Note on Anonymity of Research Subjects in this Dissertation

In order to protect the privacy of the Somali women and men who contributed to my research, I have changed the names of all but one of the people I interviewed (the exception gave me his permission to use his full and real name and the events I discuss concerning him are a matter of public record). All of the names that I use in the dissertation are common Somali names, but they are aliases. During my field work I utilized a verbal assent process rather than a written consent form. I was better able to protect my subjects’ identities through using this process, and the form I used to attain verbal consent is located in Appendix B. The letter I used to recruit subjects is found in Appendix A, and the questionnaire I utilized during my interviews can be found in Appendix C.
CULTURAL DIVIDES, CULTURAL TRANSITIONS: THE ROLE OF GENDERED
AND RACIALIZED NARRATIVES OF ALIENATION IN THE LIVES OF SOMALI
MUSLIM REFUGEES IN COLUMBUS, OHIO

DISSERTATION

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in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

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ABSTRACT

Since the mid-1990s, Somali refugees have been resettling in Columbus, Ohio, which is a large city in the Midwest of the United States. In 1990, there were less than 100 Somalis living in the Columbus metropolitan area, while the current estimate is that between 40,000 and 60,000 Somali refugees are Columbus residents. This population continues to grow and constitutes the second largest community of Somali refugees in the United States. The Somali community in Columbus is almost entirely Muslim, and this creates particular challenges in the post 9/11 era and within the specific context of Columbus, which has never before seen a high influx of African refugees or Muslims into the community. Situating my fieldwork with this Somali community within existing debates in feminist theory concerning multiculturalism and women’s rights, I examine the representations and narratives that Somali Muslim women and men identify as dominant in the Western media and in Columbus, Ohio concerning their community. In addition, I explore Columbus Somalis’ discursive and material practices of resistance to these narratives. I employ feminist ethnography to gather and analyze what I have identified as narratives of alienation that predominate in both discursive constructions of Somalis as well as interactions between Somalis and non-Somalis in the Columbus community.
These narratives of alienation are gendered and racialized, relying on Orientalist images of Islam to construct discursive divisions within the Columbus community that have material repercussions for Somali women and men. Somali men and women are differently framed by narratives of alienation and have differing reactions and resistance strategies as a result. For Somali women, beginning to wear the hijab is an important practice of resistance to narratives that construct them as inherently subjugated. Somali men’s resistance strategies differ because they position themselves as agents in pursuit of the American Dream in order to contest narratives of alienation. In calling attention to these narratives and resistance strategies, I lay the groundwork in this dissertation to explore in my future work how feminist directives can be employed productively in improving women’s lives in minority cultures without reinforcing larger narratives of alienation between hegemonic America and newly arrived immigrant groups.
Dedicated to Rhoda and Ida
I hope you would have liked it.

And to Damion
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INTRODUCTION

Research Question

Since the mid-1990s, Somali refugees have been resettling in Columbus, Ohio, a large city in the Midwest of the United States. In 1990, there were less than 100 Somalis living in the Columbus metropolitan area, while the current estimate is that between 40,000 and 60,000 Somali refugees are Columbus residents\(^1\). This population continues to grow and constitutes the second largest community of Somali refugees in the United States\(^2\). The Somali community in Columbus is entirely Muslim, and this creates particular challenges in the post 9/11 era and within the specific context of Columbus, which has never seen a high influx of refugees or Muslims into the community.

In the years following 9/11 ubiquitous media images of women in burquas reinforced Western tropes of Muslim women as silenced and victimized. These images and other experiences of being treated as victims led a group of women from the Somali Women’s Studies Association to give a talk in the Spring of 2002 at the Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio. Each woman on the panel expressed clear frustration with

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\(^1\) In December 2007, the leading newspaper in the Columbus area, *The Columbus Dispatch* claimed that the Somali population is “conservatively estimated at 45,000” and continues to grow (Ferenchik 1A).

\(^2\) The largest community of Somalis in the US is in Minneapolis, Minnesota.
representations of Muslim women as subordinated and victimized, and each repeated the phrase “we are not victims” during the course of the hour. This event piqued my interest in how refugee Somali women perceive, respond to and contest representations of Muslim women in Western culture. This dissertation project began as an examination of the representations and narratives Somali women identify as dominant in the Western media and in Columbus concerning their community and as an exploration of their discursive and material practices of resistance to these narratives. While these questions remain the primary focus of my work, through the course of my fieldwork, I encountered gendered representations that specifically and differentially affect Somali men, which expanded the scope of my project.

As a result of my research, I have identified what I call narratives of alienation. These narratives of alienation dominate in both discursive constructions of Somalis in the Western media and in interactions between Somalis and non-Somalis in the Columbus community. These narratives of alienation are gendered, racialized and rely on Orientalist images of Islam to construct discursive divisions within the Columbus community that have material repercussions for Somali women and men.

Research Design

The United States is currently experiencing the third largest wave of immigration in its history. Due to the current influx of immigrants and refugees into the US, there is popular interest in understanding how these ‘new Americans’ will transform American cultural, political and economic landscapes. However, gender and women’s issues are most often obscured in these discussions or are reduced to, and consequently reinforce, our common misperceptions about ‘other’ women. Saskia Sassen in her work, Guests and
*Aliens*, demonstrates how the history of immigration to Europe and the US is the history of war, colonialism and imperialism because invariably transnational flows of people are the result of a lack of resources and/or opportunities in certain parts of the world (10).

Sassen argues that people do not leave their countries of origin and immigrate permanently except when their survival depends on it. This is most obvious in the case of refugees because they are being persecuted in their home countries and are unable to return and live there safely. However, the relatively recent influx of non-European immigrants into the US, of which Somali refugees are a part, creates the need for new research projects on immigrant identity, and non-Western women’s immigrant identity in particular. My dissertation primarily focuses on the experiences of Somali women in the Midwest, an understudied group of women, and contributes to the building of feminist knowledge through an interrogation of how gendered and racialized discursive constructions affect the daily lives of Muslim refugee women.

I have been actively involved with the Somali community in Columbus since the fall of 2001 when I began volunteering at a local non-government organization (NGO) that serves the Somali population. Building on my seven years of experience working with the Somali community, I employed feminist ethnographic methods to interview Somali women and men about what they believe to be the perceptions of native born Americans about their community. My main purpose was to explore if Western representations of Muslims and specifically of Muslim women affect Somali women’s interactions with the wider Columbus community. This dissertation seeks to understand the material repercussions of discourse through the textual analysis of pervasive
narratives concerning Somalis as well as the gathering of ethnographic data through participant-observation in the community and in-depth interviews.

I completed over 15 months of fieldwork in the Somali community in addition to conducting 38 in-depth interviews with Somali men and women. I formally interviewed 28 women and 10 men during the course of my fieldwork utilizing an open-ended questionnaire that asked interviewees to share their perspectives regarding what they believe to be the dominant representations of Somalis in the local and national media. I also asked participants to share their analysis of their life experiences post-resettlement in Columbus inquiring into what they enjoy, dislike and see as the main challenges facing Somalis in Columbus. During my fieldwork, I gained a thorough knowledge and understanding of the refugee process which helped me to understand not only the discursive but material challenges that face Somalis upon their arrival in Columbus.

I spent hundreds of hours with Somali refugees, helping them to gain access to material resources like furniture and other necessities needed for day to day living. I also worked in community outreach, which meant that I met with schools, churches and community groups interested in learning more about Somalis in Columbus and possibly providing material support to Somali families in need. My experiences in community outreach coupled with my participant-observation of the Somali community helped me to form the central thesis of this dissertation, which is that representations of Somalis in the Western media and interactions between Somalis and non-Somalis in Columbus are governed by what I identify as narratives of alienation.
Immigrant Identities

These narratives of alienation are gendered with differential effects for Somali women and men. They are also racialized and have their basis in an Orientalist view of Islam that was exasperated by the events of 9/11. Since 1965\(^3\) mostly non-European immigrants have been immigrating to the US, but the arrival of large numbers of Muslim immigrants is a new phenomena. This trend creates the opportunity to study direct interactions between US culture and historically othered peoples. Edward Said has linked the history of colonialism and Orientalism to how the West thinks about and portrays non-Western cultures. The newly forming Somali community in Columbus provides an opportunity to analyze the effects of Orientalist discourses on a non-Western community’s development in the West. My research specifically addresses gendered Muslim identity and takes as a starting point Chandra Mohanty’s criticism of Western, ‘first-world’ feminist depictions of ‘third world’ women as inherently subordinated and victimized. Mohanty challenges Western feminists to question essentialized notions of non-Western women as inferior others in need of Western feminist help. Both Said and Mohanty’s criticisms of Western conceptualizations of non-Western others inform my examination of Somali women’s experiences in the Columbus area.

Immigrant women’s experiences in the US, and particularly those of African immigrants and African Muslim immigrants, are understudied. Historically, the study of immigrants in US society has focused on male European immigrants. When Oscar Handlin published *The Uprooted* in 1951 he assumed a teleological modernization of

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\(^3\) In 1965, Senator Edward Kennedy argued that it was “un-American” to restrict immigration based on national origin, and Congress voted to repeal laws that restricted immigration based on national origin quotas that favored certain countries over others.
immigrants was inevitable. Handlin used an assimilation model to study (mostly male) European immigrants that assumed immigrants would make a radical break from the cultural practices in their countries of origin through assimilation into modern, capitalist America. In 1985, John Bodner wrote *The Transplanted*, which challenges the idea that immigrants dramatically change their cultural traditions through immigrating to America. Instead, he focuses on how people ‘transplant’ their customs and ‘old ways of being’ into the American context. More recent texts like Bonnie Honig’s work *Democracy and the Foreigner* challenge traditional ways of studying immigrants by asking new questions.

For example, she asks how and in which ways immigrants contribute to and reinforce the imagined communities of democratic societies. She challenges current trends in popular discourse such as Samuel Huntington’s recent text *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity* that characterize immigrants as a threat to the US and instead she offers examples of how immigrants are often used to support and buttress the core ideas of democracy in the US, even as they are simultaneously looked upon as economic and cultural threats. She also analyzes the ways in which immigrant women are often represented as enacting a more traditional form of femininity than native born American women, which is praised and used to reinforce traditional gender norms and “family values” (91).

These claims about and representations of immigrant women assume that immigrant communities are whole and cohesive units and that the individual members of immigrant communities always act in ways that reinforce their traditional beliefs. In Dorothy Noyes’ article “Group” she details the ways in which it is difficult to establish clearly the definition of the common term ‘group’ because behavior, alliances and beliefs
constantly shift, even within well-established communities. Hence, whenever we think we have an understanding of the core beliefs, actions and alliances of a certain group, we most probably have an understanding of the most normative beliefs, actions and alliances of the group, but by no means have a comprehensive understanding of the culture. Amy Shuman argues in her article, “Dismantling Local Culture” that it is important to understand both the center of a local community and its margins in order to investigate the boundaries that are contested within the community (356). Shuman contends that when we fail to attend to the contested nature of local cultures that our concept of “local is not local enough” (355). This dissertation employs feminist ethnographic methods in order to “get local enough” to illuminate the ways in which Somali women and men contest as well as reify their established cultural practices post-resettlement in the US as well as contest representations of themselves found in the Western media.

**Contributions to Feminist Theory**

In the 1970s, the popular slogan ‘Sisterhood is Global’ theorized a connection between women globally based on gender oppression and an essentialized feminine identity. Beginning in the late 1970s and continuing through today, this slogan and its governing idea that women are connected across cultures based on our essential identities as women and our oppressed state has been criticized as coming from an ethnocentric worldview that privileges white, middle class, Western women. One solution to feminist ethnocentrism that has been put forward is the idea that feminists need to be culturally aware and sensitive to practices that in the past they have considered always already oppressive towards women. However, many feminists remain dissatisfied with the idea that cultural relativism is a satisfactory means of thwarting ethnocentrism. Feminists are
suspicious of the claim ‘my culture made me do it’ and the idea that ‘culture’ can be utilized as a successful defense for practices that are detrimental to women.

In Seyla Benhabib’s *The Claims of Culture* she interrogates the debates surrounding feminism and multiculturalism that were epitomized by Susan Okin’s question and the edited volume, *Is Multiculturalism Bad For Women?*. Okin’s text raises questions about the current emphasis on cultural relativism within Western nations and its effects on women’s rights. In the collection, the debate is polarized and it seems as if multiculturalism and feminism are mutually exclusive. However, Benhabib suggests that cultural pluralism and feminism need not be at odds with one another when she asks, “might we be able to do justice both to women’s aspirations for freedom and equality and to the legitimate plurality of human cultures?” (101). In my project, I start with Benhabib’s suggestion that cultural pluralism and feminism are not mutually exclusive, and argue that feminist ethnography is the best tool with which to reveal the ways in which gendered boundaries are constantly challenged on a daily basis in local communities. In chapter 3, I address the tensions between multiculturalism and feminism and utilize examples from my fieldwork to challenge the idea they cannot be employed productively together.

**Chapter Outline**

In chapter one of this dissertation I explore what it means to complete feminist ethnographic work by tracing the intellectual trajectory of the field. I outline what I argue are the three main challenges facing feminist ethnographers which include grappling with feminist critiques about the problems inherent in representing ‘other’ women, mediating the competing demands of feminisms’ commitment to social change and the
ethnographer’s goal of not interfering with local culture, and making use of poststructuralist critiques of knowledge production that dislodge modernist notions that cultures can be fully known or understood. Towards the end of the chapter, I outline what I argue are the primary methodological components of feminist ethnography, which I utilize in my work with the Somali community.

In chapter two I analyze the works of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, an internationally known Somali refugee, feminist, and critic of Islam. I focus on Hirsi Ali because the Somali women I interviewed often juxtaposed her views with their own. They argued she presents the “wrong” image of Somali women, so I interrogate Hirsi Ali’s work to present readers with her claims regarding Somali women and Muslim women in general. In this chapter, I introduce my idea that it is dangerous to limit the narratives we find acceptable to the ones we already know. Hirsi Ali’s collaborative work with Theo Van Gogh on the film Submission serves as a tangible example of the limits of available narratives and the negative material repercussions that can result from relying on and rearticulating them. In her work Hirsi Ali articulates a narrative of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ which posits the West as the pinnacle of human development and Muslims as in need of Western intellectual help. Her work recapitulates Orientalist views of Islam and reiterates narratives that argue a culture war exists between the West and Muslims. I contrast her interpretations of Muslim women’s experiences with those who challenge her interpretations, including other Muslim women and, most notably for my project, Somali women in the Columbus community.

In my third chapter I engage with the question posed by Susan Okin, is multiculturalism bad for women? utilizing my experiences in the field. I outline the
debate within feminist theory about whether the protection of group rights inherently discriminates against women and then move on to consider how Somali women in Columbus negotiate their cultural boundaries and challenge hegemonic representations of themselves in the Western media. I examine the multiplicity of Somali women’s perspectives on gender equality and share my experience of attending an Islamic course entitled *Love Notes* that specifically addressed male and female relations. I also interrogate how the perception of Somalis’ ‘rudeness’ has become a narrative of alienation that governs Somali women’s actions with regard to social rituals like the shaking of hands. I address what I argue is the dominant narrative concerning Somali women in Columbus, which is the perception of Somali women’s subordination under Islam symbolized by their wearing of the hijab. I provide four examples of women who ‘put on the hijab’ after a time of not wearing it to explore the differing meanings of the hijab to Somali women, all of which counter the Western narrative that the hijab is a symbol of women’s oppression.

In my fourth chapter I address how the narratives of alienation are gendered and have differing impacts on Somali men and women. I interrogate three major media events that focused on Somalis in Columbus, all of which involve Somali men. The media focus on a Somali man suspected of planning a terrorist attack in Columbus and the firing of a Columbus city employee because he was suspected of supporting terrorists highlights the ways in which narratives of alienation construct Somali men as likely or probable terrorists. The killing of Nasir Abdi, a young mentally ill Somali man by Columbus police officers resulted in protests by the Somali community and direct contestations of narratives of alienation. In this chapter I also address how racialization affects Somali
men post-resettlement in the US as they confront American constructions of the hyper-violent black male body. Somali men’s resistance strategies to these constructions include seeking to differentiate themselves from the African American community in Columbus and positioning themselves as agents in pursuit of the American Dream.

In my fifth and final chapter I summarize the narratives of alienation that I have identified through my research and offer concluding examples of how they function in the Columbus community. I end with considering my next research agenda which is to address how feminist theory can be employed to productively counter narratives of alienation.
CHAPTER 1

Defining Feminist Ethnography

Feminist ethnographers face three major challenges: first, we must struggle with the critiques within feminism about the possibilities and problems inherent in representing ‘other’ women and working across difference; secondly, feminist ethnographers must account for feminisms’ commitment to social change, while grappling with ethnography’s tradition of studying cultures with the goal of non-interference; and thirdly, feminist ethnographers must grapple with poststructuralist critiques of knowledge production, which criticize the idea that cultures can be ‘known’ or fully understood. In this chapter, I will address the background and current discussions in the field pertaining to these three challenges. Despite these challenges I argue that feminist ethnography is a valuable methodological tool. It is valuable because it is able to ‘work the ruins’ of both ethnography and feminist theory to create feminist knowledge that is grounded in the everyday experiences of women, without embracing the false assumption that it can produce whole and coherent truths about women’s lives. Towards the end of this paper I discuss what I argue are the methodological imperatives of feminist ethnography, which are the tools I believe enable feminist ethnographers to successfully navigate the challenges we face.
Working Across Difference: From ‘Global Sisterhood’ to ‘Under Western Eyes’

In the 1970s, the popular slogan ‘Sisterhood is Global’ theorized an essential connection between women globally based on gender oppression. Beginning in the late 1970s, and continuing through today this slogan and its governing idea that women are connected across cultures based on our essential identities as women and our oppressed state, has been criticized as coming from an ethnocentric worldview that privileges white, middle class, Western women. Audre Lorde, in her foundational essay, “Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference” argues that the Second Wave of the Women’s Movement was too focused on sexual oppression at the expense of women of color who suffer from multiple forms of oppression that cannot be reduced to sex discrimination.

Since the early 1980s, global feminist discourse has been challenged multiple times by “third world” feminists like Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Gayatri Spivak and Ahiwa Ong.

In her article, “Under Western Eyes”, Mohanty argues that Western feminists have utilized colonial knowledge practices through their construction of third world women as a monolithic group that is reduced to being the victims of their patriarchal cultures and traditions. She argues that ‘third world women’ are the ‘other’ for Western feminists, who through discourse construct themselves as more actualized human beings in comparison with non-Western women. Mohanty contends that through this form of othering, Western feminists come to see themselves as the ‘superior sisters’ who need to rescue third world women from their barbaric cultures. Rescue narratives have historical

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4 I have put “third world” in quotation marks to indicate the contested use of this term because it creates a status hierarchy between the supposedly ‘first’ and the supposedly ‘third’ world. Other terms like ‘developing world’ or the ‘Global South’ are equally contentious and do not reverse the hierarchy. Now that my concern has been raised, I will no longer use the quotation marks later in the essay.
precedence under colonialism, where colonialists argued that their rule was justified because of the treatment of women in the colonized country. Mohanty points out the similarity between feminist theories and colonial practices, both of which include arguments about ‘saving women’.

In contrast radical feminist, Robin Morgan, argues in her introduction to *Sisterhood is Global* that a latent global women’s culture exists, which can be activated by women examining their common experiences with patriarchal oppression (1-3). Mohanty questions the viability of Morgan’s thesis given the diverse experiences of women, and more fundamentally Mohanty questions Morgan’s understanding of ‘women’ as a meaningful identity category. She argues for studies and analyses of women that are context specific and historically situated. Mohanty’s criticisms do not rule out the possibility of women working collectively across difference, but reveal the ways in which Western feminist discourses risk reinforcing colonial knowledge practices if they set up discursive binaries which reproduce the West and Western feminists as superior and more advanced than women in the global south.

Mohanty’s criticisms not only challenge many Western feminist tenants, but they also pose several key challenges to the practice of ethnography. In Spivak’s essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, she questions whether or not subaltern others can be ‘given voice’ by intellectuals who seek to bring voice to those who have been historically silenced. Spivak argues that academics cannot ‘give voice’ to the subaltern, that the subaltern’s ‘voice’ will always already be co-opted and secondary. Her argument points to the possibility that instead of giving voice to the voiceless, the intellectual is recapitulating the subaltern status of the subject. This remains a risk of feminist ethnography, but I
agree with Amy Shuman’s assertion in her recent text *Other People’s Stories* that even though telling other’s stories is a process fraught with representational and ethical landmines, we can and must continue to do so with the hope that we can learn something from the telling of “untold stories” (162).

**Feminist Critique of Representing ‘Others’**

Since the 1980s, critiques of Western women studying and representing ‘other’ women have emerged and specifically feminist ethnographers studying underprivileged groups have been heavily criticized. In the late 1980s, a significant example of this critique emerged when white Australian feminist anthropologist, Diane Bell, in collaboration with Topsy Napurrula Nelson, an Aboriginal woman from central Australia wrote an article revealing extremely high rates of rape within the Aboriginal community. The article and Bell came under extreme scrutiny from other Aboriginal women and feminist academics. Many critics argued that Bell had misused her power as a white anthropologist to discuss intra-racial rape within the Aboriginal community, and some argued that Nelson was not a co-author of the piece, but was used by Bell to gain legitimacy for her article (Bell 109). The article and the controversy that followed created discussions within feminist circles about the problems inherent in representing ‘other’ women.

Multiple questions arose which pose ethical dilemmas for feminist fieldworkers. For example, the viability of representing others accurately was questioned, and it was debated whether or not outsiders could or should represent groups to which they do not belong. For example, Trinh Minh-Ha argues that “A conversation of ‘us’ about ‘them’ is
a conversation in which ‘them’ is silenced” (65). Her critique is similar to Spivak’s criticism about the inability of the subaltern to speak or to have a voice when being represented by a person who is more privileged. Edward Said raises this critique in his work, *Orientalism* in which he argues that anthropologists played a key role in European colonialism through developing a discourse of colonized countries as ‘Other’, a worldview that regards (in a simplistic dichotomy) the West and Western cultural practices as superior and ‘civilized’ and the East (and the global south) and its cultural practices as ‘backwards’ and inferior. Said argues that British anthropologists specifically used images of women’s inequality to reinforce the idea that these ‘other’ cultures were barbaric and in need of colonial rule (1-28).

In a similar vein, Lati Mani argues that British anthropologists focused on practices like ‘sati’ in India in order to justify colonial rule and to construct the West as more advanced with regards to women’s rights (5). Said and Mani’s arguments demonstrate how an anthropologist’s or ethnographer’s gaze can serve to preserve the current status hierarchy, rather than to dislodge or interrupt it. This is one reason why Bell and Nelson’s article caused so much controversy. It reinforced the discourse that Aboriginals are ‘backwards’ and in need of the (white) Australian government’s help, especially when it comes to ‘women issues’.

Minh-Ha’s critiques of ethnography as reinforcing a colonialist gaze are well-known, but her critiques apply not only to ethnography or anthropology but to the humanities and social sciences in general. Her work raises questions about whether any representation of an ‘other’ necessarily means the ‘other’ will be colonized and misrepresented to preserve the status hierarchy. The ‘crisis of representation’ and
responses to it have not occurred only within feminist ethnography, but encompass most forms of knowledge production in the humanities. In an interview, Minh-Ha recounts a talk she gave, where at the end someone comes up to her and excitedly proclaims that she interprets Minh-Ha’s talk to mean that anthropology is still possible (323). Minh-Ha does not discourage this thought, but tells the interviewer that this person was mistaken in believing that these questions apply only to anthropology or ethnography. Minh-Ha’s work raises a larger question, as much poststructuralist work does, which is whether or not the colonizing gaze can be adequately ‘interrupted’ through language or experiments with representational form. In the following sections, I will explore how feminist ethnographers have been experimenting with representational form for decades, but that experiments with form do not necessarily make ethnography feminist.

Poststructuralism, the Literary Turn and Feminist Ethnography

In 1986, Writing Culture, an anthology co-edited by James Clifford and George Marcus was published, which challenged ethnography and ethnographers to re-think their projects in light of poststructuralist critiques. These critiques made apparent that there is a ‘rhetoric of ethnography’, and that literary tropes are prevalent in ethnographic writing. Writing Culture explores the ways in which ethnography is a ‘fiction’, which creates through written form an account of ‘others’ that claims to be a valid source of knowledge. Historically, anthropologists and ethnographers such as Bronislaw Malinowski and Franz Boas (considered the ‘father’ of American social anthropology) tried to collect data from the groups they studied without interfering with the culture or attempting to change it in any way. The cultural information an ethnographer collected was expected to be as
untainted by their subjectivity as possible. In *Writing Culture*, Clifford and Marcus along with the other authors attempt to reconcile poststructural critiques of knowledge as always partial and restricted by the discourses from which it emerges with ethnographers’ desires to not have their work reduced to being understood as ‘mere fictions’ (Clifford 26).

Ethnographers and historians of ethnography struggle through these contradictions in *Writing Culture* attempting to articulate the ways in which ethnography has been shaped by and uses certain literary tropes, but is not solely defined by them. Clifford argues, “The essays in this volume do not claim ethnography is “only literature.” They do insist it is always writing” (26). So to begin with, ethnographers must establish how and in what ways ethnography has been confined by certain discourses. Mary Louise Pratt’s essay, “Fieldwork in Common Places” begins with articulating how and in which ways ethnographers established the discipline as different from “less specialized genres” (27) like journalism, travel books and missionaries’ memoirs. Early ethnographers established their authority by invoking their work as ‘scientific’ in contrast to tourist recollections or other non-professional forms of writing about other cultures.

However, as Pratt points out many well-known ethnographers have also been lovers of literature and some like, Malinowski, even thought of writing novels (37). Pratt also discusses the phenomena within ethnography of writing two separate monographs on the same project, one an academic monograph and one a narrative about the personal reflections of the ethnographer in the field. There are multiple examples of this including early works like Mary Kingsley’s *Travels in West Africa* (1897) and *West African Studies* (1899) (Pratt 35). Interestingly, these two different books were not always produced by
the same author, but often took the form of a heterosexual couple who were in the field together.

In Barbara Tedlock’s article, “Works and Wives: On the Sexual Division of Textual Labor” she gives a historical and intellectual genealogy of what she argues is a division of ethnographic labor between men and women. Men (husbands) write ethnographies that are accepted in the academy because the form and content of their work is academically sanctioned, and women (wives) write ‘experimental’ or ‘reflexive’ ethnographies that are considered non-professional narratives, better suited for the general public than the academy (271). Tedlock’s article makes two significant points simultaneously. Women’s writing within ethnography has historically been undervalued and that it has been largely dismissed because of both the form and the content of their ethnographies, which included personal narrative and most often reflections on their experiences with women in the field. These exclusions reinforced the idea that ethnographies of women’s lives are forms of specialized and secondary knowledge, not necessary to an understanding of a culture as a whole.

Tedlock discusses Ann Axtell Morris’ work, which includes technical contributions to her husband’s work, and also Digging in the Southwest (1933), a first person account of her experiences doing archeological fieldwork. The book is still in print today and is often credited as attracting students to the discipline. However, her work is not part of the sanctioned canon of the discipline and Tedlock argues that it is precisely Morris’ public appeal that makes her unpopular within the academy (268). Similarly, Margaret Mead is not idealized within ethnography, and Ruth Behar claims that even feminist ethnographers are somewhat “embarrassed by her” (8). Why is Mead
an embarrassment when she is the face that most Americans associate with anthropology and ethnography? Behar suggests that because Mead was a public intellectual her academic work was belittled by those in the academy who considered their work to be more theoretically sophisticated than Mead’s work.

Nancy Lutkehaus writes about the reasons for Mead’s exclusion from the canon. She argues that Mead’s exclusion is problematic in more than one way, because Mead can be seen as writing both experimental and feminist ethnography before the textual turn and before (and during) the second wave of the Women’s Movement. Lutkehaus points out that between 1925 and 1975 Mead published more than 1,300 articles and essays (186). Many of these articles were ‘experimental’ by current standards, and Lutkehaus quotes Mead as arguing,

“…that no person ever sees more than a part of the truth, that the contribution of one sex, or one culture, or one scientific discipline that may itself cross both sex and cultural lines, is always partial, and must always wait upon the contribution of others for a fuller truth” (Lutkehaus 192).

Lutkehaus finds Mead’s articulation of ‘partial truths’ as significant given that this understanding is an important component of postmodern ethnography. Lutkehaus and Behar are writing specifically in response to *Writing Culture* in an anthology co-edited by Behar and Deborah Gordon, *Women Writing Culture*. *Women Writing Culture* attempts to understand why in a discipline with so many ‘foremothers’, there are so few women in the canon.

While *Writing Culture* questions the practices and tropes of anthropology and ethnography, it does not question the canon that excludes women ethnographers, who according to Behar and Gordon can be seen as exhibiting the characteristics of ‘experimental ethnography’ before male theorists coined the term. In the introduction to
*Women Writing Culture*, Behar critiques Clifford’s assertion that feminist ethnographers are not included in *Writing Culture* because “their writings failed to fit the requirements of being feminist and textually innovative” (5, emphasis original). He argues, “…feminist ethnography has focused either on setting the record straight about women or on revising anthropological categories….it has not produced either unconventional forms of writing or a developed reflection on ethnographic textuality as such” (21). Behar and Gordon disagree. In their co-edited book, there are multiple examples of women ethnographers (like Mead) who were experimenting with the ethnographic form decades before it became the norm within the academy.

Women ethnographers like Mead, Zora Neale Hurston and Elsie Clews Parsons were being reflexive about their knowledge production, their relationships with ‘informants’ and the remarkable resemblance their work has to literature long before the textual turn within the academy. Women’s ethnographic work was not considered ‘serious’ work precisely because it was reflexive and dialogic. They did not present themselves as the ultimate authority on the culture of others, but as presenting the partial truths they had learned and including the voices of ‘others’ in their texts. However, now that postmodern ethnographers hold all of these practices in high esteem, we do not see a turning to these works, but rather their continuing dismissal. When you read Behar’s introduction and chapter in *Women Writing Culture* you can feel her anger, even rage, at the continual absence and dismissal of women and feminism from the mainstream canon, but Gordon (who helped Clifford with his introduction to *Writing Culture*) who is equally distressed, sees Clifford’s assertions not as ‘malicious’, but as resulting from his inability to work with feminist theory (Behar 5).
Catherine Lutz tackles these questions in her article, “The Gender of Theory”, where she argues that theory is gendered, raced and classed within the academy (251). Specifically, she argues that theory within ethnography has mostly been associated with men’s writing, while women’s writing has been associated with data collection and fieldwork. Lutz argues that there is a dichotomy in which male writing is seen as ‘serious and difficult’ and women’s writing is seen as not scholarly and personal. However, now that the postmodern ethnography blurs the line between the self/other and knower/known, it would seem that women/feminist ethnographers would be at the forefront of this turn. Lutz argues they were and are, but are not recognized because of the historical legacy of associating men with theory and women with personalized ethnographies.

This is the same legacy that Tedlock describes in the ‘textual’ division of labor between husband and wives, who were together in the field but who produced very different ethnographic works. For example, Elizabeth and Robert Fernea lived together in a small Iraqi village and Robert Fernea produced a traditional scholarly ethnography, while Elizabeth Fernea wrote *Guests of the Sheik*.

Fernea’s, *Guests of the Sheik*, reads almost like a novel, although all of the events she reports were part of her experiences in a small, rural village in Iraq. Fernea discusses openly her problems with being accepted by the local women, who judge her because they think she cannot cook and is lazy by their standards. Fernea lives, as the women in the village do, in complete isolation from men who are not their relatives. Her only contacts are with her husband and the women in the town. Specifically, her social life revolves around the harem of the Sheik, where she goes almost daily to have tea and chat with the local women. Fernea’s account is marked by her personal reflections, and by her
personal reactions to the restrictions placed on her, as a woman, in this field situation, but her text does not take a specifically feminist stance in that it does not challenge, but describes the position of women in this Iraqi village. Can *Guests of the Sheik* be considered a feminist ethnography even though it does not specifically challenge women’s subordinate position within this Iraqi village?

I would like to suggest that given the historical period in which her research took place, 1956-1958, Fernea’s work can be considered feminist in that it addresses the lives and concerns of women, although without the specifically politically inflected idea of ‘global sisterhood’ that would follow in the years after. In fact, Fernea’s discussions of the complexity of her relationships with the Iraqi women (among whom she eventually makes great friends) perhaps could have served as a corrective to the romantic ideals of global sisterhood. Fernea does form bonds with these women, but they are relationships always shot through with difference; differences in religion, race, culture and education level. The bonds she forms are based on the commonalities she does share with the women, but these are few and far between. Fernea documents the negotiations she and the women perform among themselves, figuring out how they can and cannot work together and communicate across their differences.

Feminist ethnographers like Behar have combined experimental modes of writing with feminist theory and argue that they should be able to gain institutional legitimacy for their projects. In Behar’s ethnographic work, *Translated Woman*, which is the life history of an indigenous market woman in Mexico her goal is “…to see her not as a type but as she sees herself, as an actor thrust in the world seeking to gain meaning out of the events of her life” (229). Behar is committed to theoretical questions, yet does not want to usurp
the meaning Esperanza gives to her own life experiences. Instead, Behar reads the
‘economy’ of Esperanza’s life narrative and names it a ‘spiritual economy’ because
Esperanza believes her life to be a struggle between good and evil. Behar is also self-
reflexive in the work, and while Translated Woman is widely read, Behar is often
criticized for focusing too much on herself, especially in the conclusion of the book (71).

Methodological Imperatives of Feminist Ethnography

A feminist ethnographer must recognize, anticipate and explore the ways in which
her presence in the field affects her ‘informants’ responses and behavior. Feminist
ethnographers do not assume they can perform research without in some way affecting it.
Barbara Myerhoff, in her well-known ethnography Number Our Days was among the
first to creatively utilize reflexivity in her study of elderly Jews living in Venice,
California, whose social life revolves around the Israel Levin Center. In the introduction
to the work, Victor Turner claims Myerhoff’s Number Our Days is original and on the
vanguard of ethnographic theory in her use of self-reflection, narrative analysis and in
allowing the ‘native, other’ to assign meaning to their own lives.

However, Myerhoff is not studying the ‘other’ in the traditional sense, in that one
day she expects also to “be a little old Jewish lady” (19). In part, she is accepted into the
community based on her identity, but she is also scolded and judged for not knowing
Yiddish, Hebrew and many ask her who takes care of her children while she works.
Myerhoff works with and records the life history of an organic intellectual within the

community, Shmuel Goldman, who often remarks on her ‘ignorance’ of Jewish history. Myerhoff’s identity is both an asset and a hindrance to her work with these elderly Jews, and she openly discusses these issues. Myerhoff came to this work through an interest in working with the elderly. She first attempted to work with elderly Chicanos, but was turned away with comments that it would be better for her to study her “own kind” (12). Myerhoff does not leave these challenges out of the narrative she constructs, but includes them as important to the project.

However, in *Number Our Days* the community Myerhoff studies remains at the center of her analysis. She includes how the community members often treat her as a grandchild and the sorrow the community members feel with the treatment they receive from their biological children. Despite these feelings, Myerhoff does not romanticize her subjects. Rather, she presents them in their full humanity; arguing politics, judging her and each other, living in poverty, but not feeling poor, and assigning meaning to their own lives. It is the community’s ability to and dedication to finding meaning in their lives that most attracts Myerhoff. Her work is dialogic and multi-voiced, and throughout the book Myerhoff remains committed to showing the reader how and in which ways these individuals make meaning out of their life experiences, and how they do it collectively, as a community through ritual. Gelya Frank argues that Myerhoff’s work helped to create the counter canon within ethnography that now values reflexive and dialogic narratives. However, Frank argues she still risks being written out of the canon (207).

Myerhoff engages with gender and women’s issues in *Number Our Days* and in her last chapter discusses how she and many of her subjects agree that the elderly women within the community live much fuller lives than the elderly men. Myerhoff argues that
this is the result of gender construction, because women experience independence during old age and continue with many of the same daily tasks they have been doing their entire lives (cooking, cleaning, and caring for others). In contrast, the men who are retired do not know what to do with themselves or their time and have few deep relationships with others. I consider Myerhoff’s work feminist because she engages with self-reflexivity, allows her subjects to ‘speak on their own’ in her text, and interprets women’s lives and experiences through a feminist lens. She recognizes the inequality they experience because of their gender, but also highlights their resourcefulness and agency.

Ethnographers have long understood that there are major differences between what people say they do and what they actually do, and the benefit of a participant-observer methodology is that the ethnographer sees these differences first-hand. Myerhoff recognizes the formal inequality the women experience, but focuses on the ways in which their everyday lives are not completely circumscribed by gender inequality.

In the years following Myerhoff’s work, and in response to poststructuralist critiques of all-encompassing theories of power, many feminists began to write and think about the ‘resistance strategies’ women employ. Rather than focusing on how patriarchy oppresses women, feminists began to think through Foucault’s assertion that “where there is power, there is resistance” (95). However, feminist anthropologist, Lila Abu-Lughod, argues that there are dangers in reading resistance strategies romantically and she suggests that Foucault’s assertion can also be read, “where there is resistance, there is power” (42). In her ethnographic work with Bedouin women in Egypt, she finds that young girls resist their cultural traditions through the acquisition of consumer goods associated with Westernized femininity (cosmetics, lingerie, etc.). Abu-Lughod argues
that the girls are not only acquiring Western consumer goods, but also Western ideals about marriage, which make Bedouin women vulnerable to economic dependency on men in ways they have not been in the past. Therefore, resistance strategies may not ultimately lead to women’s ‘liberation’, and may in fact not even reflect ‘real’ agency if women are only entering into a new relationship with a different form of power. This raises larger questions about how and in which ways feminist ethnographers can think about and analyze women’s agency.

*Venus on Wheels* chronicles the over twenty year relationship between ethnographer Geyla Frank and her subject, Diane Devries. Devries was born without arms and legs, and Frank meets her in 1976 when she is a teaching assistant in an introductory class Devries is taking. Frank weaves into the text theoretical questions about the possibilities and impossibilities of understanding even one other person (especially one as ‘different’ as Devries), her personal reflections on her relationship with Devries, and a history of the Disability Rights movement in the United States. Frank discusses how she expects to find a ‘victim’ when she meets Devries, but is surprised by Devries’ high self-esteem.

Devries sees herself as a ‘complete’ woman and continually acts as an agent in her own life. Much of the text explores Frank’s assumptions about Devries, and how Devries continually surprises Frank with her self-assurance. Also, central to the work is Frank’s discussions of on-going differences the two have. Frank discusses how she presents a conference paper in which she does a Freudian psychoanalysis of Devries’ life, with which Devries is very upset. Frank then goes on to discuss that she thinks her failing relationship with her psychoanalyst may have led her to write the paper, and agrees with
Devries that this was a violation of Devries’ right to self-interpretation (110-111). This incident reveals two points of contention in feminist ethnography. First, it is important to consider that feminist ethnographers feel responsible to their informants for their representations of them, and secondly that feminist ethnographers often give their subjects veto power over their work, as Frank does with Devries. Devries often refers to Frank as her ‘biographer’, and Frank struggles with how much authority Devries should have over her work.

Feminist ethnographers recognize that representations are not value-free and often have consequences for those represented. Frank wants to retain authority over her work and interpretations of Devries’ life, but does not want to represent Devries in ways that she finds offensive. Frank’s questions and passions are very different from Devries’, the former being interested in feminist and psychoanalytic theory and the latter being invested in having her story told, in hopes that it will inspire others. This is not an uncommon problem for feminist ethnographers, who often face the challenge of performing research on individuals or communities that are in crisis.

_Troubling the Angels_ was first imagined by a group of women living with HIV/AIDS as a “K-Mart book” to help women cope with the illness. They wanted the book to be able to help women in a similar situation. Patti Lather works as a co-author with Chris Smithies, who is the leader of a support group for these women. _Troubling the Angels_ challenges traditional ethnographic tropes by not assigning meaning to the women’s testimonies, allowing the women’s statements to ‘stand on their own’, while Smithies’ and Lather’s comments actually are separate and below (on the page) the women’s perspectives. Lather refuses to assign a coherent meaning to the women’s
experiences and interrupts the text with ‘information boxes’ about HIV/AIDS and angels, which became common symbols associated with the disease (for example, through Tony Kushner’s play *Angels in America*). Lather argues that the text frustrates modernist ethnographic modes, and that readers’ struggles with the text are appropriate. She wants readers to “get lost in the text”, to not walk away with a coherent understanding of HIV positive women’s lives (286).

*Troubling the Angels* also works as a criticism of empathy and Lather argues that our current humanist construction of empathy needs to be challenged (306). Similarly, Shuman also offers a critique of empathy arguing that empathy often serves as a cathartic or inspirational device for witnesses, who after having an empathetic experience have a relatively unchanged worldview and feel no obligations in return (5). Lather’s and Smithies’ ethnography of women living with HIV/AIDS aims to undermine the sentimentality and empathy that might have been produced through a more coherent narrative structure.

Lather is interested in engaging both poststructuralist criticisms of traditional ethnographic work and is committed to feminist theory. Although the structure of *Troubling the Angels* challenges ethnographic tropes of realism, she remains “haunted” by the feminist commitment of doing justice to her subjects’ words and needs (302). The conflict between poststructural demands to dislocate coherent meta-narratives that ‘explain it all’ and the feminist demand of giving voice to marginalized women do not seem incompatible to Lather. She argues that *Troubling the Angels* combines these goals, as well as frustrating the readers who are looking for either a poststructuralist ethnography or a feminist one.
Lather and Smithies, like Frank, allow their informants to read their work prior to publication. The women approve of *Troubling the Angels*, although some struggle with how the book is structured. Lather asks the women if the book resists both sensationalism and sentimentality, and most agree that it does. The women feel that Lather and Smithies were ‘true’ to their stories and that the book has integrity. The book meets the demands of feminist ethnography because it avoids as much as possible representational violence and tells a formerly untold story about women, but Lather does not consider the work a ‘success’.

*Troubling the Angels* attempts to ‘work the ruins’ of feminist ethnography, but does not overcome them or even aspire to. There remain questions about how and in which ways feminist ethnographers are responsible to their subjects, especially in cases when they are not invited to write a text, as Lather and Smithies were. There are no clear answers to these questions, as they vary with each project, which must be considered individually. There are questions that must be asked of every project like, “whose story is it, what is it being used for, what does it promise, and at whose expense?” (Shuman 162), but the answers will be context specific. For example, when posed to Abu-Lughod’s work with Bedouin women or to Frank’s work with Devries, the answers to these questions will be particular to the contexts of their work. This attention to specificity is an important contribution of feminist ethnography, which studies women’s lives in the local contexts in which they live and therefore does not yield overarching theories, but culturally specific analyses that are grounded in the concerns of the women who are being studied.
Conclusions: Why Do Feminist Ethnography?

There is nothing inherently feminist about ethnography, but this can be said of all disciplines or methodologies not emerging from Women’s Studies. However, ethnography is an invaluable tool for feminism, which still currently struggles with how to work through the differences of race, class, ethnicity, ability, religious belief and other forms of difference women have from one another. Feminist ethnographers produce knowledge about women’s lives in specific cultural contexts, recognize the potential detriments and benefits of representation, are interested in exploring women’s experiences of oppression as well as how they are agents in their own lives, and feel an ethical responsibility towards the communities in which they work. Feminist ethnographers grapple with poststructuralist critiques of knowledge construction, but realize that “…the postmodernist fascination with style and rhetoric may lead not to better ways of doing ethnography, but better ways of writing unethical ones” (Skeggs 436). Here, feminist interventions are vital because we are invested in asking ‘in whose interests’ an ethnographic text works.
Chapter 2

The Limits of Available Narratives in the Works of Ayaan Hirsi Ali

A Brief Introduction to the Politics of Representation within Feminist Theory

In 1985, Donna Haraway published her influential essay “A Manifesto for Cyborgs” that theorized a feminist identity in which all women are racially/culturally impure, half human/half machine, and where we could all challenge material reality through writing. Haraway’s conceptualization of ‘cyborgs’ was an attempt to bridge the incongruities between identity politics, postmodernism and feminist struggles for material change at a time when these were colliding within feminist theory.

Haraway’s essay did serve to inspire some feminists, but as Paula Moya argues, it also obscures the material realities of women’s lives. Moya contends that Haraway idealizes the lives of women of color for her own purposes, and that in a similar way Judith Butler also “enlists women of color for a postmodernist agenda” (131-133) that does not necessarily serve them. Moya, however, does not advocate relating identity to epistemic privilege in an overly simplified way that reinforces essentialism. Instead, she argues that we need to recognize how women’s identities and their social locations affect their everyday experiences. She utilizes a ‘realist’ frame to argue that in the pursuit of a
more objective vision of reality, the experiences of women of color should be recognized as valid sources of knowledge.

Linda Alcoff argues, “experience is epistemically indispensable but never epistemically sufficient” (148), and it is important to consider how ‘experience’ and ‘the real’ function in theories of representation. In the introduction to *Haunting Violations*, Wendy Hesford and Wendy Kozol challenge feminists to think through the costs and benefits of using ‘truth telling’ rhetorics to represent women’s oppression. They ask us to consider what images convey or conceal from us about reality, and how traumatic images of women’s suffering can possibly ‘re-traumatize’ victims and/or traumatize witnesses. Scholars such as Ann Kaplan argue that witnessing has the potential to be a healing process (1242), but Hesford and Kozol asks us to interrogate the ways in which witnessing can fail or backfire (2). I will draw upon Hesford and Kozol’s ideas in this chapter as I explore Somali women’s differing interpretations of the real experiences of their lives, and how their narratives most often conform to already existing discourses.

Feminists often rely on positivist notions of the ‘real’ or the ‘factual’ to demonstrate women’s oppression and resistance, while we also critique these as discursive constructions. Hesford and Kozol ask feminists to confront the uncomfortable idea that representations of the real are themselves constructed to serve political purposes. The specific genre of ‘testimonials’, which seeks to answer the challenge that ‘subalterns can’t speak’ (Spivak 24) becomes particularly troubled when we begin to question ‘realness’, ‘authenticity’ and who is considered a ‘legitimate’ source of knowledge and why.
Susan Sánchez-Casal addresses these challenges with regard to the celebrated testimonial, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, which was published in 1984 through the collaboration of Menchú and anthropologist Elisabeth Burgos-Debray. Sánchez-Casal argues that while it is uncomfortable to critique Menchú and her testimonial, it is important that we do so in order to understand the complexities and constructedness of the work. She contends that while she supports the political goals of Menchú’s testimonial, she is not willing to interpret it as an unproblematic representation of the real. Sánchez-Casal maintains that we must assume that the ‘other’ is as complex and contradictory as we imagine ourselves to be. However, she admits that “it feels almost blasphemous to approach the pages of the testimonio with the poststructuralist tools of the academic investigator” (79), especially given the well-known challenge to Menchú’s ‘accuracy’ by anthropologist David Stoll. Sánchez-Casal contends, however, that it is crucial to challenge Burgos-Debray’s claim that Menchú’s testimonial is “simple and true” (76), and that she is a coherent representative of a homogenous community.

I believe it is imperative that the implications of challenging Menchú’s ‘authentic, native’ voice be addressed. For example, in our recognition that there are no pure or wholly ‘authentic’ natives, we risk discrediting Menchú’s work and providing fodder for those who do not support her political goals. Also, in our acknowledgment of Menchú’s identity as constructed we risk reifying again that the subaltern cannot speak authoritatively on her own behalf.

Paula Moya argues for a ‘realist’ mode of feminist standpoint, which takes into account that one’s social location does not automatically confer ‘better’ knowledge, but

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6 In 1999, David Stoll published *Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*, in which he questions her interpretation of the relationship of the Mayan peasants to the revolutionary movement in Guatemala.
acknowledges that the social experiences of racially different women can lead us to ask how and why our society is structured to produce discrimination. Sally Kitch, in her work *Higher Ground* theorizes a ‘realistic feminist epistemology’ that counters utopian thinking, which she argues is detrimental to feminism (233-234). She argues that utopian thinking and writing, while an important inspirational device, can close as many avenues of change as it seems to open up.

Once we have a certain utopia in mind, it is difficult to dismiss its vision and our longings for it. One of the most productive ways feminists can work across difference is to know the blunders of feminist utopias that imagine an uncomplicated global sisterhood or a cyborg identity where all women share similar identities, effectively erasing difference. Sánchez-Casal argues that her interrogation of Menchú is a form of respect that recognizes Menchú as a legitimate producer of knowledge and that “If we remain uncritical about the ideological content of the discourse of the Other, exotifying rather than critiquing difference, we may certainly avoid tense discussions and ethnocentric mistakes, but at the expense of eliminating the possibility that they will have anything to teach us” (102). My discussion below explores how the life narrative of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a Somali refugee, feminist, and former Dutch politician serves as an excellent example of the problems inherent in realist narratives constructed for political purposes.
Ayaan Hirsi Ali: A Feminist Testimonial of the ‘Real’ Experiences of Somali Muslim Women

Ayaan Hirsi Ali is the most well-known Somali woman in the Western world. In 2005 she was named one of *Time* magazine’s 100 Most Influential People. She currently lives and works in the United States, and her work and viewpoints are highly critiqued by many Muslim women and most of the Somali women I interacted with during the course of my fieldwork. Later in this chapter, I will analyze the discourses circulating in popular culture about the film *Submission* written by Hirsi Ali and directed by Theo Van Gogh, but first I want to consider Hirsi Ali’s claims about the status of Somali women and Muslim women under Islam that have made her such a controversial figure.

Hirsi Ali’s book, *Infidel*, makes claims about Somali and Muslim women’s treatment under Islam premised on the evidence of her life experiences. She clearly makes an epistemic claim to superior knowledge about the lives of Muslim women, and Somali women in particular because she is a Somali woman. She uses her life experiences to articulate a narrative that posits the West as a utopia in comparison with the Muslim world and Africa. This narrative is celebrated by some, denounced by others and contested by the Somali women I interviewed and interacted with during my fieldwork. In this chapter, I will address Hirsi Ali’s main claims and explain how her life narrative and the film, *Submission* reinforce Orientalist discourses. I want to challenge feminists to read her account of Somali Muslim women’s lives critically, but also interrogate the ways in which poststructuralist theories of power challenge and possibly undermine the goals of feminism, which has historically been concerned with bettering women’s material realities.
Hirsi Ali was born in Mogadishu, Somalia in 1969 one month after the Somali government was overthrown by a coup that was led by Siad Barre. Her father was politically active against the coup and was in and out of prison during her youth, eventually fleeing to Kenya, Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia to avoid political persecution. In her memoir, *Infidel*, Hirsi Ali recounts the Somalia of her youth, a country not yet completely torn apart by civil war. The recounting of her youth, however, is not a romantic or picturesque tale, but rather one that focuses on violence, suppression of women’s rights, and encompasses a thorough condemnation of what she terms a pre-modern clan based society in which she claims that “Even today you can take a truck across the border into Somalia and find you have gone back thousands of years in time” (350). Hirsi Ali details her life story as one that traces her life in Somali, Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia and Kenya as “my childhood” and her escape and adult life in the West as “my freedom”.

Hirsi Ali fled an arranged marriage by claiming asylum in Holland (while en route to join her husband in Canada), not based on gender discrimination but rather on political persecution. Her asylum case was approved, and she learned Dutch and worked as a Somali-Dutch translator while studying political science at the prestigious University of Leiden. Her work as a translator put her in direct contact with the Somali community and other Muslim communities in the Netherlands. It was during this time that she began to question her belief in Islam and the Quran as a legitimate source of knowledge. As she writes in her book, Hirsi Ali chose to study political science because she “wanted to understand why life in Holland was so different from life in Africa. Why there was so

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7 Years after Hirsi Ali had become a Dutch citizen, her citizenship was revoked, because she lied about the real reasons she sought refuge in the Netherlands. Her citizenship has since been reinstated.
much peace, security, and wealth in Europe. What the causes of war were, and how you built peace” (221). As she reads the classic texts of Western liberalism, she begins a love affair with Enlightenment ideas. Hirsi Ali has three main theses that underscore her life narrative in *Infidel*: first, she argues that the Muslim world needs to undergo an Enlightenment period; secondly, she argues that Islam is inherently violent and anti-liberal; and thirdly, she contends that Islam is inherently oppressive to women.

The evidence Hirsi Ali uses to support her theses are her personal experiences living in Somalia and within Muslim communities in Africa, Saudi Arabia and the Netherlands, and short textual analyses of the Quran. Her personal narrative is a consciously articulated development narrative from living in a ‘pre-modern’ economy and social hierarchy to living in ‘freedom’ in the West. Her ideas have made her extremely popular with conservatives in the West who believe that radical Islam is a threat to freedom in the ‘modern world’, and paradoxically Hirsi Ali is also well-admired by American progressives who see her as an out-spoken proponent of women’s rights globally.

Hirsi Ali’s political career began when she attended a lecture in the Netherlands entitled, “The West or Islam: Who Needs a Voltaire?”. During the debate most of the speakers and audience members supported the idea that the West needs critique because of its neocolonialism, ethnocentrism and consumer culture. One lone voice, that of Afshin Ellian, a law professor argued that “Islam needs critical renewal” (Hirsi Ali 274). Hirsi Ali spoke up during the debate arguing that the West has enough ‘Voltaires’ and that the Muslim world is desperately in need of one. The Muslims in the audience were critical of Ellian and Hersi Ali’s remarks and, according to her, the Muslim audience
members reacted by retelling historical facts about Islam\(^8\) that countered her and Ellian’s claims that the Muslim world is in need of change. She was not impressed with their comments and after the talk Ellian tells her that she is a “little Voltaire” and exclaimed, “I just know our Muslim civilization will be saved by a woman” (275). Hirsi Ali seems an unlikely candidate for this job as she has denounced Islam and espouses the superiority of Western liberal values. Hirsi Ali claims, however, that since she was born into a Muslim society she can still claim to be a member of the community. She often says, “Us, Muslims”, which is met with criticism by those who point out that she is no longer a believer in Islam.

Hirsi Ali was at one time a member of the Muslim Brotherhood (an organization that is deemed a terrorist organization by the US government) while she was living in Nairobi, Kenya. She details her experiences going to lectures and seminars put on by the Muslim Brotherhood. As a result of these lectures, she chose to wear a conservative form of hijab before it was ‘popular’ in Nairobi, and reports that she felt a heightened sense of superiority as a woman and as a Muslim for living a ‘truly’ Islamic life (NPR 2/12/07). She liked the direction the Muslim Brotherhood gave to her life and the sense of purpose she felt in her everyday activities of wearing the hijab, praying, and performing other aspects of the ‘inner jihad’ prescribed by the Muslim Brotherhood. The sense of purpose and power that these activities gave to her life were thwarted when she could not come to grips with the place of women within the teachings. When she challenged her religious teachers on men and women’s equality, she was told to sit down and that her ideas were coming from the devil. She uses this experience as an example to support her thesis that

\(^8\) For example, audience members pointed to the fact that Islam discovered the zero as a counterpoint to Hirsi Ali and Ellian’s arguments (Hirsi Ali 274).
Islam needs to undergo an Enlightenment period. She argues, “Look at our women, and look at our countries. Look at how we are all fleeing and asking for refuge here, and how people are now flying planes into buildings in their madness. Allow us a Voltaire, because we are truly living in the Dark Ages” (275).

Hirsi Ali’s claims are controversial for feminists who have embraced critiques of linear narratives of development which posit Western liberal countries as the pinnacle of human development. Hirsi Ali’s narrative directly challenges ‘third world’ feminists’ critiques of Western discourses of development. For example, Chandra Mohanty’s critique of Western feminist constructions of ‘third world’ women as inherently subordinated and in need of Western feminist help is directly contradicted by Hirsi Ali’s narrative. Hirsi Ali passionately contends that women in non-Western societies, and specifically women living in the Muslim world need Western ideas and ideals to free them from oppression. Hirsi Ali is unapologetic in her denouncement of women’s treatment in Muslim countries and Muslim communities in the West and as a result she has been accused of being ‘right wing’ and a ‘conservative’ (Hirsi Ali 294). It is curious and paradoxical that an out-spoken feminist can be perceived as conservative, yet that is the position Hirsi Ali finds herself in, and I want to elucidate why this is the case.

As a member of parliament in the Netherlands, Hirsi Ali represented the Liberal Party, a party considered conservative in Holland. Originally, Hirsi Ali had been a member of the Labor Party, a party of social democrats which is considered more socially liberal than the Liberal Party. However, as Hirsi Ali began to be more outspoken in her critiques of the treatment of Muslim women in immigrant communities in the Netherlands, she was censored by members of the Labor Party. She was regularly asked
to ‘tone down’ her criticisms of Somali Muslims and Moroccan Muslim communities’
treatment of girls and women by leaders in the Labor Party. She was often met with
critiques that her theories of women’s suppression in Muslim immigrant communities
were not supported by empirical data. However, when she attempted to collect data on
honor killings in Holland, she was told that records were not kept because it might
stigmatize certain groups. It became Hirsi Ali’s mission to advocate for the collection of
data on honor killings, female genital cutting and domestic violence broken down by
ethnic group so that data could be collected on the treatment of Muslim women in the
Netherlands. It was her hope that these statistics would “eliminate the complacent attitude
of moral relativists who claimed that all cultures are equal. The excuse that nobody knew
would be removed” (296 emphasis original).

Hirsi Ali left the Labor Party because of its attempts to censor her arguments
about the treatment of women in Muslim immigrant communities. She left the Labor
Party, disappointed with their support for group rights as opposed to the rights of the
individual. She claims,

“I had joined them (the Labor Party) originally because, in my mind, social
democrats stood for reform. They sought to improve people’s lives; they cared
about suffering, which I thought should have meant they would care about the
suffering of Muslim women. But in reality, the Labor Party in Holland appeared
blinded by multiculturalism, overwhelmed by the imperative to be sensitive and
respectful of immigrant culture, defending the moral relativists. When I said the
position of Muslim women had to change—-to change now—people were always
telling me to wait, or calling me right wing. Was that what they told the mine
workers in the nineteenth century when they fought for workers’ rights? “(294,
emphasis original).

Here, Hirsi Ali has raised an important point, but the answer to her (rhetorical) question
is ‘no’, mine workers were not labeled ‘right wing’ when they fought for workers’ rights,
but rather socially progressive and ‘left wing’. How is it that a feminist like Hirsi Ali is characterized as ‘right wing’ by members of her own socially progressive political party for speaking out about Muslim women’s rights?

Hirsi Ali is depicted as ‘right wing’ rather than ‘left wing’ because the Labor Party is concerned with respecting the values of minority cultures within Holland and supports multiculturalism, and her critiques of Muslim immigrant groups coupled with her emphasis on successful integration place her in conversation with and agreement with cultural conservatives who question the validity of multiculturalism. When Hirsi Ali joined the Liberal Party she was grilled by party officials who wanted to know why they should accept her as a candidate on their ticket. One older man asked her, “You’re from Africa, and you’re a woman, and a member of the Labor Party—and now you want to be with us Liberals? We’re entrepreneurs. What do you know about business? Are you even interested in us?” (297). She told him that it depends on “who ‘us’ is” (297), and went on to explain her platform issue of raising awareness about immigrant women’s issues, particularly the difficulties faced by Muslim women immigrants. She also explained to him that she believes business owners have a strong stake in ending Muslim women’s oppression, because then they can fully participate in Dutch society and contribute to the economy. In this example, Hirsi Ali reveals her willingness and deft ability to conform her arguments to the narrative and material concerns of conservatives. In the end, she is accepted by the Liberal Party and, with the strong support of one woman party leader, is placed near the top of their candidate list and is elected as a Liberal Party representative.

In Holland, elections are not based on local municipalities. There is a national vote and seats in Parliament are given to the top names on each party’s list, which is dependent on how many overall votes the party receives.
to Parliament. She calls herself a “one-issue politician” (296) and that issue is addressing the gender discrimination that immigrant women face within their communities in Western liberal democracies.

Hirsi Ali argues that these critiques must be raised in the West, because it is impossible to raise them in Muslim countries where according to her, questioning the Islamic faith is inconceivable. During her tenure as a member of Parliament she was able to persuade the Dutch to monitor honor killings for a few months, and the results shocked the Dutch public. The Dutch police monitored honor killings between October 2004 and May 2005 in two regions (there are 25 regions collectively in Holland), and found that eleven Muslim girls were killed by their families during that time period (Hirsi Ali 309). After this report was released, Hirsi Ali came under more public scrutiny and received both letters of support and threatening hate mail from those who saw her as an apostate to Islam. However, Hirsi Ali went on to write the screenplay for the film Submission, which thrust her into international fame and led to the murder of Theo Van Gogh.

Submission, Orientalism and the Material Repercussions of Discourse

Hirsi Ali’s arguments about Islam and particularly the place of women in Islam and other non-Western societies articulates what Edward Said identifies as Orientalist thinking. She argues that for Muslims the, “world is divided between “Us” and Them”---if you don’t accept Islam you should perish” (272). However, her books and arguments reinforce the discourse of ‘us’ versus ‘them’, and posit the West as a utopia and the Muslim world as a misogynistic dystopia.
In the introduction to his groundbreaking work *Orientalism*, Edward Said argues that we must resist “the simple-minded dichotomy of freedom-loving, democratic Israel and evil, totalitarian, and terroristic Arabs” (Said 27). This perceived dichotomy not only exists between Israel and Palestine, but between the West as an imagined community and the East or the ‘Orient’ as an imagined community. One of Said’s greatest contributions was in detailing the ways in which the East and Muslims in particular have occupied an important portion of the West’s (beginning with Britain, France and now the United States) imperialist imaginary, beginning with Homer and continuing through today. According to Said, the West’s authority over and construction of the Orient is simultaneously a discursive and material practice. He made it a point to emphasize the material repercussions of Orientalism, while his analysis focuses on the discursive.

For Said, Orientalism is a material practice, an intellectual practice and a cultural practice, which all continually renew themselves. These practices are self-referential and reinforce one another through intertextual exchanges. Orientalism is not just the sum of these practices, but comes to represent something larger, and that something larger is a worldview that regards (in a simplistic dichotomy) the West and Western cultural practices as superior and ‘civilized’ and the East (and the global south) and its cultural practices as ‘backwards’ and inferior. This easy dichotomy erases the heterogeneity of both the West and the ‘Rest’, but requires little effort to articulate. In short, this dichotomy is the most easily accessible narrative when a conflict between the West and the Rest occurs. This dichotomy is exemplified in the discourses that circulated after the release of the film *Submission* and the murder of Theo Van Gogh.
The Murder of Theo Van Gogh

In November of 2003, Theo Van Gogh, a descendent of the famous Dutch painter, Vincent Van Gogh, and a well-known Dutch filmmaker was murdered while riding his bike to work. He was murdered by a Moroccan immigrant who had become a Dutch citizen, Mohamed Bouyeri, a Muslim fundamentalist who was upset by Van Gogh’s recent film Submission. Van Gogh’s murder was violent; he was shot several times, and then when he pleaded for mercy, his throat was slashed and he was stabbed. Bouyeri also pinned a note to Van Gogh’s shirt that was addressed to Hirsi Ali, the script writer of Submission, which threatened her life and also threatened to destroy Holland and the United States.

As a result of the murder, anti-Muslim violence occurred throughout Holland and in return there were attacks on Christians and churches. The film Submission had been shown on national Dutch television, but most stations and theaters were fearful of continuing to show the film after Van Gogh’s murder. One website, ifilm.org, continues to show a portion of the film on its site after the murder, and receives hundreds of e-mails regarding the choice to do so.

The e-mails come from Dutch citizens, non-Dutch citizens, Muslims, Christians, atheists, academics, actors, writers and humanists. Some are written in defense of Van Gogh and Hirsi Ali’s right to make Submission and others are written in defense not of Bouyeri’s actions, but of the legitimacy of his anger. These e-mails directly respond to one another, and form an international dialogue about Submission and the murder of Van

10 Submission may also be viewed on YouTube.
Many of the e-mails address whether or not Submission is an accurate portrayal of Islam’s treatment of women. For example, the very first e-mail posted by ifilm.org reads:

“It is a shame that Theo van Gogh was murdered, simply for trying to bring to light one of the many problems of the Muslim world, one that won't go away unless more people (Muslims) are educated properly and not just taught by self-appointed experts and religious zealots how to live their lives” (Posted 11/15/04 5:10 a.m).

This posting made by a self-identified agnostic contends that Submission is an accurate representation of women’s treatment under Islam. This claim is echoed in multiple other postings, and highlights one of the discursive questions that dominates the discussion: Is there something inherently non-democratic and patriarchal about Islam or is there something inherently offensive in Van Gogh and Hirsi Ali’s representation of Islam?

Van Gogh was known for creating controversial films and television shows, and had a popular reputation for being purposively offensive. However, he was well-liked in the Netherlands for his contentious style, and after his death several of the e-mail posts mourn him as a person who died for ‘free speech’. Van Gogh’s making of Submission did not surprise the wider Dutch public, but the reaction by Dutch Muslims to the film was not anticipated by Van Gogh. The dangers, however, were anticipated by Hirsi Ali. She warned Van Gogh that making Submission might be dangerous, and after the film was released both Ali and Van Gogh received death threats.

Ali took the threats seriously and accepted further protection (she was already under police protection) from the Dutch government, but Van Gogh did not. For the agnostic contributor above, and for multiple others who contributed to the dialogue on ifilm.org, the murder of Van Gogh confirms their Orientalist visions of Muslims. The murder demonstrates to them the depth of Muslims’ hatred of ‘free speech’, ‘free
societies’, and their inherent oppression of women. The title Submission does not refer to the submission of Muslims to Allah, but to the submission of women under Islam. In the film, verses of the Quran are written on nude women’s bodies as they speak of the abuse they suffer at the hands of their husbands. The film is 11 minutes long and contains sequences with women wearing transparent burkas and having swollen faces from the beatings their husbands have given them. One of the posts on ifilm.org addresses the erotic overtones of the film:

“This film reminded me of a grad class on gender, race, and empire that I took. We analyzed the European male fetishization of Muslim women, particularly the eroticization of the veil and how, in the name of liberatory politics, Europeans might appropriate the bodies of Muslim women.

There was a particularly violent photograph of a naked woman who was veiled—we discussed this at length. In this film, the woman in this film is veiled, but the veil is sheer and reveals a naked body underneath. Throughout the film, the filmmaker and camera disembody her—which arguably is as violent as some would say the veil is. The male gaze, indeed, eroticizes the woman in a torn wedding dress, and the image of her bruised body after her Muslim husband beats her reminds me of the high couture ads that again sexualize and dominate women—only this time, the film justifies its dominant and violent gaze (on multiple levels) in the name of revealing how Islam violates women's rights.

The title, "Submission," and the voiceover would have us believe that this film is a critique of Islam's treatment of women. To the contrary, the title indicates how, yet again, a European male has eroticized and appropriated a woman's body and voice for his own prurient fantasies. In Women's Studies we must open our students' eyes to the ways in which women throughout the world are often written into this narrative of Euroamerican liberation, while the power relations inherent in the sexualization of their bodies and identities continues.” (11/11/04 4:45 p.m, From Arizona State University)

This e-mail post was ignored by all except one respondent, a person who identified as a student at a Christian theological institution, who argued that the nude women’s bodies were not erotic and that “Any arousal that might have come from the woman's nude body is subverted by her words of submission and abuse at the hands of her male family
members. I believe the woman's nudity is symbolic for she was baring her soul to Allah and it was not used as titillation” (Answering Others 11/17/04). The dismissal of the Arizona State University poster’s comment is symptomatic of the larger discourses circulating in all of the messages. This e-mail respondent’s comments are outside of the available narrative of the divide between the freedom loving West and the oppression of Islam, and thus are dismissed. Her narrative is rendered illegitimate because it does not fit into any recognizable discourse. However, beginning with Franz Fanon, post-colonial and feminist theorists have addressed the use of women’s sexuality and discourses of women’s oppression as tools of colonization. Said argues that it is the authority with which the West and Western authors define and conjure the Orient that is problematic. He maintains that the West and its creative and intellectual minds are convinced they understand the East better than it understands itself. Orientalism is a state of mind, it is an Enlightenment mode of thinking where everything can be classified and known—where the mysterious and the exotic can be made understandable, except when it is more pleasurable to imagine the other as so foreign that familiarity is impossible, which makes eroticization possible.

Fanon was one of the first critics to study the psychological impact of colonialism on colonial subjects. His 1952 publication of *Black Skin, White Masks* explores how whiteness becomes a commodity under colonialism, which people of color seek to both possess and emulate. He traces the psychological effects of colonialism to both men and women of color desiring white sexual and marital partners. For Fanon this is an example of how colonialism creates certain psychological distortions in people of color, specifically alienation from their own culture and selves. Fanon advocates reading
psychological symptoms such as these as signs of larger social patterns, and as the result of the psychological violence of colonialism.

Fanon theorized that under colonialism both the colonizer’s position and the colonized’s position is normalized, and the power hierarchy is essentialized. Fanon hoped to problematize the essentialization of the status quo by arguing that the colonial social context produces psyches and certain desires. For Fanon, a man of color’s desire for a white woman is a socially produced desire. However, his theorization of desire is complicated in two ways. First, Fanon relies on the Freudian conception of desire as essential and foundational, and secondly, he is willing to argue that men of color can act politically by possessing and/or violating whiteness through sexual relations with white women, but he is unwilling to see women of color as acting transgressively through relations with white men. His reluctance to see colonized women as political actors creates an important space where feminism and (post)colonial studies can inform one another.

Ann Stoler, in her article, “The Education of Desire”, critiques Fanon’s essentialization of desire and gender roles, and instead utilizes Foucault’s theory of desire, which holds that there is no “original desire”, but rather that desires are constructed through discourse. For Stoler, there is no primordial desire that is shaped and pushed into socially acceptable forms of expression, and she is critical of studies of colonial history, which explain colonialism as the manifestation of repressed Western desire. She argues that critiques of colonialism, which rely on essentialized notions of desire, oversimplify the colonial condition. Such analyses reduce colonial desire to sexual desire and ignore differences in power and the material benefits of colonialism for the
colonizers. Stoler points out that while Said utilizes a primarily Foucauldian analysis in his study of Orientalism, he still relies on Freud’s notion of projection to make his argument. For Stoler this is an example of how deeply entrenched Freudian concepts are with regards to (post)colonial studies.

Stoler complicates colonial theories of desire by giving examples of how the construction of whiteness was interrupted and mediated by class and gender in the colonies. She points out that lower class white men were expected to have sexual relations with women of color because of their lack of education and in order to satisfy their ‘carnal desires’. Upper-class men were not expected to mingle with women of color, and to do so was considered an affront to their ‘whiteness’. The strictures were even more severe for white women, who, if they desired or had relations with men of color, were no longer considered ‘white’. Stoler argues that discourses of desire vary with regards to class and gender, intricacies that essentialized notions of desire cannot account for. Similarly, Stoler argues that it is a mistake to read, “all desires as sexual ones” (192) and to reduce racism and colonialism to the repression and projection of Western sexual desires onto black bodies.

Stoler advocates reading nineteenth-century discourses of sex as recapitulating many of the discourses of race that circulated widely in both the previous centuries and in the colonialist period. For Stoler, then, it is difficult to straightforwardly distinguish racism, colonialism and sexual repression as separate discourses or to place any as foundational to the others. Her critique of homogenizing colonialist discourses into discourses of sexual repression creates an opportunity for critique of feminist discourses, which homogenize ‘third world women’.
Chandra Mohanty’s 1988 article, “Under Western Eyes” was one of the initial discursive critiques of Western feminism and its depictions of women from the ‘third world’. Mohanty is critical of what she sees as the “discursive colonialism” of Western feminism, which she argues characterizes all ‘third world’ women as dependent on men, especially vulnerable to patriarchal abuses and relies on essentialist notions of ‘woman’ for its theories and practices. Mohanty criticizes Western feminism for discursively characterizing ‘third world’ women as helpless victims without agency. According to Mohanty, this characterization creates a discursive situation where Western women are understood as ‘subjects’ and ‘the norm’, while subaltern women become the ‘homogenized other’. This recapitulates colonialist privilege and ways of seeing the world and does discursive violence to the ‘third world’ women Western feminism aims to ‘help’. Mohanty calls for more nuanced and complicated discourses and research projects, which take into account the differences among ‘third world’ women and takes seriously their different axes of privilege and discrimination.

Mohanty’s critique of Western feminism’s depiction of ‘third world’ women’s powerlessness with regards to oppressive patriarchy is also a critique of theories of monolithic power structures, where power flows from the ‘top’ to control the ‘bottom’. Aihwa Ong, in her article, “Colonialism and Modernity: Feminist Re-presentations of Women in Non-Western Societies”, is also critical of the Western feminist essentialization of ‘third world’ women. Ong is especially concerned with linear narratives of development, which she argues Western feminists utilize in their depictions and theorizations of subaltern women. Ong argues, “The status of non-Western women is analyzed and gauged according to a set of legal, political and social benchmarks” (110),
which she critiques as emphasizing Western goals at the expense of recognizing alternative and/or native goals for development.

Ong is also critical of constructions of modernity, which place it as the moment of ‘liberation’ for women. Under this construction, ‘third world’ women are conceived of as living in a pre-modern era, and entrance into a modern world and economy is seen as the goal of ‘development’. Ong critiques this as a “magical” belief in the power of modernity to emancipate women from oppressive gender roles. She is concerned with feminist discourses that locate ‘third world’ women as ‘tradition bound’ instead of recognizing how they live between and within the tensions of traditional ways of life and modern ways of being in the world.

Ong’s criticism of the dichotomy set up by Western feminists between, ‘we, who are liberated’ and ‘the rest, who are not’ is also a critique of colonialist missionary discourses. Western feminist ‘development agendas’ are plagued by assumptions about what does and does not count as women’s development, which in turn silences native/Other ways of conceiving of development. Ong suggests that Western feminists should, “jettison our conceptual baggage and open up the possibilities for mutual but partial exchange” (115). For Ong, the ‘partial understandings’ accomplished through mutual exchange not characterized by Western notions of linear development are more productive and useful than large-scale theories, which take as foundational Western cultural superiority.

Similarly, post-colonial feminists like Marnia Lazreg are also critical of unproblematic constructions of ‘other’ women, which view victimization as primary in the subject formations of subaltern women. Like Ong, Lazreg is critical of Western
notions of modernity versus tradition, which usually characterize religious Muslim women as pre-modern. Lazreg advocates abandoning Western feminist scripts of liberation, because she contends they reinforce colonial discourses rather than challenging them.

Mohanty and Ong advocate abandoning Western feminist notions of development, which they argue always begin with the assumption of ‘third world’ victimization. They advocate challenging colonial discourses by allowing subaltern women to define their own goals for development, instead of being circumscribed by Western feminist constructions of development. However, Ong argues, “Despite my critical remarks, I remain convinced that feminists, because of their privileged positions as members of hegemonic powers, should speak out against female oppression at home and overseas” (114-115). For Ong, the dangers of not ‘speaking for others’ are more treacherous than continuing to do so, although these attempts at representation will inevitably be fraught with colonialist discourses. In order to counteract colonialist thinking within feminist studies of ‘developing’ nations and subaltern women, Stoler, Mohanty and Ong all promote recognition that ‘partial truths and understandings’ are preferable to all-encompassing theories, because they are less likely to reinscribe dominant discourses, and they allow for different “visions of the future” (116). In the next section I explore the ways in which Hirsi Ali’s work and specifically the film Submission close down rather than open up different visions of the future.
Submission: Available Narratives and the Material Repercussions of Discourse

Submission can be seen as reinscribing a colonialist view of Islam in multiple ways and disparaging Ong’s ideas of varying futures. Although within the academy the ‘author is dead’, Said argues for the re-legitimatization of taking the author’s intentionality into account. He contends that it is important to take an author’s positionality into account when thinking through the intellectual and material repercussions of a work. The film was created by Hirsi Ali as a direct challenge to women’s place in Islam and as a challenge to what she argues is the Dutch public’s blind acceptance of a form of multiculturalism that allows the continued subordination of Somali and Muslim women in Holland. Hirsi Ali’s arguments, however, are problematic because they reinforce and reinscribe dominant discourses of the Other that are prevalent in Holland and the West. For example, the following post from ifilm.org illuminates how those who support the film Submission often support it because of their own belief in racist and ethnocentric discourses that the film can easily be interpreted as recapitulating.

The problems are huge--here is a SUPER-liberated society of people who have solved HUGE human problems by legalizing prostitution, decriminalizing drugs, allowing abortion, etc. Add to this mix a premodern group of religious fundamentalists, and what do you expect the native artists to start making? Good, nice films about the backward "donkey fuckers"? I applaud van Gogh's courage and his complete and utter disregard for playing with kid gloves... What would Muslims do if Dutch people showed up in Arabia and started acting like they were in Holland? (When in Holland 11/17/04)

Other similar posts berate Muslim women who posted e-mails claiming the film is not an accurate representation of their treatment under Islam. One respondent rebukes Muslim women who live in the West for challenging the veracity of Submission because they live under the protections of the West, and have no idea what it is like to live in a Muslim
country. All of these posts fit within the available narrative of the West being ‘liberated’, ‘freedom loving’ and democratic and the Muslim world being ‘backwards’ and undemocratic. These discourses support the easy dichotomies Said urged us to move away from, and buttress the ideas that Muslim and third world women are victims in need of Western help.

In the aftermath of Van Gogh’s murder, these discourses also illustrate the material repercussions of available narratives. Said argued that discourses always have material consequences, and Van Gogh’s murder is the result of the strain between two discourses that cannot communicate across the cultural divide. For the respondent above, it is impossible to imagine that Muslims would be offended by Submission, when to her the problem of women’s oppression under Islam is obvious. Living in a ‘post-modern world of flexible citizenship’, it is easy to imagine we understand each other’s narratives, but Van Gogh’s murder is an example of the fault lines that exist within cultural understandings. It also illuminates how easy it is to retreat into available narratives when conflict does arise. The murder of Van Gogh by Bouyeri is a significant moment, because it offers the opportunity to analyze the ways in which discourses of the Other are constructed by available narratives that can produce horrific outcomes in the material world. Van Gogh’s murder offers us an important opportunity to reflect on the costs of limiting the narratives we find acceptable to the ones we already know.
Muslim Women Respond to Ayaan Hirsi Ali

The easily recognizable and recurring narrative of ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ and the West as liberated and Muslims as backwards strikes a very negative chord with the Somali women I spent time with during my fieldwork. I remember one interesting conversation with a young woman about Hirsi Ali who said, “Well, I don’t think she should be killed for what she is saying, but I disagree with her”. The comment points to the strongly negative feelings towards Hirsi Ali and her criticisms of Islam that are largely held by the Somalis I interacted with in the Columbus community. She is universally known and almost universally disliked by the Somalis I know, and during two of my interviews, women specifically referenced her as misrepresenting Somali and Muslim women in the Western media and reinforcing negative representations of them(selves) as oppressed and subjugated. They specifically wanted to challenge her representation of Muslim women’s status through the way they lived their lives: as devout Muslims, but women who were empowered through education and who made independent decisions about their lives.

In August of 2007, an international conference dedicated to Somali Studies was held at OSU. At this conference I was able to meet and interact with many Somali women who are active politically and socially within the Somali diaspora. One woman, Zubeda, who is a leader in an international union, traveled to the conference from Canada. She shared with me an experience that she characterized as extremely negative, and based upon the type of representations of Somali women and Muslim women perpetuated by Hirsi Ali.

Zubeda attended a conference in Canada about women’s rights as the representative from her union, which is a union dominated by female workers. At the
conference she told me she was ‘attacked’ by Canadian feminists for wearing the hijab. She told me that she tried to engage in conversation with them and explain that she chooses to wear the hijab, but she reports they would not listen to her. One woman commented to Zubeda that her husband must require her to wear it, but that she should liberate herself because she lives in Canada and does not have to conform to oppressive norms. Zubeda told the entire group that her husband does not require her to wear the hijab, and emphasized again that it is her free-will choice to wear it. The other women did not believe her. They continued to challenge her for wearing the veil, and told her that it is a symbol of women’s oppression and that if she is working for women’s empowerment she should remove it. Eventually, Zubeda left the room and did not speak with the women again. She was angry and frustrated that they would not take seriously her claim that she chooses to wear the hijab.

This incident is troubling and problematic because it is an example of Western feminists and Muslim feminists becoming alienated from one another because of the discourses surrounding the veil. Zubeda was very clear that she did not want to work or interact with these women again, because of their denial of the possibility that she is an agent in her own life and is not controlled by the men who surround her. As she was telling me the story, her husband approached where we were sitting, and she exclaimed loudly, “Ahhh, here comes the oppressor himself!” Zubeda has an excellent sense of humor, but her anger at the experience was tangible.
Other Muslim women have reacted with combativeness\textsuperscript{11} to Hirsi Ali’s claims. Fareena Alam wrote a review of Hirsi Ali’s other book, \textit{The Caged Virgin}, which is a set of essays that challenges the position of women and specifically women’s sexuality within Islam. Alam, a magazine editor and British Muslim, challenges Hirsi’s claims:

“It's obviously what I've been waiting for all my life: a secular crusader--armed with Enlightenment philosophy, the stamp of the liberal establishment and the promise of sexual freedom--swooping into my harem and liberating me from my "ignorant", "uncritical", "dishonest" and "oppressed" Muslim existence (54).

Alam critiques Hirsi Ali for reinforcing negative representations of Muslims, and specifically her representations of Muslim immigrants in the West. Alam claims that as a Muslim living in the West, she is just as much ‘Western’ as she is ‘Muslim’, but she is very concerned with how Hirsi Ali’s claims reinforce Western cultural superiority.

Alam shares Hirsi Ali’s concerns about issues like forced marriage, genital mutilation, lack of education and “the obsession with static gender roles” (54), but she argues that Hirsi Ali “makes some thoughtful points, yet they are lost among the inaccuracies, exaggerations and omissions. To demonstrate Islam's obsession with female sexuality, for example, she quotes the Koranic verse calling on women to behave modestly, but conveniently omits the first part, which demands the same of men” (54).

Alam does not obscure the challenges facing women in the Muslim world, but she does not accept Hirsi Ali’s thesis that Islam is inherently anti-liberal and anti-woman. She accuses Hirsi Ali of denying Muslim women the spiritual support they need to combat the injustices they face.

\textsuperscript{11} In a more extreme example, Dutch newspapers have reported that a group of immigrant Muslim women have vowed to assassinate Hirsi Ali claiming that it will be much more compelling if she is killed by a Muslim woman than a Muslim man.
In a radio interview in the US on National Public Radio (NPR 2/12/07), Hirsi Ali was asked if she supported Muslim women who argue for women’s rights using religious arguments based on the Quran. Hirsi Ali replied that she does support their efforts, but cannot participate in them because she is no longer a ‘believer’. She argued that within any social movement, there are radicals and moderates and that she represents a radical perspective and other women (and men) are more moderate in their criticisms. Hirsi Ali draws inspiration from Western feminists like Mary Wollestencraft who were considered radicals in their time. She argues that it took more than 100 years for women in Europe and the US to fight for suffrage after The Vindication of the Rights of Woman was published, and “I knew that freeing Muslim women from their mental cage would take time, too. I didn’t expect immediate waves of organized support among Muslim women. People who are conditioned to meekness, almost to the point where they have no mind of their own, sadly have no ability to organize, or will to express their opinion” (295). Hirsi Ali argues that Muslim women are not victims of false consciousness, but that most have been beaten into submission and have “no will of their own”. She seeks to represent women she argues are voiceless, and wonders why she did not become one of them. In the epilogue of her book, she tells a story which reflects her passion for radically speaking out about women’s rights. In 2005, when she was featured in Time magazine, she went to a store to purchase a copy of the magazine. However, the Time magazine they were selling was not the one in which she was featured, but rather was focused on poverty in Africa. She looked at an image of a thin woman with three children who she describes as “hopeless” looking, and wonders why she is not that woman. She believes that she has been “lucky”, and that “in some sense [she] owes them something” (Hirsi Ali
Hirsi Ali’s experience while looking at this photograph is a direct contrast to an interview I had with a Somali woman who is well-known in the Columbus community and who spoke to me about her reactions regarding similar photographs.

The woman I interviewed told me that she is angered and saddened by images like the one described by Hirsi Ali. She agrees with Hirsi Ali that these images do make women appear hopeless, but she argues that they reinforce negative perceptions of Africans and Muslim women in the Western media. She told me, “The worst images are the ones with women and children with flies covering their faces”. She is angered by these images precisely because they reinforce notions that Africans and Muslims are in need of Western help.

Hirsi Ali is not the representative voice of a homogenous community of oppressed Somali Muslim women. However, like Sanchez-Casal feels a sense of “blasphemy” in her critiques of Menchu’s narrative, I experience conflicts in my criticisms of Hirsi Ali’s narrative. While reading Hirsi Ali’s life story it is difficult to deny that her experiences of female genital mutilation, forced marriage, and economic disempowerment should be concerns for feminists globally. She utilizes the feminist moniker, the personal is political to its fullest potential in Infidel by relating her individual life experiences to political and social problems in the Muslim world. She has been accused of internalized self-hatred and wanting ‘to be white’ by her critics. In response, she says,

“This is a tiresome argument. Tell me, is freedom only for white people?...Life is better in Europe than it is in the Muslim world because human relations are better, and one reason human relations are better is that in the West, life on earth is valued in the here and now, and individuals enjoy rights and freedoms that are
recognized and protected by the state. To accept subordination and abuse because Allah willed it—that, for me would be self-hatred” (348).

Hirsi Ali’s voice is clear, concise and thoroughly feminist. As a native Other, her narrative carries authority as an ‘authentic’ account of women’s oppression under Islam. However, many other Somali women who also inhabit the subject position of native Other have contradicted Hirsi Ali’s arguments when speaking with me. In Joan Scott’s essay, “The Evidence of Experience”, she argues, “Subjects are constituted discursively and experience is a linguistic event” (93). Hirsi Ali’s narrative utilizes a modernist view of identity, not a postmodern subjecthood created through discourse. Her narrative brings to light debates within feminist theory between materialist feminist theories and poststructuralist feminist theorizations of power.

Materialist feminist theorizations of power have historically sought to understand how and in which ways women are oppressed within patriarchy (a practice that Hirsi Ali utilizes). In these theories, power is understood to be held by men with detrimental material effects for women. Poststructuralists have introduced theories that critique totalizing top-down theories of power and posit that interventions in language through challenges to hegemonic discourses best serve feminist theorizing. In Michèle Barrett’s essay, “Words and Things: Materialism and Method in Contemporary Feminist Analysis”, she explains the debates within feminist theory surrounding poststructuralist conceptualizations of power and materialist theories of power. Barrett argues that poststructuralist theories of power critique theoretical universalisms, and therefore directly challenge materialist feminist theories of power, which have historically been associated with Marxism. Poststructuralist theories of power also undermine
Enlightenment modes of thinking such as rationality and objectivity, and instead utilize theories of language that argue that ‘things’ are constructed through discourses, and that discourses actually form or ‘speak’ their subjects (people). In this way, poststructural theories of power do not provide all-encompassing theories that explain oppression in terms of broad categories and simple dichotomies (for example, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat), but argue for specificity and an understanding of identities as fluid and not fixed by inherent characteristics.

The poststructuralist critique of ‘essential’ identities challenges Marxist feminist concepts like Nancy Hartsock’s idea of the feminist standpoint. Hartsock theorizes that women are the ‘proletariat’ of patriarchy and therefore women’s knowledge of the costs of patriarchy are concrete, grounded in experience and represent ‘truth’ in comparison with patriarchal and capitalist ideology (23-25). Much feminist poststructuralist work does not use Hartsock’s feminist standpoint, but critiques it as an oversimplified theory that essentializes women. Feminist poststructuralists moved away from utilizing all-encompassing theories of power in their work towards analyzing specific discourses within individual texts. In contrast, Barrett argues that analyses of specific texts do not adequately explain ideology and its effects in the material world. For Barrett, close readings of texts do not address the material conditions works are produced within, or the material and ideological environments in which they are received. She is also critical of the deconstruction of identity categories like ‘woman’, because she claims this serves no materialist function, and could lead to the elimination of the common goals and struggles of feminism (100-102)
Barrett’s argument has been followed by other critiques of poststructuralist feminist work, such as Teresa L. Ebert’s work *Ludic Feminism and After*. Ebert is critical of feminist work that offers linguistic intervention in dominant discourses as a form of legitimate materialist theorizing and praxis. For Ebert, feminist theorizing should be politically engaged with the material conditions of women’s lives. Like Barrett, Ebert does not advocate abandoning discursive critique, but rather is in favor of critiques that extend beyond individual texts (44).

Hirsi Ali’s text is a discourse of the Other produced by a ‘native’ Other, and it is a text concerned with the material realities of women’s lives. I believe that Hirsi Ali would concur with Ebert that feminist theory should address the material conditions of women’s lives, and in her work she makes impassioned arguments for the importance of doing so for Muslim women in particular (like documenting honor killings). She rejects arguments that she is reinforcing Orientalist and colonialist discourses through her work, arguing that even if her work is used by racists and Islamophobes to support their ideologies, “That’s not relevant, because when something is true, it is true” (Hirsi Ali 275).

Is it True? Are Muslim Women Oppressed? Heterogeneous Voices from the Somali Diaspora

Hirsi Ali’s narrative relies on truth telling as a narrative device to legitimate her arguments about the position of women in Somali culture and Muslim women under Islam. Critics of Hirsi Ali often attack the veracity of her life narrative by claiming certain aspects of it are not ‘true’. Similarly, Hirsi Ali is also criticized for reinforcing negative perceptions of Muslims and for making arguments about the status of Muslim women that others, including Muslim women, argue are “not true”. For example, many of
my interviewees share the sentiment that Hirsi Ali’s claims about Islam are inaccurate, and they offer different versions of reality and the ‘truth’ about Somali Muslim women’s lives based on their own experiences. Their version of the ‘truth’ often directly contradicts Hirsi Ali’s arguments. Truth and truth telling figure prominently within Hirsi Ali’s narrative and the controversies that surround it. Hesford and Kozel’s challenge to critically reflect on uses of ‘the real’ in feminist representations is especially important when the ‘truth’ is contested by and within the community that is being represented.

Hirsi Ali’s narrative conveys clear theses which she supports with evidence from her own life experiences, and she claims to give readers the Truth about Muslims women’s lives. In *Infidel* she articulates a meta-narrative that encompasses the position of Muslim women globally, rather than arguing that her experiences and evidence relates specifically to Somali women and immigrant Muslim women in the Netherlands.

While her experiences as an immigrant are localized in Holland she argues that the experiences of Muslim immigrants in the Netherlands raise questions about the validity of multiculturalism in the West as a whole. She does not account for the fact that there are multiple ways to interpret and practice multiculturalism, and that perhaps the problems of Muslim immigrant communities in Holland are not universal. Poststructuralist feminists like Ong and Spivak would argue that Hirsi Ali’s narrative obscures Muslim women’s realities rather than illuminating the truth of their experiences. Hirsi Ali provides readers with an all-encompassing theory of women’s oppression under Islam that she argues is universally True. As a result, Hirsi Ali’s claims discursively reinforce Orientalism, but materialist feminists would want to explore Hirsi Ali’s claims.
of epistemic privilege and her arguments about the tangible realities of Muslim immigrant women’s lives.

I believe that it is most productive for feminists to utilize both materialist and poststructuralist theories of power because together they help us to consider how social meanings are assigned to women’s bodies and how these cultural tropes can lead to oppressive material consequences in women’s lives. In the case of Hirsi Ali’s testimonial, *Infidel*, feminist poststructuralist theories of power help us to identify the top-down theory of power that operates in the work and how the work reinforces Orientalism. However, this recognition does not fully help feminist readers to answer the material question; but is it True? The empirical evidence Hirsi Ali provides about honor killings in Holland cannot be overlooked, denied or justified because her narrative reinforces Orientalism. Honor killings should clearly be a concern for Dutch feminists as well as feminists globally, but there is an empirical problem with Hirsi Ali’s arguments that is very important to illuminate. We do not know if her claims are equally applicable to Muslim immigrant populations in other Western countries, and she provides no evidence that they are. It is a feminist imperative to examine the impediments to women’s full equality in society (which is a materialist feminist perspective), but we should also be alert to the dangers of making universal claims about women’s lives based on one particular example. One of the major contributions of feminist poststructuralist theory is to point out the danger inherent in meta-narratives of oppression, which, while seductive because they provide clear answers to who constitutes the ‘oppressed’ and who are the oppressors, obscure the complexities of power relations in specific times and in specific locations.
I do not question the veracity of Hirsi Ali’s narrative, but I do challenge her interpretation of it. However, I would not have the ability to challenge her interpretation of Somali women’s life experiences without the benefit of my fieldwork. The Somali women I interacted with provided different interpretations of their life experiences than does Hirsi Ali. My main concern with Hirsi Ali’s narrative lies with her reinforcement of the discourse of ‘us’ vs. ‘them’. She claims that Muslims make this distinction, but she clearly reinforces it through her arguments that the West is enlightened and the Muslim world is ‘backwards’. Through my fieldwork experiences, I came to find that Somali women in Columbus are invested in challenging traditional Somali gender norms, but feel alienated from Hirsi Ali because of the way she discursively constructs Islam as the ‘problem’ and the primary apparatus of women’s oppression which needs to be overcome.

During my fieldwork, I had several experiences which contradicted Hirsi Ali’s claims of Somali Muslim women’s status in their culture as completely subjugated. One such experience occurred in the spring of 2007 during an event which brought together students from a local college preparatory high school and newly arrived refugees. The students were visiting a non-government organization (NGO) that resettles refugees in the Columbus area. The newly arrived refugees attend an ‘orientation’ class that teaches them about the practicalities of life in the US. The Somali instructor of the course teaches students in Somali about banking, healthcare, schools and work life in the US. The high school students were visiting the NGO to learn more about refugees in central Ohio, and time was set aside for a question and answer session between the newly arrived refugees and the students.
There were approximately 10 refugees in attendance at the orientation class when the high school students visited. Most of the refugees were Somali (two were from Liberia) and 7 of the 10 were women. When the time came for the high school students to ask questions of the refugees several hands went up. One of the first questions asked of the refugees was, “How do you like living in the US?” All of the questions had to go through translation from English to Somali. A Somali man stood up to answer the question. He spoke passionately in Somali for several minutes and his answer was translated by the Somali instructor periodically. First, the man said that he loved living in the US. Tears came to his eyes as he shared with everyone that he had not been able to walk outside without fear of harm for 15 years, and that he cherishes his security in the US. Then he pointed directly at me while talking. I was curious to know what he was saying because I did not know him and really did not know what he could be saying as he repeatedly pointed at me. Finally, the translator told everyone that even though the man loved the US, he was afraid to say ‘hello’ or attempt to talk to people like me because I might call the police on him. He was using me as an example of someone, a(n) (white) American, who he feels alienated from. Eventually, he made everyone laugh as he made the sound of sirens that would accompany the police if he approached someone ‘like me’ on the street.

This man was newly arrived in the US (within the past 3 months), but he already felt alienated from white and possibly also African Americans. I worry that Hirsi Ali’s work, *Infidel*, serves to discursively and materially further alienate Somalis from native born Americans rather than build cultural bridges. After the Somali man sat down, a very articulate young student stood up and asked very carefully how the position of Somali
girls and women will change post-resettlement in the US. The same Somali man stood up
to answer the question. He said that he believes it is natural for parents to be more
protective of girls than of boys, and that he would continue to be more protective of his
daughters in the US. He specifically mentioned that he did not want his daughters to play
sports. While he was talking, a Somali woman started talking loudly with the woman
sitting next to her. Many of the high school students, both boys and girls spoke up and
agreed with the Somali man that it is ‘natural’ for parents to be more protective of girls
than of boys. Just when it seemed there was cross-cultural consensus that girls should be
more restricted in their behavior (for their own protection), I broke in and asked what the
Somali woman was saying loudly to her friend. The instructor informed me that she was
telling her friend that she didn’t know what this man was talking about, and that her
daughters could and should do as they please in the US. Then he added, “By the way, that
man is her husband”.

This example from my fieldwork illuminates the tangible realities of both cultural
alienation and what I call the heterogeneity of the Somali community regarding their
views on gender and women’s place in society. I did not witness consensus within the
community regarding its perspective on women’s place, but rather encountered
disagreements and contradictions. In the following chapter, I will share more examples
of the different perspectives among Somali women regarding gender roles which serve to
elucidate the multiplicity of perspectives within the community and to challenge the
representation of Somali Muslim women as inherently oppressed and subjugated.
In 1999 the daunting question, *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* was posed by Susan Moller Okin. Okin argues that multiculturalism can be ‘bad’ for women if it serves as a rationale for discriminating against minority women who live in Western democratic societies. Okin faces charges of ethnocentricism and Orientalism in response to her essay, yet argues that allowing ‘group rights’ for minority cultures often means implicitly agreeing to the continued subordination of women within those cultures. For Okin, the political correctness of multiculturalism married with continued misogyny within Western culture allows discussions of ‘group rights’ to flourish.

**Women’s Rights vs. Group Rights**

Okin’s concerns about group rights is not only a theoretical debate, but also a public policy debate that has occurred in many Western democratic states. For example,
the current Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Rowan Williams, stating in February of 2008 that he believes that the adoption of some aspects of Sharia law in the United Kingdom is inevitable. Dr. Williams was heavily criticized for his comments, but he argues that Muslims should not have to choose between "the stark alternatives of cultural loyalty or state loyalty" (2/8/08 BBC News On-Line). BBC News reported on a case involving Somali immigrants living in the UK who utilized an informal Somali court to settle a dispute. The case involved a group of Somali boys who were arrested for stabbing another Somali teenager. The victim’s family told the police they did not want to press charges, and that they would handle the matter outside of court. The suspects were then released on bail, and the perpetrators and victim met with elders who punished the perpetrators by requiring them to compensate the victim with an apology and an exchange of goods. A witness to the proceedings reported that all of the uncles and fathers of both parties were present at the elders’ meeting and all agreed on the solution together.

A spokesperson for the British police (Scotland Yard) claimed that it is common for the police not to proceed with prosecution in assault cases if the victim does not want to press charges. However, the spokesperson went on to add that in the event of domestic violence or rape, they would be more likely to prosecute the crime without the support of the victim. Okin would be critical of both Archbishop Williams’ claim that a form of Sharia law should be introduced in the UK (or in the US), and she would also critique the actions of the British police in the assault case. Okin would question the idea that the

12 Sharia law is the legal system under Islam. It is derived from the Qur’an and the life of the Prophet Mohammed.
police would be more likely to move forward in a rape or domestic violence situation given that these crimes most often occur in the private sphere and are severely underreported and under-prosecuted. Her worries about the true intentions of sanctioning ‘group rights’ seem to bear fruit in this quote given by Dilwar Hussain of the Islamic Foundation, "We are not seeking the introduction of a new system - absolutely not. But there are some areas, issues around families for example, where many Muslims would like to be able to find solutions according to what they believe. That is not incompatible with our law" (BBC News On Line 2/8/08). Furthermore, Ibrahim Mogra of the Muslim Council of Britain supports this point of view by arguing, "We're looking at a very small aspect of Sharia for Muslim families…with regards to their marriage, divorce, inheritance, custody of children and so forth” (BBC News On Line 2/8/08). These “small aspects of family law” are important cites of empowerment or disempowerment for women who have historically been circumscribed to the home and to their roles as wives and mothers.

The elders who met to resolve the assault case involving Somali teenagers were all male, and Okin rejects arguments that culturally based customs (like excluding women from leadership positions within a community) can be justified on the basis of ‘tradition’. Matters of family law are especially worrying for Okin who argues that cultural groups seeking a special set of rights often do so in order to maintain patriarchal control and dominance over girls and women.\footnote{For example, Okin points out that successful legal cases utilizing ‘cultural defenses’ most often focus on gender. She states, “Indeed, the four types of cases in which cultural defenses have been used most successfully are: (1) kidnap and rape by Hmong men who claim that their actions are part of their cultural practice of \textit{zij poj mia}, or “marriage by capture”; (2) wife-murder by immigrants from Asian and Middle Eastern countries whose wives have either committed adultery or treated their husbands in a servile way; (3) conviction of a husband who killed his wife in a fit of jealous rage because he suspected her of being unfaithful; and (4) conviction of a husband who killed his wife because her family had refused to give her back to him.\textsuperscript{13}}
I would like to challenge Okin’s assumptions about the gender relations in minority cultures in the West, and to challenge the tone of her essay, which is severe and possibly offensive to minority women who might otherwise share and support her viewpoints. For example, Okin begins her essay discussing the changes in expectations for immigrant communities from assimilation to the majority culture to the very recent (since the 1960s) ideas of cultural pluralism and respect for multiculturalism that are now pervasive. Okin claims, “This assimilationist expectation is now often considered oppressive, and many Western countries are seeking to devise new policies that are more responsive to persistent cultural differences” (9). Okin is antagonistic towards these ‘persistent cultural differences’ and in reading through her essay, there are strong threads of ethnocentricism when she assumes that Western democracies are inherently more liberatory spaces for women—why else would multiculturalism be bad for women? Okin’s essay seems to claim that Western cultures are always much better places for women than the cultures of Others.

In the same volume, Azizah Y. Al-Hibri, argues that Okin’s essay is “written from the perspective of the dominant cultural “I,” a Western point of view burdened with immigrant problems and the human rights conflicts they engender” (41). She goes on to argue that Okin believes that some cultures are worthy of extinction because of their treatment of women\(^\text{14}\), and she is highly critical of Okin’s viewpoints on religion and

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\(^{14}\) In Okin’s reply at the end of *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* she claims that she does not argue that any culture is worthy of extinction. She supports multiculturalism in education and in order to create cross-

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Islam in particular. Al-Hibri, a Muslim, goes into great detail outlining the differences between Christian belief and Islamic belief concerning the creation of man and woman and their fall from God’s grace\textsuperscript{15}. She argues that Okin’s ignorance of the differences between Biblical passages and passages in the Qur’an highlight her inability to recognize significant differences in religious belief and is also an example of “Okin speaking in her dominant voice about the \textit{inessential Other}” (42, emphasis original). Al-Hibri is critical of secular feminists who ignore the importance of religious belief in women’s lives, and sees parallels between Okin’s arguments and colonialist arguments that were used by colonizers to justify their domination\textsuperscript{16} of Other cultures.

It is difficult to think of an immigrant population more ripe for entry into this debate than Somali refugees living in Columbus, Ohio. Somalis traditionally have practiced all of the cultural customs that concern Okin; polygamous marriage, arranged marriage, early marriage for girls, female genital mutilation, seclusion of women from the public sphere, and wearing of the hijab. Somalis are also almost universally Muslim, which according to Al-Hibri is an underlying concern in Okin’s essay with regard to immigrant groups. In this chapter, I will share my experiences completing fieldwork in cultural understandings, but does not support special rights for groups that explicitly discriminate against women.

\textsuperscript{15} According to Al-Hibri, “the Qur’an nowhere says that Eve was created out of part of Adam. In fact, the Qur’an clearly states that males and females were created by God from the same \textit{nafis} (soul or spirit), and that the most honored among them in the sight of God is the most pious. The story of the fall of Adam is also different in the Qur’an. \textit{Both} Adam \textit{and} Eve were tempted by Satan, and both succumbed” (42, emphasis original).

\textsuperscript{16} The title of Al-Hibri’s essay is “Is Western Patriarchal Feminism Good for Third World/Minority Women?” Al-Hibri argues that Okin’s arguments are akin to patriarchal justifications for dominating and controlling Others.
the Somali community, and how I have come to understand and engage with the
question; Is multiculturalism bad for women?

**Between Orientalism and Feminism: Somali Women and Muslim Identity**

In the spring of 2005, I attended a conference held at the medical center at The Ohio State University (OSU) concerning immigrant health issues. One of the speakers was a young Somali woman, someone I had met on two occasions prior to attending her presentation. Zahra was and is the only Somali woman who identified herself as a feminist to me during the course of my fieldwork. Zahra had completed graduate work in Women’s Studies, and she has studied with Cythia Enloe, a well-known radical feminist. Zahra’s presentation was cut short because of time constraints and the fact that her presentation included a history of Somalia as well as providing information on Somali refugee’s health needs. Zahra was very clear in her presentation that Somali culture was/is thoroughly patriarchal and that women operate under certain constraints as a result of the traditional practices of Somali culture. Zahra referred to the fact that Somalis have traditionally practiced female genital mutilation (FGM), and that it continues to be a popular practice among refugees in Kenya as well as among Somalis currently living in Somalia.

Zahra referred to the practice of infibulation, in which portions of the outer labia are removed and sewn together leaving only very small holes to allow urine and menses to pass through as ‘female genital mutilation’. The dialogues, controversies and debates within feminism surrounding the practices known collectively and alternately as ‘female genital mutilation’, ‘female circumcision’, and ‘female genital cutting’ are well-known.
Alice Walker’s film *Warrior Marks*\(^\text{17}\), a film describing female genital mutilation in Africa was a ‘call to arms’ directed towards creating feminist activism around stopping these practices. Afterwards, Walker was criticized and even condemned as an ethnocentric Western feminist who overstepped her cultural boundaries in critiquing Other’s cultures. As a result, this critique is felt deeply by Western feminists working with groups who perform these practices. I was keenly aware of the risks in broaching this topic with my subjects, less they regard that as my only point of interest.

The perils of this subject led me away from discussing it with subjects unless they brought it up to me. In the winter of 2005, I attended another lecture about Women’s Human Rights at OSU, and one of the topics was FGM/FGC. The debates within feminism about the subject were brought to light by a contentious dialogue that took place between the presenter (a woman affiliated with the United Nations) and a feminist (self-identified) audience participant. After the woman’s presentation and after we watched an indigenous film aimed at ending FGM, the debate began. The feminist audience member strongly and passionately presented her argument that the problem was not the practice of FGC (her term for the practice), but the West’s ethnocentric arrogance and culturally imperialist viewpoint. She gave an example of a Muslim woman living in Canada choosing to wear the hijab, and seeing it as a source of liberation (from Western beauty norms and the male gaze) and as celebration of her cultural and religious affiliations.

\(^{17}\) While I regard Walker’s film as an example of ethnocentrism, her film did raise awareness about a topic that still concerns feminists today. Also, many of the Somali women with whom I spoke about this topic agreed that the practice should be discontinued.
Currently, in the post 9/11 West the symbols ubiquitously associated with women’s oppression are the veil and female genital mutilation. The wage gap, while a significant feminist issue does not ‘grab’ the attention of the vast majority of American or Westernized minds like the foreboding image of a covered woman, who may or may not be genitally mutilated. The Orientalist implications of this mis-en-scene, especially for Somali refugees is significant and affects the kind of care they receive in medical situations. The white young feminist’s passionately argued statements coupled two of the practices feminists have historically criticized as inherently oppressive to women; the veil and FGM. However, these feminist critiques are now heavily criticized as ethnocentric and as supporting Orientalism.

Zahra’s audience were doctors, medical students and nurses who were likely to have interactions with Somali patients. However, during her talk she did not emphasize how doctors’ ethnocentric assumptions about Somalis may affect their interactions with patients or criticize the level of care they currently provide for their Somali patients. Instead, Zahra focused on how Somali patriarchal families may interfere with a patient’s care. For example, Zahra explained that Somali women may not speak directly with their male doctors or may request to call their husband/father/brother before agreeing to any procedures or forms of medical treatment. Zahra’s critical attitude towards these cultural practices was apparent, however she did inform her audience of the importance of being aware of and culturally sensitive to these issues in order to provide Somali women with the best care possible.

During the course of her presentation, it did not seem that Zahra was concerned that she might be reinforcing negative ideas about Somalis that many in her audience may
already hold. Instead, the approach she took was to point out the problems that inevitably occur between American doctors and their Somali patients based on cultural differences. However, most of the cultural differences she pointed out (as listed above) relied on women’s position within Somali culture and family structure and implied a definite critique of women’s traditional positions and status within Somali culture. Zahra, while not among the most well-known Somali community members I interacted with, is well-known by well-educated, young, middle class Somalis. One young woman, Amina, with whom I interacted with over a period of years knows Zahra and is critical of her stance.

Amina is someone also interested in helping to foster cultural awareness about Somalis to medical professionals, but does not openly or publicly criticize Somali culture in the way that Zahra has done. Zahra is a renegade in terms of her open critiques of the patriarchal relations that dominate Somali culture and the ways in which the patriarchal bargain does not adequately address women’s needs, especially post-resettlement in the United States. Zahra’s presentation also contrasts with another professional, Ali, whose responsibilities at the NGO where he worked included being a cultural liaison between Somalis and the facilities responsible for elder care in the central Ohio area. He often gave presentations at nursing homes and for hospice professionals about the cultural differences between Somalis and Americans. A handout he prepared for one of his presentations outlined in bullet form many of the same issues that Zahra’s presentation discussed. However, the emphasis in his work was on how Somali culture is much more filial and family oriented than American culture. For example, he also mentioned that a Somali woman may want to get advice from or consult male members of her family before making medical decisions, but rather than stressing that this was a result of
centuries of the patriarchal oppression of women, he simply stated, “Somali men are traditionally the heads of the household”. The implication of his statement and presentation is that as a result of Somali cultural heritage, it is simply logical that women may seek out male counsel when making medical decisions. Thus, he does not challenge Somali cultural heritage in the way that Zahra or even Amina does.

Ali, Zahra and Amina exist on a continuum of challenging women’s traditional place in Somali society. Ali is at one end of the continuum, representing someone who clearly understands the traditional roles of women and men in Somali society and does not seek to challenge them. Zahra’s point on the continuum lies farthest from Ali, because she actively seeks to challenge traditional gendered norms, and Amina lies somewhere in between these two points. I do not see her as clearly the dividing line, rather I believe she lies closer on the continuum to Zahra. I realize that I have set up a gendered continuum, placing the man within the realm of continuing tradition and the women as challenging it. However, I have met and interviewed both men and women who would not easily fall on their gendered half of the continuum, as I have outlined it above. I have met Somali women, both young and old, who take pride in maintaining strict adherence to traditional Somali gendered norms, and I have met men who are so critical of traditional gendered norms they would exist on the continuum beyond Zahra’s point on it. Also, because of my long term interactions with members of the Somali community, I have seen changes over time in the ways that people interact in cross-gender meetings.

For example, one man, whom I have known for seven years, never shook hands with women. Therefore, I never attempted to shake hands with him while greeting him. I
ran into him at a wedding in the summer of 2007, and was shocked when he extended his hand for a handshake. The handshake was not quick or awkward, rather he shook my hand for a longer than normal time, while looking me directly in the eyes. I have always liked and admired this man, but I was taken aback by what seemed to me to be a sudden change in behavior. I remarked on the handshake to another male informant, who knew the man and was also at the wedding. The second informant was also surprised, but told me that the man had recently made a comment to him to the effect that “he was tired of all of these Islamic fundamentalists taking over”. The second man thought that his change in behavior may have something to do with this comment.

During the course of my fieldwork handshaking served as a constant source of information about cultural differences. Early in my fieldwork, a male friend of mine visited me at the NGO where I was working and conducting participant observation. While introducing my friend to one of the Somali women who worked at the NGO, he extended his hand, which was met with a non-awkward response from the woman who told him, “In my culture, we don’t shake the hands of men”. She did not seem to be bothered by the incident and smiled as she said it, while my friend blushed and apologized. This was a unique encounter because it took place at the NGO, where a Somali cultural presence is dominant; a majority of the employees and clients are Somali, and this fact created a Somali cultural space where the woman felt confident in her ability to forgo American modes of public behavior and assert her Somali/Muslim identity. The evidence I have that Somali women do not always feel confident enough to assert their cultural identities, in this case as a Muslim woman, comes from other handshaking examples.
Another Somali woman, Asha, who I met during my fieldwork and with whom I am still in contact also does not shake hands with men who are not her relatives. I should note here that not all Somali women adhere to the idea that women should not shake the hands of men they are not married or related to, but here I am discussing women who do hold this belief, a group which constitutes the vast majority of my informants. Asha told me on my first meeting with her that she does not shake the hands of men, but I witnessed her shaking the hand of an unknown man at a wedding in the summer of 2007.

The wedding was a non-Somali event, but the woman who was getting married invited several Somali friends, some of whom were co-workers and clients at the NGO where she works. Asha was helped by this woman who was her caseworker when she first arrived in the US, and feels a great affection for her. The other Somalis who attended the wedding were slightly older and slightly more conservative in terms of venturing outside of the Somali community than Asha. I watched with great interest to see if the Somali invitees would attend the event given that it was a mixed gender event (most Somali weddings are not), alcohol would be served (strictly prohibited for practicing Muslims), and the food would be ‘harem’ (meaning food, especially meat not butchered in accordance with Muslim customs). The bride had made one promise to her Somali guests—that there would be no pork in any form at the event. She kept her promise and all of the Somali guests arrived. Some were very late, owing more to the Somali tradition of arriving late to weddings\(^ 18 \) (and many appointments in general), a practice regarded as

\(^{18}\) The first Somali wedding I attended was supposed to start at 9:00pm according to the invitation. After my long contact with the Somali community, I knew that the event would not begin promptly at 9:00, so a friend and I met in the parking lot where the wedding was taking place at 9:30. We waited in our car until 10:30 when other guests started to arrive. When we entered the building at 10:40 the photographer greeted
“rude” by many Americans. The question of what is considered rude is culturally determined, but during the course of my fieldwork it often came up with native born Americans telling me that they think Somalis are rude, and Somalis reporting to me that they know about and are concerned with this characterization of Somalis. In fact, the example I am about to consider illuminates the cultural and personal pressures on Somalis not to appear ‘rude’ when they are outside of a Somali cultural space.

After the ceremony, there was a cocktail hour, a very common practice at American weddings. This practice was unfamiliar to the Somalis who had not attended an American wedding before, and Asha asked me, “What do we do now?”. I explained that we talk with other guests and most people drink alcoholic beverages while we wait for the bride and groom to come back from taking pictures. None of the Somalis drank alcohol, but all did get some kind of beverage, ranging from water to soda. One of the younger Somali men who attended the wedding told me that he usually drank, but felt that he could not since he was “being watched” by the other Somalis at the wedding. I was speaking with Asha when the father and mother of the groom approached our group. The groom’s father automatically extended his hand to Asha’s husband, who shook it. He then turned to Asha who awkwardly extended her hand and gave him a half-hearted handshake, barely grasping his hand. When he walked away Asha told me, “I didn’t want him to think that I’m rude”, so she shook his hand. There are several important points I would like to make regarding handshaking and perceptions of rudeness.

First, the cultural context in which the handshaking takes place determines whether Somali women can effectively demarcate their religious and cultural differences
from non-Somalis and non-Muslims without appearing ‘rude’. Secondly, because non-Somalis and non-Muslims are unlikely to understand the cultural practice of not shaking hands with men or women who are not relatives, scenarios like the one of Asha at the wedding are likely to occur countless times a day in the Columbus community. Thirdly, Somali women’s choice to shake hands or not to shake hands with non-related men serves as an assessment tool for determining where on the continuum they lie regarding challenging the traditional gender norms of Somali culture.

Asha shook the hand of the groom’s father in the presence of her husband, and he said nothing. He was not upset in any way. Asha’s husband is not a strictly religious man (nor is he not religious), and he is very progressive in his views on gender, and these circumstances probably made it easier for Asha to shake the man’s hand than not to shake his hand. However, the woman from my earlier example (where she told my friend she did not shake the hands of men) also attended the wedding. I do not know if she also shook the hands of men at the wedding, but I did not see the father-in-law approach the group of Somalis where she stood.

One of the reasons I believe he did not approach the group relates to my earlier example of the student at the event about FGC/FGM making reference to the veil. Asha, while she was wearing a hijab, wore a brightly colored turquoise one that matched her floral turquoise dress. In the evening sunlight, flowers traced in glitter sparkled on her dress and she wore makeup. I imagine that Asha seemed much ‘friendlier’ in her colorful

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19 For example, a student of mine from OSU recently told me this story. Her family immigrated from Egypt several years ago, and her father is a former employee of United Dairy Farmers. While working there he served many Somali women who did not want to touch his hand while he gave them their change. In one instance, he was so frustrated that he lifted up the end of a woman’s hijab (which covered her hands), put the change directly in her hand and said, “I took a shower this morning”. The woman left without saying anything to him. In this example, the employee of UDF regarded the woman’s behavior of removing her hand when he handed her the change as ‘rude’.
attire than the other woman who wore a long, black dress and black hijab. Also, I want to emphasize the differences between and individuality of the women I interacted with and interviewed during the course of my research. In Amy Shuman’s article, “Dismantling Local Culture” she argues that in our attempt to understand cultures, we often ignore the people that do not quite ‘fit’ into the mainstream of the culture. When we ignore the ‘others’ within cultures, we ignore important members of the community who either explicitly or implicitly challenge the community’s norms, but also have legitimate places within that community.

I have been asked to ‘explain’ Somalis, to give a general definition of Somali culture, on multiple occasions. At the beginning of my research it was a much easier task for me to do than it is currently. For example, I can say that a majority of Somali women that I met and interacted with do not shake the hands of non-related men, but a significant minority do, so I would not give advice to automatically refrain from shaking the hands of Somali women (to men) because you might be interacting with a woman who does shake hands across genders. When we do not “get local enough” (Shuman 355) and account for these types of differences than I believe we do a disservice to the communities in which we do research. We misrepresent them if our representations are not sophisticated enough to account for differences within the community. For example, the differences in attitudes towards women’s traditional place within Somali culture vary greatly between Zahra, Asha and the third woman in the examples listed above, and I would like to introduce two more examples that help to clarify the pressures that some Somali women experience to maintain or create their identities as Muslim women, and the pleasures some also have in this activity.
One young woman, Nasra, a 26 year old refugee was the first woman I interviewed for this research. Over the time I have known her, she has helped me in innumerable ways by introducing me to friends and providing ‘insider’ information about the Somali community that would not normally be available to me. I am indebted to her and as I share my experiences with her I feel I face an ethical dilemma. In Gesa E. Kirch’s article, “What Do You Know about My Life, Anyway? Ethical Dilemmas in Researcher-Participant Relations” she argues, “As researchers and participants get acquainted, establish trust, and form friendships, they become vulnerable to misunderstandings, disappointments, and invaded privacy” (26). Since Nasra introduced me to friends, and I kept in touch with them, they often shared private information about Nasra with me (like friends do) that she did not always share with me directly. Some of the details shared with me by friends about Nasra’s job search serve as important evidence for the challenges facing Somali women as they enter the workplace in America, and I will be utilizing this information. However, I am withholding other information, while equally useful in terms of my research questions, that I deem too personal to share. Like Kirsch, I am concerned with betraying the trust established with informants during the research process, and I do not believe that anonymity is an adequate form of protection from the costs of (my) personal sensibilities of betrayal between informants with which I have shared intimacies. Nasra has expressed an interest in reading this work, and while I am open and expect she may disagree with some of my interpretations, I will not risk that she will feel alienated from me because I shared personal details of her life that although anonymous, if she read them, would certainly feel like a betrayal. Now that I have prefaced and informed readers that I am sharing and
conscientiously withholding some information about Nasra, let us begin with my first interview with her.

It was a cold winter day, and Nasra and I went to lunch at a local Somali restaurant. Most Somali restaurants have separate eating spaces for men and women. The men’s space normally occupies the front of the restaurant and the women’s space is located in the back or in a small enclosed area of the restaurant. At one restaurant a rear entry for women even exists, so that women may enter and leave without walking through the men’s space. My first reaction to this arrangement was to think about segregation in the South during the Jim Crow era, but for Somalis that is a foreign reference that is not a culturally relevant comparison. However, there is one very well-known and well-liked Somali restaurant that does not have gender segregated seating, and this is the restaurant that Nasra and I chose to eat at for our first interview. As we were seated at the restaurant, Nasra spoke to the waiter in Somali asking for a partition to be placed around our table, so that we would be shielded from the view of male customers. Nasra took noticeable pride in asking the server to place the partition, and I noted his approving smile as he did so. In performing this action, Nasra publicly made a spectacle of conforming to traditional Somali gender norms in a Somali cultural space. All of the employees at the restaurant were male as were the other customers that day, and she was met with several approving glances for erecting the gendered boundary that the partition created. In this example, Nasra takes pride and pleasure in creating and maintaining her identity as a ‘good’ Somali Muslim woman within the local Somali community.
As we ate and talked, Nasra told me that in Somali culture it is expected that the husband will provide financially for his wife. She explained it this way, “We have the best of both worlds. I can pursue a career if I want to, but my husband is required to support me”. I was struck by her confidence in this statement and she went on to express how she feels pity for American women who cannot count on their husbands to support them. I asked Nasra about situations where a man is unable to support his family, for example if he loses his job or works but does not make enough money to support his family (a situation I know many Somali men face upon arrival in the US). The question made her pause and she then told me “in that case, she should be patient with him”.

Nasra is very newly married and her husband lives in England. After their marriage, she lived with him in England for several months, but decided that she did not want to live there. She then informed him that she was moving back to the United States and that she expected him to join her here. He has visited her several times since she left England, but is unable to move to the US yet. Nasra is college educated and holds a degree in Business from The Ohio State University (OSU). She has no children and works outside of the home. Her statement that Muslim women “have the best of both worlds” comes directly from her religious studies with an on-line Muslim university, which also offers weekend seminars. The Muslim university offers a series of on-line courses, and also weekend-long courses across the United States for Muslims who want to learn more about their faith. Nasra and some of her friends invited me to a weekend-long course held in the Spring of 2007 on the campus of OSU. The class that I attended was entitled, Love Notes and specifically addressed relationships between men and women under Islam.
Nasra did not attend the event, because as she told me, “I’ve already read the books” (associated with the class) and she felt that she already had an excellent understanding of the tenants and main points of the course. In striking contrast to the idea presented in *Love Notes* that the man is the head of the household (and therefore in charge of all major decisions), Nasra did not submit to her husband’s request that she remain in England with him, but rather she decided to move back to the US and told him to join her. Nasra does not see a contradiction between her actions and her identity as a Muslim woman, whose stated goal is to strictly adhere to the rules of her faith. Over my many conversations with Nasra, it became apparent that she does not believe that women or wives are or should be subservient to men or to their husbands. However, she does maintain a belief in ‘separate, but equal’, which was the idea presented in *Love Notes* concerning the equality of men and women.

A friend of Nasra’s who did attend the course, Ruquiya, told me during the event that, “It’s not that men and women are equal. They are made for different purposes by God. It’s like comparing apples and oranges”. Ruquiya, herself, had just recently begun to wear the hijab properly, which occurred after she took the first level of the Muslim university’s classes\(^{20}\). She had started taking the classes a little over a year ago and now wears a very conservative form of hijab (prior to this she would sometimes wear the hijab, occasionally not wear it at all, and usually wear it incorrectly when she did wear it), and intends to take all of the university’s courses. When I asked her why she began wearing the hijab more formally, she replied that “I didn’t understand the purpose of the veil before. I was ignorant about a lot of things concerning my faith”. Ruquiya

\(^{20}\) The first level in the university addresses the fundamental beliefs of Islam and the responsibilities of Muslims under Islam.
experienced a major transformation in her religious beliefs and lifestyle after taking several courses. She has even become a campus organizer for classes like *Love Notes*. Ruquiya and Nasra’s interest in these courses is noteworthy, as both decide to alter their lifestyle choices after attending and reading course materials.

When I first met Nasra, she did wear the hijab, but not a very strict one. She often wore scarves, which covered her hair, but left her neck bare and visible (which is not the case with a more formal head scarf). Furthermore, the clothes she wore minimally met Somali social standards. Somali women most often wear long skirts which cover them at least until the ankle (if not the floor) and shirts, jackets or sweaters which are not form fitting and are long sleeved. Nasra did wear ankle-length skirts, but they were tight and form-fitting as were her shirts and jackets. A male friend of Nasra’s once commented that her outfits showed more of her figure and emphasized her figure more than most ‘Westernized’ clothing\(^{21}\). However, the last time that I met with Nasra, she had changed her appearance drastically. She now wears a much more formal and strict hijab, which covers her neck and shoulders and drapes down to her waist. I asked Nasra about her physical transformation as we chatted at a local coffee shop and she informed me that she had been reading more about the hijab and realized that she has been wearing it incorrectly. I wanted to ask her; “According to whom were you wearing it incorrectly?”, but she answered me before I could ask. She had been listening to tapes recorded by a sheik (a Muslim religious leader) from which she was learning more about the purposes of the hijab, and her duty to wear it properly as a Muslim woman.

\(^{21}\) During the course of my fieldwork, I tried as much as possible to wear long pants, skirts and shirts which conformed to Somali social standards for women’s dress. However, I never covered my head or wore a hijab.
While I do not doubt Nasra’s religious convictions, I do believe that there are other factors at work in her decision to wear a more formal hijab. Nasra is basically alone in the US, most of her immediate family still lives in Kenya, her husband lives in England and the relatives she does have in the US are scattered throughout the country. From the first time that I met Nasra, I could tell that she is concerned with more than superficial questions, and in fact her friends often tell her (including me) that she should write a book. She cares deeply about moral questions, and constantly reads in order to look for the answers to her moral dilemmas. Her intellectual curiosity coupled with her interest in “man’s (or woman’s) search for meaning” has led her to the courses and books associated with the Muslim university. I believe that she has found a thorough and complete set of beliefs that help her to make meaning out of her life circumstances. By definition refugees are displaced people, but the displacement is far more than physical and geographic.

Refugees face cultural displacement as they are resettled in countries that grant them asylum. Unlike other immigrants, refugees are forced to flee their countries of origin, and most have reservations about doing so. Immigrants who choose to leave their home countries often find something appealing about the country and culture into which they are moving, which spurs their migration. This need not be the case for refugees, who may be seeking an escape from life in refugee camps, and who often do not have a choice about where they are resettled. Refugees are asked to provide their ‘top choices’ for where they would like to be resettled, but are not guaranteed to receive resettlement in any of those countries. Nasra did want to be resettled in the US, and was able to be resettled here, but that does not mean that she does not feel culturally displaced.
In the classic work, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, Fredrik Barth and others sought to address “the problems of ethnic groups and their persistence” (1). Originally published in 1969, the volume analyzes how ethnic groups are maintained in multicultural societies, and is a foundational attempt at viewing cultures as constantly “in flux” (Barth 5) rather than as fixed and coherent entities. Also, while not a stated goal of the work, I read it as engaging with the debates surrounding assimilation at the time. Beginning in the 1960s, supported by the seed change that the Civil Rights Movement, the Women’s Movement, and the Anti-War Movement represented, the idea that immigrants would or should assimilate into mainstream US culture began to be questioned. Barth’s volume interrogates how ethnic groups maintain their boundaries, even while making concessions or changes in their behavior when they interact with the majority culture. Rather than accepting traditional anthropological thinking that the norm is stability within cultural groups, Barth argues that stability is no more ‘normal’ for an ethnic group than is change. Therefore, it is very important to focus on empirical fieldwork which can delineate how culture is contested and emergent rather than fixed and stagnant.

My work with the Somali community furthers the project of studying cultures empirically and interactionally, where the challenges and contestations within the community can be seen on an everyday level. This type of research resists the blunder of assuming cultural consistency. Also, empirical work helps feminist ethnographers to notice the differences and intricacies between what they are told by informants and what they witnesses on the ground. For example, Nasra told me that she expects her husband to support her, but he does not. Through my fieldwork, I have found that often Somali
cultural norms or expectations are thwarted by the practical problems of living in a new and different culture.

During the course of my fieldwork I came across several examples of how the Somali family structure is affected by resettlement in the United States. Firstly, because they are refugees, many families have been separated from each other or have suffered the loss of a loved one due to the civil war. As a result, many families arrive in the US, not as nuclear families\(^{22}\), but rather as single parent families. Most often, the single parent is a woman with children to care for upon her arrival. For nuclear families that do arrive, there are challenges that await them as they learn to navigate living in the US.

The Gendered Aspects of Somali Cultural Expectations of Life in the US

One of the main challenges that faces all Somali refugees as they arrive in the US, whether they are single, married, or single parents is the financial challenge of living here. Most often they receive welfare benefits after their initial month in the US\(^{23}\), and it can take months for men or women to secure permanent jobs. The types of jobs that are available to people with little knowledge of English and without a high school diploma are limited. Often the jobs available are custodial or cleaning positions or packing and shipping positions. Somali men are reluctant to take on cleaning jobs because of their association with women’s work, so it can take even longer for Somali men to locate a job

\(^{22}\) I asked the head caseworker at the largest refugee resettlement office in Columbus how much of a percentage he thought single mothers with children made up of his caseload, and he said he thought it was 40-50%.

\(^{23}\) The US Federal Government requires that refugees have sponsors who will support them financially and provide a home for them for at least one month before they can resettle in the US. A sponsor can be a church, a family member, a civic organization or in rare instances a friend.
than it does for women. However, there are exceptions to every rule. For example, one young man told me that the first job he took in the US was working in a daycare center. This type of job was out of his comfort zone, but he told me he took it because it was the first job offered to him. Contrary to the idea presented in Okin’s essay that certain cultures are more dedicated to the oppression of women than others (and she sets up a clear juxtaposition between Western and non-Western cultures), during my fieldwork I witnessed that Somali men and women are no more or less likely to conform to or challenge gendered norms than are native born American men and women. The norms within Somali culture can be said to be more patriarchal (as reported by both my male and female informants), but the Somali women I met and interacted with are just as likely to challenge the gendered norms of their culture as are ‘Western’ women.

For example, while Nasra explained to me the rights she has as a married Muslim woman, she also responded to the question of whether or not she would one day like to return to Somalia with this answer: “Why would I want to go back there? It’s a boy’s club”. The majority of Somali women I interacted with were challenging the gender norms that they deem as important to challenge. For example, most of the women I spoke to highly valued education, and argued that under Islam women have a right to education. Also, Somali women are interested in how they can limit their husband’s ability to enter into a polygamous marriage utilizing religious rationales. While attending the course *Love Notes*, a Somali woman that I know asked the sheik, “Can a man marry another wife without telling his first wife?” The sheik fumbled in his answer by not answering it directly, but answering that there are four primary schools of jurisprudence in Islam and also other rules that mitigate decisions like these. The young woman did not let him off
the hook, she raised her hand again, and said, “I’m sorry, but I didn’t hear an answer to my question of whether a man can marry another wife without telling his first wife”. He then responded, “Well, legally ‘no’ he does not have to inform his wife, but emotionally he should”. After the initial, ‘no’ that he does not have to legally inform his first wife the women’s gallery collectively gasped and the men’s section collectively laughed and some cheers were heard. The sheik then explained that when entering a marriage contract, a woman can stipulate that a man has to inform her or she can even possibly (it depends on which school of jurisprudence you are using) limit the marriage to monogamy.

The feeling I had sitting in the women’s gallery is that if possible all of the women would like to limit their marriage to a monogamous one and that they would use the tools they were learning in this seminar to do so. My observation received support when during a break as I walked to the restroom, a middle aged woman who assumed I was Muslim said to me, “Thank God you are learning all of this now. It’s so equal. We’re so equal!” The women at this seminar were not attending it to learn how to conform to Muslim gender roles as much as to learn the obligations their husbands have to them.

Since the seminar was held at OSU, the main organizers were OSU students who are pursuing a higher education with the intent to have a career. The event did attract non-students, but in my interactions with them during the weekend, I found they were also there to learn their rights, rather than focusing on their obligations within heterosexual relationships.
Four Women ‘Put On’ the Hijab

During the course of my fieldwork four different women told me that earlier in their lives they did not wear the hijab, but have very recently started wearing it. They all told me that while they formerly did not wear the hijab, they are now choosing to wear it. The fact that the women have chosen to start wearing the veil post-arrival in the United States is intriguing and contradicts the relatively common idea in the West that Muslim women long to liberate themselves from the hijab and would do so immediately if they were not forced to wear it. 

When I asked Somali women what they believe are the perceptions of them by non-Somalis, the answer was universally that they believe others think they are oppressed because they are Muslims and wear the hijab. It is this universal response, which led me to the conclusion that the dominant narrative (as perceived by Somali women themselves) about Somali gendered identity in Columbus is the veil. The veil or the hijab is the symbol that associates Somali women with oppression in the minds of non-Somalis.

The veil plays an important role in the debate about whether multiculturalism is bad for women. Okin claims that the French government does not adequately address gender inequality within Muslim immigrant communities, because even though they have banned the wearing of the veil in schools, they have allowed polygamous marriages to flourish (Okin 9). Sheila McDonough, a Canadian feminist, argues that Canadians in general and specifically Canadian feminists have a gut level negative reaction to the hijab because it represents a turning away from the pursuit of women’s rights in Canada. According to McDonough, the veil, as a powerful symbol, threatens women’s progress in the West. So, how do Somali women perceive the veil? Why would a woman or four
different women decide to wear the veil in the US after a period of not wearing it or never wearing it before? There are no universal answers to these questions; rather each woman’s reasons for deciding to put on the veil are unique. I do find similarities and connections across women’s narratives of why they decide to wear the veil, but each woman’s experiences illumine her distinctive reason for beginning to cover herself in public.

The first informant that told me that she had recently begun to wear the hijab ‘properly’ is the young woman I mentioned above who asked the sheik about the wife’s rights in a polygamous marriage. Her name is Aisha and she is a college educated Somali-American citizen who is 25 years old. She is currently not married and she does not have any children. She told me that she began wearing the hijab after attending classes like Love Notes and others presented by the same traveling Muslim university. Throughout her adolescence she sometimes wore the hijab, but most often she did not. When she did wear it, she told me that she did so inappropriately because her hair would show, making her improperly covered. She told me that one day she decided to start wearing it correctly and then said, “Once you put on the hijab, that’s it—you wear it”. Her remarks point to the seriousness with which she regards her decision to wear the hijab and her commitment to continuing to wear it ‘properly’.

Aisha’s decision to start wearing the veil is religious. She told me that she did not understand the true meaning of the veil prior to taking Islamic religious courses. Aisha is a friend of Nasra’s and Nasra is the one who introduced me to Aisha. One night over

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24 The hijab is most often worn in public or in the home when there are guests who are non-relative males. On many of the occasions when I visited women’s homes, they did not wear the hijab or wore a very loose fitting one.
dinner and coffee the three of us met for over three hours. During the three hours, we discussed at length the perceptions of non-Somalis and non-Muslims of Somalis in Columbus. Both of the young women took time to pray during the time we were together going to the restroom at the busy café to wash their feet, face and hands before praying in the café’s seating area. Praying five times a day is a religious obligation for Muslims, and most of the women I interacted with would pray where they were when the allotted time for prayer occurred.

We were sitting in the corner of the café, so there were few peering eyes, but Nasra and Aisha did stand out from the other customers in their long dark skirts and full hijabs. Nasra and Aisha took a few moments to decide which direction was East, the direction in which their prayers should be directed, but they finally agreed and both performed their prayers, which took less than 10 minutes. Over the time I have known Nasra and Aisha they have both become increasingly religious and invested in their identities as Muslims.

Aisha and Nasra are keenly aware of representations of Muslim women as inherently subordinated and oppressed. They told me that they believe most of these ideas come from the Western media and that the focus on Muslim women’s oppression under Islam became a major problem for them post 9/11. Their comments mirrored another woman’s remarks who told me that prior to 9/11 most people did not even know which religion she practiced, and may not have associated her head scarf (she has always worn the hijab) with Islam. She said people basically ignored her head scarf, especially in the workplace. However, this woman wears a very short hijab, which does not draw as much attention as a more long and conservative hijab. For Aisha and Nasra, the effects of 9/11
on how they are perceived in the US as Muslim women became palpable and even tangible through the way people looked and them and interacted with them differently. Nasra, who has always worn the hijab was especially affected, and Aisha, who has recently started wearing it said that she heard stories from friends and relatives of how they were treated differently. One dramatic example of how women were treated differently post 9/11 came from another informant. She told me that she was shopping at Walmart when two other customers, both white women, spoke loudly enough for her to hear calling her a terrorist and saying that she should “go home”.

However, Aisha, who works for a retail cell phone company in a corporate center does not feel that she experiences direct discrimination in her workplace. She has been employed at the cell phone company for more than 2 years, a job that she started while in college and before she decided to wear the hijab. Therefore, she has undergone a transition in her workplace from being a recognizable Somali-American employee to a self-identified practicing Muslim Somali-American employee. The friendships she formed prior to becoming a fully practicing Muslim are still intact, and she tells me that she enjoys conversations with her co-workers about her faith. Also, and perhaps most importantly to Aisha, the company she works for is accommodating of her needs for prayer breaks and vacation days during certain Muslim holidays. Prior to attending the religious classes, Aisha did not pray at work or take vacation days for religious reasons, but now she does both. Prayer times occur during the work day everyday, so it became very important to Aisha that her requests for these short breaks be accommodated by her

I want to be clear that Aisha always identified as a Muslim, but she now believes that she is practicing her faith more actively.
employer and they are. Overall, she is happy and satisfied with her work environment and the corporation’s treatment of Muslims.

Since both Aisha and Nasra have become more interested in Islam over the past two years, they are also concerned with abiding by many other rules besides wearing the hijab properly. For example, the three of us had a long discussion about careers, which ones are preferable and why. Two types of careers which came up in our discussion were medical careers and careers in law. I explained that I have several friends who are attorneys, and both of them knew several medical students. During my fieldwork I often came across Somali parents who encourage their children to pursue medical careers, and Somali college students who are pursuing careers as doctors or pharmacists. The prestige of a medical career along with the perception that doctors contribute positively to society makes medical careers seem preferable to law for the Somalis I spoke with. For example, after I explained what one attorney I know who works for the medical board of the state of Ohio does on a daily basis, Nasra commented, “Oh, then lawyers can perform halal work. I always thought of becoming a lawyer, but too much of what they do is haraam for Muslims”.

Halal is term which refers to food and activities which are permissible under Islam and the term haraam refers to food and activities that are forbidden for Muslims to partake in. For example, it is considered haraam to take or give a loan with interest, making it difficult for Muslims who strictly adhere to this rule to get car loans, house loans or any type of formal loan from a bank in the United States. However, there are ways for banks to offer loans to Muslims, and during my fieldwork I met one banker from a local bank in Columbus who told me that his bank was currently working towards
offering loans to Muslims, and specifically Somalis because of the large population in the Columbus community.

A form of loan that qualifies as halal is similar to micro-credit lending banks that take place in many developing countries, popularized by models based on the Grameen Bank. The difference is that the halal loans that I learned about in the Somali community were organized by women who knew each other, not by formal banks. Women agree on an amount that all can afford to contribute for several months. Then each pays that amount every month, and one month during the cycle each woman receives the entire sum that was collected. I was invited by a Somali woman I know well to enter into this type of loan, but the amount they wanted to contribute each month ($500) was too much for me on my graduate student’s budget. She did tell me that she and most other women she knows will not enter into these types of loans with men, because they have a history of paying only until they receive their payout month and then abandoning the group. She told me that the process of selecting who can be a member of your lending group is largely determined by your reputation in the community, and that she does perform the reference checks on new group members by asking around in the community to see if the woman has honored her loan obligations in the past.

The difficulties of procuring a halal loan within the community that meets the financial needs of a major purchase like a car or house are great. In fact, the woman who invited me to partake in the halal loan told me that she wanted to do it and others were interested in entering into the loan so that they could pay off their credit card debts more quickly. According to Nasra, the distinction between halal and haraam are not reserved for food and loans, but extend to many other types of behaviors and activities, like the
type of career you choose. The concern over what is deemed appropriate for Muslims based on the norms of halal and haraam greatly influence Nasra in her life decisions. For example, Nasra was looking for a job in the corporate world and was asked to attend an interview in another city. All of her expenses were paid and the job looked very promising to her. The pay was considerable and she thought she would like the work. The interview was going well until the afternoon when she returned to her hotel and was told by one of interviewers (a man) from the corporation that she would be picked up for dinner at a certain time. Nasra then inquired who she would be going to dinner with, and the man gave her the list of names of who would be attending. At that time she realized that she would be the only woman at the dinner and she told the man that she could not attend a dinner where she was the only woman. The man was a little shocked, but said ‘okay’, and they called off their dinner plans. She did not get the job.

Nasra asked me specifically how she could get a job in the United States without shaking the hands of men. She told me that she prays every time that she has an interview that she will be interviewed by a woman, so that she may shake her hand and avoid the awkwardness of telling a man that she cannot shake his hand. I told her that she can explain that she does not shake the hands of men who are not her relatives for religious reasons, and leave it at that. I told her to move on and try and focus the interview on what she has to offer the company, and direct their attention as much as possible away from the fact that she does not shake hands with men. However, I have my doubts that this strategy will remedy the situation for Nasra and other Somali women who do not shake the hands of men because handshaking is an important social ritual in the United States and one on which people place an emphasis in the workplace.
The second young woman I interviewed who ‘put on the hijab’ after very rarely wearing it does shake the hands of men and has started wearing the veil, not as a religious statement, but as a way to define herself more clearly as a member of the Somali community. Sahara is a 22 year old college student, who is unmarried and does not have any children. She is studying to be a nurse and currently works part-time as a nurse’s aid in a local hospital in order to support herself and work her way through college. Sahara is a remarkable young woman who taught herself to read and write as a teenager when she was resettled to the United States. Sahara and her family were resettled to Arizona when she was about 15 years old. At that time Sahara was illiterate in both Somali and English, because she had spent most of her life in a refugee camp in Kenya, where access to school is limited. As a result, she did not have any formal education prior to arriving in the United States.

After being resettled near Phoenix, Arizona, Sahara was placed in school with her age group, rather than at her education level. However, she did spend part of her school day in an ESL class dedicated to working with newly arrived immigrant and refugee children. Sahara was the only Somali and she believes the only Muslim at her school, and therefore she did not wear the hijab while attending high school. In her words she “wanted to fit in” with the peer group at her high school, and she viewed the hijab as an impediment to her social integration into American social life.

After moving to Columbus because she has some extended relatives that live here, and also to attend school, Sahara began to wear the hijab. She does not wear a very conservative form of the hijab, but she does wear it almost all of the time that she is in public in Columbus. The day that I met her she wore a dark colored scarf as hijab, which
fully covered her hair, but left her neck exposed. She told me that she chose to start wearing the hijab because of the large Somali community in Columbus. In Arizona, she was a member of one of the few Somali families in the area and did not feel that a strong Somali community existed. In Columbus the Somali community is well-established and Sahara told me that she likes to wear the veil as a marker of her public Somali cultural identity.

Sahara made a conscious choice to begin to wear the veil to meet the social expectations of the Somali community and in order to be seen as a legitimate member of it, much like she chose not to wear the veil in Arizona in order to fit into her peer group there. However, there is something unique in her decision to move to Columbus and then to begin to wear the hijab, and that is Sahara’s decision to move to a location that affords her more opportunities to feel that she is a part of an established Somali community and to mark her cultural membership by wearing the hijab. The persistence of ethnic group boundaries is a focus for Barth, and the investigation of these self-created boundaries is important because it does not assume that ‘tradition’ is passed down generation to generation without interruption or adaptation, but rather explores the significant reasons that traditions are successfully transferred to the youth within a culture (Barth, 24-25). This is especially significant for the question of whether or not multiculturalism is bad for women (and here I am specifically addressing the Somali experience in Columbus), because in order to answer the question it is imperative that we understand the importance of culture in Somali women’s lives.

Sahara moved from Arizona to be a part of a close-knit Somali community, when in contrast she could have easily stayed in Arizona where there were few Somali or
Muslim families. In Arizona she did not ‘have to’ wear the hijab, but in Columbus she
does, unless she wants to remain largely an outsider within the Somali community. Okin
would clearly see this as an example of women’s rights being curtailed by patriarchal
social norms, but then why did Sahara choose to move to Columbus and wear the veil?
She was largely free from having to live up to the social standards of the Somali
community while in Arizona, but she sought out a location where this was not the case.
Sahara moved towards Somali cultural identity---not away from it, but why?

The main reason that Sahara moved towards rather than away from Somali
cultural identity is that she enjoys and takes pleasure from her identity as a Somali
woman. Her choice to wear the hijab does not feel like an obligation to Sahara, but rather
a symbol of her identity which raises her status within the Somali community. Minority
cultures often have symbols (like the hijab) and ways of interacting in their intra-group
relations, which serve as both boundary demarcations and solidify intra-group relations
outside of the social norms of the dominant culture (Barth, 27). For Sahara the wearing
of the hijab marks her as Somali, and makes her easily identifiable to other Somalis
within Columbus. This marker makes her identity as a Somali woman unambiguous, and
grants her access to intra-group relationships she might otherwise be excluded from.

The third woman that informed me that she has only recently begun wearing the
hijab is very different in age and status than Aisha and Sahara. Mariam is a middle-aged
Somali-American citizen who is married and does have children. Mariam is a leader in a
well-known NGO that serves Somalis in Columbus. She has a reputation within the
community of being strong-willed and dominant. While interviewing Mariam, I found
out that she began wearing the hijab after 9/11. Prior to 9/11 she did not wear the hijab
even though at that time she also held a very high profile position within the Somali community. She did not believe that she had to wear the hijab to be considered a ‘good’ Somali woman or a ‘good’ Muslim woman. Mariam explained to me that she is very concerned with representations of Somali women as inherently oppressed and the representation of Somalia as a ‘backwards’ place with regards to women’s rights. She showed me a framed newspaper article that hangs in her office of an interview with a Somali woman who was a leader in women’s rights prior to the eruption of the civil war. She took pride in this document and she strongly advocates against representations of Muslim women and Somali women, in particular, as subordinated, weak or helpless. Her decision to don the hijab was facilitated by the anti-Muslim sentiment that was present in the American media post-9/11.

Mariam began to wear the veil out of a sense of solidarity with Muslims worldwide who she argues were being represented as inherently oppressive towards women and as inherently terrorist in their orientation. Mariam displays the hijab on her person as a political statement. Beginning in the second wave of the women’s movement during the 1960s and 1970s, feminists began to point out that the ‘personal is political’. This statement encourages feminists and women in general to explore the ways in which bodies can be used as political tools to enforce or challenge the gendered status quo. The feminist term ‘body politics’ specifically addresses the ways in which bodies are constructed through social and political institutions. Mariam decided to use her body as a

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26 “The personal is political” is not a statement that only encompasses body politics, but rather has much broader implications. Carol Hanisch is credited with the coining of the phrase in an article she wrote in 1969 in which she argues, “One of the first things we discover in these groups (consciousness-raising groups) is that personal problems are political problems. There are no personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective solution.”
site of resistance to Western norms she believes discriminate against Muslims. She views her action of wearing the hijab as act of political solidarity with Somalis in the Columbus community. She is also directly challenging the idea that Muslim women who wear the veil are inherently subordinated, because as a well-known leader within the community she is consciously juxtaposing her authority with the symbol of the veil.

Leila, is a Somali woman who like Mariam holds more status within the Somali community than either Aisha or Sahara. Leila has lived in the United States longer than any of the other woman who have ‘put on’ the hijab. Her family moved to the US in the early 1980s when she was entering adolescence. Her father held a significant position within the Somali government, which led him to move his family to the US over a decade prior to the outbreak of the civil war because of fear for his family’s safety. Leila’s parents were strict regarding her dating behavior (dating was not allowed), but encouraged her to go far in her education. Leila told me that “she was wild” and did “date” men without her parent’s knowledge. However, she ended up marrying a Somali man that she had known (as a child) from Somalia. Historically, arranged marriages were the norm in Somalia, but Leila and her husband chose each other and then went through the customs surrounding arranged marriages as a matter of respecting tradition officially while circumventing it in every other way.

Leila never returned to live in Somalia, but she was visiting when the civil war broke out in 1991. She and her husband barely escaped, getting on the very last commercial flight out of Somalia for an extremely high fee. She described it as a nightmare come alive and as a miracle that she and her husband are alive today. Leila told me that she did often wear a very informal hijab (but not always) before beginning to
wear the very formal and conservative form of veiling that she wears today. Like, Aisha, Leila began to wear a very formal hijab as the result of a religious transformation. According to Leila, her religious transformation occurred late in her life, after the birth of her second child, a girl. After her daughter was born, Leila began to take her Muslim faith more seriously and began to study the Qur’an and pay more attention to Islamic teachings regarding all aspects of her life.

For example, I met Leila at a Somali wedding where she told me that she could not dance because Islam forbids it. However, most of the other Muslim women were dancing at the wedding. She explained to me that she believes they do not truly understand all of the obligations under Islam and that the women at the wedding were more ‘Somali’ than ‘Muslim’. While Muslim identity and Somali identity are largely synonymous, Leila contends that many Somalis do not adhere to the rules of Islam because of their culture. Somalis have a rich tradition of music, but Leila told me that she believes that Islam forbids the use of string instruments because of their affects on the heart (only drums are acceptable according to Leila), and much of Somali music utilizes string instruments. According to Leila the women at the Somali wedding were committing at least two if not more infractions against Islamic norms by playing string music and dancing to it.

Most Somali weddings are gender segregated (though not all), however, there were a few men coming and going from this mostly all-female wedding. The fact that the women were dancing in front of men added a third mistake that the Somali women were making at the wedding according to Leila. Leila has many family members in Columbus, but currently lives with her family in Washington, D.C., where she works for the federal
government. She met one of her male relatives at the wedding (outside of the main hall) and he did not recognize her. She told me that he did a ‘double take’ of her, but still did not approach her, so she approached him. He was astonished at her dress because it was much more conservative than he remembered her dressing. The form of the hijab that a woman wears is a culturally significant marker which allows people in the community to know how more or less conservative a woman is—she literally wears her social location on her head. Leila laughed at the man and told him, “My conservative dress didn’t stop you from looking at me twice!”. Leila has become critical of the Somali community for what she sees as its ignorance of the proper way to practice Islam and she sees the community as more loyal to Somali culture than to Muslim belief.

Leila’s comments were echoed by a witness to a Somali dispute resolution that occurred in Britain outside of the British courts. A Somali man said, "Us Somalis, wherever we are in the world, we have our own law. It's not sharia, it's not religious — it's just a cultural thing." (BBC online 2/8/08). Leila is now extremely critical of cultural practices, which she sees as un-Islamic and she told me that she believes that Somalis are mostly ignorant about Islam and practice it more out of tradition than true belief. Her act of ‘putting on the hijab’ is not an act of solidarity with the Somali community like Mariam’s actions, but rather it is an act of rebellion against her former primarily Somali cultural identity.

**Aisha and Leila: A Religious Identity is Created**

For both Aisha and Leila the act of putting on the veil is the result of a religious transformation during which they have come to recreate their identities. Prior to their
religious transformations the primary way they understood their identities was as Somali women, and currently the primary way they view themselves are as Muslim women. Muslim identity was always an important part of their identities as Somali women, but now it is the most important component of their consciously chosen subjecthood. Their newly reformed identities lead them to be critical of many traditional practices within Somali culture as they embrace their wider religious identities as Muslim women.

Their critiques of Somali culture are based on newly found interest in Islam and education from institutions like the traveling Muslim university and mosques that are not dominated by Somalis, but rather by Muslims of differing cultural backgrounds. However, they do not see a conflict between their identities as Muslim women and as Somalis, because Muslim identity has historically been an integral component of Somali identity. Rather, Aisha and Leila see themselves as role models for the Somali community and especially for Somali women who they now believe do not practice Islam appropriately.

Sahara and Mariam: Veiling as an Act of Cultural Solidarity

In contrast to Aisha and Leila, Sahara and Mariam have not begun wearing the veil out of a religious transformation, but as an act cultural solidarity with the Somali community. Sahara has started wearing the veil in an effort to build rapport with other members of the Somali community in Columbus. She came to Columbus seeking a Somali community to be a part of, and part of becoming a legitimate member of the community (as a woman) is to wear the hijab. Sahara accepts this boundary marking
practice and actively pursues her membership in the community through compliance with it.

Mariam’s choice to begin wearing the veil stands out because she is a leader within the community, and her actions are watched with interest by the community at large. Beginning to wear hijab was an important step in her decision to support the Somali community post-9/11 and to attempt to contradict Orientalist beliefs about Somalis in Columbus. Her choice to assertively challenge the belief that Somali women are inherently oppressed because they wear the veil by putting it on herself illuminates her dedication to the Somali community and to raising awareness about women’s issues specifically. She is concerned with representations of Muslim women as subjugated and how these representations affect Somali’s women lives in Columbus. She supports education activities for Somali women and also seeks to actively challenge Western notions of Somali women’s domination by patriarchy through wearing the veil.

Is Multiculturalism Bad For Women?

In this chapter I have described different forms of activism by women within the Somali community. Only one woman (Aisha) is explicitly feminist in her orientation and in her criticisms of Somali culture as patriarchal. Aisha is relatively well-known in the community, but not well-liked because of her explicitly feminist claims. Most of the other women that I interviewed and worked with did want to see gains for women within the Somali community like ending FGM/FGC, arranged marriages, polygamous marriage, early marriage for girls and social expectations that women’s place is solely in the domestic sphere. Many of the women like Aisha and Leila sought reforms for women
specifically through religious arguments based on the Qur’an and sources of Islamic jurisprudence that they believe support women’s rights.

The four examples of women ‘putting on the hijab’ within the context of the United States, where they are free to choose to wear or not wear it raises exactly the issue that concerns Okin about multiculturalism. If the veil is a symbol of women’s oppression than the fact that women are “choosing” to wear it in a liberal democratic society could be evidence of how tolerance for ‘group rights’ and support for multiculturalism maintains the subordination of women within minority cultures. Okin would question the idea that women have a free and valid choice to wear or not wear the veil if they are socially punished for not doing so within the Somali community. The fact that Somali women who do not wear the hijab will face discrimination within the community seems to support Okin’s argument. I met and heard about many Somali women who wear the hijab when they are in the Somali community, but do not wear it when they do not expect to interact with Somalis. One young woman told me that after she began wearing a more conservative form of the hijab she received compliments and felt more welcome in the Somali community. All of these examples seem to support the idea that Somali women are subordinating themselves to Somali gendered norms in order to meet the demands of the Somali community, and they are. However, I argue that this does not mean that they are subordinated, and pointedly they do not see themselves as subordinated.

The veil is a symbol heavy with controversial meanings. During my fieldwork, I wanted to understand what the veil means to the women I interacted with, and to appreciate what they deem are the purposes and importance of it. I have chosen to share examples of women who recently started to wear the veil, because it highlights the
different meanings of the veil to individual women. While two common themes emerged of wearing the veil as a religious symbol and wearing it to conform to Somali cultural traditions, each woman has a specific and unique reason for beginning to wear it. Baring in mind, Barthe’s argument that it is as important to explain cultural continuity as cultural change, these women’s experiences illuminate how cultural dynamics are always in-flux and what may appear on a superficial level to be the same act performed by different actors may actually be actions that arise from divergent motives that are idiosyncratic to individual women. For example, what appears to be an example of women’s subordination within an Orientalist paradigm, the ‘putting on’ of the hijab, has not only a multiplicity of meanings to Somali women, but concurrently a multiplicity of motives.

It is possible to interpret all four of the examples of women putting on the hijab as direct challenges to Western cultural imperialism. This argument is particularly applicable to Mariam’s case where she begins to wear the hijab out of political solidarity with the Somali community. However, through my work I would like to challenge the idea that Somali women’s primary reason for wearing the hijab is out of a rebellion against Western norms and ways of being in the world. When Al-Hibri claims that Okin regards immigrants as the “inessential Other” (42) it is because Okin is basing her claims about the risks of group rights on the notion that it is a fact that Western women are more liberated than women from minority cultures. I wish to avoid this mistake and take seriously my informant’s claims that they have put on the hijab for the reasons that they purport.

In Mariam’s case it is clear that part of the reason that she has put on the hijab is out of a critique of how the Western media represents Muslim women. However, her
main stated goal was to serve the Somali community as a positive role model for women who wear the hijab. If I do not take the women’s claims seriously and instead read their actions as only examples of rebellion against the West than I reduce their agency to a paradigm where it exists only in opposition or submission to the West. I would like to consider the possibility that they do have another perspective, valid not because it opposes or supports Western values, but because it springs from their life experiences. Their life experiences serve as a constant reminder of the tensions between the West and the Rest, and one of the most available narratives to interpret their experiences is that of submission and oppression. Another available narrative is rebellion and opposition to the West. Is there a third possibility?

In my second chapter, I shared my thesis that it is dangerous to limit acceptable narratives to the ones we already know and believe to be true. This is especially important when discussing Somali women’s experiences and actions, because in an Orientalist worldview the West (and potentially Western feminism) already knows and understands the position of Somali/Muslim women and we do not need to learn anything from them—but they have much to learn from us. Over the course of my fieldwork, I have come to believe that Somali women challenge the parts of Somali gendered norms that serve them to challenge and they leave the rest. The West does not need to educate them about their own subjugation—they already know more about it than we do. They also know how to challenge it effectively to meet their life needs.

Abdullahi An-Na’im argues that Okin’s theses regarding the dangers of multiculturalism do a disservice to minority cultures and the goals of feminism. He questions Okin with these claims:
“Do such theorists in North America and Western Europe have a clear understanding of the *meaning* of cultural membership in a minority culture in Western societies, as a daily existential experience and not merely a theoretical construct? And are they willing and able to act in solidarity with minority groups in advancing the objectives those communities now hope to achieve through assertions of group rights? In particular, if they encourage young women to repudiate the integrity and cohesion of their own minority culture, how can the theorists then help to sustain the identity and human dignity of those women? “ (1999, 59, emphasis original).

An-Na’im’s focus on the practical implications of Okin’s arguments is also of concern to me. My project is an effort to understand the *meaning* of Somali cultural membership in the Columbus community on the level of daily experience from a Somali perspective. The women (and men) that I have interviewed have left me with a strong impression that cultural solidarity is extremely important to Somalis in Columbus individually and as a community. This solidarity is unlikely to change even if members critique aspects of community life. While Aisha and Leila are critical of certain behaviors within the Somali community, they are not abandoning their identities as Somalis. For example, their main relationships remain relationships with Somalis in Columbus and throughout the Somali diaspora and they are not actively seeking to change their social network. However, I found all of my informants interested in making contacts outside of the community, as for example, they invited me into their homes and businesses to interview them. The purpose of this chapter is to give examples of the differences among Somali women in their attention to issues of gender in the Somali community.

Multiculturalism is not ‘bad’ for women. The question of whether multiculturalism is bad for women reinforces the well-known narrative that posits Western liberalism as the pinnacle of social and human development and the ‘Rest’ as

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27 An-Na’im argues that Susan Okin’s argument is reminiscent of Samuel Huntington’s *Clash of Civilizations* and could affect public policy issues in North America (1999, 59).
backwards and und(e)veloped. Okin’s arguments reiterate this narrative and are in themselves dangerous to the forms of organic feminism found within the Somali community. None of the Somali women I met, including those who wore niqab (a veil with full face covering, except for the eyes) or those who were extremely religious believed that girls should not be educated, should not be able to choose to marry or not marry, or believed that men’s status as the head of the household was unquestionable. Rather, they all supported women’s education, women’s right to choose her marriage partner, and were willing to challenge men’s status in the home when it served them to do so.

For example, there is what is considered a serious problem within the Somali community regarding the breakdown of families post-resettlement in the US. On multiple occasions I heard from caseworkers similar stories of Somali women demanding that their husbands either get a job or leave. Or in other cases where Somali men, although not working, felt that in their role as head of the household they should decide where the family’s income should be spent (either the wife’s income or welfare benefits), and their wives vehemently rejected this situation. One caseworker told me that he was called to a home to help settle this kind of dispute where the woman told her husband that if “he doesn’t earn the money, he doesn’t get to decide how it is spent!” That particular family separated because the husband refused to share authority with his wife in making financial decisions. Somali women do speak out against injustices in their lives, and there are forms of feminism that are organic within the community. However, there remains a very negative connotation towards feminism within the Somali community, one that is not lessened by arguments made by Western feminists that minority cultures and
especially Islamic minority cultures are inherently more oppressive towards women. These types of claims further alienate Somali women from feminism and put them in a defensive position where it is much more likely they will feel the need to defend their culture rather than work with Western feminists across cultural divides.

Somali women should not have to choose between gender equality and loyalty to their Somali Muslim identity, and that is the dichotomy set up by Okin, but challenged by An-Na’im, Al-Hibri, and my work with the Somali community. Western feminist ‘development agendas’ are plagued by assumptions about what does and does not count as women’s development, which silences native/Other ways of conceiving of being in the world. My empirical work with the Somali community reveals that Somali women do indeed have different visions of the future, not just from Western feminists, but from each other. However, Okin would be pleased to know that my work also reveals that a majority of the Somali women I interviewed and interacted with share common concerns and goals with her and Western feminists to end discriminatory practices against women in all cultures.
CHAPTER 4

Gendered Narratives of Alienation: Somalis and Racialized Muslim Identity

“Do you think there was a change after September 11th?” “Big change. Not even small. Complete change in the US. Before I remember the US they were very compassionate people, very kind. And they have not any bad impression or any reaction to any other people. But now the things changed because of the media. Many people saw that Islamic people are not good people, they are afraid. They are scared…That is not right. I can say that. That’s a big change for them”. Excerpt from interview with 35 year old male Somali-American citizen

Somalis are facing a lot of things. For example, I’ll give it to you. A lot of media stuff…a lot of stereotypes. Excerpt from interview with 34 year old male Somali asylum seeker

“Columbus is not Lewiston, Maine---yet.”
Leader in a local NGO serving Somali refugees in Columbus, Ohio.

By the fall of 2002, 1,100 Somali refugees had relocated from other cities in the US to Lewiston, Maine. The refugees were trying to escape the poverty and crime of metropolitan areas like Atlanta, and a few ‘scouts’ from the Somali community were sent to find more appropriate living conditions around the US---Lewiston was among the cities chosen. The documentary film, The Letter explores how Lewiston becomes an ideological battleground for debates about racism, immigration and multiculturalism in the US after the mayor of Lewiston, Lauier Raymondrites, wrote an open letter
(published in the local newspaper in October 2002) to the Somali community asking them to stop the migration of Somalis into the town.

Many in the Lewiston community, both Somali and non-Somali, were outraged by the letter, and the town received international media attention when a white supremacist group decided to hold a rally in Lewiston on January 11\textsuperscript{th}, 2003 in support of the mayor’s letter. A counter-rally, organized by ‘the Many and One Coalition’ (a group from Lewiston) was held across town on the same day. In preparation for the rallies, the Maine police organized their biggest effort in the state’s history to provide for the safety of the protesters and to hopefully avoid violent confrontations. No violence took place on January 11, 2003 in Lewiston, and the protesters at the ‘Many and One Coalition Rally’ greatly outnumbered those in attendance at the white supremacist event.

Since that time the tensions between the newly arrived Somali community in Lewiston and the native population have lessened, although there have been several incidents of violence, especially among teens\textsuperscript{28}. Most of the Somalis who originally settled there have chosen to remain in Lewiston. Many media outlets referred to the Somali community’s arrival in Lewiston as the “Somali Invasion”, a phrase which helps to construct a narrative of alienation towards the Somali community. The arrival of Somalis in Lewiston and the controversies that overtook the city serve as an important touchstone for similar, though less publicized narratives of alienation that are currently circulating in Columbus surrounding the arrival of the Somali community.

Similar to the situation in Lewiston, Maine, there exists a negative sentiment towards the Somali community in Columbus, Ohio. This negative sentiment is fueled by

\textsuperscript{28} The most highly publicized incident took place when a frozen pig’s head was thrown into a mosque in Lewiston in 2006 (Huang 21 July 2006).
racism and negative attitudes towards Muslims, which intensified in Columbus post-9/11. Many of the Somalis I interviewed and interacted with shared experiences of discrimination, and concurrently non-Somalis often shared their negative views of Somalis with me. I did not solicit these comments from non-Somalis, but inevitably when I would share my research project with people from the Columbus community, many would offer their opinions of Somalis.

Based on my fieldwork and analysis of media narratives, I have identified four major narratives that often circulate concerning Somalis in Columbus. Two of the narratives are not unique to Somalis, but encompass meta-narratives concerning immigration to the US. The other two narratives are claims made specifically about the Somali community in Columbus. The meta-narratives are: 1) ‘Others’ including legal immigrants, illegal immigrants and refugees exist outside of the US imaginary of who constitutes ‘us’. Instead, these groups constitute a ‘them’ with which US natives have cultural and material conflicts; and 2) The US is responsible for its own (cultural and economic) demise by allowing too many ‘others’ to cross its borders both legally and illegally, and this material practice has led to an invasion by others with the greatest risk being the loss of cultural hegemony to the ‘invaders’.

29 In Otto Santa Ana’s book, Brown Tide Rising, he argues that metaphors shape public opinion in ways that have tangible results. For example, he argues the common metaphors used to characterize Latino/immigrants in the US often result in public policies that aim to ‘control’ and ‘minimize’ immigration. Santa Ana argues that everyday values and ways of thinking are represented by the metaphors that are commonly used to describe Latino/a immigrants. A common metaphor, Santa Ana finds relates ‘immigration to dangerous and uncontrollable waters’, which conveys Americans’ fears of being over-run and ‘drowning’ in a sea of immigrants.

30 Senator Kennedy’s argument that it is “un-American” to discriminate against immigrants based on national origin has recently come under scrutiny by Samuel Huntington in his book, Who Are We: The Challenges to America's National Identity, in which he claims that both elite educated Americans and Latino/a immigrants do not accept American identity as an important and salient part of their personal identities. Huntington worries that elites’ ‘transnational identities’, and Latino/a immigrants’ allegiance to
The narratives particular to Somalis in Columbus are: 1) Somalis function as an unimaginable other, meaning that their religious and cultural identities are so threatening to the status quo—so ‘other’ that there exists a need to discursively construct and then reiterate a division between Somalis and the native Columbus community. This discursively constructed division utilizes a narrative of ‘rudeness’ that obscures the actual problematics, which are that Somalis are Muslim and black; and 2) The final narrative is explicitly gendered and is directed towards constructing a narrative of cultural superiority in which Somali women are the victims of their culture until they arrive in the US, after which they may become liberated, which is the narrative I have analyzed extensively in the previous chapters. These four narratives constitute what I identify as narratives of alienation, which I argue govern the relations between Somalis and non-Somalis in the Columbus community. This chapter focuses on the everyday experiences of Somalis who confront these narratives of alienation and specifically addresses how Somali men confront these narratives and construct narratives of resistance.

Ethnographic Evidence for Negative Perceptions of Somali Refugees in the Columbus Community

Below is a sampling of the comments that non-Somalis shared with me regarding their attitudes and beliefs about the Somali community. During my fieldwork with the Somali community and in my interviews I explicitly asked what they believed to be the perceptions of native born Americans about Somalis. Somalis identified the narratives of the countries of their birth interferes with their identification with American cultural values, which he argues have their origin in Christianity, liberal individualism, respect for private property and the Protestant work ethic.
alienation I have outlined above revealing that these narratives are well-known and perform a governing function in everyday interactions between Somalis and non-Somalis. In the following examples, it is clear that narratives of alienation explicitly dominate in non-Somalis perceptions of the Somali community.

“Oh, you work with Somalis. I guess there must be something good about the community, but you never hear about it.” White man, age approximately 50, fundraiser for a charity in Columbus, Ohio

“I work at the housing authority, and I would NEVER want my daughters to grow up the way they treat women.” White woman, age 30 at a private dinner party

“I saw a Somali woman receiving welfare benefits and then getting into her expensive SUV outside the office. They are exploiting the system.” White man, approximately age 70, at a Catholic Church that was considering sponsoring a refugee family

“Somalis: They’re freeloaders who don’t shower.” White woman, age 55, works in a hospital in Columbus

“Aghhhh, Somalis! My sister works with them all of the time—she’s a nurse. She thinks they are so rude, she can’t stand them. She’s going to change hospitals because she doesn’t want to work with them anymore. She’s an ER nurse, and they use the ER like it’s a doctor’s office.” White male, age 29, private conversation

“I just don’t like them.” White woman, approximately age 40, Social Worker, private conversation

“When I go to their homes, they just want more, more, more! I just barely get in the door and they’re saying, “we need more money”, “we need more welfare”. They don’t even say ‘hello’ to me.” White woman, approximately age 45, Social Worker, at a seminar for Columbus city workers who interact with the Somali community

“My son has to live by them. He can’t sell his house. I have to listen to him all the time complaining about Somalis.” White woman, approximately age 60, private conversation
“It seems to me Columbus is just becoming too multicultural. Why are they all coming here? I go around Hilliard and it feels like another country.” White male, approximately age 50, Doctor who lives in the Columbus area

“You like to work with those Somalis. I can’t believe it—I couldn’t do it.” African American woman, approximately age 55, private conversation

These are just a sampling of the comments that I received regarding the Somali community during my research. In addition to these comments, I had direct experiences of the negative perceptions of Somalis in Columbus when I (during the course of my fieldwork) accompanied newly arrived Somali families to a local NGO, where they could receive used furniture to furnish their apartments.

The staff at the NGO does not see the Somali community as a target population for its services. However, the NGO has local contracts with several NGOs that serve the Somali community in Columbus, and as a result sees a high volume of Somali clients each week. During my fieldwork, I would often attend at least one and up to five appointments each week with Somali clients. Over a year and a half, I attended well over one hundred such visits, and I came to know the staff at the agency well. They did not look forward to working with Somali clients, and at least one staff member explicitly refused to work with them.

The schedule that the agency operates on is highly punctual, with appointments scheduled every 15 minutes because of the high numbers of people they serve. The agency provides free used furniture for welfare recipients, people who have lost their homes due to bankruptcy or fire, people who were formerly homeless and very low
income senior citizens, in addition to newly arrived legal immigrants or refugees. The staff often complained to me that Somalis were consistently late to appointments, wanted more furniture than they were allotted, and were rude. In addition, other practical issues were of concern to the staff when working with Somalis. For example, newly arrived Somali refugees often have limited language skills and the first question I would be asked is “Do they speak English?” The limited English language skills of many clients were problematic because of the resulting difficulty of explaining the rules of the process at the agency. Clients could not freely choose what they wanted from the warehouse where the furniture was kept, but needed to fill out a worksheet that included a list of the goods they needed (mattresses, kitchen table, chairs, sofa, etc) before entering the warehouse. After the worksheet was filled out, clients were unable to change anything on the list unless the warehouse did not have an item they had listed. For example, if the warehouse was out of kitchen tables, a client could get other items that were considered of equivalent worth by the NGO\textsuperscript{31}. This complicated process was difficult to explain to newly arrived refugees who did not speak English and thus had trouble communicating if a translator did not accompany them.

Somali clients did often arrive late to appointments, and if they were more than five minutes late their appointments would be cancelled and rescheduled (this was a universal policy for all appointments). The agency schedules appointments often weeks ahead of time, so if clients were late and had to reschedule, they had to wait another two to four weeks for furniture. Staff at the agency often encouraged me to inform my clients that their appointments were earlier than they actually were in hopes that they would

\textsuperscript{31} The worksheet that clients complete includes a point system in which each item is worth a certain number of points. Each client can request the equivalent of 40 points worth of furniture.
arrive early. I did not embrace this practice, but instead encouraged clients to come 15 minutes early and informed them of the strict schedule of the agency. I also sometimes gave examples of other clients who had been late and had to wait weeks longer to get furniture. These cautionary tales often worked, and many of my clients would arrive early to the appointments.

A majority of the clients with whom I went to the agency were women. Because of women’s traditional roles within the home, many Somali families viewed the act of choosing furniture for the home as a woman’s job. Also, many clients were women who arrived as single-parents, so they were solely responsible for establishing their household here in Columbus. Somali clients often asked me if the furniture available through the agency was “good” or not. I would tell them that it was used furniture^{32} and some of it was in good condition and some of it was not. Several clients were unhappy with the selection of furniture available through the agency and informed friends and family. This resulted in a few Somali clients complaining to the agency that the available furniture did not meet their expectations. After these incidents, staff at the agency perceived Somali clients as ‘picky’ and ‘not grateful’ (in addition to rude) for the help they were receiving. In my experience, this was not true. Somali clients were overwhelmingly thankful for the help they were receiving, but the actions of the few individuals who complained were taken to represent the community as a whole.

These perceptions worked to undermine the relationship between the agency and the Somalis they served because they entered into interactions with Somali clients with a negative attitude and disgruntled tone in their voice. During the course of my fieldwork, I

^{32} A majority of the furniture at the agency comes from donations from private citizens, but occasionally a business donates furniture to the organization.
became keenly aware that Somalis are ‘people oriented’, and by this I mean they are acutely attuned to reading people’s body language and overall attitudes. Somali culture has a long oral tradition, and it is a clan based society so that historically it has been socially important to pay attention to social cues that alert one to one’s relationship to another. Also, most of the Somalis currently arriving in Columbus have been living in refugee camps for several years, which other Somalis have told me affects their behavior and attitudes in situations concerning resources. Conditions in refugee camps can be incredibly difficult and many are forced to compete to receive the daily necessities they need to survive.

At another local NGO where I spent a lot of time, one of the most challenging positions in the office (according to the staff) was sitting at the front desk. The organization did not have funds to hire a receptionist, so the staff would rotate during the week sitting at the front desk, greeting clients and answering phones. The staff was composed of both Somalis and non-Somalis, but all equally found sitting at the front desk stressful. Clients often came to the office without appointments and wanted to see staff members. Some staff members would see clients without appointments and others would not. Therefore, the person at the front desk often had to be aware of the boundaries of the individuals on the staff at the NGO as well as try to meet the needs of the clients.

Often clients were simply seeking information about their family members currently living in refugee camps and wanting to know the status of their refugee applications. Hundreds of people who have been approved for resettlement in Columbus are just waiting for flight assignments, meaning they are awaiting notification of when they will fly to the US. It can take up to a year or more for flights to be assigned, with
some families arriving fairly quickly (within 3 months) and others waiting over a year. Often family members whose relatives have been approved but whose flights have not yet been assigned come to the office seeking an answer to when their family members will arrive. The local NGO is powerless in determining when a family will arrive, but it serves as the access point for refugees already in the US to seek information about the status of their family’s application. The local NGO can contact the international refugee agency it works with (there are several) and request information about a family’s arrival. The information received back, however, is often, “the family is ready for travel” with no other information given. This result is frustrating for both the NGO staff workers and the family here in the US. As a result, the staff member at the front desk often has to talk with refugees who are upset and worried about their family abroad and who are not satisfied with the answers given by the international organization. Consequently, the front desk duty is seen by staff members as the least desirable position in the office.

The non-Somali staff members also faced language barriers at the front desk, and clients would often request to speak with Somali staff members because they could not communicate effectively in English. The non-Somali staff members often complained about this because it was difficult to get the Somali staff to come to the front to translate. Often Somali staff members wanted to avoid the area, for they knew they would inevitably get inundated with questions not only from the person needing a translator, but from other clients as well. During one excessively busy day, a non-Somali worker was on the verge of tears from working at the front desk. A Somali worker consoled her and gave her this advice, “You can’t change them. Don’t take it personally. They have been living in refugee camps, and they are just using their survival skills here, too”. The front
desk worker felt overwhelmed by what she called the ‘aggressiveness’ or ‘rudeness’ of the clients, and this was a common trope I heard articulated by non-Somalis about their interactions with Somalis.

In previous chapters, I discussed other examples of perceived rudeness, but the perceptions of Somalis’ ‘rudeness’ stem primarily from native born Americans’ expectations that Somalis conform to American social etiquette almost immediately after their arrival in the US. Often I encountered non-Somali workers at local NGOs who treated Somali clients inappropriately because of claims that Somalis are ‘rude’. One extreme example occurred at the NGO where front desk duty was avoided by everyone in the office. A non-Somali worker, a young white woman, was adamant that she would not see clients who did not arrive on-time (or close to it) for their appointments. She told me directly that she believes that Somalis need to learn to arrive on time for appointments, and her refusal to see clients who were more than 15 minutes late was her way of enforcing this social norm. However, for refugees who often rely on others for transportation (public transportation did not stop at the office), being on time for appointments could be challenging. For example, an elderly woman arrived over 30 minutes late for an appointment because the relative who drove her was late returning from work. Rather than taking the circumstances into account, the worker at the NGO wanted to discipline the Somali client into adherence with her policy that they should arrive on time for appointments. An argument ensued between the NGO worker and the Somali clients, which encompassed the time the appointment would have taken to fulfill its original purpose. At the end of the incident, the appointment was rescheduled for another day, but at the time and expense of the client. In this case, the NGO worker’s
goal of culturally reinforcing ‘American’ social standards was detrimental to the needs of
the refugees.

However, I also witnessed episodes in which Somali workers at local NGOs made
demands on non-Somali co-workers to meet their cultural and religious needs. For
example, at a local NGO where Somali workers outnumber non-Somalis two-to-one,
there were often times when the non-Somalis conformed to Somali cultural requirements.
For meetings and events where food was available, Somali food was most often served
because of the food restrictions of Muslims and also their preference for Somali food
(even if they did not abide by Islamic food restrictions). In one particular incident, a non-
Somali agency worker (the one mentioned above who did not see clients if they were
more than 15 minutes late) suggested that they serve pizza at a luncheon, and a Somali
worker became irritated and said, “I remember when Jan used to work here,” in reference
to a woman who was a former employee of the agency “She always ordered us beautiful
Somali food.” This comment was a direct challenge to the non-Somali worker and her
attempts to enforce what she saw as ‘American’ social standards. The incident was not
only about which type of food would be available at the luncheon, but also about the
strain in the office between the Somali and non-Somali workers and their differing
interpretations of how the office should operate.

In another example, two Somali women workers had become increasingly
devoutly religious, and this affected the times at which they prayed at work. While in
previous years they prayed within a certain window of time, their newly conservative
religiosity required them to pray at precise times during the day. During staff meetings
this could prove to be difficult to accommodate. For example, during one important staff
meeting, a training session which was held to meet the requirements of one of the major funders of the organization, the meeting started late. Instead of beginning at 1:00pm, the training began at 1:40pm. Shortly after the meeting began, one of the Somali women told the leader of the training (a non-Somali) that the meeting needed to stop at 2:00pm so she and others could pray. The leader of the meeting was upset because the training was already 40 minutes behind schedule. A discussion began between the leader of the meeting and the Somalis workers. Eventually, a compromise was reached and it was decided that the prayers would be held early and right away so that the flow of the training would not be interrupted. The compromise was brokered by two Somali male workers who are religious but who do not follow the strict prayer regime that the women follow. It took several minutes to convince the two Somali women to pray early, but eventually they (reluctantly) agreed. The leader of the training and the other non-Somali workers watched as the men and women prayed separately before continuing on with the meeting.

These mundane experiences are important to analyze because they illuminate the cultural divides and compromises that take place daily in Columbus between Somalis and non-Somalis, and they help us to trace some of the everyday trajectories of the narratives of alienation towards Somalis in Columbus. Along with these everyday experiences of cultural challenges, there have also been three major events within the Columbus community concerning Somalis that have served to reinforce narratives of fear and alienation. All three incidents concern both Somali racial identity and Muslim identity. The first incident concerns the prosecution and conviction of a Somali man involved in a terror plot to take place in Columbus. The second incident revolves around the firing of a
Somali Columbus city employee after political remarks he made in an online web blog, and the last incident is the death of Nasir Abdi, a young Somali man who was shot and killed by Columbus police officers in the fall of 2004.

The Somali Terrorist

On November 28, 2003, a Somali asylum seeker, Nuradin Abdi, was taken into federal custody for allegedly violating immigration rules. He was held without being formally charged with a crime until June 14, 2004, when he was charged with conspiracy to provide material support to terrorists, conspiracy to provide material support to al-Qaeda, and two counts of fraud and misuse of documents (Gilmore). The case became high profile when Attorney General John Ashcroft said in a press conference, “The American heartland was targeted for death and destruction by an al-Qaeda cell which allegedly included a Somali immigrant who will now face justice” (CBS on-line news 6/14/2004).

Abdi had been seen meeting with now convicted terrorist, Iyman Faris, who pled guilty to providing material support to Al Qaeda and Christopher Paul, a Columbus native who is currently awaiting trial for a terror plot involving the Brooklyn Bridge. The three met at a local coffee shop in Upper Arlington in June 2002 where they criticized American foreign policy and talked of plotting to bomb or ‘shoot up’ a mall in Columbus. The three did not meet again, and there were no materials purchased for the plot. In July of 2007, Abdi pled guilty to one count of conspiring to support terrorists and was sentenced to ten years. After he serves his sentence he will be deported to Somalia.
This event was highly publicized not only in the local media, but also in the national media, in a larger part due to John Ashcroft’s attention to the case. Many Somalis in Columbus believe Abdi to be innocent of the charges. I had the opportunity to interview a close relative of Abdi (prior to his pleading guilty), and she claimed that he was innocent and hoped he would be acquitted at the trial. I also spoke with several members of the Somali community between November 2003 and June 2004, when Abdi was officially charged with a crime. During this time his family was not able to see him, and he did not have access to an attorney. When his mother was able to see him about a month before his indictment in June, she reported that he was acting strangely and was not himself. At the indictment in June, he did indeed act strangely by alternately grinning and banging his head on the table. In an interview with reporters, Abdi’s mother, Nadifa Hassan, claimed, “He's very sick. When I saw him last time he wasn't talking at all. I feel pain inside, the way he looked like that. I know my son, that he's not a terrorist” (CBS online news 6/14/04).

The magistrate who presided over Abdi’s indictment agreed with Abdi’s mother that his behavior was extremely abnormal, and he sent him for psychiatric evaluation to determine if he was competent to stand trial. By August, Abdi was transferred back to Franklin County Jail, apparently deemed competent to stand trial, although his medical records and evaluations were never released. Rumors spread in the Somali community that Abdi had been tortured during his initial time in custody (November 2003-June 2004) and that his maltreatment caused his unusual behavior and mental problems. Many Somalis I spoke with about the case did not claim that Abdi was innocent of making the threatening comments, but rather that they were just that: threatening comments, not acts
of terrorism. The federal government claimed they had evidence that Abdi attended a
terrorist training camp in Ethiopia, but his family claims he did not. After his sentencing
a spokesperson for the family claimed that the “government exaggerated the facts against
Abdi, knowing they would be hard to disprove” (CBS on-line news 11/27/07). Rather
than face life in prison, according to the spokesperson, Abdi pled guilty to one charge and
the others were dismissed.

After Abdi’s sentencing the Somalis I spoke with, both those who were convinced
of his innocence and others who were not, were surprised at the leniency of his sentence.
10 years was not seen as an arduous sentence, especially because he is receiving credit
for time already served between his initial arrest and his formal sentencing. While there
was relief within the community regarding what is considered to be a ‘light sentence’, it
does raise questions about the legitimacy of the case against Abdi in the minds of Somali
community members. For example, one man told me that if there were more evidence,
then his punishment would have been more severe, to fit the crime. For some in the
Somali community, his light sentence serves as evidence that there was no proof that he
actually intended to bomb a local area mall, and that he was guilty of only making an
angry anti-American comment.

The case and the publicity it received through the media during the four years it
was being litigated constructed a narrative of alienation equating Somalis with terrorist
acts against the US. This narrative of alienation explicitly associates Somali men with
terrorism and frames them as likely terrorists in Columbus. The effects of this narrative
can be seen in the treatment of Abukar Arman, a central player in the case I will consider
next. When John Aschroft, claimed that “the American heartland was targeted for death
and destruction” by a Somali ‘immigrant’ (which is inaccurate, because Abdi was an asylum seeker, not an ‘immigrant’ in the normative definition), he constructed a narrative of alienation that has far reaching consequences in the Columbus community. It implicates Somali men as especially dangerous and particularly un-American or anti-American, and contributes to the meta-narrative that ‘others’ are invading the US and intend to do it harm.

The Firing of Abukar Arman

In July of 2007, I met Abukar Arman at a coffee shop in German village to interview him. I had met him several times before this meeting, our last meeting taking place at a Committee for American Islamic Relations (CAIR) function in Columbus, where the current governor of Ohio, Ted Strickland, attended to show his support for Muslims in the Columbus community. When I was leaving the CAIR event, I asked Abukar if I could meet with him for my doctoral research and he agreed. He returned my phone call for an interview right away, and arrived at the coffee shop early and was reading when I arrived. As I approached, he welcomed me and insisted on buying my coffee. I wanted to insist on buying both my coffee and his coffee, but I felt that if I pushed too far in my efforts to be the one to buy the drinks, it might affect the entire dialogue. Taking this into consideration I acquiesced and allowed him to buy the coffee, and it was clear to me that he considered it inappropriate for me to pay because I am a woman. Abukar is very religious, which I knew from watching him at the CAIR event, when he appeared to be in religious ecstasy listening to an Imam preach at the event. I knew Abukar to be an excellent orator and an accomplished liaison between the Somali
community and the Columbus community. He worked for the city of Columbus, primarily as a mentor to underprivileged youth, and also taught cultural awareness training for the city of Columbus.

I attended one of his trainings for city workers about Somali culture. The negative ideas that pervade the Columbus community concerning the Somali community arose during the event, with some city workers claiming that Somalis receive extra welfare benefits in comparison with native born Columbus citizens. Someone also mentioned that he believed the city of Columbus gives preferential treatment to Somalis in granting them minority-based business loans, and that this accounts for the plethora of Somali businesses in Columbus. Abukar treaded lightly and tried not to further upset his audience by directly challenging their claims. I raised my hand and said that I had a long term affiliation with a local NGO that resettles Somali refugees, explained what the refugees receive when they arrive, and argued that they actually receive very little financial assistance from the government. No one directly challenged me, but during a break several people did want to talk with me to confirm that Somalis are not receiving preferential treatment.

Abukar’s presentation covered basic information about the history of Somalia and Somali culture. After the event, a nurse who visits Somali homes for health programs told me that she believed she had offended a Somali woman who was attending the event by asking her questions about Somali culture. Specifically, the nurse wanted to understand

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33 The federal government requires that all refugees have a ‘sponsor’ before they are approved for resettlement in the US. A sponsor can be a family member, a church or civic organization, or in rare cases a friend. The ‘sponsor’ must promise to meet the basic daily needs of newly arrived refugees for the first three months of their lives in the US (ie, food, clothing and shelter). Refugees do receive a one time cash grant from the US government in the amount of $425.00 per person. After six months in the US, refugees are expected to start repaying the loan they received for their flight to the US, which can range from $800.00-$1,2000.
what she perceived as Somalis’ rudeness, although she did not explicitly state that to the Somali woman. She did ask her why Somalis don’t say ‘hello’ to her before they begin listing what they need and telling her that they need more help or money. The Somali woman politely excused herself from the conversation, saying that she had to leave for another meeting, but the nurse knew she had offended her. The nurse wanted me to answer the question for her, since I had spoken up earlier in the day about working with the Somali community. She was very concerned about the relations between Somalis and her program workers (she was a manager within the program), as many of the nurses in her program openly declared their dislike for Somalis and their hesitancy in working with them. I used the advice given by the Somali worker to the non-Somali worker I discussed above. I told her that most of the newly arrived refugees have lived in refugee camps for several years, and their desperation in pleading for services, without the interlude of polite conversation, was a result of these circumstances. I am not sure if she believed me, and I do not think she was very satisfied with my answer. Instead, after a half-day seminar of learning about Somali culture, she was looking for me to articulate a narrative of alienation to fill the gap carved out by her expectation for one.

Throughout the training, I had been impressed by the way Abukar handled the often disgruntled questions about Somalis that he received, so I was looking forward to meeting with him again in mid-July. The interview itself was relatively uneventful with many of his answers echoing and reconfirming the narratives that had previously been explained to me by others. He did offer one very interesting anecdote about a young Somali woman he knows, who fought for her right to pray in a public school in the Columbus area. The young woman had recently entered high school and decided that she
wanted to observe prayer while at school. At first she was told by her teachers and eventually the principle that she could not take time away from class to pray. They told her that she was requesting special treatment, and that other students could not leave class for purposes other than using the bathroom, so neither could she. Abukar did not get directly involved in this issue, but he gave her direction about confronting the school with evidence of legal cases which guaranteed her right to pray. She did present this evidence to the administration, and they relented (probably in fear of a lawsuit) and gave her permission to leave class to pray in the early afternoon as well as provided a space for her to do so. Abukar was proud of this young woman for asserting her rights and also for observing the Islamic practice of praying five times a day.

When I asked Abukar what he most likes about living in the US, he said that it was the ability to express oneself freely without the fear of reprisal. He said that there are very few places on Earth where this is the case, and that he cherishes this right in the US (he used the example of the Middle East as a place where you cannot freely express yourself). Ironically, the very next day Abukar was fired for expressing his political views in an online blog. Abukar had been writing an online blog for several months, but one specific blog that he wrote concerning the political situation in Somalia garnered him the attention of an ultra-conservative online magazine, which labeled him a terrorist supporter. Readers of the magazine contacted Columbus City Council members requesting an investigation of Abukar’s credentials for serving on a Department of Homeland Security Taskforce for the city of Columbus. Abukar is not a US citizen, and the requirements for the post included being “a citizen of the county” (Carmen 1A), so he
resigned from the position. He was also fired from his position working for Columbus City Schools with at-risk youth.

The source of this controversy was a blog that Abukar wrote concerning the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), a political party in Somalia, in which he suggested that although they harbor extremists, perhaps they should be given an opportunity to rule Somalia long-term because they had been able to establish approximately six months of peace in the country beginning in 2007. The US government deems the ICU a terrorist organization with ties to Al-Qaeda, and the conservative online magazine deemed Abukar a terrorist supporter because of his support for the ICU.

If Abukar qualifies as a terrorist supporter because he supports the ICU then almost every Somali man and woman I know is a supporter of terrorism. Recently, I spoke with a local Somali Imam concerning the current political situation in Somalia. He vehemently and unequivocally does not support the US backed transitional government held in place by Ethiopian troops that is currently in power. Ethiopia and Somalia have a long history of enmity, and most of the Somalis I know view the Ethiopians not as peacekeepers, but rather as invaders in their country. Most support the goals of a unified Somalia that the ICU espouses, if not their extreme religious views. When I asked the Imam if he supports the ICU he said, “Look, I support most of the ICU, not the extremists. I mean, if they saw me, they would kill me and call me an infidel because of the way I dress and act. But, I do support young religious guys over foreign invaders.” These sentiments echo Abukar’s thoughts and most (though not all) of the Somalis I
know share similar criticisms of Ethiopian troops in Somalia\textsuperscript{34}, if not support for the ICU.

I saw Abukar a few weeks after he was fired at the Somali Studies Conference, which took place at OSU in August. He did not seem to be his usual upbeat self, and I wondered if his enthusiasm for free speech and for the United States had been irreparably damaged. I do not believe that Abukar supports terrorism in any way, although I have grave concerns regarding the treatment of women by the ICU, which I have no evidence is of great concern to him. My worries about his political statements notwithstanding, his civil rights were trampled upon in the aftermath of writing his online blog. After an investigation, he was considered “not a person of interest” (Carmen 1A) by local authorities, which means that there are no records of him materially supporting terrorists or participating in terrorist organizations. However, the media attention to his online blog raises questions about what constitutes terrorism—is merely stating support for the ICU a terrorist act?

Abukar’s firing illuminates the repercussions of narratives of alienation that reinforce cultural, social and political hostilities between Somalis and non-Somalis in the Columbus community. While Somalis are now intimate and significant members of the Columbus community, they are mostly separated from their non-Somali neighbors through narratives of alienation that govern interactions between community members. Narratives of alienation are extremely dangerous and, as one non-Somali woman who interacts with Somalis often told me, “they can make everyday interactions between

\textsuperscript{34} Of particular concern to Somalis is the threat that Ethiopians might overtake part of the Somali coastline. Most people told me that they believe Ethiopians are involved, not out of concern for the welfare of Somalis, but for self-seeking economic reasons.
Somalis and non-Somalis pretty ugly.” The incident involving Abukar is particularly costly because he served as an important cultural interloper for the Columbus community, a position that is critically needed and difficult to fill. I now want to move on to analyze another event, the event that highlights the construction of narratives of alienation surrounding racialized Muslim identity within the Columbus community—the death of Nasir Abdi.

The Death of Nasir Abdi

Nasir Abdi was 23 years old when he was shot and killed by Columbus Police officers on Wednesday December, 28th 2005. Abdi had recently been released from an area mental hospital where he was force-fed medications to control his paranoid hallucinations. On that Wednesday, Abdi began acting paranoid and his mother was frightened, so she called 911 for help. The police arrived knowing that they were seeking a mentally ill Somali man who needed to be transported back to a mental hospital for immediate help. Amina, his mother, speaks perfect English so there was no confusion in her call to emergency workers. What happened next has been the cause of both a criminal investigation and a civil lawsuit against the city of Columbus.

Within minutes after the police arrived at Abdi’s apartment complex, he lay dead on the front lawn, killed by a single shot to the chest. The police officers claim that Abdi was wielding a knife and threatening them. None of the police officers were carrying a ‘taser’, a weapon that disables a person with an electrical shock, which could have been used and would have saved Abdi’s life. At least one witness, a Somali woman, said that Abdi did not have a knife and that the police shot him for no apparent reason. In April of
2006, a grand jury in Columbus decided not to indict the police officer who shot and killed Nasir Abdi. However, a civil lawsuit against the City of Columbus is still pending (it is scheduled to go to trial in June 2008) (Maymood 1C).

After the death of Abdi, the Somali community held several protests around Columbus to draw attention to the event and to object to the police officers’ actions. One of the protests took place outside of City Hall in an effort to encourage the mayor to take the matter seriously. Local Somali community leaders talked with the press regarding the Somali community’s intentions regarding the protests: "We are not against the mayor or the city," said Omar Hassan, president of the Somali Community Association of Ohio. "We came from a war-torn country to a safe haven…They should have protected us. Why did they shoot someone who is mentally ill?" (Ferenchik 1A).

After the killing of Nasir Abdi by Columbus police officers, however, there were many narratives circulating within the community about the meaning of Abdi’s death. Here is an exchange I had with one of the Somali women I interviewed, which includes many of the most common narratives.

I: Did you read the article, you might have heard a lot about it, about the death of Nasir Abdi, when the police shot him?

Woman: Yes.

I: Do you think that the coverage was accurate or inaccurate about his death?

Woman: Actually, when that happened I was in outreach in that part of the community. I talked to the police investigators, detectives actually, and then…. Yeah, it was OK with me because there were so many things going on. People are giving the victim events that happened. I talked to the translator for some of the witnesses. Yeah…the news was OK.

I: It was balanced?
Woman: It was balanced. Also, I mean, I talked to the community afterwards and they were talking about, “They are racists and things like that.” Even when it was acquitted, I talked to them. I went to some of the meetings and explained to the community the way the process, you know, how to check the system. That is what happened. It’s not against Somalis. It’s not against…you know…some people that… I gave them the example that in some cases we know the crime happened, but how can we prove it. There is no evidence to prove it. They know the victims are the evidence in front of them. That calms them.

I: Was an idea in the Somali community that it was discriminatory, what happened?

Woman: Right. There were rumors that the police officers were in jail. He’s a member of KKK and all that.

I: Oh really? That one of the police officers was a KKK member?

Woman: Yeah.

I: That’s interesting.

Woman: It’s a rumor.

I: I hadn’t heard that. But in the Somali community, did they think it was because he was Somali or because he was black?

Woman: They think he was…all of it. They think it was because he was black. He was Somali. He was an immigrant. He was a Muslim. All of these things.

I: OK. All of those things.

Woman: Yeah. All of those things combined. So who cares about the life of that kind of person? That’s what they were thinking.

I: So you talked with some of the witnesses? I know there was like a witness, a girl…

Woman: There were…. Some of them were just like a few days in the country.

I: That were there?
Woman: They were there. It was like a complex…you know…most of them were Somalis and they didn’t know what some of them were completely…

I: Stories?

Woman: Yes. Stories and all of that. I had to explain to them. The evidence was just what…we don’t know the system. We don’t know from…explain for example. If you ask somebody how to explain this, you have to say step one, step two, and step three. People who just came from Somalia do not know you have to follow these steps. They jump up here and there and there. It’s going to like it’s one lie or something like that.

The implications of Somalis not explaining events in a linear development led to the questioning of the validity of some of the witnesses’ testimony, and this is what the woman above is pointing out. After the criminal acquittal of the police officers, there were strong negative reactions within the Somali community, and this woman tried to keep these sentiments at bay by explaining the legal process in the US. She claims that this “calms them”, but the rumors circulating in the community that the police officer who shot Abdi is a member of the KKK illuminates how the event brought perceptions of discrimination on the basis of race and religious identity to the surface.

In the summer of 2007, I attended meetings held by Somali community members concerning the death of Nasir Abdi. At one meeting, a Somali man in his late 50s, argued that Abdi was not shot because he was black or because he was Muslim. He implored the young men at the meeting not to spread rumors in the Somali community that the Columbus police are inherently racist or anti-Muslim. He passionately petitioned the young men to rethink how they were framing the incident. His arguments were not well-received and all of the men left while he was talking. One young man insisted that he had an appointment to get to and that was why he was leaving—the others did not make any excuses. The man who claimed to have an appointment said, “I hear what you are saying,
I’m not leaving because of what you’re talking about, it’s just that I have to go”, but it was clear that he was resistant to the man’s arguments. The older Somali man explained to me that he believes the view that Abdi was shot because he was black and Muslim is dangerous to the Somali community. He believes it could make them feel like outsiders in Columbus or in the US, and he argues they are not and do not have to be considered ‘outsiders’.

This man has been living in the US since the 1970s, and had previously been married to an American woman35. He is very concerned about the narratives circulating in the Somali community concerning the death of Abdi, and believes the narratives are damaging the self-image of Somalis in Columbus. He is worried the Somali community will become too focused on feelings of victimization because of their racialized and religious identities in the US. His arguments seek to undermine Somalis’ (potential) identification with African Americans. This was a common narrative that I heard repeatedly during my fieldwork. For example, here is an exchange I had with a Somali man about the relationship between African Americans and Somalis in Columbus:

Man: Yes. When I see sometime…..I can see a barrier in the community like black or white. And remember that kind of…we had no idea in Somalia. Because I never experienced it. But when I study the kind of slavery and the difference….the barrier between whites and blacks. I can say African-Americans and the other white people…I can sense this is not a positive thing. Sometimes we try to make distance about African Americans. Because we think if we become like African-Americans the whites might treat like negative things.” (Somali man, age 35)

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35 When I asked him why he had moved to the US, he replied, “Love. I was following love.” He was studying in Italy in the 1970s when he met an American woman who was also studying there. Eventually, he moved to the US to be with her and they married. Now, he is divorced and wants to move back to Italy.
This man articulates how he understands the divide between African Americans and whites in the US. He also clearly articulates his understanding of the power relations between whites and blacks when he relates:

Man: Because after midnight, if you are driving a taxi.....you cannot because of what fear is. Umm...sometime if a black person, in my experience or in my impression, a black person has a higher rate of crime and umm. I can say that 100% that the black man because of money that can be tried...90% of them...that percent of them would be convicted. But maybe they...but a white person...they would get a very good lawyer. Ninety-nine percent of them may be safe from that.” (Somali man, age 35)

This man understands the barriers of racialized identity that African Americans face, but instead of articulating a politics of solidarity with African Americans, he articulates a narrative of conscious and deliberate separation. Part of this consciously chosen separation occurs as a result of Somalis new experiences of racialization—as the man reports, he had never experienced race as an important component of his identity prior to living in the US and is just beginning to comprehend its full import in the context of the US. Another cause of the divisions between the Somali and African American community are the narratives that circulate within the African American community about the ‘special’ and ‘preferential’ treatment of Somalis by the government. Here my conversation with same man continues as we discuss these issues.

I: Is there a lot of tension between Somalis and African-Americans?

Man: Sometimes. I have seen it too. There is this impression between...the African Americans they have the impression that Somalis might get a lot of help from the US government.

I: They think you get a lot of money or support?

Man: Yeah, a lot of money. Because of that, they have enmity. They say, “We are living here. What about our ancestors two hundred years before? We’re not
getting anything. They just came yesterday and they get everything.” That impression, especially in Columbus exists.

I: Do Somalis have negative impressions of African Americans?

M: I can see, yes. They believe….if they rent an apartment among the neighbor of an African American, they get harmed. Because of…violence….living with a neighbor of white people…safe.

While he believes it is safer to live with whites than blacks, he is also cognizant of the fears surrounding Somalis’ Muslim identity, which he argues primarily originate from the white community:

“People born in the US are different for African Americans and white people. I think African Americans have their best impression here in Columbus, that Somalis get a lot of help from the US government. But the other, I think white people may see us as Muslims that are causing problems all over the world. Like what’s going on in the wars. They may see the impression, “They are Muslims. They may follow…” (Somali man, age 35).

For example, they may be following Muslim extremists, which as we have seen in the case of Abukar, can be a very dangerous narrative. This man shared examples from his friends’ lives of being discriminated against based on their religious identity rather than their racial identity. For example, he knew five Somalis who were flying out of Minneapolis, and were pulled off of the plane before it took off. They are currently suing the airline for discriminatory treatment. The men believe they were targeted for discrimination because they prayed before they got on the plane. They speculate that this act might have frightened passengers or crew who believed they were praying in preparation for an attack similar to 9/11. The most pressing concern for this man and his friends who had this discriminatory experience is how to eliminate prejudice against
Muslims. They are not as concerned with their racialized identities in the US, because they do not believe race is as salient in predicting discriminatory behavior as is their identities as Muslims.

However, the relationship between the Somali community and the African American community in Columbus is a concern for Somalis. Another Somali man I interviewed believes the conflicts between the African American community and the Somali community result from their co-existence in low socio-economic neighborhoods with limited access to resources. When I asked him about the relationship between the Somali community and the African American community he responded:

“You know, I have met like different types of African Americans. I have met people at OSU, people who don’t even know there are Somalis here… and then there are people who work with the African American poor community that know the difference between the Somalis and African Americans. Some of them think Somalis are brought in here and the government is giving them a lot more help. I have had other people tell me, “Somalis are given a specific amount of money by the government to set up businesses.” But I think those are completely…not the average individuals. It’s the…poor individuals who just don’t know really what is happening. Some of them feel like they are in competition with Somali communities for government benefits and things like that. You know…in schools that people attend it just so happens that poor African Americans end up having the same residential area and the same school as the immigrants that arrive right now. There’s a pull and push factor where people are fighting for… like somehow feeling at risk”. (Somali Man age 31)

This man argued that the conflicts are a result of economic disadvantage rather than racialization, but other men and women I interviewed shared with me that they arrived in the US with negative perceptions of African Americans. Their only knowledge of African Americans comes from the media, especially from music, music videos and American movies. As a result, many Somali refugees arrive in the Columbus with an image of the African American community that is shaped by the hyper-violent and hyper-sexualized
images present in the media concerning African Americans. Similarly, most of the knowledge African Americans and Americans in general have about Somalis and Africans comes from the media.

The Somali man above had an experience which highlights the repercussions of Americans receiving most of their knowledge about Africa and Somalis from popular culture. Below, he shares this experience with me, and we begin with a discussion of how and why Somalis have negative perceptions of African Americans.

Man: I know some reasons of why people think like that. On my own, some of the people I know would say, “African-American…young, men, women, they are lazy.” I will ask, “Well why do you think like that?” It all leads up to the simple reasons that when people come here from other countries, they really have never had an image of Americans. But they got some from media information. So they don’t know anything about African American communities. Then when you are a refugee and you are poor and the only poor people you see are African-Americans, then you know, negative perception is confirmed. It’s just that…but they don’t really know what the average African American person is like. They just know the poor people they meet.

I: So the negative perceptions they get are from movies and TV shows?

Man: Right…which we all know is wrong. But it’s not because they have inherent information or understanding about the African American community. Once you explain it to people like that, they’re like, “Oh.” But the funny thing is the African Americans I have met do have a stereotypical view of Africans as well that they also got from the media, which can be funny too. Like I had someone…this is actually a woman who took courses at OSU, Fine Arts believe it or not. She told me that the movie she was talking about, like she said, “Oh…have you ever seen this movie?” She mentioned two movies. One was a movie about Idi Amin in Uganda, like when he was expelling all the Asians. Then another movie was about that comedy…Coming to America.

I: Right. Coming to America. Eddie Murphy.

Man: Eddie Murphy. Both of those two are weirdly not representative of anything. They just like made up the story. Those are like…they’re nothing, you know. But when she mentioned that I was like, “Wow.” That’s like me saying to an American in Somalia, “Yeah. I know about Americans…because I saw the “Forty Year Old Virgin”, you know?
This is a humorous example that masks the problems inherent in how narratives of alienation construct and then reiterate divisions between Somalis and Americans who get most of their knowledge about one another from the popular media and mass produced films like *Black Hawk Down*. The Hollywood movie *Black Hawk Down* depicts the violent murder of US soldiers in Somalia in 1993 and in the documentary film, *The Letter*, serves as a reason for some residents in Lewiston, Maine to reject the entrance of Somalis into their community. Another man gave me examples of personal experiences confronting narratives of alienation that make him feel estranged from non-Somalis in the Columbus community. For example, when I asked him “Have you ever been asked by a non-Somali person why you were in the US?, he responded:

Man: Yes…many times, many times. The worst one…uh… sometimes indirectly… they will tell you like why all these Somalis are here? Thinks like that, kind of generalize it. Not even a personal question like, “Why are you here?” Usually they say, “Oh, OK. Can I ask you a question? Why are all these Somalis coming to Columbus?” Questions like that. I have a lot of those.

I: What do you tell people when they ask things like that?

Man: It depends on the situation. If it’s like a person I know or I read from their face that they are very sincere, I will tell them the reason I think the Somalis come here, in Columbus. If I sense that the person is bad, then I give them bad answers.

I: What are the good answers versus the bad answers?

Man: Like one day I was in ODH, Ohio Department of Health. I was doing presentations on Somali culture and Somali community health problems, those things. So there was employees of the Department in there and one lady after I finished my presentation asked me, “Oh… can I ask you a question? Why all these people are coming here?” And I said to her, “You are going to have to ask the State Department.”

I: Because you could tell she was kind of…?

Man: Yeah. She was kind of, you know…
I: Negative?

M: Yeah. Negative. I was reading from her that she was, you know, she didn’t like you know, she didn’t like all these new people coming here. I gave her that. “Ask the State Department of the US government, I don’t know why.” It was something like that.

I: And what do you say if you think someone is genuinely interested?

Man: People like that I will basically… I will give them my idea. It’s not real, I don’t know if it’s real or not. I think most of them will come here like for their relatives are already living here or Columbus has a reasonable cost of living. So I think the main reason I usually provide is the real one like that, Columbus has a reasonable cost of living so that’s why so many come here.

This man directly experiences the narrative of alienation that divides Somalis from non-Somalis through the construction of “us” vs. “them” in his daily work, and he also shared experiences with me of confronting the narrative of Somalis’ ‘rudeness’. However, when I asked him whether he believes he is treated differently in the US because he is black, he responded that he had lived in Italy before coming to the US, and that to him the racism in Italy is much worse than in the US.

In Italy he experienced overt forms of racism with people calling him derogatory names on the street and telling him to ‘go home’. He said that he has never had an experience akin to that in the US and he told me, “In America, I think it won’t happen unless you are in a very bad place”. He contends that the difference between Italy (and he generalizes to the whole of Europe) and the US, is that in the US there are laws that protect minorities from being discriminated against and a history of fighting for equality. Other Somali refugees I spoke with had similar views of the difference between racism in the US and in Europe. For example, one man told me that he told the UNHCR (United Nation’s High Commission for Refugees) that he would not accept resettlement in Europe, but only in the US. He said that he would rather stay living in a refugee camp in
Kenya than have his children grow up in Europe. He was so adamant in his argument that he was resettled in the US (after turning down resettlement in Europe). When I asked him why he was so adamant on this issue, he explained that he had traveled around the world prior to the civil war in Somalia. His work had taken him to Europe, the Middle East, and the US. He said that the racism he experienced in Europe had made him determined to be resettled in the US, because he believed his children would always be “second class citizens” in any European country, while they could receive a real opportunity to succeed in the US. As I discuss below, this belief in the American Dream is the most common resistance strategy used by Somali men to counter the narratives of alienation they experience in the US.

Somali Men’s Resistance Strategies: “I think if I work hard, nobody can stop me.”

In response to the narratives of alienation that Somalis confront in the US and the specific narrative which targets Somali men as prone to terrorism, Somali men adopt and utilize the traditional narratives associated with the American Dream. They articulate strong support for the Protestant work ethic and the discourse that the US is ‘the land of opportunity’. Also, Somali men emphasize that Somalis are entrepreneurial and that is why they will make good Americans. In the film, The Letter, leaders from the Somali community respond to the mayor’s letter asking them to stop any more Somalis from moving to the town by holding a press conference where they argue that Somalis are contributing to the Lewiston economy by working and, more importantly, by opening
businesses. The claim that Somalis are inherently entrepreneurial is a narrative strategy used by not only Somalis in Lewiston, but also in Columbus.

Somali women often told me that they were happy to be living in the US because it affords them more opportunities, but only Somali men constructed narratives where they inhabited the subject position of the person who came to the US with nothing, but who will succeed and even thrive due to hard work. They also often reinforce notions of America as exceptional when they argue that it is a nation of immigrants where anyone can make it with education and hard work. For example, here are some of the responses that I received from Somali men who I asked to tell me about any positive experiences that they have had in the US.

I would say my whole experience has been positive. My collective experience…from looking at it from my field, it’s like I am kind of open to everybody who go into, who go through these steps they legally go through. I’m thinking my whole experience was positive. It was hard but positive. Somali Man, age 32, aspiring doctor

Wow. I quite frankly can’t…with few exceptions I can’t really, I feel like my whole general life in the US has been positive. I feel like if you just know the right way to do things, that there’s just a lot more opportunity of…the ability to self determine what to do in life. I feel like in general I have been lucky enough, you know, just to have a lot of positive issues. I mean I came here and I was able to do whatever I wanted. Everything has been positive. I just don’t know where to begin. It’s just too vague and general. I guess the one thing I can point is when I was going to school; I really enjoyed the fact that I could do whatever I wanted. And this way people never wondering, or never wanting to know, either my parent or my family as long as I had my documents and I was doing well. You just do whatever you want and nobody knows you. That’s just positive. There are very few places in the world where you can just get lost in the midst of millions of people and do whatever you want. I think that was just really positive. Somali man age 31

Oh, yes. I love this country. Because I have three kids, wonderful kids. I enjoy it. It’s like, it’s become my home. I’ve been here eleven years. I probably like the education, which I really benefitted by getting an education. Also my kids, where I’m living, I’m thankful that I’m here and safe and healthy. I appreciate America giving me an opportunity in this country which I didn’t have before. You know, I
lived in civil war crisis and now I feel like I am going somewhere. I really like it in America and I really enjoy being here. Somali man, age 34

I love the American culture because it’s a different culture… different people from different countries… different families. And all of them, they are a symbol of how they respect each other. Because if you met on the way one of… a different person. One is from Africa or Asia … Somali man age 41

Man: I came here as a refugee. The positive things is that how America welcomes me, myself. I came as a single man without any other hope, just hope that I could make it in the USA. I get everything that…I get a wife. I get children. I get a job. I get a house. So that’s the positives that I get from the US and made my satisfaction of living here in the USA. That’s my positive things living here in the USA.

I: So do you think you have achieved the American Dream?

Man: Absolutely, yeah. I think if I work hard, nobody can stop me. They can’t say, “You are not American originally.” I believe I can reach any dream I commit to in the USA.” Somali man, age 41

Somali men adapt to narratives of alienation by adopting these strategic narratives that allow them to make claims of being men in pursuit of the American Dream. Somali men are remedying their immigrant and foreign status with narratives of inclusion and belonging. Bonnie Honig argues that the dominant question with regard to immigration today is, “How should we solve the problem of foreignness? (1). She argues that this perspective constructs ‘foreignness’ as a problem that needs to be solved. Rather than constructing foreignness as a problem in need of a solution, she chooses to focus on the “seldom-noted positive content and effect” of it in her work Democracy and the Foreigner (3). She interrogates “what sort of work does it [foreignness] do in cultural politics?” (2). I have detailed in this chapter the negative impact of narratives of alienation for Somalis, which rely on an assumption that the foreignness of Somalis is inherently problematic as they resettle in Columbus. Like Honig, I would like to
challenge the discourse that the foreignness of Somalis is always problematic and in need of a resolution, especially because that resolution usually includes the erasure rather than the acceptance of difference.

Somali men’s resistance strategies mimic many of the historical ways immigrants have tried to de-alienate themselves in the past. Honig finds that immigrants and those who are pro-immigrant have used similar strategies to counter the more prevalent negative associations with immigration and foreignness. These strategies include claiming that foreigners are bringing much needed skill sets to the US, contribute significantly to the economy, especially as entrepreneurs, and model traditional ‘family values’ that natives have stopped practicing but which they regard with nostalgia (Honig 2, 86). More generally, she argues “Sometimes, the figure of the foreigner serves as a device that allows regimes to import from the outside some specific and much-needed but also potentially dangerous virtue, talent, perspective, practice, gift, or quality that they cannot provide for themselves (or that they cannot admit they have)” (3). Through the course of my research, it has become clear that Somali refugees find themselves caught in what Honig identifies as the ‘potentially dangerous’ subject position more often than the position of the ‘much needed’.

On occasion Somalis would talk with me about the fact that the US brings refugees into the country, but does not adequately care for ‘its own people’. I will always remember one particularly riveting conversation I had with a middle aged Somali woman who lives in a low-income neighborhood in Columbus. She asked me, “Why do you people bring us here when you don’t even take care of your own?” She has given money and help to her neighbors, and she told me that sometimes she fears that there might be a
civil war in the US like the one that broke out in Somalia. I do believe that the traumas she suffered in Somalia and in refugee camps may predispose her to expect disaster, but her earlier argument raises some important concerns. One of the benefits of Somalis’ foreignness is that because they are foreigners they have a unique perspective from which to observe and analyze the social problems that exist in Columbus. Repeatedly, Somalis I interviewed told me that one of the main problems they find when moving to the US are the divisions between African American communities and white communities. On the whole, their strategy for addressing this problem is to distance themselves, discursively, if not materially, from the African American community. Their actions highlight the racial divides in Columbus that are so often obscured and ignored by natives and long-time residents of the city.

As refugees Somalis are not accepted into the US as highly skilled workers who are bringing needed skills to the labor market. Rather they are accepted into the US for humanitarian reasons. Their acceptance into the US fulfills a strategic need for Americans, not a material need (like the need for low-skilled workers), but a psychospiritual need to accept the ‘tired and weary’ that is a major component in the hegemonic narrative of American identity. Less than 1% of the world’s approximately 14 million refugees are ever re-settled permanently, and the US is the international leader in the numbers of refugees it accepts for permanent resettlement (UNHCR on-line). As the woman above points out, however, there are major obstacles in the road to success in the

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36 To be considered refugees, people must flee the border of their home country. The country they flee to, often where the refugee camps are located is called the ‘second country’. If refugees are re-settled permanently to another country like the US, that country is referred to as the “third country” and the “country of permanent resettlement”.

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US for refugees, especially Somalis who are racial and religious others in the context of hegemonic America.

The strategies of resistance that Somali men utilize are often problematized when men cannot find adequate work and thus cannot participate in the pursuit of the American Dream. The types of entry level jobs that are available in the Columbus community are often associated with feminine activities like cleaning and caring for the sick and elderly, thus making it difficult for men to find work. For example, a Somali man who works as a caseworker at a local NGO that serves Somalis in Columbus told me that he thinks it is easier for Somali women to adapt to living in the US because,

…here in America I think most of the families…women are the breadwinners. Like you find in some cases that a family who has got a father and a mother and the children…the father maybe doesn’t have a job or he does not have any other place to get an income. So if…usually most of the responsibility goes upon women. So they have to take courage when they go to look for a job and they just do…they get into the American society much easier.

I: So why do you think the women are working more often than men?

Uhh…in some cases it’s because like men who come into this country might feel really depressed. Just like…the other culture men were the breadwinners and women were usually the housewives. Men…they just feel in this society that women have a lot more chances than men. Like I remember several times whereby they applied with some other women and then like in most all cases, women were more considered than men. (Somali man age 32)

For this man, the experience of men applying for the same jobs as women and women receiving preference is deeply humiliating and emasculating. This same man told me about a friend of his who had recently arrived in the US. His friend had a very good job in Kenya working with refugee resettlement, and he had a high standard of living there. However, when he was offered the opportunity to be re-settled in the US, he took it with high expectations for his life here. After arriving, he soon realized that he would have to
work two or three jobs to have a decent standard of living, while sending money back to his family. He now wants to return to Kenya and to his former job, but his family ridicules him when he tells them that he wants to return. They cannot believe that he would ever want to leave the US, and that he is having problems making money here. They have the same preconceived notions of the US (perpetuated by the media) that he had prior to his arrival: that life would be easy here and that money would be readily available. One of the most surprising aspects of life in the US for the man (besides how difficult it is financially) is that he faces discrimination based on his race. After arriving in the US, he now faces the tangible consequences of narratives of alienation that limit aid to refugees and immigrants, construct narrative and material divisions between “us” and “them” and serve to reiterate separations among communities based on race and religious identity.

**Conclusions: Narrative Strategies and Resistance**

Somali men’s resistance strategies of utilizing the narratives of the American Dream and the American melting pot meet their own resistances in the material world; for example, it’s difficult to achieve the American Dream if you do not have access to a well-paid job or any job at all. It is also difficult to legitimately see yourself as an accepted member of the American imaginary when you are fired and socially sanctioned for claiming and utilizing your right to free speech.

I asked all of the men (and women) I interviewed what they believe to be the biggest challenges facing the Somali community and here is one man’s response:

Man: Hmm… the biggest challenge I think would be, depending on … like in Columbus and Minneapolis there is a large Somali community, I think they will
have the challenge of assimilating. You know…intermingling with Americans because of their numbers. Some people might not see you or have any contact with Americans for a long time because they are in their community. They will find everything they need from the small shops and things. I think that is not a good thing…some of them don’t have that exposure. That’s negative for them I think. Feeling the main culture is a positive thing.

I: And why do you think it’s negative for them not to have any exposure to American people born here?

Man: Umm… I think number one, I think they will lose a test of why they came here. Number two, they are minorities. So if you are the minority, I think that you have… even if you don’t want to do like they do, you have to understand the main culture or know how to go to it. I think that’s one reason. Another reason is their kids will become Americans or think like Americans before they do. It can be tough for them to understand their kids. So I think those are the two or three main reasons. (Somali man age 32)

For this man, he fears that Somalis will be held back by not interacting with native born Americans and not learning and adapting to hegemonic American cultural ideals. At first he frames this problematic as ‘not assimilating’, but later his more pressing concern comes to the surface. He recognizes the difficult subject position Somalis inhabit because of their status as ‘minorities’, and he worries that if they isolate themselves they will be more readily affected by narratives of alienation. Below, another man shares with me his views on the challenges facing Somalis in Columbus:

I really think people come here with very little education and don’t know the language. If you come to this country and you don’t speak the language and you don’t come with like several skills which can be useful, then you have a big problem. The other problem is the people who come here are really young children and mothers. The few families that come with husbands the skills they have are completely useless here and people just…they can’t find jobs. And then again, I mean they come to a country where people have a language barrier. Second, they are Muslims. That’s definitely a problem. Then they have a color that’s also different. So you have three issues which are all huge right now. Right now, the situation in this country, people definitely have these problems. You’re Muslim…obviously there’s a lot of problems about being a Muslim here right now. And then there’s the racial issue for people who are black in color. (Somali man age 32)
This man identifies lack of education and job skills, Muslim identity and racialization as the three major problems facing the Somali community. He is specifically concerned for women and children who he argues disproportionately suffer the consequences of these three issues. The narratives of alienation that govern relations between Somalis and non-Somalis work to further the disaffection between communities in Columbus rather than resist or counter them. The man below offers a more succinct and singular view of what he sees is the biggest challenge facing Somalis:

One challenge is how they can live in their community…us and see us as a usual community, not as fundamentalist or not as Muslims who are creating problems. That’s one challenge as a people of the Islam religion. (Somali man age 41)

For him, countering the narrative that Somalis are fundamentalist Muslims is the most important resistance strategy that is needed. The risk of being seen as a potential or likely terrorists is gendered and primarily affects Somali men, while Somali women are primarily affected by narratives that characterize them as victims of Islam. Both men and women in the Somali community are affected by meta-narratives of alienation and the narratives specific to Somalis in Columbus that characterize them as rude in order to obscure discrimination based on their religious identities and, as one man above describes it, “people who are black in color”. My long term contact with the Somali community makes me hopeful that men’s and women’s resistance strategies will enable them to eclipse some of the narratives of alienation that dominate in Columbus, and instead facilitate narratives of good relations that include that they are “usual” or agreeable neighbors.
CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

National cultures are composed not only of cultural institutions. A national culture is a discourse—a way of constructing meanings which influences and organizes both our actions and our conception of ourselves.

Stuart Hall (The Global, the Local and the Return of Ethnicity)

Somalis in Columbus: A Discursive Economy Dominated by Narratives of Alienation

In the spring of 2002 after attending a panel discussion with Somali women from the Columbus community, I became interested in exploring why and how they thought they were represented and treated as victims in the context of Columbus and the Western media. I employed feminist ethnography to gather and analyze what I have identified as narratives of alienation that predominate in discursive constructions of Somalis and interactions between Somalis and non-Somalis in the Columbus community. These narratives of alienation are gendered as they construct Somali women as inherent victims of Islam and Somali culture and Somali men as potential or likely terrorists.
I began by examining the historical trajectory of feminist ethnography and articulating what I argue are its major components, which include producing knowledge about women’s lives in specific cultural contexts; exploring women’s experiences of oppression as well as how they employ resistance strategies; and feeling an ethical responsibility towards the communities in which we work. These elements made feminist ethnography the most appropriate tool for me to utilize in my research analyzing Somali women’s and men’s life experiences post-resettlement in Columbus as well as their interpretations and responses to representations of their lives.

In my second chapter, I explored the most common representations of Somali Muslim women, most clearly articulated by Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a well-known Somali critic of Islam. Her strident positions have been addressed often in my dialogues with Somali women who argue that her representations of their life experiences are not accurate. I analyzed Hirsi Ali’s arguments about women and Islam and the controversies surrounding the film *Submission* because they are poignant examples of narratives of alienation that circulate internationally and are localized in Columbus with material effects for Somali women and men. One of my primary interests during my research was to analyze the material repercussions of discourse, and I found multiple examples of the material effects of narratives of alienation on the Somali community in Columbus.

In my third chapter I interrogated the question—is multiculturalism bad for women?—and, based on my research with the Somali community, concluded that it is not. Multiculturalism can be seen as challenging women’s claims to full equality, but only if it is viewed from a perspective of ‘us’ (the liberated women of the West) versus ‘them’ (the oppressed women outside of the West, especially Muslim women or
alternately the men in these cultures who want to continue oppressing women). This narrative of alienation does not serve feminist goals and undermines organic forms of feminism found within minority cultures. It creates discursive divisions that locate minority women in rhetorical positions where they are forced to defend their cultures from exterior assault rather than work towards intra-cultural reforms that benefit women. Hirsi Ali claims that freedom for women is only possible through liberal reform, but the women I interviewed and interacted with during my fieldwork often challenge this claim. It is important to them to frame the changes they want to see in their lives as originating from within their cultural framework rather than as an assault against it.

Although it was not my original intention to interrogate how Somali men are affected by narratives of alienation, the trajectory of my research led me to see how Somali men and women are differently framed by narratives of alienation and have differing reactions and resistance strategies as a result. The three major events that received media attention in Columbus concerning the Somali community all revolved around gendered narratives of alienation that specifically affected Somali men. The arrest of a Somali male terrorist in Columbus, the firing of Abukar Arman because he became suspected of supporting terrorism, and the killing of Nasir Abdi by Columbus police officers all serve as examples of how Somali men are particularly vulnerable to narratives of alienation that characterize them as prone to terrorism. They are also differentially affected by their racialization in Columbus where they experience discrimination based on race as well as their religious identity. Many Somali men shared their feelings with me that after 9/11, their experiences living in the US changed drastically for the worse. This was also true for Somali women, but the challenge they faced was distinctive. Women
did not fear being suspected of terrorism or other acts of violence associated with racialized men, but felt the burden of being represented as the subjugated and helpless victims of Islam.

Somali women’s resistance strategies include directly challenging those who assume that they are oppressed because they are Muslim. For example, in chapter 3, I shared the experiences of a Somali woman union leader who confronted feminists at a conference about their assumptions concerning the hijab. The practice of ‘putting on the hijab’ emerged as important site of Somali women’s material practices of resistance to narratives of alienation that construct them as inherently subjugated. Men’s resistance strategies differed as they positioned themselves as agents in pursuit of the American Dream, which is their primary strategy for contesting the narratives of alienation they encounter.

**Concluding Examples of Narratives of Alienation**

Narratives of alienation affect the everyday lives of Somali men and women in Columbus. In addition to the examples I have already shared in previous chapters, I would like to provide two additional accounts of the daily repercussions of narratives of alienation in the lives of Somalis living in the Somali community. In the spring of 2007, I was at a local NGO that aids Somali refugees completing my fieldwork. A young Somali woman with a baby came into the agency fleeing a domestic violence situation and requesting help from the agency. The Somali male caseworker who listened to her story was overwhelmed and asked if I would help the woman. I called a few homeless and battered women’s shelters in the Columbus area to see if they had space for her and her
child for the night. One of the shelters told me they were full, another did not accept
children and the third shelter told me, “We don’t accept Somalis”. This shelter is partially
funded by the city, so it cannot reject Somalis in need, but there was a culture within the
shelter of avoiding taking in Somalis if at all possible. I had been made aware of this
policy via rumor, but did not know it to be accurate until I was directly confronted with
this situation. Later, I called the shelter back and asked to speak with a supervisor and
was told that if the Somali woman could produce documentation that she had been in
Columbus for at least 30 days, she could stay at the shelter. The woman did not have
any documentation with her, making it impossible for her to gain entry into the shelter. It
was very late in the afternoon so I ended up getting a room for the woman and her child
in a local motel until the next day.

Eventually, the woman gained access to the shelter because the director of the
NGO I was working with made a call to the director of the shelter and challenged the
legitimacy of the documentation requirement. Later, when I had the opportunity to talk
with a representative of one of the local shelters, I inquired about the policy they had
adopted with regards to Somalis seeking shelter. She told me that shelter advocates and
workers were frustrated with Somalis, “coming here and taking all of our resources” and
that “the shelters are for people in or from Columbus, not for them”. This example of a
narrative of alienation can sometimes have dire consequences for Somali refugees who
are in desperate need of basic necessities like shelter. The woman also told me that

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37 This requirement came about because in the previous months a large number of Somali Bantu, an ethnic
group within Somalia had been resettled in the US. The US government accepted Somali Bantu for
resettlement without the security of ‘sponsors’ and this resulted in large numbers of Somali Bantu seeking
shelter from local homeless shelters. In response, the shelters began to require proof that someone had been
a resident of Columbus for at least 30 days in order to be able to access the shelter.
Somalis in shelters have difficulties because they do not speak English, so they do not understand the rules of the shelter when they are explained to them. When I asked if translators were provided, she replied, “sometimes”. She also told me, “they’re just too different. I’m not sure they really belong here”. The woman was distressed over the changes in food preparation that had to be made when Somalis were in residence (for example, no pork or pork by-products) and the accommodation of prayer time and (infrequent) requests from parents for separate play areas for boys and girls.

These differences created in the mind of the shelter worker a barrier, a narrative of alienation, between herself and Somalis too great to overcome. There was also the unspoken, yet important question of whether an institution that was primarily funded by Christian churches (this shelter had a religious founding) should be caring for Muslims. This was an unspoken concern at the shelter, but clearly present in a comment made to me by the shelter worker, “well, you know they are Muslims” in response to my question about why Somalis had difficulties at the shelter. During other fieldwork experiences this issue was raised directly by church members who attended meetings about the possibility of sponsoring a Somali refugee family for resettlement in Columbus.

At an event I attended at a church in Grove City, a suburb of Columbus, a man stood up and declared in a long monologue the reasons he felt his church should not sponsor a Somali family. His reasons included: Somalis are invading Columbus; using too many resources; unfairly utilizing the welfare system; and could be terrorists and therefore cannot be trusted. He articulated many of the most common narratives of alienation with passion and then left in an angry huff when a representative from an NGO aiding refugees in Columbus disagreed with him.
In *Infidel*, Ayaan Hirsi Ali claims that issues of non-Western immigration and multiculturalism are the biggest challenges currently facing the US and Europe. My empirical research with the Somali community reveals that issues of immigration and multiculturalism are important subjects in the Columbus community that I argue are currently dominated by a discursive economy of alienation and fear. These narratives of fear and alienation are sometimes mediated by discursive claims based on American exceptionalism, that is, the narrative that America is a land of immigrants and opportunity for all. In my fieldwork, I also witnessed examples contrary to the ones above, where religious arguments were used to justify the welcoming of refugees into the Columbus community. For example, in response to the man’s monologue above, the NGO worker read a biblical verse which recounts that Jesus was a refugee and that Christians have a moral obligation to aid refugees. However, both religious arguments based on Christian theology and arguments utilizing the rhetoric of American exceptionalism are ineffective as discursive devices in countering the dominance of narratives of alienation because they are so widespread and deeply entrenched.

The purpose of this dissertation is to use feminist ethnography as a tool of feminist analysis to understand and re-present Somali women’s voices on the topic of how they are represented in the Western media. I have used the empirical data collected during my fieldwork to enter into the current debate within feminist theory about whether or not multiculturalism is detrimental to feminist claims for women’s full equality. The Somali women I interacted with articulated clear objections to how they are commonly represented in the Western media, epitomized in the work of Ayaan Hirsi Ali. While disagreeing with Hirsi Ali’s representation of the lives of Somali and Muslim women as
inherently subjugated, they agree with her on many points, including ending FGC/FGM and the importance of education in the lives of girls and women. However, as one Somali woman from Canada told me, “Where I come from assimilation is a bad word”, making it clear that many Somali women’s concerns for expanding women’s rights do not extend to radical critiques of either Somali culture or Islam, but rather focus on reform from within their religion and culture.

Future Research Question: Can Feminist Theory Help Us Counter Narratives of Alienation?

My research raises several key questions regarding feminism, multiculturalism and issues of immigration. For example, I would like to further pursue the question of how multiculturalism and feminism inform, challenge and complement one another as politically charged philosophies. I am interested in exploring whether feminism is uniquely poised to offer discursive solutions to the narratives of alienation I have found operating in Columbus concerning the Somali community. Also, since feminism has been debating and confronting issues of difference among and between women since the Second Wave of the Women’s Movement, I believe it has a unique perspective and important standpoint from which to address the current debates surrounding immigration and multiculturalism in the US.

By looking at the experience of Somalis in Columbus, I offer here a localized study of some of the most challenging aspects of debates surrounding immigration and multiculturalism in the US. Somalis are racialized Muslims who face the triple-bind of being othered based on both their racial and religious identities as well as by their
experiences of gendered forms of discrimination. My research has shown that when Somalis resettle in Columbus they encounter a city not entirely welcoming of the ideals of multiculturalism and a city that is sometimes hostile to them (suggesting that Columbus is more ‘monocultural’ in its perspective than multicultural). I would like to explore further how feminist theories of difference can productively be employed to counter these narratives of alienation.

My research exposes how narratives of alienation govern relations between Somalis and non-Somalis in Columbus, and I find this discursive economy of fear and alienation troubling. As the US absorbs record numbers of immigrants and refugees it is problematic that discourses of fear and alienation are dominant. It is also troubling that feminists like Ayaan Hirsi Ali who articulate laudable goals for women’s advancement utilize these narratives. Now that I have uncovered the ways in which these narratives detrimentally affect Somali refugees’ lives, I would like to explore further how feminist directives can be employed productively in improving women’s lives in minority cultures without reinforcing larger narratives of alienation between hegemonic America and newly arrived immigrant groups. Stuart Hall claims that, “a national culture is a discourse—a way of constructing meanings which influences and organizes both our actions and our conception of ourselves” (626), and I have found that localized narratives in Columbus primarily construct Somalis in negative and harmful ways. In my next project, though, I want to move beyond identifying and delineating narratives of alienation and begin offering alternatives to them as a feminist prerogative.
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Dear Potential Participant,

My name is Richelle Schrock and I am a PhD student in Women’s Studies at The Ohio State University. I am interested in interviewing you for my dissertation thesis. During the interview, I will be asking you questions about your experiences in the United States and your knowledge of and reactions to media representations of the Somali community in the local and national media. I am seeking to understand how Somali women and men in Columbus, Ohio understand and respond to the stories told about the Somali community in the media. I will be asking questions of you that address this issue. For example, in 2001, a panel of Somali women spoke at OSU. The main point they addressed in their talk was that they do not want to be viewed as victims. Do you understand why they would want to express this thought?
You may choose not to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable, and I welcome your feedback and questions about my project.

It is likely that your interview with me will be included in my written dissertation and possibly in conference presentations. However, I will not use your real name or identity in any of my written or oral presentations, unless you explicitly ask me to do so.

If you have questions or concerns, please contact me and I will discuss them with you immediately. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant contact Sandra Meadows at The Office of Responsible Research Practices, 1-800-678-6251.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Richelle Schrock
Schrock.21@osu.edu
Phone: (614) 946-2132
Cultural Divides, Cultural Transitions:  
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Verbal Consent Script

I am going to read to you about your rights during this interview and your rights as a participant in this study. Could you please say ‘yes’, ‘okay’, ‘no’, ‘I understand’, or ‘I don’t understand’ after I explain each part to you? Also, if you have questions while I am reading this, please let me know and I will answer them. Thank you.

The Co-Investigator, Richelle Schrock, will print off this information and give it to each participant in the study.

Your Participation is Voluntary

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You can withdraw at any time and you may choose not to answer questions without any reason. Do you understand?
The Purpose of this Study Is:

1) To understand the narratives that are produced by the US media about Somali refugees. I especially want to understand what these narratives say about Somali women.

AND:

2) To understand how Somali women in Columbus, Ohio think about and respond to the narratives told about the Somali community in the national and local media.

Do you understand? Do you have any questions?

Procedures/Tasks:

I will be interviewing you and asking you questions, and you may refuse to answer any questions for any reason.

Do you understand?

May I record this interview?

May I keep the recording I make of this interview?

Duration:

This interview could take anywhere from 30 minutes to 2 hours. If we are unable to finish the interview in the time we have today, would you be willing to meet with me again?

Also, you may leave or end the interview at any time without any repercussions for you.

Do you understand? Do you have any questions?

Risks and Benefits:

There are few risks in being involved in this study and there likely will be no direct benefits to you personally. Your participation will help in scholarly understanding of the Somali community in Columbus, Ohio. If you are interested in receiving a copy of my completed study, I will provide a copy to you.

Confidentiality:

I will make every effort to make sure that your interview with me remains confidential. It is likely that your interview with me will be included in my written dissertation and possibly in conference presentations. However, I will not use your real
name or identity in any of my written or oral presentations, unless you explicitly ask me to do so.

I will be asking you at the end of the interview for suggestions of others to interview, but I will always turn off the tape recorder after asking this question and note the names.

Do you have any questions?

**Contacts and Questions:**

For questions, concerns, or complaints about the study you may contact _Cathy A. Rakowski at Rakowski.1@osu.edu 614-292-6447 or _Richelle Schrock at Schrock.21@osu.edu or 614-946-2132.

For questions about your rights as a participant in this study or to discuss other study-related concerns or complaints with someone who is not part of the research team, you may contact Ms. Sandra Meadows in the Office of Responsible Research Practices at 1-800-678-6251.
APPENDIX C

Dissertation Research Questionnaire

I. Introductory Questions

I will ask basic questions about identity, why they are living in Columbus, Ohio, and if they work outside of the home. For example:

1) How old are you?

2) Is Columbus the only city you have lived in in the US?

3) Why do you live in Columbus?

4) Do you work outside of the home? If yes, where do you work and how long have you worked there?

5) Do you like your work? Why or why not?

II. Questions on Interactions with Non Somalis

I will ask questions about Somali women’s experiences in Columbus and the United States. For example:

6) In 2001, a panel of Somali women spoke at OSU. The main point they addressed in their talk was that they do not want to be viewed as victims. Do you understand why they would want to express this thought?
7) Have you ever been asked (by a non Somali) why you are in the US? Why you are in Columbus? If yes, how did you respond?

8) Could you share with me your favorite aspects of American culture?

9) Could you share with me the aspects of American culture that you do not like?

10) Have you had a very positive experience in the US that you would like to share with me?

11) Have you had a very negative experience in the US that you would like to share with me?

12) What do you think are the ideas people born in the US have about Somalis? Have you had any personal experiences that reflect these ideas?

13) What do you think are the ideas people born in the US have about Somali women? Have you had any personal experiences that reflect these ideas?

14) What are the biggest challenges you see facing the Somali community in the US?

15) What are the biggest challenges you see facing Somali women in the US?

III. Questions on Media Representations

I will ask questions about newspaper articles and images. For example:

16) Can you give me an example of something you saw in the newspaper about Somalis?

17) What did it say?

18) Did you think it was accurate?

19) Was it a complete picture of what happened?

20) If you know more about this event than what the newspaper said, how do you know it?
21) Why do you think the newspaper got it wrong?

22) Do you have examples of a good description of something Somali?

23) Do you think the Somali newspapers also give inaccurate depictions?

24) If no, why not? If yes, then why do you think they do this?

25) What had you heard about the Somali community in Columbus before you got here?

26) How did you get that information?

27) Have you seen photos of Somalis in newspapers or on TV? Were they typical of Somalis you know?

IV. Questions About Recognition of Identity in the United States

I will ask questions about how Somalis think they are identified by non Somalis. For example:

28) Do you think non Somalis are able to differentiate between Somalis and other Africans?

29) Do you think non Somalis are able to differentiate between Somalis and other Muslims?

30) Do you think non Somalis are able to differentiate between Somalis and African Americans?

V. Questions Concerning Reading/Writing

I will ask questions about reading and writing practices in Somali families. For example:

31) Who reads in your family? Who does not read? Who knows how to read but doesn't read very much?
32) Do people in your family read in Somali as well as English?
33) Is it hard to learn to read in Somali?
34) Is it hard to learn to read in English?
35) Did people you know have to leave school because of the war?
36) Did they get other means of education?
37) Who writes in your family? For example, who pays your bills? Is it because they can write in English?
38) When you have to read complicated government forms in the US who helps you?
   Or if you help others, who do you help? Do you find that school children, especially teenagers are the best at reading complex English documents?

VI. Questions Concerning Discrimination

I will ask follow up questions that concern identity and then begin to ask questions about discrimination. For example,

39) What do you want people to know about Somalis?
40) What do you think non Somali (African American, Latino/a, white, and Asian American) people think about Somalis?
41) What do people say about women wearing head coverings? Veils? Do you think there is too much attention to this? Have you been following discussions about Muslim women wearing head coverings in France?
42) Do you know of any examples of women wearing head coverings facing discrimination either at jobs, at stores, renting apartments?
VII. Questions Concerning Controversial Media Stories

I will ask questions about whether or not they have followed any controversial media stories that involve Somalis. For example:

43) Can you think of a particular incident in which there was controversy over how the Somali community or an individual Somali was represented?

44) How were women involved in this controversy?

45) Did you follow the incident of Nasir Abdi?

46) How did you hear about it?

47) How did women participate in protesting what happened?

48) Were you part of that?

49) What did you do?

50) Did Somali women participate in the protests and in the conversations with the police about Nasir Abdi’s death in the same way as men?

51) It seems to be a very controversial topic. Can you explain what became so controversial?

52) Do you think that the witness (woman) had credibility? Who believed her story? Who didn't? Why?

VIII. Questions Concerning Cultural Values

I will ask questions concerning the values Somalis feel are important to pass onto their children. For example:

53) If you have children, which values do you want to pass onto them? Which values do you want young Somali girls to learn and keep? Which values do you want young Somali men to learn and keep? Why?