima: Oh yeah, there was. My dad will always be like, "Oh let's go to a library. We still have our library cards," and we would go, they'd be like, "Oh, you have a fine from like 19-8, 1999 or something like that," and we'll be like, "Um, how do they get on there?" It'll be books like Dr. Seuss or, you know, like ABCs, and I'm like, "Oh, yeah, let me just pay that down." (Laughs).

Mary Helen: So tell me about your parents. It sounds like they have good English skills.

Halima: Yeah, they do. They actually have better, like, English skills than most Somali people in the community 'cause they both go to college and they have like some sort of degree and they're going back now, so.

Mary Helen: Did they go to college in Somalia before you came here?

Halima: Um, I think my dad-

Mary Helen: Or in Ethiopia or somewhere?

Halima: It was Somalia, but I think my dad, I think he was in college, some college before we came here and then my mom went to high school over there and then we came here.

Mary Helen: That's pretty unusual for them to have had that much education before they came here.

Halima: Yeah.

Mary Helen: So, uh, was it, what was it like for them when they first came here, job-wise and education and ...

Halima: Oh, they had, um, like the standard factory job when they first came here and it was like, it was basically, uh, counting, you know, like how to count inventory and then, um, my mom went to school, so she quit that job, and then my dad had some business now.

Mary Helen: Oh okay. So what does he do? What do your parents do?

Halima: Um, my mom is goin' back to get her RN and my dad is like a owner of like a car battery shop, like he fixes old batteries, like, yeah.

Mary Helen: So it sounds pretty more, like, more, um, more successful than a typical experience when people come and don't know the language.

Halima: Yeah. Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mary Helen: They already had some ability, didn't they? All right, so tell me, you don't have any other language skills except for English.

Halima: English.

Mary Helen: And a little bit of Somali (laughs).

Halima: Yeah. Pretty much it. I wanted to take Arabic. I can read Arabic really good, but it's just, I can't pronounce it, you know, like, have a conversation with like a Arabic person, so I'm trying to take like maybe a Somali class. I know they offer that, uh, um, Arabic they're going to and I'm like, "Oh, maybe I could take that."

Mary Helen: What do you know about Somali as a language?

Halima: Like, what do you mean?

Mary Helen: How many books do you know are published in Somali?

Halima: Uh, I have no idea, like, or if I would like read a text message in Somali, I couldn't like conjugate the verbs correctly or when I'd have, um, a conversation with my mom, she'd like, "To say he and she is different when you say them to a sentence, you know," and then she'd be like, "What are you tryin' to say?" and I'm like, "Oh, forget it! I'll just say it in English," you know.

Mary Helen: How does that change the dynamic in your family? Like ...

Halima: My parents, they, they always try to like speak more Somali, but it's just hard for it's like, we can do like a English-Somali combo, but we couldn't do straight Somali.

Mary Helen: So I think it's very interesting, um, the mix and mash-up of your language, but then I look at you and you're very traditional.

Halima: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mary Helen: In your dress and style.

Halima: Yeah.

Mary Helen: You don't sound, you sound like an American kid.

Halima: Yeah (laughs).

Mary Helen: So how do, talk about that a little bit.

Halima: I don't know, I guess-

Mary Helen: Do you have any stories about that?

Halima: Yeah. Um, when I was in fifth grade, there's was this one story I remember. Um, I would come, this is before like I knew of anything about matching, like I would have different skirt, different top, you know, different color of scarf, and I would just go to class and it'd be like a normal class, it's like honor students, you know, and they'd be like, "Sweetie, uh, you're in the wrong class," and then, and then I would talk and they'd be like, "Oh my God, like, you don't sound like you have an accent or anything, you know," and then I'm just like I would get really offended by it and wouldn't say anything, you know, and I will just show them like in my work ask questions that I can actually, like, I belong in that class, you know, and then people just like, "Oh, that's nice," so I made, like, a lot of like friends over the years for that.

Mary Helen: I bet you have some stories about people seeing you and having misperceptions about your language skills.

Halima: Yeah, um, or like, just me looking confused. I think that I have a confused face to people when I'm just walking 'cause the first day I was walking I knew where I was going. I completely knew where I was going, and there was one guy that came up to me, he's just like, "Are you lost, sweetie?" and I'm like, "No, do I look lost?" He's like, "Yeah, you look really confused," and I'm like, "No, I know where I'm going." He's like, "Oh okay," and I would see him, like, in like passing and he'd be like, "Oh okay, have a good day," you know, and I'm like, "Thank you." It was really weird.

Mary Helen: So how does that, how does, um, as much you said when we met that you're studying Biology, what do you think you're gonna do?

Halima: Uh, Pediatrics, like go to law, uh, law, not law school, but med school and then, um, I haven't really looked into it, but I think like the minor is Pediatrics and then, uh, you study about like all the kids and everything to become a pediatrician, so.

Mary Helen: You want to be a doctor?

Halima: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mary Helen: Do you want stay in the United States?

Halima: Uh, I think so. Right now I do, but I don't know, maybe like in the future years ...

Mary Helen: If things got better in Somalia, would you want to go there?

Halima: Uh, I want to actually go. My parents, we've been talking about that, but, like, we have to all go when we have like time, you know, like when our schedules don't mess up.

Mary Helen: Well, if you, if you think about it in terms of, um, broader Somali culture in the community of millions and millions of Somalis and you'll probably be some of the first women that would go to medical school outside of ...

Halima: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah.

Mary Helen: The country for sure, right?

Halima: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mary Helen: I mean, how does that make you feel in terms of your identity?

Halima: I don't know, I think, like-

Mary Helen: And how you fit into traditional Somali culture?

Halima: I kinda, I kinda like 'cause it breaks like the actual like norm of Somalia and like most people say, like, I'll have friends, they're like, "Oh, I'm gonna be a doctor." I have like aunties, they were like, "Oh, yeah, I wanted to become a doctor," but they would always stop at like the nursing stage and they wouldn't actually like go through. Maybe I think they got married and have kids or something happened.

Like, I wanna actually, like be the first Somali girl doctor that I know, like my generation.

Mary Helen: There's another one I met! (laughs)

Halima: Really?

Mary Helen: So, um, you've got some competition (laughs). She's not from ...

Halima: From?

Mary Helen: She's from Washington. I met her ...

Halima: Oh?

Mary Helen: Yeah, last summer, but I think it's really interesting and, um, how does your family feel about ...

Halima: They're like, "Yeah, go for it." They're like they're really into education, like my parents would come home and they're like, "Oh, just do your homework, just read your books," you know, like it's always education first before we actually play.

Mary Helen: And how does that fit in with, um, religion and identity in terms of your role as a woman?

Halima: Religion, I think like most people are into like the whole, uh, stereotypical, like Somali women or Muslim women generally have to be at home and can't, like,

really do anything like towards education. Our parents teach us like, "Yeah, you wanna work? Go work. You wanna go to school? Go ahead."

Mary Helen: I think that's something interesting I found in my research is that most Somali women I know and before the civil war in Somalia, Somali women did what, it's, there was like what is the perception of the typical Muslim woman, but then a Somali woman was not necessarily the typical Muslim woman, right?

Halima: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mary Helen: And that after the civil war, they became more conservative and so, but before that, Somali women were sort of like the economic engine of the family.

Halima: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mary Helen: They did it all, did, went where they wanted to. This is what I talk about with, um, my friend's mom all the time is that, you know, they ran businesses and did all those things, and I think that there's a perception in the United States, but that's not ...

Halima: Yeah. I think it's more like when people leave Somalia, they come here for opportunity and like if they're just blessed to have like the chance to come here, so why waste it. So, you know, like, "Oh, you can go to college if you want. You can work if you want," like might as well, you know.

Mary Helen: I agree. Yeah. That's great.

Mary Helen: Well, I think, um, I'm sure you've had friends that have had difficulties, um, with language issues and learning and I have a lot of students who are not as successful as you are. Most of them, if they come over here when they're twelve, thirteen, fifteen, sixteen, they have a really hard time integrating.

Halima: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mary Helen: And I also think that, um, I think that there's a lot of family pressure sometimes on, on girls, Somali girls especially, to stay home and take care of their family or get married really young and ...

Halima: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mary Helen: Those are the dominant stories that you hear like arranged marriage.

Halima: Yeah.

Mary Helen: You know, all that kind of stuff. That's not what I, my experience has been, so, I'm interested to know what's it like for, for real folks, for real girls?

Halima: Real folks?

Mary Helen: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Halima: Like ...

Mary Helen: For real Somali families.

Halima: Like the traditional ones?

Mary Helen: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Halima: I think that the traditional ones ...

Mary Helen: No, for you.

Halima: For me?

Mary Helen: For you.

Halima: Oh, well, um, my parents, my mom, I think she had arranged marriage, but the guy actually died before they had like a chance of getting married. So she's like, "Oh, I want you to pick your partner. You know, I'm not gonna force it on you." I know, like, my friends, some of them like have arranged marriages and they're like in the [inaudible 11:03] their parents, "No, I don't wanna marry him. I don't want him," you know, and then my parents are just like, "You marry who you want, like, we'll sit down and have a conversation with him, you know. If he's like the perfect fit, like, go for it, you know, like, but he can't be like those parents, I mean, the husband that's like you have to stay home, you have to cook, you can't do this, you know, he has to like willing to help you with your dreams." Well, I think that's ...

Mary Helen: Well, that's very interesting.

Halima: Yeah, well, my parents want for us.

Mary Helen: I, I think, um, I think it's interesting that there's the whole issue of assimilation, you know, that if you come to United States to act American, to be American, and so many Somalis that I know don't do that, they retain their culture. I think it's really interesting. And for you, for example, it's just, it's usually based in language, so that if you live with your Somali friends and family, you speak Somali that helps you retain that, but you don't have that and you're still ...

Halima: Yeah.

Mary Helen: You know, you still retain that culture.

Halima: I mean, I can understand it like if my friends personally talk to me, I can like, I understand what they're saying, but it's just like, I'm really like embarrassed to reply back in English to them, so I will just like try a nod or be like, "Yeah, can we go to her room or something," and like it's really awkward, but I'm trying like I'm learning. I have a book at home with like basic like just conversations with like people I would have and I'm getting better.

Mary Helen: I guess it would be, if you go back to Somalia, it would be like how it was with most of the Somalis that came here (laughs).

Halima: Yeah.

Mary Helen: It would be stigmatizing, difficult for you. They all look at you like, "Ahhh."

Halima: Yeah.

Mary Helen: Well, that's, that's really all I wanted to talk about, so it's very easy.

Halima: Oh. Yeah.

Mary Helen: But if you have any questions, you know. Have you read any books about Somali women?

Halima: I haven't. Actually, I wanna read those books that you mentioned earlier. Let's see, which one is it.

Mary Helen: One's called "Iman."

Halima: Okay.

Mary Helen: One, uh, Ayaan Hirsi Ali wrote two, one of them's called "Infidel."

Halima: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mary Helen: Um, most of them are about persecution of, of Somali women based on really horrific patriarchal practices. They make a, they put a very big focus on it and talk a lot about, um, things that as many Somali women and I've met had never, ever identified or said, "Yeah, that's been my primary experience," and, um, they just make it sound like it's the worst thing in the world to have been born a Somali woman.

Halima: Yeah (laughs).

Mary Helen: And the, and all, all of the people that I know and I know lots of different groups of refugees and so, um, I wanted to explore and research what is it like for a group of women to quietly come over here, learn the language, go to college, progress, all that kind of stuff.

Appendix F: Interview transcript Salam

Mary Helen: All right, how old are you?

Salam: Um, nineteen

Mary Helen: Okay. Where did you go to school?

Salam: Um, for elementary I went to Indian Creek which is around the corner. Um, middle school for sixth and seventh grade I was home schooled because, it was an Islamic school because like, the middle school that was my middle school, Freedom Middle School, was a bad middle school. So my parents didn't want me to get influenced so it was like an Islamic school and I went there for sixth and seventh grade, um, and then eighth grade-

Mary Helen: Was it in someone's home?

Salam: Yeah it was in someone's home.

Mary Helen: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Salam: It was a teacher. She was, um, she was African American but she converted to Islam. And she would teach us, um, basically math and science and all the basic

stuff. And then eighth grade I went to Tucker Middle and then from ninth through twelfth I went to Tucker High School.

Mary Helen: So did you come when, were you born here or did you-

Salam: I, I was born here.

Mary Helen: Okay.

Salam: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Mary Helen: So, you were born here and you went to Indian Creek?

Salam: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Mary Helen: Tell me about that experience because it's a...

Salam: Yeah.

Mary Helen: There's so many immigrants there, did they assume that you would be an ESL kid or (laughs) like what happened?

Salam: Um, when I went there I started like, two thousand and, I think I started Pre-K 2001, yeah. So when I went it was like, it was not like right now in Edgetown, there's a lot of Nepali, Burmese, Asian, there was none of those people there.

Mary Helen: No.

Salam: It was just like African Americans and then Somali people. We were the immigrants, like how they populate Edgetown now, we used to populate Edgetown. So-

Mary Helen: Interesting.

Salam: I lived in a, um, like a town...not a townhouse, a house in Edgetown. So when I went there, there was a lot of African American, Somali, but there was, there wasn't any white people or-

Mary Helen: So it was primarily Somalis, at Indian Creek-

Salam: Yeah.

Mary Helen: As far as the immigrants?

Salam: Somali-

Mary Helen: That's interesting.

Salam: African American, um, Ethiopian,

Mary Helen: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Salam: Um, like, Sudanese

Mary Helen: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Salam: A lot of like, diverse people from around the world.

Mary Helen: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Salam: It was Vietnamese.

Mary Helen: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Salam: There's a lot of Vietnamese people that came. Um, it really is a diverse school.

Mary Helen: It has changed a lot though.

Salam: But it hasn't changed, it shifted.

Mary Helen: Because I noticed that my, my school, my students now are most, I used to have lots more, um, Somalis and, I have a lot of Ethiopians still.

Salam: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Mary Helen: But you're right, now I have all these students from Nepal and Burma.

Salam: Yeah, a lot of Burmese and Nepali people are in Edgetown now.

Mary Helen: Mm-hmm (affirmative) Yes, I've noticed that. Do you remember, um, learning to read or write? In what language do you remember learning to read or write in?

Salam: Um,

Mary Helen: Or speak, because

Salam: Speak.

Mary Helen: You know, you may have learned to recite Quran, I don't know, like what you remember,

Salam: So my mom-

Mary Helen: The first.

Salam: My mother tells me that when I was, 'cuz both my parents are fluent in Somali, so around the house they speak Somali. English is hard. Well, my dad, he's fluent, but English is hard for my mom.

Mary Helen: (Laughs)

Salam: So she tells me that my first language was Somali, that I used to speak Somali to her even though I was, um, born in America. And then when I went to school I kinda like forgot all of that and when I started watching TV and I started speaking English, so, and then my memory like fades about when I used to speak Somali. But she said all of her friends used to think that I was born in Somalia, the way that I used to speak.

Mary Helen: Well that's interesting.

Salam: Yeah.

Mary Helen: You're the first one I've known-

Salam: Yeah.

Mary Helen: Who was born here who speaks it that well.

Salam: Yeah.

Mary Helen: Because all the other ones are like can't use Somali.

Salam: But I,

Mary Helen: (laughs)

Salam: I forgot it for like...I don't know that much but like me compared to my younger siblings, it's, I know more than them. But I'm not-

Mary Helen: Ahh.

Salam: -an expert.

Mary Helen: Ahh. Tell me about the size of your family.

Salam: It's only, it's only four of us. It's we're pretty small.

Mary Helen: Oh, that's tiny (laughs).

Salam: For a Somali family, yeah. They usually have like-

Mary Helen: That's funny.

Salam: Ten, like my aunt has like ten.

Mary Helen: I was talking to Mowal's mom and we were talking about that she'll tell Musin and Maha to go get something from the kitchen in Somali-

Salam: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Mary Helen: And they'll come back with the wrong thing (laughs).

Salam: (Laughing)

Mary Helen: And I think that...what do you think about that connection and having that language?

Salam: That language connection? I think it's really important because later on I want to teach, if I have a family, I want to teach my kids Somali, but I don't think I will be able to because I'm not that well, I don't, I speak better English than Somali. So, it's good to know your language so you can always go back to Somali because that's who you are.

Mary Helen: Yeah.

Salam: Yeah. And my younger siblings, they don't, like me brother, he really doesn't know anything. Like he'll understand what you're saying but he will not respond back, like that's pretty hard for most people.

Mary Helen: Well Somali's a really hard language. (Laughs)

Salam: Uh-huh.

Mary Helen: I've been around it for, uh, eight or nine years-

Salam: Yeah.

Mary Helen: and I don't know anything.

Salam: (Laughs)

Mary Helen: I can't, sometimes I think I can tell in conversation, pick up a couple things but it's so difficult.

Salam: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Mary Helen: It really is I think. So, what about Arabic? Is that a part of?

Salam: Arabic, yeah. I also, like on Saturdays and Sundays we used to go to Quran school.

Mary Helen: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Salam: And we learned how to read in Arabic so we can read the Quran but I don't know how to speak Arabic or understand it, like I could read it but I don't know what I'm saying.

Mary Helen: Do you think you learned to read in Arabic first or did you learn to read in English first?

Salam: English because, um, I started, I think, Quran school when I was in second grade.

Mary Helen: Okay.

Salam: So I learned how to read before that, maybe first grade, pre-k, kindergarten. So I learned English first, then I learned how to, uh, Arabic. Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mary Helen: Tell me about school. So you went, I've never, um, interviewed anybody for this project that was home schooled.

Salam: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Mary Helen: And then went back to Tucker and then, I think it's unusual for you to go straight off to [State U].

Salam: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Mary Helen: Because most folks I know-

Salam: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Mary Helen: Stay, like it's unusual that Mowal and Minal got to go to school so far away.

Salam: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Mary Helen: So for you how is that change? I mean, [State U's] a big place.

Salam: Yeah. So when I was in home school it was, it was difficult because there was only like six people there and it was just like me and my sister, my neighbor, her sister, that's already four, and then two other girls. It was like six or seven people there. And then in my grade, um, there was only one girl that was the same grade

as me. So it was difficult because, I mean, it was easy because like everyone there, they're like the, were all the same, like we're all Muslim. We all um, were going to school, so it's like you're not the different one but like when you're at public school you kinda, you have, you're different than everyone else because you don't you know blend in. But, um, at home school, I felt like I didn't learn, like, I mean, as much as I did in public school because it's one person trying to teach all the subjects and you're not mastering every single subject.

Mary Helen: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Salam: So maybe that was maybe a flaw from there. And, um, we used to wear abayas, I, do you know what that is?

Mary Helen: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Salam: It's like the long, black thing.

Mary Helen: Yes.

Salam: Every single day. We couldn't wear...that's all we wore everyday with a scarf. Like, um, I think it was, it didn't really matter what color scarf, but everyday we used to wear and abaya. So when I trans...like when I was trying to transition back to public school, it was hard because like everyone there would wear like, um, they would wear like you know, shorts, pants, whatever and I didn't, it wasn't comfortable for me because it's like I went from being in elementary school, you know, I was a wild child,

Mary Helen: (laughs)

Salam: To being like trying to, like, you have to be a certain way, in, like home school to be better, a better Muslim, a better, like, a more proper person. And then going back to middle school, people would say, "Oh what happened? You used to be like the old Salam." And I'm like no. (laughs)

Mary Helen: Well that's interesting because, uh, I talked to, um, Mowal's mom about this a lot. In terms of the way that Somali women dress,

Salam: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Mary Helen: And she said that, that over here in the United States.

Salam: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Mary Helen: Everyone dresses much more conservatively.

Salam: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Mary Helen: But back in Somalia, it was much, they were much more free-

Salam: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Mary Helen: To be and be colorful-

Salam: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Mary Helen: And to wear all different styles-

Salam: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Mary Helen: Not, they didn't have to cover up so much-

Salam: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Mary Helen: And we talked about why she thought that was.

Salam: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Mary Helen: But I think that's interesting. How do you feel about the way you fit in at [State U]?

Salam: Well, um, it's like, like before I used to care, but I really do not care (laughs). Like, I feel like I am who I am, you know? If I were to take my scarf off or I would change who I am, people wouldn't recognize me, you know? They'd be like, "Who are you?" So I feel like my clothing and how I dress is in my culture, that's my, a part of my identity.

Mary Helen: I think Somali women look beautiful-

Salam: Yeah.

Mary Helen: The way they dress, though. They don't look the same. It's very individualistic.

Salam: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Mary Helen: So you get to express yourself.

Salam: And then, I also feel like in Somalia, I don't think they were like, 'cuz like, you, Somali, Somali, it's like a culture, you know?

Mary Helen: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Salam: And then Islam,

Mary Helen: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Salam: So, back then I guess they weren't really strict on the Islam, and then now, since everyone keeps ...they're trying to be more Islamic. So to try to blend like Islam and then your culture and your religion is pretty hard.

Mary Helen: Yes. I think you nailed it. That's exactly how they talked to me about it. I agree.

Salam: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Mary Helen: So, um, do you remember who taught you to read?

Salam: Mmmm, at school probably-

Mary Helen: Do you remember-

Salam: I don't remember my teachers.

Mary Helen: Any books that you like, have liked over the years, particularly do you have a favorite?

Salam: Um, I used to read Junie B. Jones all the time.

Mary Helen: (Laughs) That's so cute.

Salam: I think I had like all of her books. Um, I used to read Goosebumps.

Mary Helen: Oh yeah?

Salam: Yeah. I never, I stayed away from Harry Potter because it was so big.

Mary Helen: (laughing)

Salam: When the teacher used to make us go to the library, um, Harry Potter, it was like on the bottom and it was really thick and so I was lazy.

Mary Helen: (laughs)

Salam: So I didn't want to read, (laughs), I didn't want to read that book.

Mary Helen: (Laughs)

Salam: Because I think we had to read one, um, or she assigned us to read it so I used to get the small skinny ones and Junie B. Jones was-

Mary Helen: Yeah.

Salam: Like, 70 pages. So those are the ones I used to grab. And Goosebumps were really small too. So I just stayed into the small little books. (laughs)

Mary Helen: How is it reading, what's it like in college now? What do you think you want to study? What classes do you like?

Salam: Well, right now, I'm undecided, because like, I wanted to do pharmacy...

Mary Helen: Mmm.

Salam: But then like there's a lot of chemistry and a lot of science and it takes a lot of studying. So, but, maybe that's what I'm going to lean towards.

Mary Helen: Pharmacy? Yeah, so you, were you a, did you like science in high school?

Salam: Yeah, I liked science in high school.

Mary Helen: Yeah. That would be great. So what does your family think about you in college?

Salam: Oh, yeah. That's what my mom, she, my parents, they all wanted me to go to, uh, college and become successful.

Mary Helen: What do your parents do?

Salam: My dad's a taxi driver and my mom, she works at a, like a warehouse.

Mary Helen: So they both work?

Salam: Yeah.

Mary Helen: Yeah. And did either of them have high school or college? Your dad, you said, had college.

Salam: Mm-hmm (affirmative) He was trying to be an engineer but, um, I guess it didn't work out for him and he dropped out and then he went back to Africa and he

married my mom and then they started a family. So he just stopped going to school.

Mary Helen: Are you the oldest in your family?

Salam: Mmm-mmm. My sister is.

Mary Helen: Is she in college?

Salam: Yeah, she's in college.

Mary Helen: Where is she?

Salam: She goes to community college.

Mary Helen: Oh, okay. What is she going to study?

Salam: She wants to do respiratory therapy and then later on do PA-she wants to be a physician's assistant.

Mary Helen: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Salam: Yeah.

Mary Helen: So what do your parents think about their two oldest girls-

Salam: Yeah.

Mary Helen: In college?

Salam: Yeah, my mom's like, she always says, um, my mistakes, don't follow my mistakes. And she's like, if you guys become successful then I'll be successful.

Mary Helen: Awww. Do you have other extended family, like back in Somalia, or here?

Salam: Mmmm.

Mary Helen: What are their ideas about you guys in college?

Salam: From my mom's side, she's the, like, she has, I think she said she has six siblings, and then they all like have like ten kids,

Mary Helen: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Salam: like, I have a lot of cousins.

Mary Helen: Yeah

Salam: In Africa, but I don't know any of them and so, I don't know. Like her side of the family I really don't know them. I probably talked to my grandma once on the, a couple times on the phone.

Mary Helen: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Salam: And my dad, he only has one sister. She lives in Canada. So, I know them. And I know my dad's mom, so I'm close with them. But not my mom's side.

Mary Helen: Was your family from, what part of Somalia?

Salam: Um, in northern Somalia.

Mary Helen: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Salam: Hargeisa.

Mary Helen: Yeah. I know people from that area.

Salam: So she's from, my mom's from there, and my dad was born in, um, Ethiopia, uh, Jijiga.

Mary Helen: Have you, you want to go back?

Salam: Mm-mmm.

Mary Helen: No.

Salam: I've never been there.

Mary Helen: You've never been. Do they go back sometimes?

Salam: Um, I think my mom wants to go this summer because she got her passport. She passed her test, citizenship test.

Mary Helen: Ahhh!

Salam: So she wants to go back.

Mary Helen: So you're a, you already are a citizen because you were born here.

Salam: Yeah.

Mary Helen: So it's no problem.

Salam: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Mary Helen: But she got hers. It's a big deal.

Salam: She got hers, yeah.

Mary Helen: How, how is it for her studying for the test?

Salam: She would s-(laughs)

Mary Helen: (laughs)

Salam: She would study all night, like because she's not that good in English, so she would study all night and like listen to the cd over and over again.

Mary Helen: (laughs)

Salam: And she would practice writing, um, the little, um, sentences she had to write so it was hard for her but she passed it 'cuz she like, she studied non-stop.

Mary Helen: Yeah.

Salam: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Mary Helen: You know I've never met anybody, um, that I've interviewed so far, who wasn't completely a hundred percent invested in their girls going to college.

Salam: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mary Helen: I think that's pretty neat.

Salam: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mary Helen: So I think that that's sort of the expectation in the community.

Salam: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mary Helen: That you guys are going to go on-

Salam: Yeah.

Mary Helen: And you're going to get, like jobs and careers.

Salam: Mm-hmm (affirmative), yeah.

Mary Helen: It's just kind of, but it's interesting 'cuz, ah, it's been three generations of folks,

Salam: Mmm (affirmative).

Mary Helen: Who, since they've left Somalia, there's been no civil government or educational institutions-

Salam: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mary Helen: In Somalia-

Salam: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mary Helen: So everyone who was able to leave,

Salam: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mary Helen: Everybody got to go to school and be educated-

Salam: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mary Helen: And do all this kind of stuff.

Salam: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mary Helen: And then what's going to happen when Somalia settles down and everybody can go back?

Salam: I think-

Mary Helen: It's going to be interesting.

Salam: It's going to be interesting.

Mary Helen: (laughs)

Salam: My mom always says, if you become like, whatever you become, you can always go back to Somalia and then help the people there. She was like, if you become a pharmacist you can go back to Somalia and then try to open a pharmacy there and help people out.

Mary Helen: I think it's interesting in the research you read that, you know, oh, Somali girls don't go to school after the age of thirteen and they get married-

Salam: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mary Helen: And have families.

Salam: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mary Helen: I haven't met one yet that's done that and you know it's like-

Sabah: Yeah. My mom didn't get married when she was thirteen. I think she said she got married when she was like twenty, I don't remember, because when she got married, because when the war happened, she went to Djibouti and then my dad and her met there and then he married her. He came back to America and then she applied for a visa and that took like three, four years. So, and she had my sister at twenty-seven.

Mary Helen: Was she living in a refugee camp in Djibouti?

Salam: No.

Mary Helen: Just somewhere.

Salam: She lived with, ah, family.

Mary Helen: Family member.

Salam: Mm-hmm (affirmative). She was not a, she was, I don't think my mom was a refugee. I don't know about my dad. I don't know how he got here.

Mary Helen: (Laughing).

Salam: Yeah. I think he was too,

Mary Helen: We don't need to talk about that (laughs).

Salam: A refugee (laughs).

Mary Helen: So you've lived, um, in Edgetown. Where do your parents live now? What part of town?

Salam: Edgetown.

Mary Helen: So, they're still here?

Salam: They still live in Edgetown.

Mary Helen: Yeah?

Salam: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mary Helen: So, what do you think about that and the community? Like being, you know, this is a pretty refugee-centric or immigrant-centric, um, community.

Salam: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Mary Helen: You know there's just a few folks that have left and gone, I think groups of people go to different areas, like a lot of Afghans go to Gwinnett County,

Salam: Yeah.

Mary Helen: You know, people move to certain parts,

Salam: Uh-huh.

Mary Helen: And I told you our Somali friends that live in Centertown.

Salam: Uhh-huh.

Mary Helen: But I, I wonder, it seems like, for folks who do go move to other parts, like, um, the Mowal family, it's really happy there, you know.

Salam: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Mary Helen: It kinda is, not a big deal to be-

Salam: Yeah.

Mary Helen: It's not like isolating, or...

Salam: Mm-mmm. We lived in, we moved from Edgetown, 'cuz, when we used to live in Edgetown when there was a lot of Somali people. We bought a house in Edgetown. That's why we lived there for so long.

Mary Helen: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Salam: We didn't want to sell our house. But then, after like the recession or whatever, we bought another house in Stone Mountain. So we lived there for like-

Mary Helen: A little bit.

Salam: A little bit and then we moved back.

Mary Helen: (laughs) to Edgetown.

Salam: We sold that house and moved back. Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mary Helen: I like it better here. I wish my house (laughs). I like the whole feel of how this-

Salam: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mary Helen: Feels very international-

Salam: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Mary Helen: Even though we're right smack dab in the middle of Georgia so,-

Salam: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mary Helen: Um, that's all the questions that I had.

Salam: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mary Helen: And that was really helpful.

Salam: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Mary Helen: So I appreciate it.

Salam: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Appendix G: Interview transcript Zahra

Zahra: Abdulahi.

Mary Helen: He's going to help? You want him to help us?

Zahra: Yeah, Abdulahi.

Mary Helen: Okay, but you're going to tell me the name of the city where you were born.

Zahra: Somalia, is name, Erigabo.

Mary Helen: Erigabo. It's in the north or the south?

Zahra: North.

Mary Helen: In the north. All the way to where Somaliland is?

Zahra: Yeah.

Mary Helen: All the way?

Zahra: Yeah.

Mary Helen: On the coast, near the water?

Zahra: Yeah, Somaliland, it's North Sanaag. It's name is big city.

Abdulahi: Is it part of Sudan or ...

Mary Helen: The next big city? Was it a small town or big town, where you were born?

Abdulahi: Big.

Mary Helen: Big city?

Abdulahi: Yes.

Mary Helen: So, do you, when you were young in Somalia, when did you first go to school?

Zahra: I was [foreign language 00:00:57]

Mary Helen: You don't know?

Zahra: Abdulahi.

Mary Helen: Who taught you to read first of all? She wants you to help.

Abdulahi: All right.

Mary Helen: Ask your mum where she first went to school.

Abdulahi: [foreign language 00:01:18]

Zahra: [foreign language 00:01:23] Seventy Four.

Mary Helen: Seventy Four?

Zahra: Yes.

Mary Helen: The first year that you went to school?

Zahra: Yes.

Mary Helen: And what year were you born?

Zahra: Yeah, in Somalia.

Mary Helen: Yes, but what year were you born?

Abdulahi: [foreign language 00:01:37]

Zahra: I was born 1963.

Mary Helen: Okay so you were eleven when you went to school for the first time?

Zahra: Mm-hmm (affirmative) yes.

Mary Helen: For the first time? Abdulahi, I need your help. I want you to help me talk to her about what kind of school she first went to in Somalia. Was it a religious school, a public school, what kind of school was it?

Abdulahi: [foreign language 00:02:14] It was a public school.

Mary Helen: It was a public school.

Zahra: [foreign language 00:02:25]

Abdulahi: Just like the one I went to in America, the ESL one and the government paid for.

Mary Helen: Sit here so, It was a government school and she was 11 years old when she started going?

Abdulahi: [foreign language 00:02:38] okay, she said, "I started school when I was 7 years old, the Koran school."

Mary Helen: So Koran school when she was 7 and then public school when she got older.

Abdulahi: That's right.

Mary Helen: Was it boys and girls together in the same school?

Abdulahi: [Foreign language 00:03:03] Yeah, it was boys and girls.

Mary Helen: When she went to public school were they teaching her in Somali to read and write, or in Arabic, English?

Abdulahi: [Foreign language 00:03:15] Only Somali.

Mary Helen: It was, does she remember the first books that she learned to read?

Abdulahi: [Foreign language 00:03:23] She said, "All we learnt was only Somalian, wasn't English. I only started learning English or the alphabet for English when I came to the United States, in the ESL school. All I learnt back then was Somali and how to read Somali, how to write Somali and mathematics."

Mary Helen: Somali and math. She doesn't remember what the books were about that they taught in Somali? Some of my other women I've interviewed talked about that,

Siad Barre was President and a lot of what they were learning in school was about him.

Abdulahi: [Foreign language 00:05:08] So basically history of Somalia ... So basically all we learnt was the history of Somalia, and how to live right, no separate book they had to take.

Mary Helen: Did she go to school until when? How old? How many years?

Abdulahi: [Foreign language 00:05:50] Less than 6 or 7 years.

Mary Helen: Now I know ... you have to speak up or we're going to have to do it over again. Now, we've already talked about this before, that she knows how to recite Somali poetry, the way that it's done traditionally, who taught her that?

Abdulahi: [Foreign language 00:06:15] She said I never did poetry but I used to listen to people who used to do poetry, so I just, they're gifted, they just come up with words and recite them. We'd go there and listen to them, listen to the radio. Our, someone recites it and somebody will learn memorizing and he will go and recite it to other people and then we'll do the same thing. Kind of memorize the whole thing once then recite it, there's never something that I had to come up with on my own.

Mary Helen: I've heard that it was performed in Somalia and they'd go see it and wait long time to go see specific people. Doesn't it seem like that's happened here in the United States that it wasn't brought with the culture, do people still do that here?

Abdulahi: Like go to places where ... [Foreign language 00:07:56] Yeah, this thing we're still doing here, in the weddings and the invitations like a party in Somali group that come together to just have a party or ... They're still doing in here and everywhere in the United States where Somalis are.

Mary Helen: So I want to talk about if she has any stories or if she remembers any particular teachers that taught her anything. Anything she remembers.

Abdulahi: [Foreign language 00:09:18] It's the same thing, I mean, they're children and they have teachers that they like and teachers they dislike. We have teachers that I like and teachers that I dislike and I still know their families and they're children. I've heard of them so I will remember oh that's the, his teacher taught me something so she says I still know their names.

Mary Helen: So your mom went from Somalia to Ethiopia and then to the United States?

Abdulahi: [Foreign language 00:10:07]

Zahra: America, yeah.

Mary Helen: So she had to go to a country where Amharic was spoken and then here so that's two new languages.

Abdulahi: Yeah.

Mary Helen: I want to now about how difficult it was to be in those different places, not being able to, with small children, not being able to communicate.

Abdulahi: [Foreign language 00:10:29]

Zahra: Somalia, two languages.

Mary Helen: Same? Very similar?

Abdulahi: No, different languages.

Zahra: No, different language, no similar. [Foreign language 00:10:48]

Abdulahi: Another language ... and to get used to the weather. It rains and the weather kind of changes because compared to Somalia, it rains.

Zahra: [Foreign language 00:11:18]

Abdulahi: [Foreign language 00:11:35] She said at the time I moved into Ethiopia it was a time that Ethiopians didn't like Somalis or they weren't used to each other yet.

Mary Helen: How did she learn English when she came here?

Abdulahi: [Foreign language 00:11:53] Went to an ESL school.

Mary Helen: Where? Which one?

Zahra: [Foreign language 00:12:02]

Mary Helen: At the Church? At the International Bible Church?

Zahra: Yes, I like.

Mary Helen: When you came to Edgetown were there many Somalis? Many more Somalis?

Zahra: [Foreign language 00:12:15]

Mary Helen: There are not so many Somalis now.

Abdulahi: [Foreign language 00:12:20] Once I moved into Edgetown, there's lots of Somalis, but now there's less Somalis. Whenever I used to go to ESL school, I would see a couple Somali people I used to know them and we had any Somali neighbors that lived in our neighborhood but anytime I would go across the street or Somali area to see my cousin, I would see Somalis and ask them questions.

Mary Helen: So how important is it for your children to have education here in the United States?

Abdulahi: [Foreign language 00:13:14]

Mary Helen: I'm happy because [Foreign language 00:13:26]

Abdulahi: [inaudible 00:13:33] 18 they're nothing. They don't like, until they're 18, they're nothing. Education's important ...

Mary Helen: Okay, so before the war in Somalia, if there had not been a war, you as children could have gone all the way through college in Somalia because there are public schools there right?

Abdulahi: [Foreign language 00:13:55] Before the war happened it was a different country. Even, there was colleges for free.

Mary Helen: Yeah, so now it's so divided the people who are still there ...

Zahra: [Foreign language 00:14:17]

Abdulahi: Even if somebody had a little amount of money, they could still survive and then ...

Zahra: [Foreign language 00:14:27]

Mary Helen: So the big question, does she want to go back?

Abdulahi: [Foreign language 00:14:41]

Zahra: Yes, I like but can't ...

Mary Helen: What? Wants to go back to Somalia?

Abdulahi: Yep.

Mary Helen: Yeah, and with the whole family?

Abdulahi: [Foreign language 00:14:50] Yeah, with the family.

Mary Helen: She's talked to me before about how her life would be different if they were back there.

Zahra: [Foreign language 00:14:56]

Abdulahi: She says once I become a United States citizen then I would love to go there.
[Crosstalk 00:15:05]

Mary Helen: What hope does she have for Somalia as a country becoming peaceful and being back to ...

Abdulahi: [Foreign language 00:15:19] She said I never seen war and dying [Crosstalk 00:15:57] There's no war, there's [inaudible 00:16:00] The war started from Saudi and the people there are not, they don't want the peace in South. Most of North is peaceful, there is some parts they're moving up to war, but most of where I'm from is peaceful. [inaudible 00:16:21]

Mary Helen: What does she think, I think that Somali women have stayed, have kept the culture together even though they're here in the United States. More than other groups. I wonder why does she think that, how has the people here been able to stay together as families and as a culture and not become Westernized or Americanized?

Abdulahi: [Foreign language 00:17:23] So, what the Somali mother is, they're the ones that keep the family together and we don't want our, we teach our children not to ... We teach them our culture and tell them not to be bad people or just end up being in the wrong place. We also help family members back home where we send money and support them, not just family members but friends that I had back home whenever they're likely to call me and had trouble, like this child was sick or they need money for food or something I'll go out and support them, send money. Especially my mom, which I always send money to her because it's my turn now to help her. I can ...

Mary Helen: That was a lot! (laughs) So the women are, the moms are who hold it together.

Abdulahi: Yep.

Mary Helen: Would you agree with that?

Abdulahi: I do.

Mary Helen: I agree too. I think that's why I did this whole project because I began to understand that Somali women were the strongest part of the community. I didn't know that. In the West, people think that Muslim women are oppressed and have no power...

Zahra: [Foreign language 00:20:36]

Abdulahi: [Foreign language 00:20:50] We're different than the Arabs.

Mary Helen: Yes, I got, I understood.

Zahra: [Foreign language 00:21:09]

Mary Helen: But she has ...

Abdulahi: She can work, she can go anywhere she wants to. It's different to Arabs, the way they treat their women.

Mary Helen: But so she, I want her to fr-

Abdulahi: The freedom they give her compared to the freedom we gets. The freedom the Somali woman gets in Somalia is similar to the ones in America.

Mary Helen: Exactly, except people, Americans do not understand that, which is why I did this project.

Abdulahi: [Foreign language 00:21:54] They think of us as Arabs in a way, you know?

Mary Helen: Exactly.

Zahra: [Foreign language 00:22:01]

Abdulahi: So, what have you seen Somali women then?

Mary Helen: Are some of the strongest women I've ever met and known. When I started coming to your house many years ago, and I met your mom and it was very loud and happy and your mom was sort of in charge of everything that was going on, it was the first time I realized ... You know, many, it's very difficult to know Somalis. You were the first one I really got to know because it's a closed, it's more closed than other groups, I think. The community is very tight. Then I read books, I told you I read the books about Somali women, there are only three in English and they're about very bad things. Very bad arranged marriages, and bad persecution of girls and they tell very terrible story about being a Somali girl.

Abdulahi: Which you don't believe?

Mary Helen: I believe that was their experience, but I don't believe that is the experience for all of Somali women. So my, this project was to try to understand what the real experience is of being Somali. I think that Somalis are extremely proud and gentle and peaceful people and I don't think that's portrayed in the West.

What do you, what is the feeling you get when people, what's your name on my cell phone? "Abdulahi, the Terrifying Pirate!" (laughs) I know but what's the perception?

Zahra: [Foreign language 00:23:42]

Abdulahi: The conference calls that we have and still do over different states where the majority of moms talk about how [Crosstalk 00:24:30] 500 or more can talk on the phone and try to prevent ways ... To join, hanging out with their own people or listening to their own people they tell them lies about Islam or what they should do and they don't want whatever that person tells them, they will believe because they're too young and will go with them or join them. We try to prevent that stuff. We try to find a way to, find a way for them not to be associated with them or for them not to, what's the word I'm looking for, I lost it.

Zahra: [Foreign language 00:25:29]

Abdulahi: She says the children, they run away, there's children that they caught doing all sorts of stuff.

Mary Helen: That's true in every culture, everywhere, that's true.

Abdulahi: She saying Somali we try, that's what we do, there's a conference phone call that we do. We talk to the sort of higher, everywhere ...

Mary Helen: And they keep track of everybody?

Abdulahi: Yeah, I mean we just talk on this, ask them some ways we can help our kids.

Mary Helen: Ask her, do you get tired of people, Americans, thinking about Somalis a certain way? I was talking to Mowal, She's in college and she says all anybody ever asks her about is Al-Shabaab or pirates. That's all they, so Americans, that's the first thing they think about, or failed state, or civil war.

Abdulahi: She told me that, she said the reason they think of that is because that's what they see on the news.

Mary Helen: There's nothing else.

Abdulahi: Yeah, so what the news tells is what the person's going to believe. If I was to watch the news in Somalia, I see something they say about white people that's the only thing I will know, then I see another white person I probably would say that to them. (laughs) It's not wrong for them to say because that's where they learn, it's the news that's telling them.

Mary Helen: Well maybe this will be one small contribution to people understanding each other a little better.

Appendix H: Interview transcript Hoodu

Mary Helen: Ok tell me your name and your age.

Hoodu: My name is Hoodu and I'm 21 years old.

Mary Helen: And tell me how old you were when you came to the United States.

Hoodu: I think I was 5 when I came here and I was born in Canada.

Mary Helen: Oh, interesting.

Hoodu: Yeah.

Mary Helen: Tell me a little bit about your family leaving Somalia. Did they go straight to Canada?

Hoodu: I think they went first to Texas then Canada. That's what my dad told me.

Mary Helen: So do you remember learning to read?

Hoodu: Ummm, well yeah in Canada I learned French.

Mary Helen: Oh, wow! How many languages do you speak?

Hoodu: I know a little bit of Somali. Not much. I'm still learning to speak it.

Mary Helen: We'll talk about that some more. So you learned French.

Hoodu: Yeah, I went to a French school.

Mary Helen: Were you in Montreal?

Hoodu: We were in Ontario.

Mary Helen: So French is your first language or do you think you were learning Somali when you were a little kid?

Hoodu: I was learning French first.

Mary Helen: Do you remember the first book you read as a little kid?

Hoodu: I really liked Junie B. Jones.

Mary Helen: Everybody should say that. (laughs)

Hoodu: Those were the first books that I read as a little kid because I grew up reading all those series and I really liked it.

Mary Helen: That's amazing. But they didn't have Junie B. Jones in French, I'll bet, so that was when-

Hoodu: No.

Mary Helen: -you were, was that when you-

Hoodu: That's when I came here, I started reading Junie B. Jones.

Mary Helen: OK. So you were born in-

Hoodu: I was born in Canada, and we came here when I was five-

Mary Helen: When you were five.

Hoodu: -and I started kindergarten here.

Mary Helen: Do you remember what school?

Hoodu: I went to Idlewood.

Mary Helen: Oh, OK. Awesome. I have some Afghan friends over there now. Why is that? If you live on the north side of Edgetown is that where do you tend to go?

Hoodu: Yeah, we lived in Carson, so that was closer to where we were.

Mary Helen: I don't know much about Idlewood. What is it like as far as what kind of kids, what's the make-up?

Hoodu: A lot of African-Americans, some white people. It's like-

Mary Helen: Were there many Somalis?

Hoodu: I didn't really know that many Somalis when I went there. I knew more African-Americans and whites.

Mary Helen: Then middle school. Where did you go?

Hoodu: Tucker Middle and then Tucker High School.

Mary Helen: Oh. I haven't interviewed anybody. Abdulahi went to Tucker. That's interesting.

Hoodu: That's cool.

Mary Helen: You went from Tucker and now you're here.

Hoodu: Yeah.

Mary Helen: You're studying what?

Hoodu: Biology. I want to be a doctor.

Mary Helen: But you're a Somali woman. You're supposed to get married and have kids.

(laughs)

Hoodu: It's like-

Mary Helen: Tell me about that in your family. How is that? Tell me about your parents and education and how they feel about it.

Hoodu: My dad, he's OK with that because he's a physician, so I told him I really like science and I really want to be a doctor, and he's like, "That's good."

Mary Helen: Is he a physician here?

Hoodu: Yes, Fulton County Health Department.

Mary Helen: Is he really? So did he go to school in Somalia?

Hoodu: Yes, he did.

Mary Helen: How was that struggle for him, to be recognized as a physician here, licensing?
I'll bet that was hard.

Hoodu: Yes, it was. He would tell us stories how sometimes, with traveling one place to another, it was very long, and he would tie a little thing around him so he wouldn't get hungry sometimes.

Mary Helen: Oh, my gosh.

Hoodu: It was very, that's why when he tells us certain stories about how it was in Somalia, he brought us here because he wants us to have a better life, and he's always telling us we should feel grateful. (laughs)

Mary Helen: But you don't know any yet. Have you been to Somalia?

Hoodu: I haven't been, but I'm hoping to go over the summer because my dad, I think he's trying to go, to either Kenya or Somalia because we have family in both places.

Mary Helen: A lot of people are going back now.

Hoodu: Yeah, a lot of people are, like my friend-

Mary Helen: That's exciting.

Hoodu: -she recently went over the winter break to Kenya.

Mary Helen: Did she like it?

Hoodu: Yeah, she would tell us she really loved it there.

Mary Helen: Everyone I know from there really loves it. I hope I get to go some day. (laughs)
It's going to have to change a lot before I get to go.

Your mom, do you know how long she was in school? Did she go to high school?

Hoodu: She didn't go to school.

Mary Helen: In Somalia.

Hoodu: No. She was cleaning mostly, helping with the family. She didn't have a chance to.

Mary Helen: Does she speak English or French here? You just said she was the one that got you to go to the French school.

Hoodu: She knows a little bit English, but mostly Somali.

Mary Helen: What does she think about you being in college?

Hoodu: She thinks it's good, a good experience for me, and I'm always telling her about how much, like, I go to so many different workshops or events here and I always tell her about it and how great it is, and I like it here.

Mary Helen: It's an unusual thing for Somali girls to go away from home to go to school.

Hoodu: Yeah, it is because, in the beginning, I wanted to live on campus, but then my parents were, like, no, but now I'm glad I don't because I really like living at home with my family because if I lived on campus I'd have to worry about food and a lot of other stuff that I wouldn't have to worry about.

Mary Helen: It's a lot more expensive.

Hoodu: Yeah. It is.

Mary Helen: Tell me about fitting in.

Hoodu: I remember all this. Sometimes it was like, it was very difficult [crosstalk 00:04:15] school for me sometimes. Like to wear a dress in elementary school it was like getting bullied a little bit, yeah. But I got through it.

Mary Helen: It's much easier when you get older, isn't it?

Hoodu: Yeah, it is.

Mary Helen: But I don't think that has anything to do with being Somali.

Hoodu: It's like everyone goes through that.

Mary Helen: My kid gets bullied in middle school and he goes to school in his athletic clothes, so I think it's interesting.

But it's interesting because you weren't at schools where they were really high immigrant populations.

Hoodu: No, not in elementary school. But, in middle school I did start to see a lot more Somalians and I became friends with them.

Mary Helen: How was that socially? Were most of your friends, do you stay pretty close to the Somali community, or do you have a lot of friends, just whoever.

Hoodu: Actually now I have a lot more Somali friends than any other one because even after high school we still, I still see them, like some of them go here or they go to [State U], so maybe I'll see them.

Mary Helen: Do you speak or read Arabic?

Hoodu: I read Arabic. I go to, we go to Quran school to learn the whole Quran, so I'm currently going right now so that I can finish the whole Quran.

Mary Helen: When did you start?

Hoodu: I think when I was twelve or thirteen.

Mary Helen: Oh, later.

Hoodu: I'd be the second one in my family because my dad was the first one to finish the Quran, so I really want to do that.

Mary Helen: Are you the oldest?

Hoodu: No. I'm the middle child. (laughs) Three older and three younger. Like three older siblings and three younger.

Mary Helen: Girls or boys? Tell me.

Hoodu: Four girls and two boys.

Mary Helen: So the older ones, have they gone to college and graduated?

Hoodu: Yeah, they have. One graduated last year-

Mary Helen: From?

Hoodu: From [State U], a biology major.

Mary Helen: Oh, jeez!

Hoodu: I think he wants to go to dentistry.

Mary Helen: It is very hard. Dentistry is harder than, getting into dental school is harder than medical school. Really hard.

Did the second oldest go [State U], too?

Hoodu: The other one went to Emory. He's the oldest. The second oldest went to [State U]. The one that went to Emory, we just picked him up yesterday from South Korea because he was teaching English over there.

Mary Helen: I need to talk to him, but he's not a woman. (laughs)

Hoodu: No he's not.

Mary Helen: He was a Somali male teaching English in South Korea. That's amazing.

Hoodu: He left right after he graduated in 2010.

Mary Helen: Does he want to be a teacher? Not after that (laughs)

Hoodu: I don't know if he wants to, but it's a good experience. I wouldn't mind doing that.

Mary Helen: That's kind of odd. How did your family feel about him going all the way over there?

Hoodu: They were OK with it, but he would extend his stay. He was supposed to come back, but he would be, like, he would say he'd come by December, then he'd move it to February. So then we'd all be, like, "When are you coming?" (laughs) But he finally did.

Mary Helen: That's pretty funny. Do you remember who taught you to read?

Hoodu: I think I learned through school, I believe. I don't think it was one specific person.

Mary Helen: Were there any particular teachers that you remember being really crucial in helping you read and write?

Hoodu: I think my third-grade teacher. I really liked her and she helped me, and I got into the spelling bee with her. She helped me with that.

Mary Helen: That was a big memory.

Hoodu: I really liked that.

Mary Helen: Do you consider yourself, I'll bet you didn't take any ESL classes.

Hoodu: No, I didn't have to when I came here.

Mary Helen: Or ever.

Hoodu: No, yeah, yeah.

Mary Helen: How does that-

Hoodu: I know some people have had to.

Mary Helen: Yeah.

How do you feel in relation to other kids your age, Somali kids who probably didn't come until they were 15, 16, 17?

Hoodu: It would take longer for them because they'd have to go through, take all of these ESL classes before they can take 1101 or 1102, so it would take a while, but, in the end, they would get through it.

Mary Helen: Do you hear them complain about it?

Hoodu: I don't think they do. I think they just want to get through and move on and get on to the major stuff.

Mary Helen: So you know French, read Arabic.

Hoodu: A little Somali.

Mary Helen: Native English speaker, really. All right, talk to me about your Somali and how it's used at home.

Hoodu: Sometimes my mom will speak to me in Somali, and I know what she's saying. I can understand it and sometimes I'll say it back to her in Somali. I only know a little bit, not really that much, but I'm still learning a little bit. My mom's like,

"You need to learn Somali. What about when you get married? Your husband is going to leave you if you don't." I'm like, that's not going to happen.

Mary Helen: I think it's interesting because I was sort of trying to make some kind of connection in my research between the speaking Somali at home and keeping Somali culture intact, but you don't fit that mold because you still are traditional in your dress and your approach to things and your religious practices, but you don't speak very good Somali. (laughs)

Hoodu: Not that much.

Mary Helen: So it's not necessarily the language. It has to be something else about culture that helps you retain that identity.

Hoodu: I'm in International Club right now, and I really enjoy getting into that because I also did it in high school. We did International Night, and notifying people about Somalian culture, and I really enjoyed doing that.

Mary Helen: Do you get a lot of people who have misperceptions or wrong ideas or misunderstandings about Somalia?

Hoodu: Not really, to me.

Mary Helen: What do most Western students or people here in the United States, what do they ask you about Somalia?

Hoodu: It's mostly about Muslims than actual Somalis, so they ask those random questions, like "Do you sleep with your scarf or do you take a shower or do you," so those questions like, come on.

Mary Helen: So they ask about religious practices.

Hoodu: Yeah, religious practices, more like that. They hear all this stuff and they ask you that, like, what? Where are you getting your information from?

Mary Helen: Well, it's not like Somalis are the only Muslims. Goodness.

Hoodu: Yeah.

Mary Helen: Second largest religion in the world.

I saw my other friends who I interview on my phone, Abdulahi put in his name as my contact as "Abdulahi the Terrifying Pirate" because it's a joke.

Hoodu: Yes, they're always Somali pirates.

Mary Helen: It's a big joke that that's always the first thing people ask about. That or what's the other thing?

Hoodu: Terrorists. Oh, yeah, that. It's kind of crazy.

Mary Helen: I think that people in the West know very little about Somalia.

Hoodu: Yes, because they see them, and they are "Oh, this is how Somalis are." They see all these terrorists [inaudible 00:11:11], but it's really not. It's just that group, and

they're saying, "Oh, this is what Islam says." But it's really not. They're giving their own interpretation of how they think.

Mary Helen: If you were going to offer any kind of correction for the way people, what would you want to say about being Somali or being a Somali woman?

Hoodu: I really want people to learn more about the culture and the religion before they try and say something, like think before you speak. Just get more information, like immerse yourself in the culture sometime and just see how it is before you say something about it.

Mary Helen: I agree with you. I think that you should do that in regards to anything, right?

Hoodu: Yeah, yeah.

Mary Helen: It's just kind of manners.

I committed those mistakes and made a lot of assumptions when I was teaching in the beginning, a lot of refugees and immigrant kids, and I would make assumptions about things, so I've learned a lot about, and just by spending time and, what I've learned about Somali families is that they're loud, and that-

Hoodu: Yeah, sometimes we do get loud. Oh, my God. I'll get loud sometimes with my mom, and she'll be "Lower your voice." Sometimes when we're at the store, she'll be, "People can hear you." I don't care. Even at home, she'll be, "Why are you yelling so loud? The neighbors will hear." They're asleep. They won't hear me.

Mary Helen: They are also very happy. There's a lot of arguing can go on, but also just lots of family togetherness and stuff going on.

Hoodu: Sometimes I can never be serious with my mom. I'm trying to get mad at her, but I'm laughing, and then, me and her end up laughing, and I forget why I'm mad at her.

Mary Helen: I also have learned that there's a lot more equality between girls and boys and men and women in terms of marriage and relationships than I think is portrayed most often. I think that women seem to be kind of the central part of the family. They really hold everything together.

Hoodu: My Mom. I don't know what I'd do without her. She does a lot for us. I'm grateful to her.

Mary Helen: I think that they're the real strength instead of the idea that some people have that they are oppressed or-

Hoodu: Yeah, that whole, I hate that, like, no, they're not. "Islam women are oppressed." I'm, like, no they're not.

Mary Helen: There seems to be a lot of talk between confusing Islam in Somalia with Islam in other parts of the world, and people assume that Islam in Somalia was just like Islam in other parts of the Middle East or Saudi Arabia or other places. I've even had a Somali Islamic scholar tell me how different they are, that they're not even in the same branch of understanding the way that the religion works.

Hoodu: They do things one way. The way they do things is very different.

Mary Helen: That's all I wanted to ask you unless you have any other stories about reading or school or fitting in or being a Somali woman in college. Every single girl I've talked to, younger generation, every single one of them, college. Gonna finish, go on and have a professional-

Hoodu: Yeah, that's what I want to do. Finish college first, then marriage later on.

Mary Helen: Yeah.

Hoodu: My dad was telling me, "Whatever you decide, I'll support you on that." I want to finish school first, become a doctor, then I'll go on to marriage or whatever.

Mary Helen: Do you have any ideas about whether you'd like to live in the United States or Canada or go back to Somalia?

Hoodu: I actually wouldn't mind living in Europe, maybe, like London. I don't know. I've always wanted to travel to so many different places, so I wouldn't mind living in that area. That would be really cool.

Mary Helen: That was perfect. I really appreciate it.

Appendix I: Interview transcript Nura

Mary Helen: Okay so tell me your name.

Nura: My name is Nura Mohammed.

Mary Helen: It's okay. Nura Mohammed?

Nura: Yes.

Mary Helen: Nura is a pretty name.

Nura: Thank you.

Mary Helen: You know how Somali women all have very similar ... well boys too. Everybody has the same 10 names.

Nura: I know.

Mary Helen: I haven't had a Nura. That's beautiful.

Nura: You've had somebody with the last name Mohammed probably.

Mary Helen: No I haven't.

Nura: Really?

Mary Helen: Mostly Abdi.

Nura: Oh, yeah that's very common too.

Mary Helen: All right, how old are you?

Nura: I am 19.

Mary Helen: 19. Tell me how old were you when you came to the United States?

Nura: I was 11.

Mary Helen: Oh, you were older?

Nura: Yeah.

Mary Helen: So you remember Somalia?

Nura: Yeah.

Mary Helen: Did you come from Somalia or were you somewhere else?

Nura: I was in Ethiopia.

Mary Helen: How old were you when you went to Ethiopia?

Nura: Probably 8.

Mary Helen: So you actually did grow up speaking Somali?

Nura: Yes.

Mary Helen: That was your primary first language?

Nura: Yeah.

Mary Helen: Then how long were you in Ethiopia?

Nura: About 2 years I would say.

Mary Helen: So did you start speaking some Amharic too?

Nura: I did but we lived in a community where there were a lot of Somalis so we didn't speak it that much and then once I got here, after a while I didn't speak it so I forgot all about it.

Mary Helen: You forgot all about it?

Nura: Yeah.

Mary Helen: Do you remember when you were little in Somalia, did you go to school?

Nura: No.

Mary Helen: So who taught you to read and write when you were little?

Nura: I didn't learn. I learned when I came here.

Mary Helen: When you were 11?

Nura: Yeah.

Mary Helen: Really?

Nura: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mary Helen: That's fascinating. I don't have any other folks I've interviewed. So really you didn't write or read until you were 11?

Nura: No, I didn't even know how to write my own name when I got here.

Mary Helen: That's a big, big change.

Nura: Yeah.

Mary Helen: Wow, so even when you were little and growing up, did you go to Quran school?

Nura: No, because we lived in a village kind of place so we didn't have all that.

Mary Helen: So you weren't even doing that really?

Nura: Yeah.

Mary Helen: Did you start doing that when you came here?

Nura: Yeah.

Mary Helen: So you've been looking at some Arabic?

Nura: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mary Helen: So you know probably Arabic. You forgot your Amharic. You know Somali very well and English.

Nura: Mostly English and Somali.

Mary Helen: Well a lot of girls your age don't know their Somali very well.

Nura: Yeah, that's true, that's true.

Mary Helen: So you have a very unique experience. You were 11, you came here. What school did you go to first?

Nura: At first I started at ... I don't remember the school name but I think I was in the 5th grade. They put me in the 5th grade and I started at a normal elementary school and I was lost.

Mary Helen: You'd never been to school before.

Nura: Yeah, it was so difficult and I would come home every day and cry myself to sleep. I would be like, "What is this? What am I doing? I cannot do this," and then thankfully there was a school called World School. Have you heard of it? Do you know?

Mary Helen: I do.

Nura: Yeah, so I started there.

Mary Helen: How old were you there? Did you do a year in 5th grade or did you immediately go over to World School?

Nura: Yeah, after a while, maybe a month after being here. It was an amazing experience up there, even though it was still difficult but it was easier because there were a lot of immigrants there and they had ESL classes that could help you more and the teachers were awesome.

Mary Helen: I have a lot of friends who teach there.

Nura: Really? Yeah, they were amazing.

Mary Helen: So it was a big difference?

Nura: Mm-hmm (affirmative). At the beginning I was not able to talk. I would just sit there and smile but within 6 months, I started talking, saying some stuff, saying hello to my teachers.

Mary Helen: How old are you now?

Nura: I'm 19.

Mary Helen: So in 8 years, you learned how to read and write, you made up for all that lost time in elementary school, and you're in college now?

Nura: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mary Helen: That's pretty amazing.

Nura: I know. It's awesome.

Mary Helen: What do you think about your life and how different it would have been?

Nura: You mean if I didn't come here?

Mary Helen: If you hadn't gone to school, yeah.

Nura: Wow. I don't know where I would be. I used to think I would just be married and have children and be a housewife, that's it. I didn't really have any expectations for myself until I started to learn how to read and all that.

Mary Helen: What are your expectations now?

Nura: Now I just want to finish college and make my family proud and just help them, provide for them however I can.

Mary Helen: Let's talk about them a little bit. So talk about your parents and their schooling. What kind of schooling have they ever had?

Nura: They are still back home.

Mary Helen: Your parents are still home?

Nura: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mary Helen: That's hard.

Nura: Yeah, so they live the same way I lived when I was young and all my brothers and sisters too.

Mary Helen: Are at home?

Nura: Yeah.

Mary Helen: You're the only one here?

Nura: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mary Helen: That's amazing. Your story's getting more amazing by the minute. How often do you talk to them?

Nura: Once in a while when I can because it's difficult to get service sometimes over there.

Mary Helen: What part of Somalia are they? North, South Somalia? Where are they?

Nura: They're in Somaliland but in the country.

Mary Helen: So it's a little safer though? You feel better about that?

Nura: Yeah.

Mary Helen: Is your family originally from the Northern part?

Nura: We're from there.

Mary Helen: From Somaliland?

Nura: Yeah.

Mary Helen: That's why you look like my friend because that's where she's from too.

Nura: Oh really?

Mary Helen: You look like you're her daughter. It's freaking me out. You talk just like her too.

I love it. That's extremely difficult. 11 years old in the United States, does not read or write and no family is here.

Nura: I had my aunt here.

Mary Helen: Is that who you were with?

Nura: Yeah.

Mary Helen: Does she go to school? Has she gone to school or have kids? Is she supporting you to try to get this education done?

Nura: Yeah, she hasn't had any education though. She's been in the Middle East when she was younger but she didn't really take school seriously and she always tells me that, "I made that mistake. Don't make that mistake now. Learn from my mistake." But she works and she hasn't gone to school.

Mary Helen: So that's helpful to have people supporting you but you have to be so lonely.

Nura: Yeah, at the beginning. It's eerie sometimes when you think about it.

Mary Helen: So tell me about your dream for yourself. You're studying psychology, so what's the plan?

Nura: I'm sorry. Don't be mad but I don't know if I'm going to stick with psychology.

Mary Helen: Oh yeah, yeah, it would be hard.

Nura: Yeah. I'm not sure. I had my intro class but I want to take one more class and see how I like it because people say the intro class is not really ... so I'm thinking about taking one more class.

Mary Helen: Do you want to be a case worker like she is? Or what do you think you want to do for a job?

Nura: I just want to help people like so many people have helped me through my process. I don't know what I will do but I just know I want to do something like that.

Mary Helen: Why don't you be a teacher?

Nura: I have no patience. I'm sorry.

Mary Helen: At least you're honest.

Nura: Yeah, I don't have patience.

Mary Helen: So pretty much you learned to read when you were 11 and you were here and you first learned to read in English?

Nura: Yeah.

Mary Helen: And write in English?

Nura: Yeah.

Mary Helen: Do you remember who taught you to read the first time? A particular teacher or class?

Nura: Yeah, her name was Ms. Frances. She taught at World School. She taught me. I remember I used to have a bunch of books like this and I would copy books because I never wrote anything before so my handwriting was like a little child that's just starting school. So I would copy the books into my notebooks and try to

improve my handwriting. I was always self-conscious of my handwriting. I still am but now I see a lot of people with bad handwriting so I'm like, it's okay.

Mary Helen: You are so right. They don't teach handwriting anymore. My own sons have the most terrible handwriting. I'm a teacher and I feel powerless to help fix it. It's terrible. Did you remember the first book that you read or a favorite book? Or were there certain books that you liked to read?

Nura: I used to read Dr. Seuss books like The Cat in the Hat and those books. I think the first book I read was Are You My Mother.

Mary Helen: The llama is my mother, the little bird going around?

Nura: Yes. It was so cute. I just liked the pictures. At the beginning, I didn't understand it but I would just look at the pictures and then later on, maybe I understood one thing and then I would connect to the other things and later on I could read the whole book and understand it.

Mary Helen: That's amazing. Did you have books that once you learned to read well that you enjoyed?

Nura: Probably The Outsiders.

Mary Helen: Oh yeah, like adventure stuff.

Nura: Yeah, I like that book a lot.

Mary Helen: Do you ever read much about Somalia?

Nura: Not really. I don't know what to read about. It's usually in the news.

Mary Helen: Yeah, and it's not good, is it?

Nura: Yeah.

Mary Helen: One of the things that the younger Somali girls I've talked to a lot have discussed are the misperceptions people have about you when they see you or hear that you're from Somalia. Do you have any experiences or stories about that?

Nura: Not really because I went to Edgetown and if you've seen Edgetown high schools, it's mostly immigrants.

Mary Helen: Yep, and you're here. So you're pretty closed. You haven't had the experience of going out.

Nura: Yeah, I haven't had that experience but I'm sure I will come across something like that. I know when that movie came out about the pirates--

Mary Helen: Captain Phillips?

Nura: Yes. When that movie came out, I know a lot of people in my high school were talking about Somali pirates and watch out for the Somali people here.

Mary Helen: I have a few good Somali friends but Abdulahi put his contact information in my phone. I'll show you. His mom just passed her citizenship test so her ceremony's Friday. He put his contact in as this. Let me see. I don't know how to make it show. Well, you can see part of it. He calls himself Abdalahi the Terrifying Pirate

and when it comes up on my phone, people are like, "Who's that?" So we joke about that. Then also [00:12:22 Melal] was telling me that she goes to American University in Washington D.C. and it's supposed to be really international, so she says that people there are always asking her about Al Shabaab. She's like, "I don't know anything about Al Shabaab or about Somali..." All these misperceptions about what Somalia is really like. But you have a very good memory because you were old when you came here. So what are your memories of it? What do you think about it?

Nura: I haven't really had any bad experiences in Somalia. I just remember the people were always happy. They don't have a lot of things like people do here. They may not work, they may be homeless, but at the end of the day, they get a meal from somebody, so nobody's starving in the streets. People give each other stuff even though they don't know each other. So that's what I really remember is just people being kind to one another.

Mary Helen: I've had that experience too with my Somali friends and also the experience of being close to their families and spending a lot of time with them that they're very loud and happy. I think that's not the perception most people think of, especially Muslim girls as being quiet and oppressed and that has not been ... The Somali girls that I know, they are tough and the happy, just like you said, is something that I've experienced too. I think that that's why I wanted to do this research and also the strength of the family in Somali culture. They really take care of their families, which is very different from the West.

Nura: Mm-hmm (affirmative). It's like over here when the first time I heard when somebody's parents get older, they have homes that you could take to them and I was like, "Why don't their children take care of them?" And they were like, "Some children don't want to take care of their parents so they put them in homes where other people take care of them." I was so shocked. That is so strange.

Mary Helen: It is, yeah. It's really interesting. Another thing I found out in my research is that I was talking to Minal about her mom and she said that before the civil war in Somalia, that there were public schools everywhere and that girls and boys went to school together, no one was separated, that her mom wore pants. You dress so beautifully and very colorful and I think that a lot of times people in the United States have a perception of a certain kind of person being a Muslim woman.

Nura: Right, like all black or something like that and the big hijabs.

Mary Helen: Yeah, and that's not been my experience. Somali culture is very creative and expressive and women have the freedom to express themselves in the way that they dress. I wish that in my dissertation I could include pictures of each of you but I have to write it all. I describe how you look because it's always so beautiful. In fact, one of the girls, I think Halima, was talking about how when she first started, she went to Druid Hills and she didn't have to take ESL classes, but she hadn't been around a lot of Somalis I guess at school and how she hadn't really taken the time to learn how to match her clothes. She was like, "And I didn't really match." A lot of my Somali friends are very into fashion and all that kind of stuff and I think that's a part of Somali women's identity that I would like to have

more people appreciate. I interviewed Melaal's mom about that. She laughed and her dad says, "Yeah, and when I met her, she wore pants and she had an afro."

Nura: Yes, back in the day, that's how it was. One of my aunt's good friends, she's a little bit older. The pictures she has and when she talks about being in school. She used to be in Mogadishu, where it's really bad now where Al Shabaab is controlling and stuff so she needs to talk about it. When she was talking about her experiences, it sounds like I just want to go there now. It's all awesome and be in the classroom.

Mary Helen: I know. I've heard that too. When the older women I interview talk about Somalia, it's always how much they love it, how beautiful it is. It makes me really want to go but they're like, "No, you're white. You can't go right now." They're like, "You have to wait for it to calm down a little bit." So I hope some day. It's my dream that I could go. I'm sure you know. But everybody's starting to go back more. Have you been back?

Nura: I haven't. I wanted to go back this summer but it didn't work out.

Mary Helen: Are you working? Do you work too?

Nura: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mary Helen: Where do you work?

Nura: I work at The American Home. It's a property management.

Mary Helen: So you work and go to school?

Nura: Yeah.

Mary Helen: So you'll be finished here probably in like a year and then do you think you want to go to [State U]?

Nura: I think I will finish my Associate's degree and then transfer, especially since I'm not so sure about--

Mary Helen: Don't take it so seriously. I changed my mind so many times. So many times. When you take a class and you really like it, what's been your favorite class so far?

Nura: Chemistry.

Mary Helen: Oh, so you are pretty science-minded. Maybe that's what you wanted ...

Nura: It's always been like that. Even in high school, even though they were difficult, I enjoyed learning it, the challenge.

Mary Helen: Oh, we didn't talk about that. So tell me about going from World School to Edgetown High School?

Nura: At the beginning, I was really scared because I used to watch a lot of TV shows. I think that helped me learn English through watching TV and in the way they portray high school as this mean place where there are mean girls and you should be scared if you're not a certain type of person. So I was worried but once I got

there, it was so many people that are similar to me and a lot of Asian students. So I felt like I fit right in. So I really liked it, especially at the beginning.

Mary Helen: So it was a good experience?

Nura: Yeah.

Mary Helen: Then what about coming from there to here?

Nura: Coming from there to here. Oh my god. Last semester, I thought I wanted to go back to Somalia. I was like, "What? This is so difficult." I felt the same way I felt when I--

Mary Helen: First got here?

Nura: Yeah, first started school. I was like, "What is this? It is so difficult," and I was shocked by the amount of homework and all that, the different classes. I think that was the most shocking because in high school, I would go to school and maybe stay an hour after school finished and finish my homework and then go home and I wouldn't have anything to do. I wouldn't even have to study. Maybe once a week I would study because it was not even that difficult, but here you have homework and then you have to study each day for the class that you have tomorrow.

Mary Helen: I have a secret. Community college is pretty hard. People think it's not. It really prepares you. It'll be easier. It'll get easier. I promise.

Nura: It did. This semester is so much better than last semester.

Mary Helen: It's going to get easier even when you transfer. I promise. Community college is really pretty hard. People think just because it's a community college that it's going to be easy, but it's not. It really gets you ready. You'll be ready. That means you'll be successful no matter where you go to school.

Nura: Right, yeah, and that's the point.

Mary Helen: So do you speak mostly Somali at home with your aunt?

Nura: Yeah, I do.

Mary Helen: It's pretty easy for you. You're the youngest person I've interviewed who has really excellent Somali skills because everybody else talks about how their Somali's gotten really bad, they don't understand their parents. Does your aunt have children in the home too?

Nura: No.

Mary Helen: So it's just y'all?

Nura: Yeah, it's just me, her, and her husband.

Mary Helen: Yeah, so there's a lot of Somali at home.

Nura: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mary Helen: Don't ever lose that.

Nura: I won't, yeah.

Mary Helen: That connection. I wish I could interview your mom. I'd love to hear what she thinks about you. What does she say about what you're up to? Is she very proud?

Nura: Yeah, she is. She's like, "Just make yourself proud first and then us."

Mary Helen: I think you already have made her very proud I'm pretty sure. That's pretty neat. Did your aunt go to Somalia and bring you back or did you have to travel here by yourself?

Nura: No, I came here--

Mary Helen: With adults?

Nura: Yeah, yeah.

Mary Helen: I have some friends who've done it alone and that's even more terrifying.

Nura: I know. I bet.

Mary Helen: Well that's really all that I was going to ask. That was incredibly helpful. You were completely different from all the other ones, which is really exciting and I want--

